

**Code-switching as a resource for identity construction:
The case of three Indian YouTube comedians**

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I look at three YouTube comedians of Indian heritage. What is interesting about these comedians is their use of code-switching (CS), deploying aspects of Punjabi English and Vernacular American English. These bilingual comedians switch codes as part of their “presentation of self” (Goffman 1959) as a means to present and preserve their ‘Indian’ selves, both in contrast to and in conjunction with their Canadian upbringing and urban environment. CS is an important component of constructing ethnic identity, as others have argued (cf. DeBose 1992 and De Fina 2007, among others). Switches between dialects are crucial to understanding the sociolinguistic “stance” of the speaker towards her audience and towards her own identity (Jaffe 2009). In this study I apply the idea of 'intra-linguistic' CS to the videos of these Indian-Canadian YouTube comedians. The comedians employ multiple codes in their videos as an important element of multi-faceted identity construction.

Keywords: code-switching, comedian, identity, Indian, presentation of self, stance, YouTube

1. INTRODUCTION. As video technology develops into an increasingly popular way to share thoughts with a wide international audience, a large number of YouTube personalities emerge. This ‘celebrity’ population includes YouTube performers of Indian heritage such as Jasmeet Singh, Amandeep Kang, and Lilly Singh, who make humorous YouTube videos incorporating different characterizations of Indian or ‘brown’ people.¹ What is interesting about these video bloggers (more commonly known as ‘vloggers’) is their use of code-switching (CS) within their videos, deploying an inventory of Punjabi English (PE), General American (GA) and aspects of Vernacular American English (VAE). This study investigates the extent to which these switches entail “language crossing” (Rampton 2009), along with other aspects of CS, in the context of comedic performances by Indian YouTube vloggers.

The most vital discussion of the CS in these videos goes beyond their performative aspect. As the data and discussion show, bilingual comedians such as Kang switch codes as part of their “presentation of self” (Goffman 1959) as a means to present and preserve their ‘Indian’ selves, both in contrast to and in conjunction with their Canadian upbringing and social context. CS is an important component of constructing ethnic identity, as others have amply argued (e.g. Bailey 2007, Chen 2008, De Fina 2007, Eppler 2013). Even, or perhaps especially, when the codes are within one language rather than multi-lingual, switches between dialects are crucial to understanding the sociolinguistic “stance” of the speaker towards his audience and towards his own identity as a speaker (Jaffe 2009). To clarify the significance of the choice to use a dialectal code in this speech event, I look at previous research on ethnic and social identity construction through linguistic performance. Subsequently, I apply these ideas to the videos of several Indian-Canadian YouTube comedians using various dialects in their videos for comical purposes but also as a part of their presentation of self.

My primary research question is the following: in what ways does purposive code-switching (focusing on switches among GA, PE and VAE) aid Indian YouTube performers in constructing and expressing a unique ethnic identity? As part of answering this question, the study attempts to ascertain what such an ethnic identity comprises, and the process by which the comedians construct this identity linguistically and extra-linguistically in their videos. A comparison and contrast of the various performance styles of these three comedians illuminates the relationship between ethnic identity and code-switching among multiple Englishes.

2. BACKGROUND. There is a wealth of literature regarding code-switching. Myers-Scotton defined it as “the use of two language varieties in the same conversation” (2009:473). The Markedness Model (MM) developed by Myers-Scotton described the two language varieties in use as follows: the ‘unmarked’ variety implying expected usage (here GA), and the ‘marked’ variety implying unexpected usage (here PE and sometimes VAE). There is a multitude of research on the active role of code-switching in society (e.g. Albirini 2011, Finlayson & Slabbert 1997) and its use as a tool for identity construction. Bailey (2007), for example, showed how CS allows Dominican-American teens to negotiate ethnic and social identity. Eppler (2013) discussed collaborative and individual identity formation by four Austrian Jewish refugee women in London. Chen (2008) looked at Cantonese-English speakers within one community in Hong Kong and their distinct use of code-switching to negotiate identity within the community. Additionally, De Fina’s (2007) work on the Italian-American card-playing club and her discussion of code-switching in the context of identity construction and display is relevant to this study. These studies help to illuminate the notion of shaping identity through CS, which is relevant in this study of the three Indian YouTube performers.

