Speaking like a Model Minority: “FOB” Styles, Gender, and Racial Meanings among Desi Teens in Silicon Valley

This article discusses what it means to be a “model minority” linguistically by examining how language ideologies, class, and gender shape language use for Desi (South Asian American) teenagers in a Silicon Valley high school. Upper middle-class Desi teens follow monolingual norms while middle-class Desi teens construct heteroglossic “FOB styles” that incorporate Punjabi, Desi Accented English, California slang, and hip-hop lexicon. Style construction is influenced by gendered community norms that also prevail at school, and boys and girls variably regard school spaces as public or private. Nonnormative, gendered ways of speaking are contrasted to “model” ones and analyzed for their racializing consequences.

In 1966, both the US News and World Report and New York Times lauded Asian Americans as a “model minority” for their high level of education, economic self-sufficiency, low crime rates, and positive social contributions. This characterization has become a stereotype that has enabled post-1965 Asian immigrants and their families relatively easy integration into upper middle-class white society (Prashad 2000). Although recent scholarly work has argued that the model minority stereotype exaggerates the citizenry and scholarly capabilities of Asians in America (Bucholtz 2004; Ima 1995; Inkelas 2006; Kim and Yeh 2002; Lee 2005; Lee and Zhou 2004; Lew 2004), its strength has not diminished in the everyday lives of Asian Americans in Silicon Valley. Indeed, the prominence of Asian Americans in the high-tech industry has created an exceedingly high standard for Asian American youth in ways that not only obscure issues of racism and class inequality in schools, but also create normative expectations for teenagers with little room for variation (Shankar 2008). In this context, what does it sound like to be a model minority?

In this article I examine how everyday performances of teenage linguistic style interact with broader meanings of class, race, and gender. Beginning with the media-ascribed category of the model minority, I examine the specifics of how it shapes meanings of race for Desi (South Asian Americans) teens in a Silicon Valley high school. Ideologies of multilingualism that prevail in South Asia travel with their speakers to an increasingly monolingual California, and such an ideological clash is managed differently by upwardly mobile, well-educated Desis and by middle-class families who have prospered from the tech boom but remain in assembly line jobs. Differences in the ways Desi teens conceive of and manage these ideologies are linked to how they regard their high school, their place in it, and the ways in which school...
spaces are understood to be public or private. I contrast two distinct Desi teen high school styles that embody these differences: the mainstream style of teens referred to as “popular”; and a marginalized style called “FOB,” or “Fresh off the Boat.” I focus primarily on FOB styles to examine how FOBs are judged by Desi peers as nonnormative, how they vary according to gender, and the ways they are received at school. In so doing, I analyze how racial meaning is constructed through language use, as well as how gender differently shapes linguistic norms for these speakers.

FOB styles index class-based values that divide the seemingly homogenous category of “Desi” into “model” and “nonmodel” speakers. In this sense, FOB styles are not simply nonnormative; rather they are central to how Desis are ascribed racial status in Silicon Valley. Metapragmatic awareness of normative appropriateness raises the question of whether FOB styles can be understood as “stylistic variables” that teens selectively employ, or “status variables” that are habitual and more difficult to regulate (Irvine 1974). Metapragmatic assessments by teens as well as school faculty inform how model ways of speaking may contrast with FOB styles. Asif Agha (1998) argues that metapragmatic stereotypes about pragmatic phenomena not only essentialize and categorize difference, but also make the stereotypes themselves reportable and subject to contention. Along these lines, FOB styles are far more complex and nuanced than speech generally associated with those “Fresh off the Boat,” but nonetheless index nonnormative ways of speaking at school. Michael Silverstein (2003) has termed such interconnected levels of meaning “indexical orders.” I examine how the everyday meanings indexed by FOB styles create linguistic stereotypes that form the basis for categorizing teens by race and ethnicity.

Heteroglossia and FOB Style

While English and Punjabi form the foundation for FOB styles, teen uses of language varieties, accents, registers, voices, and genres can be better analyzed by applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) “heteroglossia” than simply understanding their speech as bilingual. The concept of bilingualism has undergone several useful reformulations to take into account multiple ways of speaking used to construct utterances. Kathryn Woolard (1999) asserts that “bivalency” is preferable to “bilingualism” or “code switching” because the first takes into account the multiple modes and voices available to speakers. Speakers are able to draw on and deploy linguistic resources that index particular social meanings. Like Woolard, Benjamin Bailey (2007) also draws on Bakhtin’s heteroglossia as a way to link language use and racial identity for bilingual speakers. Both Bailey’s and Woolard’s formulations complicate the notion of a pure standard and an impure variation, as well as that speakers make clear-cut choices between languages. In a similar vein, Monica Heller (2007) advocates for an understanding of bilingualism in which language is a resource that speakers negotiate in ideologically charged ways. Speakers manipulate boundaries but do so under particular social constraints and historical conditions.

Style is instrumental to marking group-specific ways of speaking. Judith Irvine (2001) identifies style as the use of linguistic resources from a number of varieties of language toward a socially recognizable end (see also Irvine and Gal 2000). Because style is both actively produced or coproduced by individuals or groups and is habitual and routine (Mendoza-Denton 1999), it is always mediated by speakers and in particular contexts. Penelope Eckert (1989, 2000), for example, has documented how students’ affiliation with the social categories of “jocks” and “burnouts” is reflected in their lexical, grammatical, and stylistic use of English, in both conscious and unconscious ways. Although marginalized burnouts intentionally use particular greetings and phrases, their pronunciation of particular vowels unintentionally indexes their neighborhood and other socioeconomic variables. An analogous process of social category formation occurs through racially marked styles of speaking and dressing among Desi teens (cf. Bucholtz 2001; Rymes 2001).
In their multiracial, multiethnic school environment, teens who are called FOBs by popular teens for their style of speaking, dressing, and socializing are not actually brand new arrivals to the United States. Rather, FOB (pronounced as a word, not as individual letters) is a term that upper middle-class, popular Desi teens use to label second- and third-generation middle-class teens whose parents are nonskilled workers. So-called FOBs are middle-class Sikh Punjabis that popular teens marginalize and distance themselves from based on their ways of dressing, speaking, and comportment in school. To emphasize the connection between producers of particular ideological projects and their objects, Susan Gal (2007) has offered the term “clasp” as a way of relating how discourses are produced and linked to categories of individuals. She defines interdiscursive clasps as “speech registers (or registers of semiotic practice) that link those who create the category of a person-type and produce justifications for its indexical signs with those who are recruited to that person-type” (Gal 2007:6). FOB styles—the stereotypical ways in which FOBs are thought to speak—act as clasps between FOBby (FOB-like) and popular Desi teens.

