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Stylistic Activation in Ethnolinguistic Repertoires

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Abstract
Ethnolinguistic repertoires have recently been described in terms of fluid variability, strategic use, and ethnic identity (Fought 2006; Benor 2010; Hoffman and Walker 2010). In this paper I explore ways of assessing the degree of agency present in the use of ethnolinguistic traits. The study examines the use of Asian and British English variants by older and younger London-born Asian men. I first present a standard variationist analysis that shows older and younger men to have similar overall rates of use. However, closer analysis of variation—in repertoires and discourse—reveals underlying differences by age group, suggesting different indexical values despite similar rates of use. Older men show highly differentiated repertoires and very dynamic use of style-shifting to index stance, footing, and narrative structure. Younger men have a similarly mixed but relatively invariant style across settings, with little interactionally-tuned deployment of ethnic variants. The generational difference indicates change in indexical meaning over time despite retention of the same linguistic forms. The reason for different degrees of ‘stylistic activation’ lies in socio-historical stages of change in the community. The findings suggest that the use of ethnolinguistic features does not entail agentive use or shared identity work. Methodologically, the study indicates a need to attend to relative stylistic activation as much as to frequencies of use in understanding dialect change.
Stylistic Activation in Ethnolinguistic Repertoires

Devyani Sharma*

1 Introduction

Ethnolinguistic repertoires have been described as “a fluid set of linguistic resources that members of an ethnic group may use variably as they index their ethnic identities” (Benor 2010:159, similarly Fought 2006:21). Speakers are seen as agents who “choose among this arsenal in accordance with the meanings they wish to convey” (Gumperz 1964:138), activate “different parts of their linguistic repertoires selectively in order to highlight particular aspects of their social identities” (Doran 2004:96), and “adopt and use these features strategically” (Hoffman and Walker 2010:59).

However, agency in such variation cannot be assumed, and establishing its precise role remains a challenge. The present study develops two quantitative measures of ‘stylistic activation’ in an individual’s use of ethnolinguistic features, which can serve as an indicator of relative intentionality, as opposed to automaticity, in their use. The specific questions to be addressed are:

i. Use: Is the distribution of ethnolinguistic features equally “fluid” and “variable” for members of a community who have similar overall rates of use?

ii. Meaning: Do such features always index ethnic identity?

I suggest that standard variationist analysis precludes satisfactory answers to these questions, and argue for multi-level analysis—here, repertoire and quantitative discourse analysis—for a complete picture of the use and meaning of variable forms. Ultimately, this suggests that explanations for dialect shift cannot rely solely on aggregated quantitative data, but must take into account functions of forms by using innovative quantitative techniques.

In this study I focus on the Punjabi community in Southall, West London. As a diasporic, lower middle class, Asian-majority suburb of London, the community involves a complex layering of ethnic and class speech features. The community is particularly useful for examining change in the valuation and use of such markers as it is one of the oldest South Asian communities in the U.K., with sizeable first, second, and third generations.

In the present study I examine speech from older (age 35–50) and younger (age 18–30) men from the second generation (hereafter ‘Gen-2’). Although all were born and raised in West London, older and younger men grew up in very different sociopolitical climates. Over 60 years, Southall has seen a shift from a minority to a majority Asian population. Not unrelated to this, race relations have gone from overt and violent hostility (Oates 2002) to cooperative coexistence. The older Gen-2 group in our study grew up during the first phase, and the younger Gen-2 group during the second. Sharma (2011) and Sharma and Sankaran (2011) outline details of racial tension in the earlier historical phase and of cultural acceptance in the later phase, along with quotes from several individuals in each age group indicating experiences of cultural antagonism and hostility for older British Asians and cultural neutrality and acceptance for younger British Asians.

Semi-ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over a period of nine months by two fieldworkers (female, Standard Indian English speakers). For the wider project, 74 participants were recorded twice, along with multiple self-recordings in diverse settings collected by 10 participants in the absence of either researcher. In total, approximately 120 hours of data were collected.