Nevertheless, although these studies have been highly pertinent to the development of a code-switching framework and to this research, all of the above and most other studies focused on CS exclusively as a bilingual phenomenon. Some exceptions include DeBose's study of AAVE and Standard English code-switching (1992), Rampton's work with multiethnic adolescent friend groups (2009), and Barrett's observations on the mixed uses of AAVE and 'white woman style' by African-American drag queens in Texas (2009). Overall, however, little credence is given to CS as it relates to intra-linguistic dialect switches, as evidenced by Barrett's use of the word 'style' rather than 'code' or 'variety.'

Related to this idea of CS between dialects of one language rather than two separate languages is the concept of "dialect enregisterment," a process by which "distinct forms of speech come to be socially recognized (or enregistered) as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users" (Agha 2005:38). Johnstone's work on dialect enregisterment in performance (2011) is informative for this study as it discussed the deliberate use of a marked dialect ('Pittsburghese') in the context of "highly self-conscious broadcast performances of speech and social identity" (658). Johnstone's results showed that, in these performances, the radio DJs created multiple layered identities through their CS between Pittsburghese and GA.

There have been some studies on the relationship between performance and presentation of self, a concept first introduced by Goffman (1959), which shed light on different aspects of this relationship. Rahman (2007) looked extensively at narratives by African-American comedians. These comedians self-consciously employed phonological features to index both typical African-American and 'white' speech; as Rahman observes, "the self-consciousness results from the deliberate and purposeful attention they give to producing significant features of the dialect they are projecting" (89). Androutsopoulos (2013) discussed the deliberate use of

urban German dialects on YouTube, opening up discussion of CS for the purposes of identity construction on the YouTube stage.

Rampton's work on language crossing (2009) is also highly relevant to this research. Language crossing, or code crossing, "refers to the use of a language which isn't generally thought to 'belong' to the speaker" and "involves a sense of movement across quite sharply felt social or ethnic boundaries" (2009:287). Rampton's work centered around several multiethnic adolescent friendship groups in Britain who crossed codes by using Punjabi-, black-, or Creolized English with their friends when they were not necessarily 'licensed' to do so; i.e., boys of Indian descent did not restrict their CS to PE only, but also inserted aspects of black and Creole accents as well. Rampton's data also showed that boys of African, Caribbean, and Anglo descent mixed these codes together throughout their sociolinguistic performances.

3. METHODOLOGY.

3.1. DATA COLLECTION. This study takes an ethnography of communication approach to data collection and analysis. The data comprises several of the comedians' top viewed videos in which the vlogger speaks directly to the audience rather than performing skits or singing songs; also included is at least one video in which 'brown' culture or stereotypes are discussed directly. Each of the YouTube comedians studied here was chosen because they are in a similar demographic. All of them are early-20s bilingual Punjabi/English speakers who were brought up and who currently live in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). All of these comedians have a substantial viewership: J. Singh has 212,000+ viewers as of 21 Feb 2014, Kang has 118,000+, and L. Singh has the widest viewership at 2,173,000+, a rapidly growing figure. All three vloggers speak Punjabi and English, using unaccented English in their videos. Due to the nature

of the study, with data collection performed at a distance via the Internet, the comedians' Punjabi accuracy and fluency cannot be verified. However, all of the vloggers did grow up in Indian homes and live in communities with large numbers of native Punjabi speakers.

3.2. SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION. YouTube comedians such as L. Singh do not interact with the audience in real time, and their use of the vernacular and dialectal CS is part of a video-recorded performance rather than a face-to-face conversation. The performative nature of the YouTube videos may affect the relationship between sociolinguistic performance and identity construction, although Rampton emphasized that the chasm between conversation and performance may not be as wide as linguists traditionally believe (2009:297). These questions are beyond the scope of this study, though, and I will leave them for future studies.