Desi teens in Silicon Valley are not the first to locally define and use term FOB. While the term is not unique to Asian Americans, it is widely used in Asian diasporas, especially in the context of post-1965 Asian migration, to differentiate new arrivals from those who have learned requisite cultural and linguistic codes (Chiang-Hom 2004; Hwang 1979; Reyes 2007). FOB is commonly used by second-generation Asian American youth to distance themselves from the perceived negative attributes of first-generation or 1.5 generation youth (Jeon 2001; Loomis 1990; Rumbaut 2002; Talmy 2004; Zhou 2004). In the Desi context, FOB attributes include not adequately following fashion trends, having oily hair, speaking Punjabi at school, and speaking Desi Accented English (which I explain in detail below). Notably, these codes do not involve distancing oneself from everything South Asian. Cosmopolitan signs of being Desi—including wearing South Asian clothing to the prom, blasting Bollywood soundtracks from luxury automobiles, and incorporating South Asian elements into school performances—are not considered FOBby. Such choices do not mark popular teens as “whitewashed” (Pyke and Dang 2003); rather, these teens are knowledgeable and strategic about when and how they deploy aspects of their ethnicity and speak their heritage language. Such “model” ways of speaking stand in contrast to FOB styles. In these ways, FOB styles act as clasps between marginalized Desi teens and popular Desi teens as well as those school faculty who indicate that marginalized youth embody nonnormative attributes.

Although FOB styles of speaking include the use of Punjabi, English, Bollywood dialogue and song lyrics, hip-hop lyrics and lexicon, Desi Accented English, California slang, and Spanish, the stereotype that FOBs simply code switch loudly in Punjabi is what elicits negative judgment and enables popular teens to appear more model. In a school context, such practices of status making and exclusion are commonplace through talk and social activity (Goodwin 2006). Although I will discuss the numerous ways in which FOB styles are far more differentiated and nuanced than this, the racializing effect of the stereotype is ultimately what prevails (Roth-Gordon 2007; see also McElhinny 2001). For this reason, I use the terms FOB and FOB style to refer to the middle-class, marginalized Sikh Punjabi youth who engage in these marked language practices. FOB style is my analytical term, and I use it to contextualize their identity and style-making practices in the institutional setting of school and in the class-based inequities of the South Asian diaspora.

Language Ideologies and Language Use in Silicon Valley

The model minority stereotype is so prevalent in Silicon Valley that its normative standards pervade everyday life. For teens, this includes excelling academically as well as performing linguistically according to the monolingual standards of high school. Being a speaker of a particular language or being a member of a particular group, however, does not make these labels transparent, strictly referential, or even
stable. Susan Gal (2004) has remarked that there is no simple indexical relationship between what the census or other research suggests speakers of a particular ethnicity should speak and their actual affiliations with their heritage language. Rather, “they are likely to be performatives in the following second-order sense: the very use of them in particular contexts marks the user as a certain kind of person within the social group” (Gal 2004:339). Such a distinction is crucial to understanding how Desi teens are predisposed to particular styles of speaking in their schools and communities.

Language ideologies are useful to illustrate diasporic speakers’ predispositions toward language use in homelands versus places of settlement. Language ideologies are cultural representations of language in the social world (Irvine and Gal 2000; Kroskrity 2000; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998) and guide uses of and values associated with particular languages. Since the colonial period in India, the British offered English-medium schools alongside local-language-medium schools, a dichotomous system that still exists today (Cohn 1985; Khubchandani 1983; see also LaDousa 2006). In this multilingual ideology, different languages are appropriate modes of communication for different interactions and domains. South Asia currently has 15 official languages and more than 1,500 others that are spoken (Jacobsen and Kumar 2004:ix–xxiv). Speakers are socialized to use a variety of languages as well as registers for different contexts. This approach to language ideology and practice, in which multilingualism is a routine part of everyday life, has not collapsed among South Asians in the United States, where English monolingualism is the ideological norm (Crawford 1992, 2000; Silverstein 1996). If anything, using multiple languages and at least registers and lexical elements from several language varieties has strengthened among Desi populations in Silicon Valley.3

The specific class, ethnicity, and language-based formations of Silicon Valley Desi communities have engendered different types of relationships between teens and their heritage languages. To better understand these judgments, some discussion of the status of English and Punjabi in Silicon Valley is necessary.4 English is ideologically favored in both South Asia and Silicon Valley, though varieties, accents, and norms of usage predictably vary between and within these locations. As the language of empire, globalization, and of diasporic locales such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and the United States, English is imbued with more power and status than other Desi languages (Kachru 2000), although its specific value differs with regard to its status vis-à-vis local South Asian languages (Bhatt 2001; Pennycook 2007). Recent work on Asian American language use advocates for deeper study of English use in favor of documenting a linear retention or loss of heritage language (Lo and Reyes 2004). English is a valued tool in identity-making practices for Desi teens, and they tend to use several different kinds of English, which are exemplified in transcripts below. Despite English’s elevated status, heritage language use plays a crucial, if not straightforward, role in shaping diasporic identity (Eisenlohr 2006). As a heritage language, Punjabi is highly valued in Silicon Valley communities. In addition to being widely spoken at family and community gatherings, Punjabi language instruction is offered at gurdwaras (Sikh temples) during weekend and intensive summer sessions. Many Sikh youth go to the San Jose gurdwara on a weekly or biweekly basis and participate in casual conversation in Punjabi as they wait in line for langar, the meal offered after prayer. This practice, along with the large and prominent Punjabi population in this area, makes Punjabi one of the most widely spoken South Asian languages in Silicon Valley.5 How and when it is used, however, can vary according to class.

Class is central to shaping linguistic dispositions. In these Desi communities, wealth is a topic of intense focus of conversation, but class categories are not (see Shankar 2006). Many Desi families who moved to Silicon Valley in the late 1970s and 1980s went on to experience unusually high job security until the 2001 stock market crash and can still rely on the equity of their well-appreciated homes. Adults in unskilled jobs have been able to buy property and prosper economically, but the type of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1985) they are able to instill in their
children is not on par with that of upper middle-class parents. Such a rift, I argue,
is important to understanding how teens regard school as a place to speak their
heritage language.

At Greene High School, the diverse, overenrolled public high school where I
conducted fieldwork for eighteen months, during the period of September 1999
through May 2001, Desi teens were one of several racial and ethnic groups. Of the
approximately 2,200 students during the 1999–2000 school year, nearly 50 percent
were Asian American (about 30 percent Desi), 25 percent Latino, 12 percent white, 6
percent African American, and less than 1 percent Native American. Here, upper
middle-class students are primarily Sikh Punjabi, Hindu Punjabi, and Hindu
Gujaratis. They are children of well-educated, post-1965 immigrants. Their parents
have upwardly mobile careers and live in wealthy areas of Silicon Valley. Upper
middle-class parents who were educated in English-medium schools, whether in
South Asia or elsewhere, tend to speak English far more at home. In these families,
parents speak to one another and their children in their heritage language as well as
in English. Their children by and large reply in English and speak English among
themselves. Teens may speak their heritage language at community gatherings or
with elderly relatives who are not fluent in English, but otherwise speak in English.
This English-speaking norm, as well as their sophisticated understanding of school
fostered through extensive parental involvement, makes English ubiquitous at home
and the norm at school.

