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Style and Language Use among Youth of the New Immigration: Formations of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Everyday Practice

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In this article I consider “style” as a linguistic and cultural concept that can demonstrate how identities performed through language use are linked to topics of central concern in studies of immigrant youth, including racial and ethnic formation, generational cohorts, acculturation, assimilation, and gender. I draw on anthropological and sociolinguistic approaches to style not generally considered in migration studies and present ethnographic data of two cliques of Desi (South Asian American) teens in a Northern California high school. I argue that analyses of youth style can substantially complicate assimilation frameworks by highlighting the ways in which young peoples’ linguistic practices may not fit neatly into commonly used analytical categories of “immigrant” and “American.” Focusing on how political economy and local histories inform power and difference that shape migration experiences for youth, the article moves beyond routinely examined areas of heritage language retention and loss to analyze the significance of youth performances of heritage languages as well as English.

Key Words: Migration, language, style, youth, race and ethnicity, class, South Asian Americans

Migration scholars have examined, from a variety of perspectives, the role that heritage languages, or mother tongues, play in shaping migration experiences for youth of the “new,” or post-1965, immigration to the United States. Although heritage language retention and loss are routinely considered in assimilation and acculturation studies, less attention has been paid to the significance of youth performances of heritage languages and English. In this article I consider “style” as a linguistic and cultural concept that can demonstrate how identities performed through language use are linked to topics of central concern in studies of immigrant youth, including racial and ethnic formation, generational cohorts, acculturation, assimilation, and gender. To define style, I draw on anthropological and sociolinguistic approaches not usually considered in migration studies, including those that connect language use to ideology, everyday practice, and social meaning,
and consider it an embodied practice of heightened importance in a youth context (Eckert 2008; Eckert and Rickford 2001; Irvine 2001). Ethnographic and sociolinguistic studies of youth style can substantially complicate assimilation frameworks by highlighting the ways in which young peoples’ linguistic practices may not fit neatly into commonly used analytical categories of “immigrant” and “American,” and how political economy and local histories inform power and difference that shape migration experiences for youth. Studies of cultural practices in diaspora have moved away from this dichotomy in favor of “hybridity” (see, e.g., Dhingra 2007; Lowe 1996), and a similar revision is necessary for understanding language use.

In these ways the article offers a distinctly anthropological contribution to the study youth of the new immigration that complements and extends frameworks of assimilation and acculturation that dominate migration studies. It builds on insightful critiques of migration studies of adults (Glick-Schiller 2003; Lamphere 1992; di Leonardo 1986; Pessar 2003) and expands them by considering the specificities of youth language use. Looking beyond heritage language retention and loss to more dynamic, context-based language practices evident in the construction of style can reveal important insights about youth identity and subjectivity. To exemplify dynamics of language use and style, I present ethnographic data and excerpts from spoken discourse collected during fieldwork with Desi (South Asian American) teenagers in Silicon Valley high schools and communities, during and after the high-tech boom (1999–2001, 2005, 2007). I contrast the styles of two Desi cliques in a San Jose high school through extensive ethnographic observations in schools, homes, and community settings; analyses of recordings of spontaneously occurring conversation between youth in schools; and interviews with students, parents, grandparents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Through the construction and performance of distinctive styles, I argue that youth index social meanings that offer insight into their identities, subjectivities, and broader processes of migration.

Youth of the new immigration, class, and social categories

In the United States the “new immigration” refers to immigrants who arrived from 1965 onward. Some possessed educational qualifications in engineering, medicine, and similar professional fields; others were sponsored as family members of these highly skilled laborers, while still others came for wage labor jobs or as refugee or asylum cases. In 2000 approximately 10 percent of the United States population (27.5 million) was counted as children of one or two immigrants,
primarily from Asia and Latin America (Levitt and Waters 2002). Scholars have compared the different political, economic, and social realities of the late twentieth century to previous eras of immigration and noted that while early twentieth-century Jewish, Irish, Italian, Polish, and other European immigrants were less connected to their homeland after the first generation and subject to stronger forces of “Americanization,” new immigrants in a post-civil-rights era have been able to retain aspects of their heritage culture and language through multiculturalism, a continuous stream of immigration, dual citizenship, cheaper means of travel, and ease of communication (Foner 2003: 246–248). Unlike former eras, transnational ties to a home country may be maintained for political, economic, and social reasons, including racial discrimination in the United States (Basch et al. 1994). These shifts, along with visible formations of post-civil-rights ethnic communities, have necessitated new ways of theorizing experiences and outcomes of migration (Brettell 2000).

California has long been a major receiving state for immigrants, and Silicon Valley is an especially dynamic region in this regard. During the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, the high-tech industry drew Desi families from South Asia and regions of the South Asian diaspora as well as other parts of the United States and California. Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian families in my study arrived in Silicon Valley in the late 1970s and early 1980s and represent a range of class backgrounds. I use the terms ‘lower-middle-class’ and ‘upper-middle-class’ to indicate a family’s class status according to the size of their home, neighborhood, occupation, educational background, and English proficiency, although these distinctions tended to be more fluid than completely discrete. Most lower-middle-class Desi adults were employees of local Silicon Valley technology companies and worked on assembly lines, as janitorial and cafeteria staff, and as local delivery people. Occasionally, they were partners in small businesses, such as co-owning a convenient mart or liquor store. Until the dramatic crash of the “dot com” sector of the high-tech industry in 2000, these adults had been in this region at least a decade and benefited from ample work opportunities, job stability, and often stock options. The majority of these families occupied the same modest homes they bought over twenty years ago when they moved to Silicon Valley, but these homes had appreciated tremendously as the high-tech industry grew. When they first arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s, extended families often had to pool their resources and buy homes to be shared by two to three families until they could amass enough capital to eventually own their own homes.