This study considers the CS behavior of Amandeep Kang, Lilly Singh and Jasmeet Singh in their humorous videos, particularly as it relates to the formation and display of a social identity 'presented' to YouTube viewers. L. Singh, 25 years old, and Kang, 24, demonstrate frequent switches among three distinct codes of English: PE, morphological and phonological aspects of AAVE or VAE, and what might be typified as an informal style of GA. The phonetic aspects of VAE featured include 'be'-dropping and pronunciation of the velar nasal [ŋ] as alveolar [n]. Some specific indicators of the PE code include unaspirated stops where GA uses aspiration as in word-initial [t^h] and [p^h] and word-final [k^h], and [j] shift to [dʒ] such as GA [jogərt] pronounced as [dʒogərt]. Another distinct feature of the PE code is the alveolar trill [r] in place of the GA approximant [ɹ], as in the following intra-sentential example (L. Singh, "My Parents Do This – PART II")²:

- (1) if your parents have standards, I can almost
- (2) **guarantee**
ga[r]anti
- (3) you that those standards (.) will be double ones (0.5) double standards for days

These phonological indicators, among others, distinguish PE from GA within Singh's and Kang's vlogs, such that the switch from one to the other is unmistakable. Interestingly, J. Singh, 22 years old, rarely switches into the PE code, and switches more infrequently into the VAE code than L. Singh or Kang. His primary dialect throughout the videos is GA, making the choice to code-switch into PE or VAE highly marked. In comparing and contrasting the CS of the three vloggers, I view the variation and different usage of dialects by the three comedians as informative to this study.

3.3. DATA ANALYSIS. As Myers-Scotton argued in her research on CS, a speaker with more than one code in his repertoire is free to make the choice between marked and unmarked codes based on various sociolinguistic factors, including the context of the specific interaction, the speaker's goals in relation to the audience, and various connotations she wants to bring into the utterances (2009:477, 483). This study centers on the hypothesis, as argued here, that Kang, L. Singh and J. Singh are all choosing various codes, whether consciously or unconsciously, throughout their videos to make a statement about their individual identities. This hypothesis is borne out by the data, as we will see in the results. Although the three vloggers are similar in age, geographic location and ethnicity, each of them distinguishes herself through different styles of code-switching in YouTube videos.

This study distinguishes among these three types of switches: intersentential, intra-sentential, and syntactically independent switching of tags (Pfaff 1997:344). Because these are acknowledged in the literature as three distinct types of CS behavior, it is important to differentiate them in this data analysis. Although the pattern may not be superficially apparent, these switches in and out of PE, VAE and GA are highly motivated and are related to identity construction. This study aims to find out the specific ways in which these switches contribute to the construction of ethnic and social identity for these performers.

4. RESULTS.

4.1. “IDENTITY” DEFINED. It is important first to examine the nature of the ethnic and social identity being constructed, as the three performers themselves understand it, in order to determine the role of CS in the construction of such an identity. Looking at the comedians’ videos, in which they discuss their lives and perform skits featuring caricatures of ‘brown’ families, is the way in which we can access the performers’ thoughts on their social identity. While the videos are not strictly serious depictions of the Indian community, the videos do give important insight into the Punjabi-Canadian identity as constructed by the three comedians.

For instance, the portrayal of Indian parent-child relationships by these performers (both in videos in this study and in many of their other videos) is noteworthy. All three comedians use the Punjabi language as well as PE to represent stereotypes of ‘brown parents,’ drawing on their cultural and linguistic repertoires to joke about the interaction between parents and children in Punjabi culture. The comedians use both direct narratives and short sketches (such as Kang’s “Living in a Brown Fam” series) to spoof their parents’ behavior. Given its centrality in the

comedians' videos, it seems clear that family is an important aspect of Punjabi identity for all of them, although they parody the annoying aspects of their families for comedic effect.