Middle-class teens are predominantly from Sikh Punjabi families. Their parents did
not immigrate as professionals, and while they may have profited financially from the
high-tech industry, they rarely gained more cultural capital from this windfall.
Middle-class Desi teens display higher levels of spoken and comprehensive fluency
in Punjabi than do upper middle-class teens. This is so because at least one middle-
class teen’s parents or live-in relative does not speak English fluently. Even among
adults who attended high school in Yuba City or elsewhere in California, the strength
of their community networks and the continuous arrival of Sikhs relatives and
spouses from South Asia keep their Punjabi in constant use, so much so that they
seldom speak English to one another at home. While their children feel equally
comfortable in both languages, they choose to speak Punjabi far more often than teens
whose parents did not speak it at home.

Such distinctions map onto the spaces of the school campus and shape Desi teen
styles. Greene’s sprawling campus is filled with numerous small, one-story buildings
that create multiple distinct spaces. Such a layout creates spaces to travel between
buildings as well as places to socialize and “kick it,” or spend routine time with
friends, during morning break and lunch. Here, the seemingly private periods of
social time with friends is in the same open, visible locations as other activities. Susan
Gal (2002), among others, has remarked that notions of public and private are not
clearly demarcated, but can be understood as a continuum that is marked by distinct
ideologies. Although there is little that may be considered private about public high
school—as student lockers, notebooks, bags, and other seemingly private spaces are
all subject to seizure and search—students nonetheless territorialize the school
campus during lunch and break and demarcate it into proprietary spaces that blur
public and private distinctions.

The “quad” is the grassy, central, ideologically normative space of the school
(Gibson 1988; Mendoza-Denton 2007; Perry 2002) where popular teens claim space,
and the outlying regions are inhabited by socially and linguistically marginalized
students. Eckert (1989) has described the ways in which popular jocks naturally claim
and value school spaces as their own, while marginalized burnouts maintain that the
school is not truly theirs and that school property may be used in unintended ways for
illicit activities. Such differences in orientation are akin to ways in which populars and
FOBs differently treat the school. In back areas of the school campus, especially
behind the library and the “C” building, FOB cliques claim spaces in which they
construct their own styles.
FOB Styles of Speaking

FOB styles draw on English, Punjabi, Desi Accented English, hip-hop lexicon and lyrics, as well as Spanish and California slang. The following examples are drawn from tape recordings made by students featuring teens (M = male, F = female) speaking among themselves in my absence during March–April 2001. They exemplify that what may be overheard as simply code switching between English and Punjabi is, upon closer examination, a much more complex style. FOB styles include local California slang, such as *hella* (very), and *tight* (very cool), *dude*, and *bro*. Similar to “FOB accents” (Reyes 2007), “Mock Asian” (Chun 2001), and “Stylized Asian English” (Rampton 1995), which all refer to ways of speaking that ridicule the non-standard English associated with recent Asian immigrants, “Desi Accented English” (DAE) is a language variety I have identified through which teens index insider humor. DAE (formatted in boldface type below) is not simply an accent; rather, it is a way of speaking that indexes a lack of cultural knowledge about common aspects of American life and contains atypical grammatical constructions and lexical elements that may not be shared by other speakers of South Asian English. It may seem ironic that those called FOBs are performing a “FOBby” accent, but their sophistication in doing so is a reminder that FOB styles can indeed be seen in many instances as a stylistic variable. In the following example recorded during a morning break period, Manpreet (F) offers her friend Harbans (F) some of her Pop-Tart pastry. Munching on the snack while the conversation ensues, Harbans interrupts to inquire about the Pop-Tart’s flavor, and Avinash (M) offers an explanation.

**Example 1: S’mores**

1. Harbans: Hey this is good; what is it?
3. Harbans: S’mores?
4. Avinash: You know that thing with marshmallows and chocolate? Maarrsh-
   mallow, that little white thing?

By using DAE (formatted in boldface) to respond to Harbans’s confusion about a flavor inspired by an American campfire treat, Avinash indexes the lack of social knowledge generally associated with FOBs. His emphatic *maarrsh-mallow* especially elicits laughter, because it is not a foodstuff available in South Asia, and makes this ordinary American flavor seem exotic to the uninitiated. Like Avinash, FOB teens readily use DAE for humorous emphasis in the midst of California accented English. In a conversation where Manpreet disclosed to Ranvir (M) that she was taping their conversation for my research, Ranvir jokingly suggested that this amounted to “sexual harassment.” Manpreet smilingly replied, “It is very-very bad!” Ranvir laughed and echoed, “Very-very?” Here, not just the accent but also the construction *very-very*, a common expression in South Asian English, index their knowledge of stereotypical ways in which actual FOBs speak, and indicate that they consider themselves to be far enough from this stereotype to use it humorously.

FOB style draws heavily on Punjabi (formatted in italic type below). This can include the use of expressions such as *Oh balle, balle!*, a multipurpose cheer uttered when dancing, as a rallying cry, and for surprise or exasperation, as well as *chak de fatte!* which teens translate as “let’s go!” “raise the roof!” or “let’s kick ass!” While sometimes used literally, they are also used sarcastically, as in this exchange between Jett (M) and KB (M).

**Example 2: “Chak de fatte!” [Kick ass].**

1. Jett: Bend down, pick that up! All yous ready?
2. KB: Whaaat?
4. KB [sarcastically]: Thanks, bro.
In this exchange, the Punjabi phrase is used as a double entendre. In line 1, Jett tries to direct KB to pick up his bag and move along, but when KB takes his time doing so, Jett shouts, “Chak de fatte!” (line 3) as KB lackadaisically bends over to collect his belongings. The phrase is not just a rallying cry, but also a humorous suggestion that KB may require a swift kick in order to get moving.

Alongside Punjabi, California slang, and DAE, Spanish is also a resource for FOB style. San Jose’s predominantly working-class Chicano population has exerted a visible influence on FOB styles. Latino and Latina styles of clothing and makeup, especially when markers of gang membership (Mendoza-Denton 2007), can also shape FOB styles of comportment and speaking. Spanish phrases can be quite humorous when inserted into conversational exchanges. In the following excerpt from a lunchtime conversation, Kuldeep (M) uses Spanish (formatted in an underlined typeface) in an exchange with Uday (M) and Simran (F).

Example 3: “No Habla Inglés” [I (sic) don’t speak English]

1. Uday: Saleya eh garbage can vai? [Is this a garbage can, stupid?].
2. Kuldeep: No habla Inglés [I (sic) don’t speak English]. [loud round of laughter]
3. Kuldeep: Don’t know what you say...
4. Simran: Throw that fuckin’ shit out!
5. Kuldeep: Oh balle! Hon boleya! [Oh wow! At least you’re talking to me now!].

While Uday attempts to be discreet about Kuldeep’s refusal to properly dispose of trash and reprimands him in Punjabi, Kuldeep rebuffs him with two different performances of misrecognition. In the first, he feigns ignorance by saying in Spanish that he does not speak English. This is met with a round of laughter in part because it is a clever retort to Uday’s directive, and in part because Uday’s statement in Punjabi does not require him to know English. Kuldeep’s utterance could be read as an example of what Jane Hill (1995) has called “mock Spanish,” but perhaps a more apt name for this would be “mocking Spanish.” By occasionally speaking in Spanish in a school environment where they are routinely mistaken for Latinos, FOB boys use Spanish as a way to mock faculty who cannot easily differentiate between them and Latinos. Ridiculing this misrecognition is a continual source of humor for FOBby teens. The conversation continues when Kuldeep, encouraged by the laughter of his friends, chooses DAE (formatted in bold) to tell Uday that he does not understand him. Again, it is ironic that he uses a FOBby accent to communicate this, as a true FOB would have no trouble understanding Uday’s Punjabi remark. When Simran reprimands him in English, Kuldeep responds to her sarcastically in Punjabi, and the joke has ended. While these teens studied Spanish in school and live alongside Mexican Americans in their neighborhoods, they rarely speak Spanish outside of these joking exchanges.