By the time I began research in 1999, most lower-middle-class youth lived with their nuclear family and sometimes a live-in grandparent in
a single-family home in diverse neighborhoods populated with Asian Americans, Latinos, and African Americans of a similar class status. Lower-middle-class teens lived in small homes with their families in the flat areas immediately surrounding the school. Along with their families, these teens socialized in close-knit ethnic communities and knew their friends at school from their regular attendance at their gurdwara (Sikh temple) or from community events. As residents of previously working-class neighborhoods that had gentrified rapidly, these young people attended highly competitive schools in which getting into a college-bound track could be challenging. Although lower-middle-class parents were involved in their children’s schooling to varying extents, they were limited in their knowledge about local school systems and often lacked comfort in their English-speaking abilities.

Living a far more upscale lifestyle, upper-middle-class Desis mirrored predominant media images of Silicon Valley engineers, CEOs, and venture capitalists. In these Sikh Punjabi, Hindu Gujarati, and Muslim Pakistani families, at least one parent had an upwardly mobile career, a bachelor’s degree or higher, and was fluent in English. Some migrated as professionals from South Asia, while others moved from Canada, Uganda, or London to settle into large California homes in gated communities and other high-end developments. Their teenage children attended high-performing public schools with other wealthy Asian American and white youth, sought admission to competitive four-year colleges, and aspired to make their mark on the high-tech industry, medicine, or some other professional field.

This class divide was to an extent mirrored in Desi teen social cliques. Social cliques are not an obvious topic to consider in migration studies of youth, but in my research they emerged as an important social formation. In the racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse landscapes of Silicon Valley high schools, youth used a wide range of resources to form social cliques and distinguish their clique from others at their school. Desi teens, like others at “Greene High” School in San Jose, California, differentiated themselves into cliques according to their family’s class position, ethnicity, language use, and orientation toward school activities. Among Desi teens, I observed several types of cliques organized by common interests and subjectivities, and I discuss two of them here: “populars” and “FOBs” (which stands for “Fresh off the Boat” and is pronounced as a word, not as individual letters). These two categories are significant because they are designations that youth themselves used to refer to one another, though not necessarily to refer to themselves. For instance, FOBby teens did not refer to themselves as FOBs, but referred to other Desis as populars, and vice
versa. At Greene High School, popular Desi teens were a small, elite group of primarily second-generation teens that included girls and boys of Punjabi, Gujarati, and Bangladeshi backgrounds, as well as youth of other ethnicities that they met through their avid involvement in school dances, fashion shows, pep rallies, and other events. Popular Desi teens wore higher-end clothing and many drove luxury cars that their parents had bought for them. Girls carefully styled, colored, and processed their hair and meticulously tended to their makeup, nail polish, and other aspects of their appearance. They were careful to not display styles that they considered “ghetto” or “gangsta,” such as wearing dark lipstick and lip liner, thinly tweezing their eyebrows, or pulling their hair into tight ponytails—all markers of San Jose gang styles (Mendoza Denton 2008). Likewise, popular boys avoided baggy clothing, sagging pants, and anything else that would locally index gangsta styles, which they affiliated with working-class youth more broadly.

FOBs, who bore the pejorative label that generally refers to new immigrants, were more ethnically and linguistically homogeneous than populars. Predominantly second-generation youth who were born and raised in San Jose, along with some 1.5-generation youth who immigrated during childhood but before adolescence, FOBby teens were not the new arrivals for whom the term FOB is usually reserved. They nonetheless earned this label from populars and other youth who thought that they performed linguistic and cultural attributes of speech, dress, and self-presentation linked to newly arrived immigrants. Youth who displayed FOBby styles made ample use of the attributes populars avoided, including gangsta elements and a preference for appearing and sounding tough. FOBby girls looked noticeably different from their highly styled popular peers. Their lower-middle-class status made high-end clothing and apparel difficult to obtain, and many followed the religious norms of Sikhism in which they did not cut their hair or wear makeup and revealing clothing. Boys embraced gangsta ways of dressing and speaking, and several Sikh boys wore their unshorn hair in turbans. Families and communities gave FOBby boys far more latitude about dress and comportment than girls, who had to be far more careful about how their stylistic choices could be negatively regarded by their gossip-prone peers at school. FOBby cliques were more ethnically, religiously, and linguistically uniform than popular ones, and stylistic choices maintained these boundaries. FOBby teens placed great value on being able to display knowledge about their cultural heritage, religion, festivals, and rituals and proudly discussed these topics as a means of strengthening the bonds of their own cliques.

Teens variably positioned themselves spatially and socially in the school landscape to underscore the status of their clique and
differentiate their style from others. Popularity connected some Desi, Latino, Vietnamese American, Filipino American, and white teens together in school activities, and daily socializing occurred between these youth in the centralized “quad” area of their white minority high school. Popular teens maintained their elite status not only through fashionable clothing and self-presentation afforded by their upper-middle-class families but also by continually asserting a sense of ownership over the quad and the school-spirit activities held there. Occupying a different space in the school, FOBby teens “kicked it” or spent regular time together in the back corners of their school campus alongside other racially and ethnically homogenous cliques of minority students. In these socially marginal corners of their school, they embraced and performed stylistic elements prevalent in their ethnic communities and their working-class San Jose neighborhoods.

FOB and popular, like other social categories in high schools, are a central but fluid part of everyday life. There are certainly areas of social knowledge, interest, and taste that overlap between these two groups, but enough disparate elements exist that make this comparison a useful one. Although the oppositionality between them may seem stark, it is useful to bear in mind that they are similar to other social categories in the highly charged, emotionally volatile world of high school. In school, differences embodied in social cliques can be heightened in ways that they may not be in other realms, such as time with family, at community events, and in religious spaces. I investigate social cliques here because the distinctions they contain are both socially significant to youth themselves and anthropologically relevant to understanding aspects of the migration experience, especially the variance contained in a single ethnic group and the different ways in which ethnicity is performed. With this understanding of social cliques, I now turn to the role of language in mediating these social formations and shaping meanings of gender, ethnicity, and race.