Extracts discussed in the present work are taken from interviews as well as from self-recordings. In order to address the research questions outlined above, I present a brief summary of a variationist analysis of the data, followed by two alternative approaches to the same data—repertoire analysis and quantitative discourse analysis.

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2 Limits of Variationist Analysis

A common first step in attempting to understand the use of ethnic markers is to tally rates of use across demographic groups. As Eckert (2008a:26) observes, “[t]he traditional emphasis in variation studies has been to correlate linguistic variables with macro-sociological categories, and to take the correlation to be a sufficient characterization of the variable’s social significance.” Variationist studies of ethnic minority communities have often taken this approach, extrapolating the social meaning of a variant directly from its rate of use by a demographic subgroup.

2.1 Variationist Analysis of London Asian Speech

Starting with a standard quantitative examination of the Punjabi London data, we find that older and younger men appear to behave very similarly. An initial analysis was conducted of a single variable: retroflexion or retraction of /t/ beyond the alveolar range in British English. This feature derives from a series of retroflex stops in Indic languages and Indian English. Previous work has found this feature to be present in the speech of younger Gen-2 British Asians, primarily in the form of retracted rather than retroflex variants (Alam and Stuart-Smith 2011, Kirkham 2011). Here, all forms that fall outside the British range are grouped together.

The results in Figure 1 (24 individuals; 5540 tokens) show that older and younger Gen-2 British Asian men do not have significantly different rates of use, sharing the same mean rate of approximately 15% use of retroflex or retracted /t/. In the full multivariate analysis (Sharma and Sankaran 2011), gender was not selected as significant for the older Gen-2 but was by far the most significant factor in the younger generation. Figure 2 illustrates how this pattern looks at the individual level—two “typical” Gen-2 men, Anwar and Rohan, look very similar in their use of this feature, in contrast to the two Gen-2 women.

Under a variationist analysis, it would be reasonable to infer that, in the present data, men share a similar use of this ethnolinguistic trait regardless of age, and can be described as expressing or indexing their ethnicity more than women do.

But is this comparison of frequencies sufficient to conclude that older and younger men use this feature in the same way? Do they vary in similar ways across contexts or in discourse? And is the intended meaning always ethnic identity? More precisely, is a given form really signaling ethnicity (group level) or could it be indexing finer meanings pertaining to scene or stance (individual and interactional level)? And is it possible for variants to operate at different levels for different individuals, even if those individuals appear similar in their overall rates of use? The quantitative generalization of “15% t-retroflexion” is clearly too coarse to reliably indicate the ‘granularity’ of social meaning, that is, the level(s) at which meaning operates for a user of such a variant.

As we will see, men of different ages in the Gen-2 are in fact doing strikingly different things...
with this ethnolinguistic feature, despite appearing very similar in their aggregate use. The results suggest that extrapolating social meaning from broad group frequencies can lead to incorrect understandings of the variation at hand, and that interview data may be insufficiently representative for the task of accounting for the dynamics of variation and change in such communities.

2.2 Possible Causes Underlying Aggregate Patterns

Variation in a community has at times been given fairly deterministic explanations, and elsewhere more agentive motivations. As noted, discussions of ethnolinguistic traits have tended to appeal to agency in indexing ethnic identity (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985, Fought 2006, Agha 2007). By contrast, many variationist studies of change over time have noted the deterministic nature of outcomes, with unconscious or automatic speech accommodation and exposure over time being the driving mechanisms (Pickering and Garrod 2004, Trudgill 2008).

Selecting between these two possibilities is not trivial; either or both could be at work in a given scenario. Auer and Hinskens (2005) note that the challenge of distinguishing between more mechanistic and more socially-motivated accommodation was remarked upon as early as Bloomfield (1933). Sociolinguistic variation is best conceived of as ‘a set of resources that speakers deploy both intentionally and automatically in their day-to-day practice’ (Eckert 2008a:26, emphasis added; see also Babel 2009), and so we must take seriously both possibilities in any instance of variation. Benor (2010:173) similarly emphasizes the importance of not assuming agency a priori, but rather developing appropriate methods to assess its role.

