

An Autoethnographic Illustration of an Indian American's Negotiation of Ethnic and Linguistic Identity

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In this autoethnography, I explore and question the strong link that has been suggested between heritage language and ethnic identity as an Indian American passive bilingual who has had a global experience growing up. This research paper examines my experiences related to language and identity through the lens of three themes identified; how my ethnic and linguistic identities have been questioned by others, how others perceive my NRI (Non-Resident Indian) cousins and me differently, and how I, myself, have come to view my identity in order to add a new perspective and address a gap in the research studies on the link between heritage language and ethnic identity of Indian Americans as research is limited. Findings reveal that the relationship between language and identity is more complex than once thought as the attitudes of others might be a factor behind why those who are unable to speak the heritage language question their ethnic identity. Moreover, findings reveal that other ways of expressing ethnic identity are varied and just as legitimate as speaking one's heritage language.

Growing up in multiple countries around the world, like US, India, and China, I have learnt to adopt cultural aspects, routines, and values from each country, but one significant aspect of my cultural identity that never fully developed was my heritage language, Hindi. Since I was young, my parents and extended family have talked to me in either English or Hindi, and I would respond in English, as I can only understand Hindi, being a passive bilingual. This receptive understanding has shaped my experiences and the way I have negotiated various parts of my identity, as many have their own negative attitudes towards this common experience of foreign-born Indians, called Non-resident Indians (NRIs). A quick glimpse into this experience can be shown in the common pejorative labeling of NRIs born in the US, "ABCD," which is the short form for "American-born Confused Desi," signaling NRI's struggle with negotiating their "hybrid" ethnic and/or linguistic identities as well as the attitudes of others as it is used as an insult. My experiences and identity as an Indian American elucidate the complexities of the link between heritage language and identity, and how language ideologies, particularly language-and-identity ideology, mediate this relationship. This present autoethnography asks the following question: How have language ideologies shaped my linguistic and ethnic identity as an Indian American?

First, this study will situate my autoethnography in an academic conversation through a literature review, by focusing on how heritage language and ethnic identity relate, with a broader language-and-identity ideology lens as my

conceptual framework. After the literature review, I will discuss my findings focusing on three themes through the lens of the language-and-identity ideology which adds other perspectives that have not been included in examining heritage language in relation to identity. To conclude, I will discuss what the themes illuminate and what further implications the themes bring out for language-and-identity sociolinguistics.

Literature Review

The relationship between language and identity is always an intricate one since linguistic identity is often influenced by external and internal factors. This is especially so for second-generation immigrants of the South Asian Diaspora as they have experienced more than one culture, being Third Culture Kids (TCKs). Heritage language (HL), which is often a minority language associated with one's origin country, is often perceived as important to connect to one's ethnic identity, and as globalization grows, how ethnic identity is negotiated and viewed by and for second-generation immigrants is constantly changing (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010). In other words, there is a debate between language maintenance and shift within the South Asian Diaspora and how intricately linked they are to ethnic identity (Al-Azami, 2013; Jaspal & Coyle, 2010). Specifically, while it is common for second-generation South Asian immigrants to have a language shift to the dominant language, often English, research has also found a trend of language maintenance in some South Asian Diaspora communities, and how ethnic identity plays a role in each is quite significant (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010).

Language maintenance of one's heritage language is said to be especially significant in order to have a strong connection to one's ethnic identity in the South Asian diaspora, which we will look at in Jaspal & Coyle's (2010) study. They explored how second-generation South Asians from Britain viewed and defined language, and how this is connected to their identity, finding the majority of participants expressed a desire to maintain their heritage language in order to solidify their South Asian identity. In addition, a lack of knowledge of one's HL often has negative consequences for one's psychological well-being. To elaborate, they interviewed the participants and found that a majority of British South Asians who speak the heritage language fluently view those not proficient or well-versed in their HL as inauthentic members of the ethnic group, since the attitude was that HL is a necessity to be "Indian." To take a case in point, one participant stated that second-generation South Asian immigrants were "complete coconuts—brown on the outside, white on the inside, and they do not know the language—these people are white, not true Indians" (p. 209). These kinds of attitudes sum up the language-and-identity ideology, which is prevalent in all generations of the South Asian diaspora. From a similar perspective, Meddegama (2020) has found that strong cultural links and identity are what influenced one Malayali community's attempts to maintain their heritage language.

