



Heteroglossia and identities of young adults in Bangladesh



Shaila Sultana ^{a,b,*}

^a University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Australia

^b Dhaka University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The paper takes a Bakhtinian approach to understanding the language practices of a group of young university students from an English-medium education background in Bangladesh. These participants speak in stylised English and Bangla with exaggerated pronunciation, specific patterns of stress and intonation, and paralinguistic features of voice for a variety of intentions and meanings. When they use mockery, parody, enticing and exotic ideas, and linguistic and non-linguistic resources from Western media, they accentuate their education and class-based identity and dissociate themselves from the prescribed identity of Bangladeshi woman. This paper unravels the micro- and macro-dimensions of their heteroglossic language practices and sheds light on the process by which language and identities are continually made and remade within the historical, political, social, and cultural dynamics of the context.

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Introduction

This paper investigates the language practices of a group of young adults from an English-medium education background in a university in Bangladesh and unravels the ways in which they use English and Bangla in their day-to-day conversations and how they negotiate attributes of identity in the process. With their creative and playful and strategic use of different languages, these young adults take Bangla, the official language in Bangladesh, beyond its boundaries and make it linguistically unique. Using linguistic features as a way of borrowing other voices, they link themselves to different linguistic and sociocultural worlds contested with diverse linguistic ideologies. The ingenious incorporation and appropriation of voices allow them to activate and deactivate boundaries between themselves and *others*, and to negotiate facets of identity.

The research is timely because it has theoretical and methodological implications for applied linguistics in general, as well as practical implications for the post-colonial research context of Bangladesh. First, the paper contributes to recent studies that have suggested a redefinition of the theoretical construction which considers language as a combination of discreet linguistic features. The notion of language has recently been reconceptualised based on the newer linguistic phenomenon observed in late modern societies in which speakers prefer to use varied forms of linguistic and global cultural resources as their repertoire (cf. Blommaert, 2011; Canagarajah, 2013; García, 2014; Jørgensen, 2008, 2010; Jørgensen, Karrebaek, Jørgensen, & Madsen, 2011). Otsuji and Pennycook (2010, 2011) suggest the term 'metrolingualism' to address the urban interaction in which individual from different and mixed backgrounds engage in interaction and, emerge with new features of languages and attributes of identities.

Second, the methodological implication dovetails with the theoretical implication. The paper indicates that language is inherently heteroglossic and shows the necessity of looking beyond linguistic forms, considering them in terms of the

* Correspondence to: Department of English Language, Institute of Modern Languages (IML), Dhaka University, Nilkhet, Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh.
Tel.: +88 01711147153.

E-mail address: safa1209@hotmail.com

ideological and socio-economical dynamics of the context (cf. Bailey, 2007, 2012). The paper also demonstrates the significance of ironic tones, sarcasm, and parody, and the politics behind these satirical tools in language and identity research. Consequently, the paper strongly suggests that these features are important resources for linguistic analysis.

Third, on a practical level, the study sheds light on the role of English as a global language in the South Asian post-colonial context of Bangladesh. Foregrounding the sociocultural dynamics of a post-colonial context and post-colonial identities, the paper problematises the concepts of 'Bangla language' and language-centred 'Bangladeshi identity' that frequently appear in the discourses of the Government of Bangladesh and the print media. The paper questions the validity of an essentialised Bangladeshi identity, which is usually considered with reference to the Bangla language.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is not to identify the monolingual or bilingual features in young adults' language; neither is the intention to rejoice in the multiple linguistic and cultural resources observable in young adults' language and define it as the 'language in-between' or 'third language in third space'. Instead, the objectives are to untangle the social, historical, and ideological dimensions of young adults' *heteroglossic* language practices and unravel the ways young adults use language to negotiate their identities.