Despite the importance of resolving this ambiguity in order to explain variation, macro-social quantitative comparisons of rates are generally unable to select among these two poles, that is, between the use of a variant as either an ‘act of identity’ (intentional) or as a more unconscious Labovian indicator (automatic).\(^1\) Fortunately, ‘intentionality’ and ‘automaticity’ make different predictions for the distribution of variants in conversation, so the contrast is testable given a delicate enough metric. ‘Intentional’ or strategic deployment of a variant involves use based on specific social affordances for the speaker, so should exhibit a non-random distribution in discourse, with systematic alignment with shifts in interactional purpose, such as footing or narrative structure. By contrast, ‘deterministic’ or non-strategic use of a variant due to long-term exposure should lead to relatively random distribution of variants in discourse, as the presence of variants simply reflects stochastic exposure in the input during learning, perhaps with a broad register association but no conscious deployment at specific moments. Ultimately, establishing the relative contribution of these two broad processes is crucial for understanding the social dynamics of language change. In the present study, we find strategic use of Indian variants by older Gen-2 men; this leads to sustained use rather than avoidance of these pronunciations in the community, which in turn forms the basis of continued but more unconscious (focused) use among younger speakers.

Previous work has developed various quantitative measures to assess the relative interactional sensitivity of variable forms, for example cognitive salience (Yaeger-Dror 1993), style clusters (Podesva 2007), shifts to excited, peer-oriented speech (Eckert 2008a), stance alignments (Kiesling 2009, Damari 2010), and ‘natural’ vs. performed style (Guy and Cutler 2011). Following the goals of many of these recent studies, this paper develops two quantitative measures of ‘stylistic activation’ in order to move beyond the aggregate values for individuals presented in Section 2.1 and to better understand the work done by ethnolinguistic variables in an individual’s speech.

The first measure of stylistic activation is above the level of interview speech, namely an examination of variation across the individual’s wider repertoire of speech styles. The second measure is below the level of interview speech, namely a metric to track fluctuations in the use of variable forms within continuous speech, and to capture the degree of focusing in style-shifts of a given individual relative to their interactional meaning or purpose at any given moment.

\(^1\)The closest approximation in the variationist method is the use of segments of formal and informal speech in interviews. In the present data, both older and younger groups showed the same slight effect of formality, with retroflex /ʈ/ slightly favored in informal speech (Goldvarb weights for informal/formal speech: older men .57/.43; younger men .55/.45; see Sharma and Sankaran 2011 for details). This is in stark contrast to the later findings of the present study, suggesting that merely coding for formality in interviews does not capture the range of social meanings present in intra-speaker variation.
3 Repertoire Analysis: Stylistic Activation Across Contexts

In Section 2.1 we saw that older and younger British-born Asian men have similar rates of use of /t/. Are such features ‘stylistically active’ across settings to the same extent for these speakers? In this section we examine variation beyond interview data, that is, across an individual’s repertoire, as one way of establishing the relative stylistic activation of a feature for an individual.

In addition to interviews, a subset of participants conducted self-recordings in diverse speech situations in the absence of either researcher. Participants were instructed simply to record in as many different speaking situations as possible. This method required slightly more awareness among these participants of the goals of the study, but details were avoided and participants were asked to record continuously for at least half an hour, preferably an hour, in order to reduce awareness of the self-recording situation. The number of contexts for each individual varies, as we could not strictly control how many contexts individuals ultimately provided recordings for. This gives rise to a few unfortunate gaps (discussed in detail in Sharma 2011), but for the current discussion the focus is on the observable range of ‘activation’ of variables for each individual, not strictly the number of contexts provided.