On the other hand, some key research has found that language shift is the norm for South Asians brought up in countries other than India, but it does not mean a necessary diminished ethnic identity (Al-Azami, 2013). Second-generation immigrants tend to shift to the dominant language, like English, often to the detriment of their HL because of external and internal factors, like societal

pressure, schooling, and more (David, 2003). However, research also suggests that maintenance of one's heritage language is not a prerequisite for connecting to one's ethnic identity. Al-Azami's (2013) case study followed Safa who first learnt Bengali, but after moving to the UK, she experienced a language shift to the dominant language, English, and Bengali became her passive language. Factors influencing this language shift include a lack of linguistic input of Bengali, parents' positive attitudes towards Britishness, and schooling (Al-Azami, 2013). Despite the language shift, Al-Azami (2013) found that Safa still felt connected to her Bengali ethnic identity, even trying to learn the language later in her life. On a similar note, another research study examined the link between heritage language and culture, hypothesizing that a loss of language would mean a loss in culture if language plays a key part in cultural identity (Kumar et al., 2008). While the research found that a language shift and culture shift was occurring for second-generation Indian Canadians, language was not found to be the cause of the culture shift (Kumar et al., 2008). These studies suggest, while knowing one's HL can be helpful to connect with one's ethnic identity, it does not define it, and many of the South Asian diaspora still have a strong ethnic identity despite experiencing a language shift. However, while both studies discussed indicate that maintenance of the heritage language is not a prerequisite for having a strong ethnic affiliation, how ethnic identity is constructed without the use of the heritage language remains unclear. This present autoethnography aims to delve deeper into the link between language and ethnic identity by visualizing an Indian American's experiences with heritage language and ethnic identity, and how it developed to further explore where this debate may stem from.

Conceptual Framework

A commonality that threads the literature review together is how language-and-identity ideologies play a role in the connection between heritage language and identity, in regard to how people view others, what motivates people to maintain languages and more. On a broader scale, language ideologies are "sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use" (Silverstein, 1979, as cited in Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994, p. 57). Specifically, language-and-identity ideology, which serves as my conceptual framework, refers to the commonly held belief that in order to express and have a sense of belonging and authenticity to one's ethnic identity, one must speak the heritage language, thus making language a marker for ethnic identity (Myhill, 2003, as cited in Jaspal & Coyle, 2010). On a related note, as Tsai et al. (2020) assert, perceived ethnic identity may influence an observer's expectation of linguistic identity, and vice versa, showing how speaking one's heritage language is deeply intertwined with their ethnic identity. Even though research has shown that not speaking the heritage language does not mean having a weak ethnic identity, this language-and-identity ideology remains pervasive in society. This autoethnography examines the themes through the perspective of the language-and-identity ideology, by analyzing how my experiences have been shaped by these kinds of attitudes from my family and friends in India, and how that has influenced how I have negotiated my identity.

Overall, this present autoethnography hopes to add to this academic

conversation by exploring how language ideologies are related to the relationship between heritage language and identity, illustrating through the three themes that speaking one's heritage language is not the only way one connects to one's ethnic identity, and how others' attitudes towards heritage language can shape the relationship between linguistic and ethnic identity more than the ability to speak one's HL or not. Moreover, this autoethnography addresses the gap in research as there are limited studies on heritage language and identity of Indian Americans by examining my own experiences as an Indian American. Essentially, this autoethnography sets out to argue that heritage language is not a requirement to identify with one's ethnic identity as other ways are just as legitimate and that the language-and-identity ideology itself influences one's ethnic identity development, acting as a self-fulfilling prophecy, and so one must overcome the attitudes of others. This paper asks the following question: How have language ideologies shaped my linguistic and ethnic identity as an Indian American?