Language situation in Bangladesh

English, once the language of the British coloniser,¹ has been in Bangladesh for a long time and hence has enormous sociocultural significance. It is the most important foreign language, and is taught in school and college as a compulsory subject. It also plays a vital role as the language of academic discourse in higher education, because most of the available textbooks are in English (A. Rahman, 2007). As it has immense currency in the job market, private universities afford it great importance and use it as a medium of instruction (S. Rahman, 2005, 2009; Sultana, 2008, 2014). English is not accessible to poor and rural populations, however, and it has naturally developed an 'assumption nexus'.² Most Bangladeshis have a positive attitude towards English and English-speaking Bangladeshis (Q. Chowdhury, 2010). Elite English-educated Bangladeshis like to show off their linguistic skills because they represent status, culture, education, and intelligence (S. Rahman, 2005, 2009).

Nevertheless, Bangla has always been a significant marker of Bangladeshi identity, specifically because of its role in the liberation war in 1971, which eventually led Bangladesh to independence from Pakistan.³ This started with the issue of legitimising the Bangla nationality and the Bangla language. The political leaders in West Pakistan, ignoring the fact that Bangla was spoken by 56.4% of the entire Pakistani population, announced Urdu as the only official language on 21st March, 1948 (Maron, 1955). The 'one state one official language model' was a new form of linguistic colonisation for the East Pakistanis, i.e. Bangladeshis. This issue of language controversy started a language movement, as a result of which several students and citizens were killed by the police on 21st February, 1952. Because of this nation-wide movement and loss of life, West Pakistan had to give due recognition to Bangla, and it was declared as a provincial language in the first constitution of Pakistan on 23rd March, 1956. The events left a deep scar on the relationship between the two provinces and the nations were eventually divided in 1971. Thus, Bangla is a part of Bangladeshis' "nationalist struggle" and they prefer to "preserve its [cultural and literary heritage] authenticity through Bangla" (Azim, 2002, p. 351).

English has recently become the subject of rising apprehension in Bangladesh. Both the Government (bdnews24.com, 2012) and the print media (T. Chowdhury, 2010; Hussain, 2007; Mazhar, 2007) have expressed concerns about the alleged distortion of Bangla. The younger generations (T. Chowdhury, 2010), upper-class, English-medium (Biswas, 1998), and private university students (Juberee & Khandker, 2006), and private TV and radio broadcasters (BanglaCricket, 2012) are generally considered likely to be most responsible for corrupting Bangla, and are the alleged perpetrators of this offence. The younger generations⁴ have been identified as the most "confused and lost" because they neglect Bangla, speak Bangla with an English accent, and have limited knowledge about Bangla and the history and culture of Bangladesh (T. Chowdhury, 2010, para. 2). In a similar vein, Sayed Manjurul Islam,⁵ Professor of English Literature and Language at Dhaka University and Bangla fiction writer, speaking of the influence of FM radio and television stations, stated in an interview that, "They are turning Bengali into a street language. It's like a developer constructing a building uprooting the grave of his forefathers" (BanglaCricket, 2012, para. 11).

¹ Bangladesh, along with West Bengal, was historically a part of India and for nearly 200 years was colonised by the British. Bangladesh, then known as East Pakistan and a part of Pakistan, was separated from India in 1947 when the subcontinent received its freedom from British imperialism.

² 'Assumption nexus' is a complete set of social beliefs and practices by which people accept the superiority of a specific language speaking population. It allows people to put themselves in a privileged position, relegating speakers of other languages or indigenous languages to a subordinate social position (Ramanathan, 2005).

³ Pakistan was separated from the Indian subcontinent in 1947 on the basis of religion, i.e., Islam. However, Bangla-speaking East Pakistanis, from what is now Bangladesh, and Urdu-speaking West Pakistanis were linguistically and culturally different. The two parts, East and West Pakistan, were also geographically detached by 1600 miles of Indian territory between them.

⁴ Note that I will use the terms 'young adults' and 'young generations', but – as postmodernists like Weedon (1997, p. 178) stipulate with reference to gender, race, and class – "on the assumption that their meaning is plural, historically and socially specific".

⁵ It was Prof. Islam's newspaper commentary piece entitled "Language Pollution is as Deadly as River Pollution" (bdnews24.com, 2012) that precipitated the entire movement in favour of the High Court verdict.

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