Another commonality among the comedians' is their tendency to pigeonhole various types of 'brown' people in comedic anecdotes or skits. Each performer frequently brings up stereotypes within the Indian community, such as J. Singh's 'brown house party' stereotypes ("SURVIVING Brown House Parties"), and Kang's discussion of the only three possible occupations for Indian children when they grow up: doctor, lawyer, or engineer ("Back to School"). Although these characterizations are intended as humor and are often emphasized as such in the descriptions of the videos and in the videos themselves, one thing that they make clear is that, as members of the Indian-Canadian community, these comedians have access to a coherent picture of the Punjabi community in the GTA.

The 2011 Canadian census shows that Punjabi is one of the top spoken mother tongues and home languages in Toronto, and ethnic Punjabi make up one of the largest immigration groups in the GTA. The population of this community is bound by "dense and multiplex network ties" (c.f. Milroy & Milroy 2009:92), and the comedians address the density of their networks directly through discussions of Indian weddings and other events they attend. The dense and multiplex nature of the Indian community in the GTA is also visible via the comedians' jokes about such events, for example in the following extract from Kang's "Back to School":

- (1) it seems like every other week there's an event these days (.) you know how many
- (2) weddings I've been to this year? engagements? *akhand path*³? Preeti's sweet
- (3) sixteen (.) baby showers (.) Diya's retirement party (.) what? (.) in a banquet hall?
- (4) what the f:=Bindu's *lohri*? mom it's called ladies *sangeet* for a reason!

[...]

- (5) and the same people at Bindu's *lohri* are gonna be at Preeti's sweet sixteen
- (6) (.) and all the people there (.) are gonna be at all the wedding functions (.)
- (7) 'cause it's the same stuff with the same people (.) every single time!

As this excerpt reveals and other videos from the comedians confirm, the Punjabi community in Toronto and the GTA is dense. L. Singh, J. Singh and Kang come in frequent contact with other Indians with the same linguistic and ethnic background, making their experience as Punjabi-Canadians and their stereotypes of the community salient to a discussion of identity construction within such a community.

The strength of the Punjabi identity interwoven with culture and language is clear here. Through their comedic parodies of Indian parents and broad references to "brown guys" or other groups within the community, we can see how the comedians demonstrate their ethnic and linguistic identity and show that they are members of and active participants in the community, consistently using PE and Punjabi to substantiate their anecdotes.

4.2. ROLE OF CS.

4.2.1. PUNJABI ENGLISH. As mentioned in the discussion of the sociolinguistic situation, L. Singh and A. Kang employ the PE code frequently throughout their videos, whereas J. Singh limits his use of PE to one or, at most, two instantiations per video. All of his switches are exclusively intra-sentential phrases, as in the following phonological example from "Desi Parents and Money":

- (1) I step in the store, find this wicked wicked shirt, nice-fitted,
- (2) **tip top.**

[t]ɪp [tɔ]p

(3) everything, you know (.) man's gotta look fresh.

J. Singh's sparse use of the PE code is indicative of an interesting relationship between the PE code and its significance for identity construction in the context of this study. CS for these three comedians represents a resource for the 'presentation of self,' and we need to look into why one comedian uses this resource less frequently than the others and sees it as less valuable to the formation and presentation of his simultaneously Indian and Canadian identity.