Methodology: Autoethnography

Autoethnography as an approach to sociolinguistics is a way to explore one's experiences systematically to understand culture, as auto means "self," ethno means "culture," and "graphy" links to the research method (Canagarajah, 2012). By using autoethnography as the research method to explore the relationship between language ideologies and identity negotiation, this study aims to illustrate the key mechanisms of how language ideologies influence ethnic and linguistic identity negotiation. Autoethnography made it possible to look at personal experiences reflexively and analyze them through the lens of sociolinguistics. Additionally, as this study is situated within my specific context, I hope to extend research on language-and-identity sociolinguistic research by contributing a new perspective (Canagarajah, 2012). In this autoethnography, I chose to look at my experiences through themes instead of episodes as the themes implied a significant pattern in language ideologies around me.

Findings

This section outlines the three themes identified through my autoethnography that elucidate the connection between heritage language and identity, and how people's attitudes towards language and identity intersect. The first theme investigates how people in India have questioned my ethnic identity because of my language background. The second theme explores the difference in treatment and perception between my other "NRI" cousins and me, while the last theme ties everything together by exploring how I have come to view my own ethnic and linguistic identity.

How My Identities Have Been Questioned by Family and Friends in India

I was born in Michigan and grew up between the US, China, and India. I would visit my family in India twice a year without fail until the pandemic. Being an Indian American, visiting family in India has shaped my experiences as well as my ethnic and linguistic identity. I am a passive bilingual, meaning I can only understand my heritage language, Hindi, and this has caused other people to

perceive me differently, hence shaping their interactions with me. I, personally, never saw this as an issue as I was able to communicate smoothly with my family since everyone spoke English. However, as I grew older, I noticed differences in how others treated and spoke to me, as they perceived my identity based on language use.

One significant difference in the way my friends and family in India treated me is the way they questioned my linguistic identity. The most common question I would receive is, "How can you understand your own language but not speak it?" This would create a range of situations, like the one described below:

Shreya (my older cousin's friend): Ab aap kahaan rehte hain? (Where do you live now?)

Me: I live in Shanghai, China.

Shreya: Aap Hindi samajthe hain? Why are you speaking in English? (Do you understand Hindi?...)

Me: Yes, I can understand Hindi but can't speak it.

Shreya: Aap Hindi kaise samajh sakte hain lekin bol nahin sakte? Hindi ko bolane koshish karlo! Try speaking Hindi, if you can understand it, surely you can speak it! She's totally American. (How can you understand Hindi but not speak it? Try speaking Hindi!....)

Me:

Even after answering questions spoken in Hindi, people would switch to English, or translate their Hindi to English, and then comment on how "Americanized" I have become. People would comment on how I am an "ABCD" (American Born Confused Desi), which I felt minimized my linguistic and ethnic identity and experiences of living around the world. Even more, I felt like the term "confused" implied that Indian Americans are confused with their identity and are too "Americanized." One would think these experiences would have motivated me to learn how to speak my heritage language, but they had the opposite effect, as I felt peeved by the idea that people perceived my ethnic identity solely on the fact that I could not speak my HL.

This theme illustrates a dominant language-and-identity ideology as it builds on how people have preconceived notions about my linguistic identity, and when it is not what they expect, their perception of my ethnic identity changes, and they treat me differently from before they hear me. As the literature review expressed, one can perceive another's ethnic identity based on their language, and vice versa, hence having these set expectations influence their behavior (Tsai et al., 2020). Essentially, their perception of my ethnic identity moves me from being an in-group to an out-group, an "American" when they know I only have a receptive understanding of my heritage language. As Jaspal and Coyle (2010) found a common attitude towards those not proficient in their HL were often viewed as not authentic members of the community, how people switched to English after understanding I can't speak Hindi is often what this common attitude leads to.