Similarly, FOB styles incorporate lexical elements from hip-hop without any political or social interests in black people. Blacks are concentrated in Oakland and other parts of the Bay Area but are a relatively minor presence San Jose. Desi teens listen to commercial hip-hop but do not express interest in becoming hip-hop artists or forming social alliances with blacks. In the following example, the hip-hop shout out “West Siiiiide” is used by both KB (M) and Jett (M) to mollify a tense dynamic that develops between Uday and Kuldeep about the latter’s neighbor.

Example 4: “Dimag kharab hai, yaar” [He is crazy, dude].

1. Uday: Oh man, listen to the bullshit.
2. Kuldeep: Dimag kharab hai, yaar. Mera neighbor, yaar [He is crazy, dude. My neighbor, dude].
3. Uday: What has led you to this conclusion?
4. Kuldeep: Dimag kharab hai! [He is crazy!].
6. Uday: How do you know people don’t say this about you?
7. Kuldeep: He is crazy, fool! Everybody says that, this fool really is crazy, though.
8. Uday: Takes one to know one?
9. Kuldeep: Shut up!
10. Uday: Main te ude hi karda [I’m just kidding].
11. Jett: West siiiiide!
12. Kuldeep: Aha ki karan lag peyan tu? [What have you started doing?]. Ain’t no fuckin’ California love, California thug. . . .
13. KB: West Siiiiide!

When Kuldeep seems genuinely annoyed at Uday’s needling, Jett steps in and offers a shout out that indexes the unified front of West Coast hip-hop. Kuldeep is hardly amused and snaps at Jett with a clever use of hip-hop lyrics from the then-popular song “The Next Episode” (line 13–14). KB reiterates Jett’s shout out for unity, and the tension begins to diffuse. While such a use of hip-hop could be read as an attempt to “pass” for black or “cross” into this group (Bucholtz 1999; Cutler 2003; Lo 1999; Rampton 1995; Reyes 2005), Desi teens I observed did not use hip-hop lexicon for these purposes. FOB teens’ overwhelming use of Punjabi and DAE, compared to their relatively infrequent use of hip-hop lexicon, underscores this point.

FOB styles, as I have illustrated, draw on a wide range of linguistic resources that a recent arrival could not begin to access. Some linguistic practices, including FOBs’ use of California slang and ironic use of DAE, do not differ from those of popular Desi teens. What is most marked, however, is their use of Punjabi. It is significant that these teens do not use Punjabi in the classroom unless they believe they cannot be heard. They understand classroom time to be public and are careful there to maintain the monolingual school code. Lunch and break times in their corner of the school campus, however, are considered private. Indeed, the places they call their own are expected to be truly free spaces where they can say and do what they please, however loudly they please. For this reason, they are easily labeled FOBs by the rest of their Desi peers, who try to distance themselves. In turn, FOBs do not have positive opinions of popular teens—Desi and those of other ethnicities—and express their views in Punjabi to one another. As a group of popular Chinese American girls walked by, KB remarked loudly to Simran (F), “Saliyan Cheeniya . . . enadi neet bahut pehri ya” [Stupid Chinese girls . . . they are very stingy and mean]. Likewise, when a popular Desi boy strutted by them, Jett commented about him to Simran.

Example 5: “Oh balle, balle” [Oh, wow].

1. Jett [sarcastically]: Oh balle, balle [Oh, wow].
2. Simran: Are you talking about that guy? Are you talking about that guy?
3. Jett: Onu kera Punjabi andi vail! [It’s not as if he knows Punjabi!].
Gendered Ways of Speaking

FOB styles, like other teenage language use, have been shown to not only to affirm clique boundaries, but also to test the limits of gendered expectations (Mendoza-Denton 2007; Woolard 1994). Following the work of Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (2003), I examine how these styles vary according to their “communities of practice” (see also Lave and Wenger 1991). While popular styles of speaking do not vary significantly according to gender, FOB language use is gendered according to topic, styles of speaking, and lexical choice. What is significant about this type of gender differentiation is that it reflects other standards of comportment that are prevalent in the lives of FOBby Desi teens. Elinor Ochs (1992) has called the linkage of conversational practices and gendered stances “collocational indexicality,” and such a concept draws attention to the broader significance of gendered differences in speaking. Especially for FOB girls, maintaining a good reputation, or izzat, encourages them to minimize transgressions—be they sexual, behavioral, or disciplinary (Gillespie 1995; Hall 2002; Maira 2002). While some girls push this boundary further than others, they rarely do so to the extent that boys do.

Middle-class Sikh Punjabi girls attend Greene High School with many teens from their large community network. Here, gossip is rampant and teens are likely to spread rumors in their communities about things they witness at school. Although they can be somewhat more lax at school, girls rarely consider social time at school to occur in a private space. Even here, they are concerned about maintaining their reputation and avoiding school disciplinary measures, both things that could harm their familial and community standing. By contrast, Sikh Punjabi boys are subject to fewer social rules and tend to regard the social space of school as far more private. Treating their place in the school campus as a private space for jokes, humor, gossip, and confrontation, they criticize or choose to ignore school rules when they impede on their language styles.

Instead of quoting hip-hop lyrics, girls gravitate more toward Bollywood as their pop culture source for marking style, and elsewhere I discuss how girls quote filmy (filmlike) dialogue and songs (Shankar 2004b). Although these teens are not fluent in Hindi, they nonetheless can quote from films in limited ways. Increased access to English subtitles and the long-standing dominance of Hindu Punjabis in Bollywood films have imbued film dialogue and songs with Punjabi lexical items, phrases, festivals, and kinship terms. When girls speak Punjabi in school, it is generally limited to quoting reported speech, constructing imagined utterances, and using phrases or terms, though their Punjabi speaking ability is as fluent as that of their male peers. When, for example, Raminder (F) grew tired of her friends telling her how attractive her brother is, she squealed, “Dude! He’s my brother!” and recalled a humorous incident that had occurred at the gurdwara in the presence of her friends: “Remember those budiyan [older ladies]? There was somebody, like, at the gurdwara yesterday, some budiya [older lady], keh diya, ‘Meriyan bhanjiyan nursa da course kar diyan paiyan hain. Tera pra kine salan da hega? Asi Jattan da munda labdiyan hain’ ” [she said to me, “My nieces are doing a nursing course. How old is your brother? We’re looking for a Jatt (a Punjabi caste) boy]. “And [their brother is] a farmer!” added Janvi (F) and Mandeep (F) at the same time, shrieking with laughter that the prospective brides were doing a nursing course but their brother was a farmer. For effect, Raminder reiterated, “She was, like, ‘Oho, nursa da course kar diyan!’ “[Oh look, they are doing a nursing course!]. I was like, ‘puh-leezz!’ “ While Raminder could have as easily relayed the content of the older woman’s utterance in English, using Punjabi enabled a much more amusing retelling.