**Style and language use in migration studies**

There is no question that language is an important aspect of the migration process. Migration studies have explored the comparative bilingual abilities of first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants. In their “children of immigrants longitudinal study” (CILS) consisting of survey and interview data, Portes and Rumbaut (2001: 274) consider English proficiency in their analysis of “selective acculturation” and argue that youth who “retain” their parents’ culture and language feel less of a generational clash than those “youths who have severed bonds with their past in the pursuit of acceptance by their
native peers.” The role of bilingualism has also been noted to be significant insofar as it aids immigrant families in entering and thriving in the labor market and participating more substantially in a multilingual global economy. Bilingualism is especially important to the transnational activities of the second generation (Levitt and Waters 2002). The success of transnationalism relies heavily on heritage language retention, so much so that attachments to homelands may be renewed or curtailed on the basis of the linguistic abilities of the second generation (Rumbaut 2002). But how can we consider language use in ways beyond heritage language proficiency? What other dynamic potential does it hold to illustrate aspects of the migration process?

Although migration studies have routinely focused on the issue of heritage language retention and loss, a style-based approach shifts the emphasis to linguistic performance and social meanings of use. Styles consist of both linguistic and material elements, which together create distinct semiotic meanings in a high school context. My examination of “style” focuses primarily on language use in the context of other aspects of youth expression and extends concepts from anthropology and sociolinguistics. Language-based studies of style investigate the significance of variation among speakers and consider the innovative ways in which speakers use linguistic resources to create distinct identities. Moving beyond regional, socially significant variation (e.g., Labov 1972), recent work has considered style as a way in which individuals regard and attach values to distinct language varieties (Auer 2007; Bucholtz and Hall 2008; Coupland 2007).

I view style as an emergent resource through which youth construct and perform identities informed by the particularities of their migration histories, political economy, and their high schools. In her extensive work on language use and social cliques in high schools, Penelope Eckert (2000) demonstrates how youth embody social meanings linked to styles and analyzes how social groupings shape, and are shaped by, style. She asserts, “Style is not just the product of the construction of social meaning, or even the locus of construction of such social meaning; it is what makes the negotiation of such social meaning possible” (Eckert 2008: 126). Discussing Eckert’s work with youth, Kathryn Woolard (2008: 445) elaborates on the ways in which youth manage and perform style: “Young people take up the elements of style right along with, and as inherent parts of, the situation, the genre, and the stance or identity that they index.” In a migration context, the ways in which youth use social voices and enact certain ways of being speaks not only to questions of social cliques but also to subjectivity and the formation of ethnic and racial meanings.
Style emphasizes not just what is distinctive but how such attributes, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, may be comparatively regarded. Irvine (2001) stresses that stylistic elements themselves are less important than the meaning they take on vis-à-vis other elements in a system. Through language use, as well as other markers such as clothing and comportment, FOBs and populars differentiate their social cliques from one another and from youth of other ethnicities. Accordingly, style can demonstrate that youth do not simply belong to categories constructed or identified by immigration scholars but that they perform and transform these categories through their participation in them.

My examination of style builds on ethnographic approaches that demonstrate how youth use language in ways that shape meanings of race, class, and gender (Alim and Baugh 2007; Fordham 2008; Goodwin 2006; Shankar 2011). Looking at bilingualism among Latino youth, Zentella (1997) investigates intergenerational politics of bilingualism on *el bloque* among three generations of Puerto Ricans in New York City and reports how a range of linguistic processes—language socialization, code-switching, bilingualism, and language shift—are significant to shaping the identities of Latino youth. Examining bilingualism in a different context, Orellana (2009) considers the translation work that children and young people undertake between their parents and American society. Looking at peer interaction, Reyes (2007) ethnographically explores the use of stereotypes among Southeast Asian American youth in Philadelphia as a way of demonstrating linkages between class and regional racial formations. Likewise, Bucholtz (2009) also studies the performance of language-based identities by Southeast Asian youth in California. Girls’ use of distinct styles of speaking enable them to display their affiliation with different social groups at school. Among youth in the United Kingdom, language has been linked to new ethnicities and racially coded talk that enables British youth to perform ethnicity by using locally available Caribbean and South Asian styles (Hewitt 1986), as well as to cross into other social categories through stylized uses of language (Rampton 1995, 2006). New ethnicities and ways of understanding difference in migration contexts have also productively foregrounded youth linguistic creativity (Baumann 1996; Harris 2006).

Over 75 percent of teens self-reported as bilingual, but I observed that how they chose to use their heritage language and other language varieties differed according to gender, class, religion, and familial norms of usage. Language choice, the use of particular lexical items, preferred and dispreferred topics of discussion, and gender-based expectations were all integral to defining and maintaining
contrasts in styles between popular and FOBby youth. “Marked” ways of speaking—those that stood out in some way because they did not conform to the “unmarked” norm (Bucholtz and Hall 2008)—were especially common for FOBby teens. In the lower-middle-class households of FOBby teens, the educational level of parents and older relatives generally did not extend beyond high school. These youth and adults primarily used heritage languages for multigenerational communication, during community events, and in religious places of worship. Having limited English proficiency and being less knowledgeable about their children’s schools made parents of FOBby teens less able and likely to advocate for their children. Because these parents were less familiar with school expectations, they were less able to socialize their children to follow school norms of communication and comportment. FOBby teens regarded the classroom as a monolingual English environment, but they considered lunch and break times as spaces in which they could socialize freely in their heritage language. Elsewhere I discuss in detail how FOBby teens use Punjabi, Hindi, and Urdu in gendered ways that enable sociability in what they considered to be an alienating school environment, and how school faculty and administrators judged this heritage language use in unforeseen ways (2008b). Building on that investigation, I here focus on the marked and unmarked varieties of English that popular and FOBby teens use to create distinctive and contrasting styles, and the ways in which these stylistic performances are judged in a school context.