In the two repertoires illustrated below, four variables are tracked across settings for two sample individuals: one older and one younger Gen-2 man. The four variables examined are: /t/, the FACE vowel, the GOAT vowel, and coda /l/. The analysis divides variants of these four variables along a broad binary contrast of Indian English and British English (encompassing standard and vernacular varieties of British English in London). The Indian realizations are [ʈ], [ɛ], [o], and [l], respectively. The British realizations include [t], [e], [o], and [l], as well as local London variants such as glottal replacement, Cockney diphthongs, and l-vocalization. A binary classification is adopted here to explore how Asian and British styles are managed; naturally, a ternary or other grouping could reveal further structured variation. The binary split is also supported by participants’ meta-linguistic awareness and commentaries.

Figure 3: Indian and British variants across speaking situations (Anwar, older Gen-2 man).

In the two charts in this section, the greater the magnitude of grey bars, the more the individual employed an Indian style in that situation; the greater the magnitude of white bars, the more they employed a British style. The ‘British’ columns are named for standard British variants, as these are the most common of the British variants. The results indicate significant differences in degree of stylistic activation for ethnic variants in the speech of older and younger Gen-2 men.

The first individual, Anwar, recorded in numerous settings, arrayed in Figure 3 from more Indian style towards the left, to British style towards the right. The most striking feature of Figure 3 is Anwar’s dramatically differentiated style range. He is able to employ entirely Indian English
style or, alternatively, almost entirely British English styles.

In Figure 4, we see a sample repertoire of a younger Gen-2 male speaker. Ravinder provided three contexts of recording and although he shows some variation from Indian to British styles, he uses no completely Indian or completely British style. The lack of self-recordings with white British interlocutors is an unfortunate gap, precluding a direct comparison to Anwar. Nevertheless, our observations of young men in the community and even in popular culture (e.g., in the sketch comedy show Goodness Gracious Me) supports the use of a relatively invariant hybrid style by young men. Whereas several older Gen-2 men that we recorded were essentially bidialectal, exhibiting wholesale shifts based on context as in Figure 3, none of the 22 younger men that we interviewed and observed showed any such ability to shift between entire lects.

Despite surface similarities in interview rates, the repertoire analysis has shown that men in this community do not have equally fluid use of ethnolinguistic traits across settings. Older men have far more stylistic activation for ethnolinguistic traits, and consequently far more variability, across contexts than younger men.

4 Discourse Analysis: Stylistic Activation Within Contexts

It remains challenging to infer the precise social meaning of variants from the aggregated repertoire data in Section 3. In this section, I complete the picture by assessing indexical meanings within the discourse of older and younger men. An individual might assign very fine indexical meanings to a variant in interaction, or they might pay little attention to the presence of a form in their speech. In the former case, a subtle social meaning is intended, and in the latter, a very coarse or generalized meaning, if any. This section presents a finer measure of stylistic activation than repertoire analysis; it also complicates the idea that ethnolinguistic forms simply index ethnicity.

In order to identify the ‘granularity’ of meaning for a speaker, we need to track their style-shifting during an interaction, ideally with a metric that can establish whether variable features are finely tuned to interactional work or not. Here, I use a simple metric to track ‘lectal focusing in interaction’ (LFI; Sharma and Rampton 2011). The LFI measure offers a simple proportional measure of fluctuation in style over the course of a segment of interaction.

First, an extract is chunked into moderately small units. For the most part, these are either divided at turn-constructional unit (TCU) boundaries or at major clausal boundaries, but where clear footing shifts occur, these are treated as unit boundaries as well. Other analyses of variation in interaction have dealt with units at the level of token (Kendall 2007), utterance (Podesva 2007), and topic (Schilling-Estes 2004). As the goal of this study is to track fluctuations in style that may be indexed to footing, TCUs and footing shifts are natural choices. However, in the absence of frequent shifts, it is nevertheless useful to have relatively small units to track fluctuations, hence the inclusion of clausal boundaries. Units are preferably close to a minimum of ten words to ensure a sufficient number of tokens to calculate percentage rates per unit.