While they are less likely to directly speak Punjabi to one another, girls create imagined utterances in Punjabi to embellish conversations. When Manpreet told her friends that her aunts had a suitable boy in mind for her, they loudly shouted “No!” on her behalf. “No, for, like, later on,” Manpreet tried to explain as Jaswinder (F) cut her off and said, “The budi’s like, ‘Tu to honiya veeyan, iqiyani salan di’ ” [The old lady’s
like, “You must be about 20, 21 years old”). Jaswinder’s remark caused the rest of the girls to explode with laughter while 15-year-old Manpreet could not hold back a smile. The point that Manpreet was too young to even consider a prospective groom was most effectively made in Punjabi, even though her friends tried to make this clear in English. Here, Punjabi did the work of delivering a sensitive message in a less didactic way than simply shouting “No!” at Manpreet.

Most FOBby girls have close female friends but socialize in co-ed groups. When girls are a majority, they marginalize boys who attempt to enter and derail their conversations. Girls play a large role in community events such as weddings and enjoy discussing participants and technical terms, even when their male peers have little interest in doing so. In the following excerpt, Jaspreet (F), Harbans, and Janvi, discuss a dance that a friend’s mother had recently performed at a wedding function while Avinash and Kuldeep attempt to guide the conversation toward their own topics of interest.

**Example 6: “We call ‘em ‘weird.’”**

1. Jaspreet: Rammi’s mom did a dance! That’s so nasty!
2. Harbans: Like on a song?
3. Janvi and Jaspreet [in unison]: No! On *Jago kaad de* [a song from a ladies’ sangeet (wedding event) during which they performed]
4. Harbans: Oh.
5. Avinash: Is Rammi right there? Rammi’s mom did a dance?
7. Janvi: That’s my *mamiji*! [mother’s brother’s wife]
8. Harbans: What’s that called?
10. Avinash: *Khusra*? [a transvestite]
11. Harbans: *Khusre*? [people from the Indian state of Rajasthan]
12. Janvi: That’s my *mamiji*! [mother’s brother’s wife]
15. Avinash: *Khusre*? [transvestites, plural]
16. Harbans: *Gaddian wale*? [truck drivers]
17. Avinash: *Khusre*? [transvestite]
18. Harbans: *Khusre*? [transvestite]
19. Kuldeep: *Gaddian wale*? . . . Like truck drivers?
20. Janvi: No, you know how they used to, you know those people that come to your *pind* [village] and they have their little teepees and stuff. They’re not *khusre*.
22. Avinash: *Khusre* does not mean half man and half girl, right? *Gaddian wale*? I’ve never heard that.
23. Janvi: [to Harbans, ignoring Avinash]: You know how you guys call them *paau*? [one who performs a dance]
24. Harbans: Yeah.
25. Janvi: We call them *kale kacheyan wale.* [a type of dancer]
26. Avinash: *Khusre*? [transvestite]
27. Harbans: We call them *kale kacheyan wale.* [a type of dancer]
28. Avinash: I don’t know what the fuck, I don’t know what the fuck that is!
29. Kuldeep: Whatever, we understand you.
30. Avinash: If they’re weird, we call ‘em “weird.”

In this conversation, Janvi is very invested in helping Harbans learn the names of dances, types of dancers, and that these dancers are not transvestites. By contrast, Avinash and Kuldeep continually insert themselves into the conversation, both in hopes of hearing gossip and to offer their brand of humor. As Janvi attempts to
explain to Harbans the differences between specific dancers and Harbans tries to say them properly, Avinash repeatedly interjects by asking whether she means transvestites (lines 12, 17, and 26) while Kuldeep is equally unhelpful by mocking Harbans for her confusion between dancers (gidde wale) and truck drivers (gadde wale), and attempts to further mislead her (line 19). Janvi altogether ignores the boys and tries to explain her family village’s name for such a dancer (line 30), which makes Avinash and Kuldeep laugh loudly and tell Janvi what they really think.

While girls spend much of their time gossiping and discussing events like this one, they also use their fair share of profanity. They do not, however, stray from the “standard” English words that would elicit an FCC fine. They steer clear of racial slurs and references to genitalia; the most rancorous expression I witnessed was a girl calling a boy a “bitch.” Girls can get away with some linguistic transgressions if they are careful to do so only in the company of close friends. Even speaking on tape worried some girls. Raminder jokingly suggested what would happen if her friend’s mother heard the recording of their conversation: “Yeah, right, you know your mom’s fuckin’ gonna come over here and be, like, ‘what the fuck?’” Uttering such things in jest to a small group of friends is very different than shouting them in the school campus, which FOB boys do with abandon. When they “cuss” in English or even speak Punjabi, girls fear being caught by school faculty or overheard by gossiping peers, and restrain themselves.

Unlike FOB boys, FOB girls as well as other Desi girls are cautious about their language practices because using good language is part of a larger code of propriety to which girls are especially subject. Although using good language does not automatically make them good girls, using bad language can quickly earn them a bad reputation. For Desi teenage girls, using profane language is linked to improper comportment and even being sexually active in a cultural context where chastity is valued. They are subject to scrutiny from school faculty as well as peer policing. Tanya Hill, a vice principal, remarked about Desi girls who have violated normative expectations, “These girls, if they knew the tough language they used, their parents would be absolutely floored that their kids even know these words, let alone have them come out of their mouths! In lot of cultures, girls are supposed to be more reserved. The parents would be surprised to see how uninhibited they are with the opposite sex.” As Ms. Hill’s comment implies, bad language is linked to what must be bad behavior. As Desi girls are expected to display levels of chastity not demanded of girls of other ethnicities, using profane language is a potentially dangerous way of tainting one’s reputation. A popular girl, Avneet, explained about the FOBs, “The girls are nice, but some of the boys are kind of weird and can act sort of rowdy.” Even girls who sometimes speak in FOB styles remark about boys they know from their gurdwara: “At first the boys start out in proper Punjabi, [but] then they end up swearing and causing trouble.” Boys, however, are unconcerned with such judgment, for they operate according to a different set of community-based standards.