Differing in their orientation to language use at school, popular teens rarely spoke their heritage language in this context, but they did discuss ethnically marked topics in the context of events such as school performances and fashion shows. For them, heritage languages and cultures were important tools for performance and display but not a part of everyday interaction. Most popular teens’ parents were fluent English speakers and primarily spoke English at home, either alone or in combination with a heritage language. Extensive parental school involvement helped popular teens to develop a sophisticated understanding of academic as well as enrichment activities and opportunities, including following preferred school norms of English monolingualism and avoiding profanity. The examples below are drawn from transcripts of spontaneously occurring conversations recorded during 2000–2002 between Desi youth at school during lunch and break times. Predominant emphasis is on the language use of FOBby teens, because their styles are more differentiated according to gender and marked with regard to class, ethnicity, and race.
Style-based constructions of gender and class

Gendered performances of linguistic styles do the important work of reproducing particular power dynamics in school as well as social and cultural values across generations in communities. Gender differentiation was evident between the styles of popular boys and girls. Boys used common California slang such as “dude,” “hella” (very), and “sweet” (excellent); their talk routinely included topics of cars, electronics, girls, social life, and college. My relatively limited observations of popular boys indicated that their speech practices at school were areas through which they constructed masculinity, negotiated topics of generational change, and considered their futures in Silicon Valley and elsewhere. The styles of popular girls—whom I observed and recorded more systematically—resembled a contemporary version of Valley Girl, in which expressions such as “omigod,” “totally,” and the discourse marker “like” abounded.7 Favored topics of discussion included hair, makeup, clothes, friends, boys, dating, college, disagreements with parents, and gossip. During special events and programs, popular girls displayed a great deal of pride in dance, music, and language that showcased their heritage culture and language. They could spend months choreographing a bhangra or Bollywood-inspired dance or choosing the perfect sari or lehenga to wear to prom.

Example 1 typifies cultural and linguistic elements of popular style and illustrates how they construct sophisticated appearances and index sexual knowledge. Like other instances I observed, popular girls here spoke entirely in English about self-presentation and openly discussed topics of boys, prom dates, and sexuality. The following is an excerpt of a recording made in the large, well-appointed bathroom of popular girl Shabana’s home in the hours preceding her school’s Junior Prom. Shabana and her friend Amahl, both seniors, were helping several of their junior friends with their hair and makeup for the big dance. Shabana skillfully applied makeup and created attractive “up-do” hairstyles for each makeover recipient, who sat in a folding chair facing the large mirror. Amahl sat on the floor and handed her cosmetics and hair appliances while I sat on the edge of the bathtub with an audio recorder.8 Even though they were not attending the dance, Shabana and Amahl displayed their extensive knowledge about who would be there.

Example 1: “Girl toy.”

1. Shabana: Chris’s girlfriend is coming. (2 sec.) Christian’s little girl
2. toy.
3. Amahl: Oh, who’s that?
4. Shabana: This girl from, it’s not Washington [High School], I don’t think. It’s, like, American [High School].
5. Shalini: “Girl toy?”
6. Shabana: You know how we say “boy toy?” Well, she’s a “girl toy.”

In this exchange, Shabana and Amahl use “boy toy” and “girl toy” to refer to peers who were sexually available and open to multiple partners. In line 7, Shabana responds to my query by relating “girl toy” to “boy toy,” a term I have heard her and friends use to refer to boys they flirt with and consider as potential dates for chaperoned social events. She uses the pronoun “we” to index the shared understanding of the term within her popular clique. Such usage would be commonplace among mainstream American teenagers, but it runs counter to norms about sexual awareness and propriety held by many Silicon Valley Desi families. Depending on their level of religiosity, families expected their teenage children—especially their daughters—to abstain from dating and sexual intimacy until after marriage. Shabana and Amahl, who are held to these expectations by their observant Muslim families, would not use such language when speaking with adults in family or community settings. They enjoy doing so, however, with their friends. Popular girl styles enable them to display sexual knowledge with their peers, and gender and sexuality are co-constructed through language about desire (Cameron and Kulick 2003; Valentine 2003). Such talk could easily occur in school, where topics of dating and sexual activity are commonplace. Popular girls are less concerned that their conversations would be reported to their parents or make them the object of unfavorable gossip. Unlike FOBby teens, whose school and community worlds overlap more significantly, popular social cliques tend to be small, insular, and exclusive—all things that enabled them to keep their private conversations, such as the one above, much more confidential.

FOBby teen styles overlap somewhat with that of popular teens, in that they, like most California teens, make frequent use of the discourse marker “like” and elements of Valley Girl style such as “totally” and “omigod.” Unlike their popular peers, FOBby teens also use Punjabi or Hindi-Urdu at school to quote reported speech, relay humorous family and community incidents, and to simply speak with one another. As noted earlier, FOBby styles of speaking, interaction, and comportment vary greatly from those of newly arrived immigrants because FOBby teens draw on a wide range of linguistic and cultural markers that would only be available to insiders with extensive local knowledge. FOBby girls and boys differ in the ways that they perform styles and index clique membership. Even at school, FOBby girls express greater concern about the ways in which their dress, speech, and comportment might be perceived. Most FOBby teens at Greene High School attend
the same gurdwara and their families socialized together in close-knit communities. The norms of these communities, especially for more religious Sikh Punjabi girls, include abstaining from premarital sexual and social relations with boys; avoiding clothing, makeup, and hairstyles that would be considered immodest; and using language that could be read as unfeminine. FOBby boys are also not officially allowed to be romantically or sexually involved with girls but are under far less pressure to conform to this expectation. Although girls commonly follow these proscriptions with their families and communities, school was a place where they selectively push these boundaries. Knowing that their FOBby peers could quickly make them the subject of gossip if their transgressions are too blatant or frequent, girls perform ethnicity, toughness, and other FOBby attributes of style with an eye toward their reputations.

Because FOBby girls are so readily judged by their male and female peers, socializing can prove to be a complicated endeavor. When girls choose to date, they tend to do so on what they call the DL, or “down low,” in which both parties are discreet about the relationship and make strategic decisions about when and where to meet. In the following exchange (Example 2), Inderpreet has grown impatient with the unrealistic requests of her boyfriend, Avinash, to hold dance rehearsals for an upcoming “International Day” performance at his house. Inderpreet is frustrated because unlike most of her FOBby friends, she decided to extend herself into a social sphere in which she is not entirely comfortable (e.g., that of school activities). In an unusual turn, popular girls and FOBs decided to collaborate on a dance for International Day. The situation arose when popular girls needed more Desi girls for a dance and a handful of FOBby girls agreed, because they wanted to perform their heritage culture and had no other way into the program. Here, Inderpreet makes her frustration known to Avinash and her female friend Manjeet.