The Difference Between How Others Perceive My Hindi speaking NRI Cousins and Me

At the same time that I would visit India, my cousins who were raised outside India would also visit. I would notice a difference in the way others would talk about us. They speak English and Hindi fluently, as they learnt both at the same time, whereas I am a passive bilingual, only having receptive understanding of Hindi. At family events, it would seem they always blended in, while I was the token “American.” Often because they spoke fluent Hindi, our family and friends would see them as more “Indian,” whereas I was seen as mostly “American.” My mom would comment, “Learn something from your cousins, don’t be ashamed of your culture.” This felt quite contradictory as I felt I was just as in tune with my ethnic identity as my cousins. For example, in Indian culture, we show respect to our elders, or anyone older than us, by having a specific address term after their name. I would call my older sister by her name and then add “jija” (i.e., Padmanjali jija) and this is a cultural norm I always follow as it is an endearing term in our culture. However, one of my cousins, who is two years younger than me, always calls me by my name as she has mentioned it shows a closer relationship, as seen in American culture, so it is not that she is more “Indian” than me, but we both have different ways of enacting our ethnic identity, one more visible to others than the other. However, family and friends in India never seem to get past our linguistic differences, assuming that they are more “Indian” than me. How my cousin enacts her ethnic identity through heritage language, while I enact it by partaking in cultural traditions besides language, like calling an older sister “jija”, highlights that there are different ways of expressing ethnic identity, shining a light into possible explanations for Al-Azami’s (2013) and Kumar and colleague’s (2008) studies that found the link between HL and identity to be not as fixed as commonly thought.

When I visited India in 2019, both sides of my family gathered in Jaipur, and so we had a lot of family get-togethers. One of my distant relatives would always greet my cousins immediately in Hindi but greet me in English. In addition, this relative would also talk to them about local topics but would talk to me about how I am liking India, that it must be too “hot” for me, and essentially would talk to me like I was a tourist. A part of this stemmed from how my cousins could use our heritage language to fit in, but also from our family’s attitudes towards language. The dominant language-and-identity ideology is highlighted in these interactions as my family and friends perceived our ethnic identity based on what language we spoke. At a closer look, language-and-identity ideology includes people’s attitudes about how identity and language function together, and the way my relatives constructed my “American” identity based on language is an example of language ideologies’ influence on how heritage language and ethnic identity intertwine. Furthermore, these findings visualize Jaspal and Coyle’s (2010) and Meddegama’s (2020) finding of how heritage language is seen as a necessity for maintaining ethnic affiliation and illustrates the influence this connection has on one’s identity development.

How I Have Come to View My Own Identity

The way my experiences have been shaped by the attitudes of others has in turn changed the way I view myself. As a teenager, beginning around college, I would have a lot of self-doubt when I visited India and followed Indian traditions. I felt that since everyone did not view me as an authentic Indian, it felt weird and inauthentic to follow the cultural traditions as if I was an imposter. As a child, I experienced a language shift to English, since it was the dominant language at schools, and moving around the world made it much harder to learn two languages at once so I was left with a receptive understanding of Hindi. At that time, I did not see this as a sign of being an inauthentic Indian until later on, when I was more conscious of people's behavior, and that was when I would begin to experience more self-doubt. In general, I was framed as an inauthentic member of my ethnic group by the attitudes of some family and friends in India as well as other Indian Americans which changed how I saw myself, especially after living in the US.

Over the past few years, ever since I returned to the US for college after my experiences living abroad, like in Singapore, China, and India, I have grappled with my identity as an Indian American, especially when meeting Indian Americans raised in the US versus abroad, and as well as with my identity as a Third Culture Kid (TCK). Interacting with Indian Americans I met in college and meeting family friends from my time living in Texas made me self-conscious as I found it hard to relate to their experiences. Before coming to the US, I never gave much thought to my identity as an Indian American, but I felt like ethnicity and race were made much more salient in the US, making me question an identity that I had not questioned before. Only since coming to the US have I been made more aware of the attitudes of family and friends in India. However, as time passed, I realized the new lens I gained in the US made me doubt an identity I felt secure in and made me feel like I had to choose between my ethnic identity and other identities, like being a TCK. To elaborate, when I came to the US, my race/ethnicity became salient, as I was positioned as an "Indian American" as people would ask me if I was Indian, but a reading in my applied linguistics class talked about the author's experience of coming to the US where she felt her race became salient as well, and this led to a shift in my thinking. As part of this realization, I recognized that I do not need to prove parts of my identity to others or to myself as speaking my HL or participating or not participating in traditions does not change the fact I am Indian American and I feel at home in India and/or in the community. A sense of belonging to a community is another way other than HL in which my ethnic identity is expressed, as there are shared cultural values and practices that are much unspoken, like the subtle understandings of how things work in certain situations, or having haldi doodh (turmeric milk) when I have a sore throat, or having a spoon of curd and jaggery before flying.