The appearance of the vloggers has a clear correlation to the frequency at which they use the PE code. J. Singh wears a *pagh*, the Punjabi name for 'turban', a garment traditionally associated with Sikhism (with which J. Singh also identifies). While he does not often wear traditional Indian clothing such as *kurta* or *dhoti*, his Western-style shirts are typical of the kind adopted by young men in urban Indian areas. Contrarily, Kang and L. Singh have a distinctly "urban fashion" look (Sulmers 2012), wearing such iconic 'hip-hop' items as baseball caps, loose t-shirts, and brand names in shoes and jackets. J. Singh has an aesthetic connection to his Punjabi and Sikh identity via the turban, while L. Singh and Kang wear clothes more associated with Western (particularly American) urban youth. Given this dichotomy, it becomes clear why L. Singh and Kang switch to PE more frequently than J. Singh. Since the purpose of CS here is to construct an identity that has simultaneous Indian and Canadian elements, L. Singh and Kang use the PE code as a linguistic resource to incorporate aspects of their Indian identity and display their identity as Punjabi speakers and cultural participants.

If we consider the performances of the three comedians in the absence of PE as part of their linguistic repertoire, we can see that J. Singh is legitimized by the aesthetic addition of a

pagh to his attire, but Kang and L. Singh in their ‘urban youth’ attire have no external method of demonstrating their active participation in the Indian-Canadian community. Thus the PE code plays an important role for these comedians who construct and display their identities as members of this community, both in their direct dialogue to the online audience and in their portrayals of family members and ‘typical’ Indian behavior. We can look at the role of both Punjabi and PE codes in an excerpt from Kang’s video “Living in a Brown Fam #2”:

- (1) y’all know what this video is about (.) the shit that happens in our fam.
- (2) and I know exactly where to begin.
- (3) **auntie**, *bhabis*, moms, *nanis*, *masi*, your *bhua*, your *didī*⁴ (0.5)
[ant]i
- (4) **every ladies in your *parivar***
ε:[vr]i l[ed]is
- (5) talking mad shit about other cousins

Kang demonstrates here his ability to switch not only between PE and GA, but also into Punjabi, which he does frequently in the “Living in a Brown Fam” videos as well as other videos on his YouTube channel. The juxtaposition of the two codes shows the linguistic resources available to Kang on a regular basis; he is able to access various complex Indian kinship terms, and subsequently to take on the distinctive PE accent. L. Singh also exhibits similar CS behavior in her videos. J. Singh also speaks in Punjabi during his videos, but as mentioned he uses the PE code less frequently than do L. Singh and Kang. That the three comedians are able to tap into

these two related codes is an important aspect of their active identity construction, as conscious enactors of Indian culture as well as meaningful participants in the Indian-Canadian community.

It is clear, then, that PE is a resource for the comedians to construct an active identity as Indian-Canadians in their videos, to demonstrate their membership in the community. L. Singh and Kang particularly show the usefulness of the PE code as helpful in the toolbox of identity construction and display. PE is an important aspect of the presentation of self for the performers, as they relate their cultural experience to their YouTube audience.

4.2.2. VERNACULAR AMERICAN ENGLISH. These results on the PE code show an aspect of identity construction at work in the vloggers' code-switching, but do not tell the whole story; there are also aspects of "black English vernacular" (c.f. Labov 1973) in their speech. How does the use of this code fit into the concept of identity construction? Rampton's work on code crossing (2009) is useful in examining the three performers' CS behavior here. L. Singh, J. Singh and Kang all have Punjabi parents and speak Punjabi fluently according to their videos, so their use of PE is 'licensed' according to Rampton. But AAVE, or what I call VAE here, is not licensed, given that the vloggers are ethnically Punjabi. The comedians are thus using a dialect of English that does not 'belong' to them from a sociolinguistic perspective. Their use of VAE, much like the white boys' use of Creolized or Asian English in Rampton's account, is part of a renegotiation of social reality. In this sense, the construction of identity relates to code crossing, and how an individual's identity changes, both as a YouTube performer and a cultural participant, due to CS behavior.

The construction and projection of an identity, particularly cultural, social and linguistic, is important for these three comedians. It is therefore pertinent and significant to consider what

the performers' use of the VAE code represents as a part of this identity. Rampton (2009) brings up an important point regarding CS and ethnic identity as it relates to code crossing:

In a great deal of code-switching research, participants are seen as having a rather limited choice in how they can use language to position themselves ethnically: either (a) they can maintain and/or embrace and cultivate the ethnicity they have inherited (by switching back and forwards), or (b) they can deemphasise or abandon it, so that ethnicity drops from the repertoire of identities available and meaningful to them (by not switching). The study of language crossing throws light on a further option: (c) exploring other people's ethnicities, embracing them and/or creating new ones (293).