**Example 2: “Whatever, bitch!”**

1. Inderpreet {to Avinash, screaming}: Whatever, bitch! God! No, I’m not practicing at your house!
2. Avinash: Why can’t you practice at my house?
3. Manjeet: That’s fuckin’ rude, Inderpreet! Oh my god, you made me say “fuckin’.”
4. Avinash: You made her say “fuckin’”!
5. Manjeet: You go to his house, right? It’s not like you’re gonna go there the first time. And, like
6. Inderpreet: {scream}
10. Manjeet: If there’s
11. Inderpreet: Do you think I’m gonna get caught? Do you think my
12. parents are gonna let me go?
14. Inderpreet: Then why risk it?

Inderpreet compellingly performs a tough FOBby style to emphasize her point. She addresses Avinash as “bitch” (line 1), which is not technically profanity but nonetheless far more marked than calling another girl a bitch, or using a term more commonly used to insult men. FOBby girls may use profanity for casual talk or joking, but I rarely observed them using “bitch” in an interaction with a boy. Indexes of toughness in this conversation do not conform with gendered expectations of use, so much so that Manjeet and Avinash remark on and offer “metapragmatic” assessments, or reflections on one’s own speech—in particular about the terms “bitch” and “fuckin’.” Manjeet is the first to remark on Inderpreet’s language and uses profanity herself to emphasize its severity, which she subsequently corrects (lines 4–5) and Avinash mocks (line 6). By using tough language and taking an aggressive line of confrontation in which she screams to emphasize her point, Inderpreet is finally able to get Avinash and Manjeet to acknowledge that attending a group dance rehearsal at Avinash’s house is qualitatively different from their secret trysts on the DL.

Such prohibitions do not similarly restrict male language use, and FOBby boys openly use profanity and other elements to index toughness, regardless of topic. In Example 3, Kuldeep displays his solidarity with Farooq, a Muslim Punjabi-speaking boy who transferred from the United Kingdom a few months earlier. Born and raised in a town near Birmingham, Farooq quickly settled into this FOBby clique and here tells Kuldeep about his girl problems.

Example 3: “Kick his ass, foo’!”

1. Farooq: So my girlfriend wants to leave me now.
2. Kuldeep: Why, foo’? You guys are so happy together, all the time.
3. Farooq: Yeah, but now her ex-boyfriend is coming into our life. Her
4. ex-boyfriend asked her out again.
5. Kuldeep: Kick his ass foo’!
6. Farooq: I (1 sec) am.
7. Kuldeep: I’ll come with ya! I’m fuckin’ angry right now, foo’.
8. Farooq: You and me?
9. Kuldeep: Oh, for sure! I’ll come with ya, I’ll fuckin’ kill that
10. motherfucker.
Rather than encouraging what might become an extensive lament about Farooq’s imminent breakup, Kuldeep swiftly shifts the tenor of the conversation from feelings to fighting (line 5). Kuldeep’s lexical and phonological choices—including “kick his ass, foo!” “fuckin’ angry” and “cut the motherfucker’s throat”—typify FOBby style. Here they do the work of assuring Farooq, a relative newcomer to the clique, to take a more aggressive stance about the threat posed to his relationship. After indicating uncertainty in lines 6 and 8, Farooq gains confidence in his performance of FOBby style through Kuldeep’s encouragement and support and adopts a more aggressively masculine stance through the phrase “Beat his ass!” (line 11). By line 14, he emphatically uses the regional California descriptor “hel:la” to prove his point. These examples show how gender is integral to shaping experiences for diasporic youth. Although an emphasis on or avoidance of sexual topics and aggressive stances can index gender differently for FOBby and popular girls, neither may be thought to index acculturation and can end up being altogether overlooked. Variance in style as demonstrated through language use indicates fundamental differences in how girls of different cliques, as well as boys and girls, do not experience the same subjectivity at school, even within the same ethnic group. Dynamics of race and class further emphasize these points.

Complicating ethnic and racial formation through language use

Analyzing language use in terms of style illustrates that the common migration studies dichotomy of “American” and “immigrant” is far less straightforward in everyday practice. Indeed, the locally fashioned ways in which youth understand and perform their ethnicity can serve as a counterpoint to dominant migration approaches. For instance, Alex and Carol Stepick (2003) juxtapose the negatively coded “American” adolescent with a more positively valued set of “immigrant” characteristics. Similarly, Marcelo Suarez-Orozco (2003) reports that parents resist “a whole range of models they consider undesirable about American youth culture” (67), and that “anomie results when youth abandon their culture” (69). From this standpoint, immigrant values are lauded while American ones are devalued. My discussion of style, however, suggests that “American” and “immigrant” are not
easily codified or reducible categories, and the ways in which youth use these terms and assign meanings to them may not be straightforward. Some qualitative migration studies offer a more nuanced way to consider how youth operationalize ethnicity. For instance, in her interview-based study, Nazli Kibria (2003) identifies “ethnic identity capital” as a way that some second-generation youth selectively leverage aspects of their heritage. This concept and other insights that emerge from interview and survey-based migration research are indeed useful, but ultimately cannot tell us about the indexical meanings that such displays of capital may garner in particular contexts.