Next, the variables to be examined are coded for each unit. As the coding is auditory, I follow
the common practice of carving continuous phonetic space into discrete variants. For the present analysis, variants are grouped into enregistered lects: standard British English (BrE), vernacular London English, and Indian English (IndE). A similar metric could track individual variables; indeed, this would be more data-driven and would avoid a top-down imposition of meaning, acknowledging that each variable may have a distinct indexical field (Eckert 2008b). But at present we are interested in style-shifting that potentially invokes macro-social ethnic (British vs. Indian) indexicalities, and so the analysis benefits from lectal groupings of variants.

Primarily variables that show clear contrasts among the three lects are coded. For example, coda /l/, with IndE, Standard BrE, and Vernacular BrE variants [l], [ɭ], [w] respectively; intervocalic and final /l/, with variants [l], [ɭ], [ʔ] respectively; and the GOAT diphthong, with variants [o], [əʊ], [ʌʊ] respectively. The remaining uncoded text consists of variables that are either not audibly contrastive across the lects, not subject to a ternary distinction, or not reliably codable with auditory analysis. Where possible, the principle of accountability is observed. In a few cases, a particularly salient articulation of an otherwise uncoded segment was coded, for example, IndE bilabial articulation of [v]. Similarly, the use of a word or phrase associated with a specific language or lect was coded. Both of these types of exceptional coding were included only when the variants clearly contributed to a perceptible style shift towards a particular lect. Finally, a few variables have a binary rather than ternary contrast, such as VOT and initial [t]/[t]. These were included because of their clear participation in conveying an IndE or standard BrE style. Finally, a simple proportion is calculated for each of the three lects per unit, dividing the number of variants coded for each lect by the total number of variants coded in a given unit.

Given space limitations, I focus on two examples of monologic speech here (see Sharma and Rampton 2011 for further extracts and analysis). I first examine a narrative extract from the older Gen-2 man seen earlier, and then compare these to a narrative extract from the speech of a younger Gen-2 man.

The example in (1) is an extended narrative; its LFI measure is shown in Figure 5. The solid line traces the total use of (standard and vernacular) BrE variants. The higher the line, the more a BrE lect is employed, and the lower it is, the more an IndE lect is used. The dotted line, secondary to the present discussion, shows how much of the BrE is composed of vernacular BrE variants.