**Hypermasciline FOB Style**

While FOB style can be effectively used to articulate many things, for boys it centers on joking, insulting, and fighting. The use of blatantly sexist and homophobic language by young men as they socialize among themselves is not unusual (Cameron 1998; Kiesling 2001), and terms such as behenchod (sister-fucker), gaandu (gay; pejorative, like “faggot”), tatti (shit), and tuttay (testicles) are commonplace in boy’s FOB styles. Sikh culture in San Jose, like elsewhere, is one in which Sikh boys especially take great pride. From drawing the Sikh khanda (religious symbol featuring the kirpan, or sword) on notebooks to displaying bumper stickers that say “Jatt do it,” these boys believe that being Sikh Punjabi is more desirable than being from any other ethnicity. In their communities, Sikh boys socialize with men at events and sit with them at the gurdwara. While Sikhism officially prohibits drinking, in families where it occurs, only males imbibe. Overall, boys are far less monitored and are not discouraged from
roaming unsupervised in ways that girls are. In such a religious and social context, expressions of heightened masculinity are not uncommon. While they are not explicitly taught to be hypermasculine, many Sikh boys adopt this stance in the company of other Sikhs, especially other males. Such a cultural context is relevant to understanding how FOB styles become racially coded. 11

Boys use Punjabi when physically joking with one another. When Uday put KB in a headlock during morning break, KB had to shout, “Chad de!! Oh bas kar!” [Let me go! Oh, stop it!] over the roar of laughter to be released. Using distinct registers, such as villainous ones from Bollywood, also indexes masculinity. When, for example, Simran told Jett that only I would hear the conversation she was taping for me, he deployed evil filmi register to reply, “Nahin! Main tera khoon kar dunga!” [No! I’m going to murder you!]. DAE is also used to index the speech and attitudes of older Desis from a youth perspective. In the following conversation between Harminder (M) and Ranvir (M), the boys create a hypothetical exchange (the hypothetical dialogue is formatted in quotation marks) that might occur between an Indian liquor store owner and an Indian patron.

Example 7: “You Punjabi?”

1. Harminder: “Are you 21?”
2. Ranvir: “No I’m Indian!”
3. Harminder: Seriously, if you go to an Indian liquor store, dude, they will just hook you up with liquor. They don’t care about your ID. . . .
5. Harminder: “Of course!”
6. Ranvir: “It’s free, fool!”
7. Ranvir: “A le putra . . . pila!” [Here son . . . drink it!].

Here, Harminder and Ranvir effectively enact an imagined encounter between a Desi liquor store owner and a young Desi patron. The joke progresses well until Ranvir speaks out of character (line 7), nearly derailing the intended effect. Harminder steps in and compensates amply by using Punjabi, and the joke is saved.

FOBby boys also enjoy using Punjabi to swear in ways that are not recognizable as transgressions by school administrators but communicate solidarity, humorous insult, and rancor among friends. By now it should come as no surprise that cussing is a cornerstone of boy’s FOB style. Insults and discussions of women that could be deemed sexist usually take place out of earshot of girls. In this cultural context, it is not a norm to speak openly about such topics in the presence of the opposite sex.

On numerous occasions, boys strongly advised their female friends to leave their group as conversations headed in more illicit directions. When Simran decided to stay with her male friends after she was asked to leave, Harry (M) quipped, “Tenu kene jamya? Jamke galti kitti” [Who gave birth to you? She made a big mistake by giving birth to you]. Simran was so taken aback that her voice crackled when she responded in Punjabi, “Mere bare gal kardan?” [Are you talking about me?]. When Jett confirmed in English, “Yes. You is bad,” Simran decided it was time for her to find her other friends. 12 For the most part, insults are traded and boys cuss at one another, as in the following exchange in which tension arises when Kuldeep suggests that Uday might be scared to support him in an upcoming fight.

Example 8: “Am I cussing?”

1. Kuldeep: Damn, I don’t give a fuck. Why you all scared, fool?
2. Uday: Behenchod, tu galaan kad da? [Sisterfucker, are you cussing at me?]
3. Kuldeep: Yeah, that’s what really happens. Tu galaan kad da, saleya? [Are you cussing at me stupid?]. Uday’s cussing at me!
4. Uday: Mere dandi baad hoy jandi vai [I might bite my tongue later].
Here, Kuldeep and Uday engage in a metapragmatic exchange about their own language practices. When Kuldeep implies that Uday is afraid of fighting with someone (line 1), Uday asks if Kuldeep is cussing at him to insult him (line 2). Kuldeep taunts him until Uday admits that he may indeed be cussing, and he uses an idiomatic expression (line 5) that indicates that he might feel bad about it later.

As their conversation indicates, Punjabi is the language of choice for talk about fighting, threats, and other illicit activity. When making a threat, like this one that KB jokingly made at Uday during a morning break—"Uday nu marden aaj! Uday nu marden aaj!" [I'm going to kill Uday today! I'm going to kill Uday today!],—to recalling details of past fights, boys speak in Punjabi not only to avoid being overheard discussing illicit activity in English by school faculty, but also to convey details more graphically. As he recalled a recent fight he witnessed, Uday described the general setting and participants in English, but switched to Punjabi to remark, "Frances nu bechari nu pehlan kut kut maraya" [Poor Frances got beaten very badly first]. *Kut kut* is an onomatopoetic way of describing the violent beating that Uday witnessed, while *bechari* conveys his general sympathy for Frances without seeming too emotionally invested. Indeed, use of Punjabi signals a level of seriousness about fighting that English does not. In the following excerpt, Uday and Kuldeep observe a fight that has just erupted in close proximity to their spot in the back of the school campus.

**Example 9: Our Paully Vu**

1. Uday: What the hell? There’s a fight over there. Someone got popped in the head! Oh that’s Paul, isn’t it? And that’s our Paully Vu!
2. Kuldeep: No it ain’t.
3. Uday: That’s Paully Vu!
4. Kuldeep: It is?
5. Uday: Yeah, that’s our Paully Vu!
6. Kuldeep: Well I can’t see any glasses.
7. Uday: That’s Paully Vu, dude!
8. Kuldeep: That’s not Paully Vu.
9. Uday: Oy! dekh tan! [Oh! Look at that!].
10. Kuldeep: Oh! It is him!
11. Uday: Oh, whuuut?
12. Kuldeep: He got popped?
15. Uday: That’s fucked up!
16. Kuldeep: Paul ne unu bariyan layan si [Paul gave him a big beating].
17. Uday: He fought Paul Michaels—he’s in our neighborhood and shit. What the fuck is going on?
18. Kuldeep: Neighbors fucked him up?
19. Uday: They probably backed him up.
20. Kuldeep: I want to fight that Mexican [referring to Paul].
21. Uday: Oh dekh lagiyan! Oh dekh vaal kiddan khilare paya vai! [Oh look! Oh look how his hair has been mussed up!].

During this rapid-fire exchange, Kuldeep does not even look closely at the fight until Uday signals to him to do so in Punjabi. Utterances that deal with the physicality of the fight, such as those pertaining to Paul’s beating (line 17) and the postfight state of Paully (line 23), are conveyed in Punjabi. Also important here is the alliance between these FOBby boys and others from their racially diverse neighborhood. Uday repeatedly refers to Paully Vu, a Vietnamese boy, as “our” Paully, because they are from the same neighborhood. Likewise, they are surprised that Paul, a Mexican American boy also from their neighborhood, would fight with one of their own. Alliances made in
neighborhoods carry over into school, especially for boys who spend time roaming around outside of school (see Eckert 1989). Such alliances are central to how FOBby boys conceive of their masculinity, and where they may fit in among lower middle-class Vietnamese Americans and Mexican Americans in San Jose. Furthermore, their interest in this fight and fighting in general can be understood as a way of asserting masculinity in the hostile company of popular students, school faculty, and the school in general.