A range of language-centered studies on youth demonstrates the everyday ways in which youth complicate simple codings of “immigrant” and “American.” Bailey (2001) draws attention to the linguistic heterogeneity of Spanish speakers by documenting how youth create “nonwhite” linguistic identities by using African American English and mocking white English forms, as well as by performing “nonblack” identities by claiming Spanish and distinguishing themselves from African Americans. Investigating the language practices of Latina gang girls, Mendoza Denton (2008) notes stylistic distinctiveness and documents how phonetic differences in the Spanish and English speech of rival Norteño and Sureño gangs are readily recognizable to each other and serve as further markers of group membership and affiliation. Youth use of English language varieties can also illustrate stylistic differences within an ethnic group. In her research with Laotian American youth in Northern California, Bucholtz (2009) follows how two teenage girls use varieties of English to form affiliations with different racially marked social groups at school. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) has also been shown to be a vital resource for Asian American youth constructions of style (Chun 2001; Lee 2005; Reyes 2009).

Like youth in these studies, Desi teens also select linguistic elements from their local environments. Although Desi teens rarely spoke explicitly about their class status or racial positioning vis-à-vis other groups in the area, they did discuss who lived in the wealthy, gated communities of “the hills” alongside other affluent Asian American, Latino, and white families versus those who lived in the smaller, older homes on the flat land immediately surrounding the school. Most FOBby teens live in this latter area and refer to it as “the ’hood,” an African American term that is derived from “neighborhood” and can refer to low-income residential areas or subsidized housing projects. Although living in the ’hood need not mean performing styles that index this socioeconomic status, many teens in FOBby cliques choose to do so. They use distinct language varieties, lexical items, phonological features, and
social voices to construct styles that index marked class and racial categories in their schools. FOBby teens perform lexical and phonological elements from AAVE and use terms of address commonly found in hip-hop language to construct street “cred,” or credibility. For example, in the following exchange, boys Uday and KB use the term “dog” to address one another: “Buy me a soda, dog?” “Uh, sure dog.” FOBby teens also used the term “nigga” as a marker of affection and respect for Desi friends with whom they are particularly close, but in my observations as well as recordings made in my absence, did not use it to refer to African Americans. During a conversation in which Ruby’s friends began to malign her male friend Jaipal, she interjected, “Jaipal’s my dog! That’s my nigga!” Ruby’s use of terms such as “dog” and “nigga” display her closeness and loyalty to Jaipal in a distinctly tough way. Adopting elements of hip-hop language, Ruby opts to use the phonological variant “nigga” instead of “nigger,” which in this stylistic system clarifies that the referent is her Desi friend Jaipal, rather than an African American person.

Performing these voices with lexical and phonological emphasis enables FOBby teens to demonstrate a sense of belonging to their neighborhood and to their clique in ways that contrast with devices used by populars. Their styles overlap with but remain distinct from peers in the ‘hood, whom they referred to as “Mexicans” or “Hispanics” (I use the term “Latinos”) and “Vietnamese” (I use the term “Vietnamese Americans”). Inasmuch as FOBby styles are used within groups to create a sense of solidarity and belonging, teens also use them to differentiate themselves from and take stances against cliques of other races and ethnicities, especially Latino and Vietnamese American youth from the ‘hood. Interactions I observed between FOBby teens and youth of other ethnic groups were not always tense, but fights could break out with very little forewarning. Past incidents and potential fights were favorite topics among FOBby boys, and they consistently depicted themselves dominant and triumphant. During one such retelling, FOBby boy Uday recalled, “There was an Indian guy who beat the shit out of this other Mexican dude just because he didn’t play basketball with them or something. It was Jaipal! Yeah.” His friend laughed and confirmed the story: “We were all gonna play and Pal [Jaipal] beat the shit out of this Mexican dude, [because] he wasn’t playing with them.” Jaipal’s alleged altercation with a Latino boy over a minor incident casts the tension between these groups as commonplace and suggests that Desi youth dominate. Likewise, in Example 4, Kuldeep alludes to an upcoming fight and attempts to convince his female friend Ruby to share any details she may have.
Example 4: “Two Hispanic guys?”

1. Kuldeep: They said I was being set up (1.5 sec.) to dog [inaudible]
2. Ruby: That’s what I heard.
3. Kuldeep: Thought you said “maybe.”
4. Ruby: Not the whole crew, but two guys. That’s what I heard.
5. Kuldeep: Two Hispanic guys?
6. Ruby: I don’t know.
7. Kuldeep: Tell me!
8. Ruby: Can’t say nothing, ‘cuz you know who he is.
9. Kuldeep: Tell me!
10. Ruby: I can’t say nothing. I have to keep it on the DL, I just needed to find out (3 sec.) from my homegirl.
11. Kuldeep: Yeah, well I already found out everything [laughter].
12. Ruby: Some guy! Me and my homeboys gonna punk his ass.
13. KB: Oh, you remembered!
14. Kuldeep: Oh yeah, me and my homeboys are gonna jump his ass.
15.〈inaudible〉〈laughter〉. I know everything, I live in the ‘hood. Come on!

Kuldeep and Ruby’s performance index an ethnically marked, class-based toughness through the use of lexical items from regional gang culture. Kuldeep’s style incorporates “homeboys” (line 13), the gang term “jump” (line 15) as a form of hostile attack or initiation (in this instance, it is the former), and “punk his ass” (line 13) to refer to physically (but not sexually) violent acts. By reminding his peers that he lives in “the ‘hood” (line 16), he downplays the need for Ruby’s help, especially once he realizes that she will not offer more specific information. This exchange further illustrates how gendered performances of FOBby style enable youth to index toughness to one another and use it to emphasize ethnic and racial difference. Ruby is already in a position of power and can avoid using language that sounds excessively tough like Inderpreet or using profanity like Manjeet (both in Example 2). Instead, she chooses stylistic elements such as “homegirl” to refer to her informant and “DL” to underscore her commitment to secrecy to demonstrate her position of power without using language that would transgress gendered social boundaries.