A few key experiences that made an impact on how I perceived myself, as discussed above, happened in the last couple of years. In recent years, I have not been to India as much as I did before because of the pandemic. Last year was my first visit in a few years, where I realized that I had a skewed perspective as I focused on all the interactions where I was positioned as an American, instead of the other interactions that positioned me as an Indian. For example, a lot of my immediate family, like grandparents, my mom's sister, and my first cousins, always have acknowledged both of my identities, and see my identity as more balanced, as they do not automatically switch to English, but speak to me in Hindi,

and do not comment on how I respond in English like other relatives.

Within the last year, when I joined the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education (PennGSE) to pursue my MEd in Intercultural Communication, I also became more confident in my linguistic and ethnic identity. During my educational linguistics class, we often discussed what constitutes bilingualism, and the majority of my classmates viewed passive bilingualism as bilingualism, and I did not feel as embarrassed as before, and I felt less dissonance in my ethnic and linguistic identity. Learning about concepts such as communicative repertoire, translanguaging, and code-switching, and engaging in participant observation at the English Language Center at Drexel University was also especially helpful in negotiating my ethnic identity, as I recognized that everyone has such different experiences with the relationship between language and identity.

This shows how, even after years of socialization into this dominant language-and-identity ideology, I have changed my perspective and accepted my identity, knowing it is not for others to determine, but for me. These experiences, and how they have affected how I have seen myself show how dominant language ideologies can have a significant impact, and so growing out of these kinds of attitudes has played a vital role in my current assured view of myself, especially my ethnic and linguistic identity. In essence, I view my ethnic identity not as “half and half,” but as two wholes together, and not more important than other identities that were pushed aside when moving back to the US.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that connection between heritage language and identity appears to be more complex and not set in stone as presented in a few studies in the literature review (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010; Meddegama, 2020). Specifically, while many believe in order to enact one’s ethnic identity, one must speak the heritage language, the rise in mobility has created new ways of enacting one’s identity than the traditional way, illustrating that it is not as absolute, which also provides possible explanations behind Al-Azami’s (2013) and Kumar et al.’s (2008) studies. After being socialized into this set of perspectives from experiences in India and living in the US, negotiating my identity had been a struggle until recent years and experiences have taught me to not be so easily swayed by the opinions of others. I have realized that language is not the only or main way to express my ethnic and cultural identity, as I have come to believe that my “hybrid” identity does not equate to either identity being less than. Specifically, sharing community values and ways of being is another way of expressing ethnic and cultural identity, like being more collectivistic versus individualistic, and so on. Additionally, I do not feel the need to visibly express my ethnic identity as ethnicity is made more salient living in the US, as only I know how assured I feel in an identity, which highlights the complexity of people’s identities and the myriad ways to express them.

These findings have important implications for language-and-identity sociolinguistics, as research on the South Asian diaspora is extremely limited and does not get into enough depth to significantly impact the body of research on language and identity. From this autoethnography, further research on the impact of how specific contexts make some identities more salient than others, like how race is salient in the US compared to other countries, in relation to the language-

and-identity ideology could highlight some key areas of research. Also, the difference between active and passive bilingualism, as seen in how family view me and my other cousins from outside India based on whether we speak Hindi or not, regardless of our understanding, may highlight further areas to study. Additionally, this autoethnography has implications for the kinds of research sociolinguists can study in more detail, as ethnographic methods and case studies may produce a unique perspective into identity development.

Niharika Baghel is an Indian American graduate student at University of Pennsylvania in the Intercultural Communication program interested in researching the sociolinguistic experiences of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) as TCKs are often exposed to many languages other than their first or heritage language growing up that is often overlooked.

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