(1) Narrative of an invited visit to a British museum (Anwar, older Gen-2 man):
Don’t forget this country is a very notorious country. Let’s not forget that these people are premeditated they are premeditated conspirers. They have divided our country and they have ruled in our country. they have done the disgraceful acts. They have- they have mas- sacred- they have made each other, they have orchestrated each others- they have orchestrated massacres. I’m not talking about now but I am talking about the ideology is still within their mindset. You know. India. The greatest biggest massacre that happened. Muslims killing Sikhs, Sikhs killing Muslims you know. You know. It was a turmoil an- who orchestrated it? You ask anybody now who orchestrated it, the British orchestrated it, and the British people are doing the same. You see they are dividing and ruling. Even here, look within us, they are dividing the business community with the residents you see. It’s a divide and rule policy. It is in their- their core and you’re not gonna get away from that and we have to stand up beyond that this is why I’m always tolerant. You know some we were invited to the er Royal Albert Museum. and they said look you know you community leaders you are you know we want you to- invite you to the British heritage and I went to the- I went there and I said aw that’s beautiful that’s lovely. aw look at that. the Elgin Marbles are there. Oh look at that mosque. The member of the mosque it- the m- member you know the member where the- where the where the minister sits. You know. You- they’ve- you have raped the mosque. You have taken it out. You put it here. This shouldn’t be here, it should be in a mosque in Turkey. Now Elgin Marbles. They should be in er in Greece. You know they shouldn’t be here. So I came out and they said oh yes sir sir how did you enjoy your trip? Aw fantastic it’s wonderful. And what do you think? I said you really want to know what I think? It w- a warehouse of stolen goods. You know, and that created uproar. I said that was a warehouse of stolen goods and I’m ashamed to be British. After I went into the v and a Victoria and Albert Museum. This’s what I feel.
We see dramatic fluctuations in style in Anwar’s narrative. Echoing his repertoire variation earlier, Figure 5 shows moments of 100% BrE but also close to 100% IndE style for the variants concerned. Notably, he relies on IndE style to convey affective stances of personal and political outrage, cultural insult, the polite outsider, and the response segments of rhetorical question-response structures. Many of these show close identification with the IndE voice, despite his British upbringing. He adopts standard BrE style for narrative framing or evaluation, and moral high ground. Remarkably, he employs a Cockney voice to perform a naïve fool awed by the museum’s riches. This voice might be closest to his own demographic—1970s British lower middle class—yet this is the voice that he marks as most ‘othered’ in this particular interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interlocutor</th>
<th>Standard and vernacular IndE</th>
<th>Standard BrE</th>
<th>Cockney</th>
<th>Multiethnic BrE vernacular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lankan maid</td>
<td>greeting, emphasis</td>
<td>moral high ground,</td>
<td>naïve fool</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>solidarity, greeting,</td>
<td>voice of Muslims</td>
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<td></td>
<td>humor, emphasis,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>annoyance, nostalgia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian academic</td>
<td></td>
<td>solidarity, greeting,</td>
<td>informality</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>emphasis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Asian lawyer (UMC)</td>
<td>solidarity, emphasis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>British Asian mechanic (WC)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>British Asian Sikh school friend (LMC)</td>
<td>teasing</td>
<td>solidarity, emphasis,</td>
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<td>annoyance</td>
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Table 1: Selected functions identified through LFI analysis (Anwar, older Gen-2 man).
Table 1 contextualizes this narrative alongside a wider set of LFI analyses for Anwar across situations (see Sharma and Rampton 2011 for further analysis). Space restrictions prevent a full exploration of his range, though Table 1 clearly shows that interlocutor is the primary determinant of indexical potential for variants; we can even see entirely inverse indexical meanings with different interlocutors (e.g., the uses of Cockney style with the academic and with the mechanic). Most importantly for the present analysis, variants are clearly not randomly distributed in Anwar’s speech. He shows fine interactional and narrative sensitivity in his style-shifts. This precludes an account of his mix of features as purely automatic acquisition due to frequency of exposure and input. As with his repertoire data, he appears to strategically reinscribe specific social and ethnopolitical commitments in his language variation.

Recall that younger men from Southall bore an overall resemblance to older men in the initial variationist analysis. As in the repertoire analysis in Section 3, however, applying the LFI measure to the speech of younger men shows that they do not mirror the complex lectal and indexical range of older men. A careful examination of self-recorded and interview interactions of several younger men turned up no instances of lectal focusing to match Anwar’s, even when themes of cultural tension were at issue. Figure 6 shows the LFI measure for a sample narrative (about how the narrator and his friends bluffed their way into a dance competition); this was selected for its high emotional engagement, yet even here the strikingly high LFI seen in Figure 5 is absent.

![Figure 6](image-url)

**Figure 6:** Narrative of bhangra team experience (Anand, younger Gen-2 man).

In Anand’s narrative, not reproduced here due to space limitations, the solid line shows IndE features being used fairly consistently but not variably; the main variation we see is fluctuations in the proportion of vernacular BrE used (the dotted line). Little linkage with narrative moves or with footing shifts in this or in dialogic extracts was found. Instead, Anand favors typical monolingual devices for interactional work, such as shifts in pitch and intensity (Gardner-Chloros, Charles, and Cheshire 2000). In contrast to Anwar’s use of Asian variants, which is very alert to ethnopolitical valuation or ‘acts of identity’, Anand’s speech is more readily accounted for as an unconscious or ‘fused’ (Auer 1999) combination of variants, indicator-like in their use. As with Anwar, this supports the earlier finding for younger men’s repertoires, which also did not show dramatic shifts across settings. Anand even volunteers a comment on his “unintentional” speech patterns when describing his own speech.