**FOB Styles and School Orientations**

Using FOB styles is a source of humor and solidarity for boys and girls in an otherwise dull and alienating school environment. Unlike popular, “model” teens, FOBs do not believe that the school is working to their benefit. When discussing a report card received in the mail, Uday lamented that the school had recorded far more absences than he actually had. KB remarked, “[The] system fucked up.” Kuldeep quickly added, “System is always fucking you up.” That the system is rarely, if ever, on their side is a widespread sentiment among FOB teens. This opposition toward the school and popular teens’ affinity toward it echo seminal studies of youth social categories, such as Eckert’s jocks and burnouts (1989), or Paul Willis’s (1977) “lads” and “earoles.” In both these studies, the nonnormative group’s rejection of the institutional environment makes them marginal, while the normative group’s acceptance of the same fuels their popularity. The Desi situation, however, contains a third, vital element that shapes social action: their community. Both popular and FOB teens are deeply invested in their familial social circles, their reputation, and participating in these contexts. Thus, their styles in school are not performed according to the social dynamics of school alone; rather, the types of gendered identities teens construct in school are necessarily informed by those they construct in their community, and vice versa.

What is valued in their community and the dominant values of the schools can differ significantly for FOBs; it is the former that take precedence for girls and boys, in varying ways. While these youth rarely if ever have open confrontations with teachers or speak badly about them in English when they are in earshot, talking about them in Punjabi is commonplace. Boys avoid interaction with teachers outside of class while girls at the very least greet them, a move that is avoided by FOB boys. One day during lunch, Simran, Kuldeep, Uday, and Jett were perched on the railing of the library’s handicap ramp when the sound of walkie-talkies grew louder. As the teacher Ms. Marie Subal approached, she announced, “Coming through, thanks!” Simran greeted her with a cheerful, “Hi Miss Subal!” Ms. Subal responded by saying “Hi” to the group and kept walking, looking at the boys who failed to greet her. As she passed, KB scowled, “Marie pehri yaar. Bahut pehri yaar” [Marie is mean, dude. She is really mean, dude]. Although Miss Subal was in earshot, KB’s use of a South Asian pronunciation of her name as “MAH-ree” rather than American version “muh-REE” camouflaged the fact that she is the subject of his remark. Jett confirmed as she was walking away, “[Marie is mean, dude. She is really mean, dude]. Although Miss Subal was in earshot, KB’s use of a South Asian pronunciation of her name as “MAH-ree” rather than American version “muh-REE” camouflaged the fact that she is the subject of his remark. Jett confirmed as she was walking away, “You see these teachers who are hella mean to you in class and you see them outside and they’re all nice.” Uday echoed this sentiment by saying “She’s hella mean fool, hella fucked up.” In this interaction, only Simran interacted with Ms. Subal, albeit in a brief way. By commenting about Ms. Subal in Punjabi and using DAE to pronounce her name, the boys were able to claim a private moment in an encounter that girls and faculty would regard as decidedly public.

As their use of Punjabi and English profanity illustrates, boys regard school to be a far more private space than girls do. Girls regard the school as consisting of a number of semiprivate opportunities but ultimately as a public space in which they must carefully self-regulate their speech and comportment. Girls rarely cross limits set by their communities and schools. Thus, their use of FOB style can be a stylistic variable that they control, but a status one when compared to normative standards set by popular Desi teens. Boys likewise control FOB style as a status variable, but their
different conception of what is public and private makes their language use a status variable as well. Sikh Punjabi boys, who are under few constraints in community settings, are still subject to school rules. Because their reputations are not at stake, they can make any space private by using Punjabi and assuming that they will not be understood. In these ways, gendered differences in language use play an important role not only in how FOB boys express themselves differently than girls do, but also in how their language use is regarded by school faculty.

Metalinguistic Awareness and Racializing Consequences

FOBby boys may appear to evade punishment by speaking Punjabi when few understand it but are in fact subject to judgment. Silverstein (1993) argues that metapragmatic discourse is underpinned by particular cultural values and beliefs that appear naturalized through ideologies. In U.S. schools, as well as in other institutional settings, the ideal of English monolingualism prevails. In California schools, where bilingual education has long been a point of contention, even social uses of languages other than English have met with negative reception. Rosina Lippi-Green (1997) illustrates how “standard” ways of speaking are unmarked, normalizing, and powerful in their ability to relegate other varieties as unpreferred (see also Hill 1998; Woolard 1989). While switches in code may be unmarked and integral to constructions of identity, switching frequently is marked in a monolingual U.S. context, and it is against this norm that difference is constructed (Bailey 2007:268; see also Urciuoli 1999; Zentella 1997). In this indexical order, FOB styles index a nonnormative linguistic practice that conflicts with the dominant monolingual value. Although it may seem that multilingualism has no place in these schools, ideologies of multiculturalism complicate this message. Since the early 1990s, multiculturalism has encouraged the celebration of diverse cultures and has framed language as an important part of heritage. The unspoken caveat, however, is that such expressions are limited to designated times and spaces, such as multicultural day performances and curricular events.

Metapragmatic discourse about monolingual English standards underscores how FOB styles stand in stark contrast to this norm. For school faculty, such displays are immediate markers of otherness and cause for further investigation. Hearing loud displays of Punjabi is how Mr. López, a Greene High School administrator, initially noticed FOBby teens. He recalled his surprise when he realized this group is not Latino: “Where did they come from? Our population is so brown. And you were colorblind, let’s say. East Indians look like Hispanics. Some of them are real dark, they may look like Afro-Americans. They come here, and it’s not like they have a big flag saying ‘I’m East Indian.’ ” Mr. López explained that in the veritable sea of brown faces at Greene, he initially mistook some Desi students for Latinos. This racial ambiguity, which is less a problem for East Asian or Southeast Asian students, was quickly clarified when he heard them speaking in “Indian” (i.e., Punjabi) as he patrolled the schoolyard. As the faculty member in charge of ESL, Mr. López is privy to assessments of each student’s language abilities. As we sat in his office one morning, Mr. López scanned his list for Desi students in ELL “English Language Learners” classes as well as ESL, “English as a Second Language.” The associations between his list, ELL and ESL students, and youth who code switch but speak English fluently, are loose at best. When he sees groups of Desi teens not speaking English, they potentially became Desi teens who may not be able to speak English well.

The monolingual ideology that values English alone conflicts with FOB styles that follow a South Asian multilingual ideology of using different varieties and registers for different purposes. On a typically sunny California morning, Mr. López offered to show me how he makes such connections and invited me to accompany him on his surveillance rounds. Gesturing toward the FOBs, Mr. López remarked, “Because of their English, they pretty much stay by themselves, which hurts, because they speak their own language and they don’t speak in English and they don’t get any better.” Whether accurate or not, this association between being Limited English Proficient and
being bilingual can be quite detrimental to FOBs. While a handful of youth actually need ESL classes, the vast majority of FOBs speak English fluently and with an American accent; many actually speak it better than Punjabi. Being called FOBs when they are second- and third-generation teens predictably does not improve this situation.