In these ways, styles matter to youth while they also contribute to larger processes of ethnic and racial formation at school. Popular teens were quick to describe tough language as “gangsta” or “ghetto” and sought to avoid it because of the less prestigious status it indexes (see Goodwin and Alim 2010). FOBby teens were less concerned with how their style contrasted with popular teens and focused more on how
their own speech indexed gendered values within their groups. The term FOB itself, along with assessments of peer language, indicate that these are reflexive categories that organize migration experience. In Example 2, Manjeet offers assessments of her own speech and Inderpreet’s because she does not want to flout the norms of her ethnic community that would make her the object of gossip. While concerned with gossip within their clique, FOBby teens did not express concern about how their styles might run counter to school norms of language use. They did not use this language to speak with teachers or parents but did use it in their presence when they thought they could not be heard. While popular teens also did not always consider school norms, their choices were in line with school standards of propriety. These youth performances of style index ethnicity and class-based attributes and demonstrate the richness of experience that defies simple reductions of immigrant and American.

**Language use, assimilation, and racialization**

Both assimilation and acculturation models try to predict where second-generation youth will land vis-à-vis the racial and class order of the United States. That is, will these youth integrate socioeconomically into white, black, or some other America? Acculturation frameworks that focus on culture and language suggest three possible outcomes for the second generation: dissonant acculturation, in which children assimilate into American culture and learn English faster than their parents; consonant acculturation, where the process occurs at around the same pace for both generations; and selective acculturation, in which more “ethnic” elements are retained due to a strong “co-ethnic” presence (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Identifying such a definitive trajectory is not always possible in ethnographic work, both because meanings of “blackness” and “whiteness” vary greatly and because the types of generalizations one must make to draw such conclusions can oversimplify the complexity of an ethnographic account. For instance, the class-mediated relationships between three prominent San Jose populations of youth—Latino, Vietnamese American, and Desi—move beyond this black-white binary to illustrate variation in processes of racialization. Tensions and antagonisms that crosscut school and neighborhood for lower-middle-class teens from these groups are virtually nonexistent in interactions between popular youth in the quad. Indeed, the posh developments and gated communities popular teens share can unite them with the very groups that their FOBby peers feud with in the ‘hood.
Style thus draws attention to subject positions youth may inhabit that are not of their own choosing but that nonetheless contribute to their racialization. These positions are part of larger systems of judgment and evaluation that connect ways of speaking and dressing to the individuals who embody and perform these traits. Teachers and faculty openly praised popular teens for conforming to school standards of propriety and discipline and considered their visible socializing in the quad along with their constructive participation in school activities to set an ideal, unmarked norm for the school. Popular teens’ adherence to the school’s preferred linguistic norms of avoiding profanity and heritage language use is also unmarked. Popular styles in this sense represent a more strategic management of ethnic and linguistic difference. The reception of popular styles at school demonstrates that these teens are able to perform being minorities in ways that showcase their cultural and linguistic heritage without threatening the racial hegemony of the school by indexing marked elements of race. In their white-minority high school, Desi popular students offer a contemporary, California version of ethnic diversity without actually being white but also without being racialized as brown.

FOBby teens are subject to a different set of judgments because their styles are marked. Toughness and being from the ‘hood enable FOBby teens to establish a distinctive style and identity vis-à-vis their Latino and Vietnamese American peers. Occupying a marginal place in the periphery of the school campus and indicating a lack of interest in school activities are preferred stances within their group. From a school perspective, however, these choices suggest insubordination, alienation, and an oppositional attitude toward the school. Talk about and actual fighting, interethnic tension, and interclique rivalry counter school preferences for nonviolent, nonconfrontational interaction. FOBby teen use of marked language varieties—including profanity, gang-related lexicon, heritage languages during lunch and break times, and the incorporation of lexical and phonological elements from AAVE and hip-hop language—further mark these teens. Faculty proffered range of responses to FOBby styles, including overlooking these teens for enrichment activities, telling me that they fall short of academic and social expectations to which they hold Desi teens, and identifying them as potentially needing English language assistance (see Shankar 2008a). These assessments, coupled with their already marginal social and spatial status at school, contribute to FOBs’ racialization as brown. Thus, documenting the actual process of how racial meanings become linked to individuals and groups requires systematic investigation of the everyday ways youth regard themselves vis-à-vis other groups in their social worlds. By focusing on performance, a
style-based analysis can show why some youth gravitate toward particular ethnically and racially unmarked and marked elements, as well as how others may read and judge such choices.

Style also emphasizes links between everyday linguistic performances and political economy. As described above, class is intricately linked to the formation of social categories of popular and FOB, as well as to shaping the ongoing, shifting nature of what these categories mean to youth. Popular teens’ upper-middle-class, well-educated parents take a proactive, sometimes even aggressive approach to their children’s schooling. They emphasize the importance of excelling academically and push their children to take full advantage of any enrichment opportunities that could enhance college applications. Although this type of parental pressure does not always yield the desired result, those upper-middle-class teens who manage to be popular seem to take this mission on as their own. But they do more than excel academically; they also excel socially by making choices that position them advantageously. These include socializing with other popular teens in the central areas of the school, participating in school activities, and leveraging their heritage language and culture only in those performative arenas where such displays are preferred. Performing at this level was not always easy, but they did appear to enjoy the spotlight of being popular and their powerful social position in high school.

FOBby teens conversely gravitate toward those cultural and linguistic stances that enable them to express their heritage language and culture in school, as well as index the racial subjectivity of their working-class neighborhoods. Moreover, their parents are less able to influence their social and linguistic choices at school. To be clear, their parents are deeply invested in their lives, care and provide for them exceptionally well, and have every hope for their success. Unlike upper-middle-class parents, however, being successful does not necessarily correlate with academic achievement. Obeying religious laws, participating in family and community events, and becoming financially solvent are all things that lower-middle-class parents emphasize for their teens. Because many of these parents do not have college degrees, they do not emphasize college as the only way to prepare for the future. Despite their investment in their children’s well-being, they interact much less with the high school directly. They rarely initiate conversations with teachers or intervene in their children’s classroom placement and attend to school matters only when required. Their children also embody this stance about high school and rarely feel the sense of ownership over this space and resources that their upper-middle-class peers do. In these ways the social cliques that youth use to organize
themselves mirror the broader socioeconomic dynamics prevalent in this South Asian American population.