(2) Anand (younger Gen-2 man):

> When I’m with my um my Punjabi peers... every now and then a word or two in Punjabi will come in, but we intend that to happen. It’s intentional. And then there’s other times when it happens unintentionally with um my English friends... I’ll speak an English word but it’ll come out with an Indian accent.

As with the repertoire analysis in Section 3, the LFI analysis here has shown that individuals
with nearly identical overall rates of use of an ethnolinguistic trait in interview speech can show entirely different degrees of stylistic activation and indexical meaning in their use of such traits in interaction.

5 Implications

Our initial research questions asked whether we can assume that the use of ethnolinguistic features is typically fluid, agentive, and indexical of ethnicity. An initial variationist analysis was unable to evaluate this question: it showed similar rates of use for one ethnolinguistic trait by older and younger British Asian men. Only the subsequent quantitative analysis of repertoire and of discourse variation could show that in fact older and younger men have radically different degrees of stylistic activation in their use of this and other Asian variants.

Older Gen-2 British Asian men such as Anwar show sometimes spectacular style shifts to accommodate to different interlocutors and to manage a finely calibrated micro-indexical field in interaction. Whereas Anwar’s overall quantitative rate for selected features represents the cumulative effect of many individual stance-taking acts, the same overall rate among younger men does not. Younger men showed a more ‘fused’ and invariant distribution of Asian features. In one subgroup, then, the ethnolinguistic traits appear stylistically ‘active’, in the other, stylistically ‘inert’.

Although only a few sample cases have been examined here, data from repertoires, narratives, interactions, and interviews with other older and younger men in the wider study supports a general age-based contrast. An explanation for this contrast can be found in the sociohistory of the community (see Sharma 2011 and Sharma and Sankaran 2011 for details). Older men are still engaged in a complex ethnopolitical agenda, having grown up as a minority in a hostile cultural climate. Younger men have grown up in a culture far more accepting of multiculturalism, and as part of a local majority ethnic group. Their ‘fused’ style signals the emergence of an integrated British Asian identity (Harris 2006); in linguistic terms, this corresponds to a process of focusing from the marker-like use of older men to indicator-like use among younger men, with likely changes in phonetic quality as well but little change in the overall frequency of use of ethnolinguistic traits.

Why should these findings matter for the variationist approach standardly used in studies of language change? First, only the composite analysis allows us to understand identity and community dynamics: the bicultural inflection of moment-to-moment interactions by older men maintains a sense of the distinctiveness of different social realms, whereas the younger men project a less politicized and divided identity. Second, the composite analysis points to types of change other than changes in frequency of use, namely change in indexical value despite maintenance of forms, and change in degree of intentionality and agency in use. And finally, the LFI analysis in particular shows that close analysis of interaction is not irrelevant to the dynamics of language change. In terms of causes of change, we see that pure inferential extrapolation of meanings from aggregated variationist data can risk ascribing the wrong meaning to variants (‘masculine’, ‘Asian’), with inaccurate descriptions of the motivations of a change. In terms of rate of change, the LFI analysis can help explain the longer retention of exogenous traits by one ethnic group as opposed to another by identifying the social work such forms do (or don’t do). Here, it is the positive indexical meanings invoked by the older Gen-2 that lead to a maintenance of these forms from the first generation, and this in turn leads to exposure and acquisition of the form by the younger Gen-2, albeit with a loss of many of the original sociopolitical indexicalities. And even in terms of direction of change, the LFI analysis can help explain the adoption of traits by one ethnic group and the avoidance of the same traits by another, once again by tracking the presence or absence of particular indexical meanings among users.

References