We can see how the use of PE and VAE play a role in identity construction for the three comedians, then: PE speech follows the more traditional CS pattern, whereas VAE switches bring in the newer idea of language crossing and thus Rampton's concepts of exploring other ethnicities or "creating new ones" (ibid). This concept is useful in the context of the presentation of self in these comedians' YouTube videos. Let's consider, for example, L. Singh's excerpt from "Why I Can't Get Married" (featuring the opening line that she uses across all of her videos, introducing herself as 'Superwoman' in line 1):

(1) *what up everyone it's your gir::l Superwoman=*

(2) *=just chillin' here in my pajamas with my hair not done*

m[a] m[a:]

(3) *why? because I keeps it real*

w[a:] [a]

In this snippet we can see several aspects of VAE, primarily phonological (such as the reduction of /ai/ to [a:], as seen above) and morpho-syntactic (such as be-dropping in the phrase ‘what’s up’), that are common throughout videos by all three comedians.

To analyze the use of the VAE code, we incorporate a discussion of code crossing to understand its role in identity construction and display by L. Singh and the other performers. As Rampton suggests, using a code that is outside the ‘licensed’ repertoire for a given speaker opens new horizons in the study of CS. When employing VAE, the comedians are not using language to embrace or reject an ethnic identity that belongs to them already; instead, they are using the code to add new aspects to their identities as members of an urban, international community. They are not only Indians, but also Canadians, the fusion of which results in their identity as Indian Canadians. This juxtaposition of their cultural background and social setting as represented by the intermittent switches into PE and VAE demonstrate a complex identity that L. Singh, Kang and J. Singh express through both visual and linguistic avenues.

5. CONCLUSIONS. I have examined both PE and VAE here as part of the linguistic repertoire of three YouTube comedians. I hypothesize in this study that PE is a tool that Indian-Canadian comedians, particularly Kang and L. Singh, use to construct and display their identity as members of the Punjabi community in the GTA. Notably, J. Singh’s use of the PE code is much less frequent than that of the other two comedians discussed in this paper, and I suggest that such a disparity in frequency may be due the fact that J. Singh is able to use aesthetic means such as his turban to display his Punjabi identity, whereas Kang and L. Singh do not have such a visual connection to their Punjabi identities and must therefore rely more heavily on their linguistic repertoire, which includes both Punjabi and PE. I also view VAE as an important aspect of the

construction of the comedians' identities as Indian-Canadians. Just as PE connects them to their Indian heritage, VAE connects them to the urban language of the multi-cultural, multi-lingual metropolis of Toronto.

Language here is a powerful instrument used to construct identity as a Punjabi-Canadian, and to claim membership in the community as both heritage speakers of Punjabi and as members of an urban youth culture in the GTA. Using the multiple codes in their linguistic repertoire and switching among these codes as needed, the three comedians successfully construct an identity that encapsulates various aspects of their selves. Thus in their videos, the performers construct and present their identity to a wide digital audience around the world.

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¹ A common term used by all three comedians, both for self-reference and to refer to the surrounding Indian Canadian community in general. Observable examples from this study include “Living in a Brown Fam” (Kang), “SURVIVING Brown House Parties” (J. Singh), and “Why Brown Girls like White Guys...” (L. Singh).

² **Bold** used to indicate PE; *italics* used to indicate VAE. Text without emphasis indicates GA.

³ ***Bold-italicized*** text indicates Punjabi speech. Words in excerpt are traditional Punjabi events.

⁴ Words listed in line 3 are Indian (Punjabi and Gujarati) kinship terms for female relatives.

Parivar means ‘family.’