**Conclusion**

My elaboration of style in the context of migration studies offers a way to draw broader patterns and conclusions from ethnographic studies of language and cultural practice. Alongside widely used migration tools of surveys, regression analysis, and structured interviews, it is another way to systematically consider the everyday *performance* of identities and understand how youth make social choices that have broader consequences in their high school lives. Style is a locus for the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and language use, and a way to consider regional variance in how these may take shape. Styles and the social categories to which they are linked are continually remade and redefined by youth. Writing about them in some ways reifies them but also provides an opportunity to consider them in context.

Attention to style can both acknowledge and offer insight into why there is such variance in how youth conceive of and participate in their own acculturation and the ways in which their own assessments about their migration experience further shape this process. As an alternative to segmented assimilation models that predict that youth will assimilate “upward” into white, middle-class society; “downward” into an inner-city underclass; or avoid either of these and remain connected to their ethnic community (Alba and Nee 2003), a style-based approach offers a less deterministic picture of generational change while still considering the longer-range outcomes of youth choices. This more flexible understanding of cultural and linguistic practices takes youth-generated categories as its starting point and complicates how to interpret youth culture and language use.

Methodically examining everyday performances reminds us that meanings of ethnicity and race are not constant among immigrant populations; rather, they are shaped by political economy and local systems of signification. FOBby styles are marked in a school context not simply because teens who perform them predominantly come from lower-middle-class neighborhoods and families that more routinely speak their heritage languages but also because these teens choose to incorporate these values into their everyday performances of self at school. For FOBby teens in San Jose, Latino and Vietnamese American youth are the most relevant groups against which they consider their ethnic and racial position. Likewise, these are the youth with whom they are grouped when they transgress school norms and become racialized
as brown. As I have elaborated elsewhere, however, the strong community networks in which Desi teens participate may enable FOBby youth to avoid some systematic problems associated with some lower-middle-class and working-class youth (Shankar 2008a). Such a political economic analysis of style goes beyond black-white binaries and complicates categories of “Asian American” and “Latino” by emphasizing local configurations of ethnicity and race that shape actual experiences for youth of the new immigration.\footnote{13}

My discussion of social categories also provides an alternative to “generation” as the predominant social grouping in migration studies. Accounts of the new immigration tend to group youth according to generational cohorts based on their arrival to the United States. The largest category is “second-generation” youth, the children of first-generation immigrants, followed by “1.5”-generation youth. Less prevalent are the categories of “first-generation” youth who are themselves new immigrants to the United States, and “third-generation” youth who have at least one second-generation parent. Of these categories, “second-generation youth” is the most widely researched and is the most represented generational group in my research as well. Although both FOBby and popular teens were largely second-generation youth, they performed this generational status differently. Popular and FOBby cliques also contained 1.5-generation youth and even first-generation teens who were able to more easily join one social group or another. For instance, second- and even third-generation lower-middle-class teens born and raised in California could be far more socially marginal at school than newer arrivals from urban, cosmopolitan metropolises in Asia. It is also worth considering that upper-middle-class teens from religiously conservative households—where clothing, comportment, and language use are more closely monitored—may affiliate more readily with lower-middle-class teens with whom they share religious values. Style and youth social groupings thus offer a way to rethink generational cohorts, especially when examined in situ.

In these ways, style centrally locates studies of youth of the new immigration within key anthropological debates by considering youth performance in the context of racial and ethnic formation; furthering understandings of how class positions are inhabited; and highlighting relationships between language use, gender, and power. A focus on language use thus has much to offer to migration studies of youth and underscores the multidirectional systems of display, judgment, and social category formation that shape meaning in youth lives. Those working with youth programs and services would benefit from taking a more substantive look at language use to consider how youth negotiate...
their migration experience. These findings can be read alongside assimilation studies to gain a fuller understanding of youth as social actors that manage competing systems of status, judgment, and social change.

Notes

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1. Here I primarily discuss second generation youth but also include first-, third-, and 1.5-generation youth (the latter refers to those who immigrate during late childhood).
2. Class distinctions can be important aspects of youth social formations. See, for instance, Kasmir (2002).
3. “Greene High School” and all student names are pseudonyms. Greene High School had approximately 2,200 students during the 1999–2000 and 2001–2002 school years with a racial makeup of 50 percent Asian American (about 30 percent of these Desi), 25 percent Latino, 12 percent white, 6 percent African American, and less than 1 percent Native American.
4. See Shankar (2008a) for detailed discussions of these two Desi cliques and a third, “geeks.”
5. Penelope Eckert (2000) identifies how youth perform “tough” talk to index working-class, urban populations.
6. Since Dick Hebdige’s (1979) seminal work on subculture, the topic of style has been extensively examined in the context of youth and commodities. See, for instance, Zhou and Lee (2004) for a discussion of Asian American youth culture.
7. The use of “like” as a discourse marker, a hedge, and a marker of reported speech (Romaine and Lange 1991) remains widespread.
8. The following transcription conventions are used in this and subsequent excerpts: (F) = female; (M) = male; : = elongated syllable; (n sec.) = pause; { } = contextual information inserted by author; bold = speaker emphasis.
9. See Shankar (2004) for a fuller discussion of the politics of planning this International Day performance as well as the significance of multicultural day performances for Desi teens and other high school youth.
10. Deborah Cameron (1999) makes a similar point in her discussion about how the confrontational use of particular terms (in her example, “faggot”) call the gender or sexuality of the accused into question in ways that support the gendered stance of the accuser.
12. Bonnie Urciuoli (1999) has argued that indexes of ethnic difference can be considered celebratory, whereas indexes of race are marked and potentially threaten the social order. Along similar lines, Jane Hill (2008) demonstrates how racialization occurs through a wide range of marked as well as unmarked linguistic and cultural indexes.
13. Recent debates about brownness, most notably Vijay Prashad’s (2001) writings on the racial position of South Asian Americans, have insightfully vetted questions of where to place brown minority groups in a black-white racial continuum, as well as how to consider the complexity within them. See also Eileen Obrien (2008) and Nicholas De Genova (2006).

References