Conclusion

Language practices contribute to how some Desis remain model minorities and continue to integrate into upper middle-class white America while others share more economic, academic, and professional similarities with Latinos and other local populations. Being children of adults who hold nonskilled jobs and have far more extensive contact with extended family and new arrivals from South Asia influences linguistic aspects of FOB style in ways that marginalize them at school. While Silicon Valley offered atypical job and wealth accumulation opportunities to these nonskilled workers who became middle class, such economic prosperity has not led to equal increases in social prestige for their children in schools. Differences in cultural capital address how parents may not be able to instill in their children the type of cultural and linguistic knowledge about school codes that would lead them to refrain from using FOB styles at school. On the other hand, FOBby teen use of Punjabi, DAE, and the other language varieties discussed here privileges community language ideologies of multilingualism over school values of monolingualism. Their repertoire of stylistic resources varies from their parents’, but their use of distinct varieties, accents, and registers for different types of speech mirrors their parents’ ways of speaking. FOBby teens are aware of school codes of profanity and the punitive consequences of violating them, but are less aware of the racializing consequences of not following English monolingualism when they perform FOB styles.

FOB styles contribute to the creation of racialized meanings in the school context by disrupting the homogeneity of the model minority stereotype and playing a key role in racial formation (Omi and Winant 1994). In the struggle over who is and is not to be considered white, Desis, like other immigrant groups, have been consistently left in the blind spot of racial definition or fall subject to its aberrant nature. Scholars note the racial ambiguity that surrounds the category of Asian Americans (Okihiro 1994), and South Asians in particular (Prashad 2004; Radhakrishnan 2003; Viswanathan 1993). It has been suggested that as a model minority, Desis are poised to join white America (Prashad 2000). By engaging in normative uses of language that include speaking in English and minimizing profanity, popular Desi teens are rarely reprimanded by faculty for their styles of speaking and easily live up to the model minority stereotype. They distance themselves from FOB styles by meeting a normative standard and remaining linguistically unmarked, despite being racially marked as Asian American and brown. Popular styles can be understood as an ethnic variation on whiteness, in which a cosmopolitan, Bollywood-influenced style is showcased in performative contexts. Popular identity in school remains model in every way, including linguistically, and leaves these youth well positioned to integrate into wealthy white Californian communities.

Nonnormative use of language, combined with other unpopular speech practices such as quoting Bollywood, exchanging insults, and talking about fights codes FOBby teens as brown rather than white. FOBs distance themselves from popular Desis and instead align with Mexican American, Vietnamese American, and other teens with whom they feel an affinity in their neighborhoods. In Silicon Valley, these populations, like Desis, are not uniformly upwardly mobile and are subject to similar types of racializing judgments. Because boys and girls differently regard the school as more or less private based on the gendered standards of propriety they are expected to achieve in their communities, boys are far less self-censoring than girls in their language use. Both are marginalized by peers, but boys tend to be more conspicuous violators of school codes. The “brownness” of Indians, as Mr. López calls it, suggests
that if Desis are not acting in model ways, they should be grouped with those who require reform. These social processes affect the positioning of South Asian Americans vis-à-vis other racial groups in the United States and underscore the role of language use in shaping racial meaning in diasporic communities.

Notes

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1. I use the term race to refer to broader classifications such as Asian American, African American, white, and Latino, and the term ethnicity to refer to differences in language, religion, and regional specificities within these groups.

2. I use the youth orthography FOBby, as evidenced in their own use of this term in its adjectival form. Angela Reyes (2007) reports that Southeast Asian American youth use the acronym F.O.B. by pronouncing each letter, as well as the word FOB; in my study, only the latter is used.

3. According to the 1990 census, over 70 percent of Desis in the United States are bilingual in their heritage language and English (Garcia 1997:4), and the 2000 census confirms these trends. About 95 percent of the youth in my study understand their heritage language; about 75 percent are conversationally fluent in it. Whereas parents educated in South Asia learned at least three languages, their children raised in the United States usually only speak their heritage language and English.

4. Arguably Hindi, India’s postindependence language; Urdu, the national language of Pakistan; and Hindi–Urdu, a hybrid dialect that is prevalent in Bollywood films all hold both nationalist and popular value in diasporic communities. Yet, because some regions of South India eschew Hindi as a national standard and because of a fraught relationship between India and Pakistan and their languages, debates over whether English should be India’s national language persist (LaDousa 2005). I found this contest to be less pronounced in Silicon Valley Desi communities. Although some adults value Hindi as a lingua franca, and using it helped me communicate with speakers who otherwise preferred Punjabi, most adults prefer their heritage language or English over Hindi.

5. Earlier studies about early Sikh farmers who intermarried with Mexican Americans (Leonard 1992) as well as Sikh communities during the 1980s (Gibson 1988) provide important background and context for this discussion of Sikh teenagers. See Shankar (2008) for discussions of similarities with and differences between earlier populations and those discussed here with regard to community values, schools, and youth culture.

6. All Punjabi-to-English translations and transliterations were done with the assistance of teenagers who made recordings and, more recently, with the assistance of a young woman in her mid-twenties whom I have known since she was a teenager in a Silicon Valley high school. My knowledge of Hindi and passive competence in Punjabi enabled me to follow much of the unspecialized conversation. Still, I relied on teens to understand specific terms as well as their norms of usage, which can vary from practices of Punjabi speakers elsewhere, as well as from those of their parents. I use their translations, as they were able to provide the contextual information about utterances as well as local, teen-specific glosses about certain terms and phrases, and have not noted deviances from “standard” Punjabi.

7. Elsewhere I discuss in detail the types of gender norms to which boys and girls are differently subject (see Shankar 2008, chapter 7).

8. Although this study did not track language shift, it has benefited greatly from the work of Don Kulick (1992) as well as other recent work on gender and language shift (Cavanaugh 2006; Hoffman 2006) as well as linguistic syncretism (Fader 2007).

9. Translations of specific terms in this transcript were provided by Janvi, but there appears to be some inconsistency between her translations and those of other Punjabi speakers I
consulted later. For example, Janvi insisted that *gaddian wale, paau* and *kale kacheyan wale* are names for dancers in their Sikh Punjabi community, and I have included them as such, but other Punjabi speakers could not confirm these translations. The less common or possibly incorrect usage of these terms appears to contribute to the misrecognition and humor surrounding them in this conversation.

10. Current FCC (Federal Communications Commission) banned words still conform to George Carlin’s “The Seven Words you Can’t Say on Television”—*shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cock-sucker, motherfucker, and tits*, although occasional exceptions are made, and girls tended to use the first three the most. Greene High School shares this list and also discourages the use of words such as *hell, goddamn, and asshole* in school contexts, which girls also used.

11. While a comparison between Sikhs and other South Asian ethnic groups is beyond the scope of this paper, the hypermasculine stance of some FOB boys echoes the ways in which the British constructed Sikhs as masculine in comparison to other ethnic groups such as Bengalis (see Metcalf 1997). I am not here suggesting that Sikhs in Silicon Valley should be considered a “martial race,” but rather, that this South Asian ideology may have some relevance to the hypermasculine stance expressed by some Sikh boys. I am grateful to Paul Manning for drawing my attention to this point.

12. Jett’s comment, “Yes. You is bad” is not in DAE but is similar to other nonstandard English utterances I heard FOB teens use with one another.

13. Elsewhere (Shankar 2004a) I discuss the complicated inception and execution of multiculturalism and the ways in which it often exacerbates the very racial and ethnic inequalities it addresses (see also Labrador 2004).

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