

**This is the text of a presentation at a workshop on ethnicities organised by the ESRC Identities & Social Action Programme in June 2006. It is intended to provide non-linguistic social scientists with an idea of the perspective on ethnicity (and identity more generally) that linguistic ethnography can provide.**

## **THE MEANINGS OF ETHNICITY IN DISCURSIVE INTERACTION: SOME DATA AND INTERPRETATIONS FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC SOCIOLINGUISTICS<sup>1</sup>**

Ben Rampton, Roxy Harris & Lauren Small

King's College London  
Urban Classroom Culture & Interaction (UCCI) Project  
ESRC Identities and Social Action Programme  
June 2006

### **1. The problem**

"I don't mix with [kɑ|e:] ((= 'black boys' in Punjabi)) I don't like [kɑ|e:], cos they... cos you know what they're like... that's why I don't like them" (lines 105-9 in Section 2 below)

What significance can we attach to claims about ethnicity/race like this? As a set of techniques for looking at texts and utterances in detail, (micro-)discourse analysis often warns against taking words too literally. And when discourse is taken as central to cultural process, 'ethnicity' itself becomes a highly complex issue:

"My own view is that events, relations, structures do have conditions of existence and real effects, outside the sphere of the discursive; but that only within the discursive, and subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities, do they have or can they be constructed within meaning. Thus, while not wanting to expand the territorial claims of the discursive infinitely, how things are represented and the 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely reflexive, after-the-event role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation – subjectivity, identity, politics – a formative, not merely an expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life....

[It also] marks what I can only call the 'end of innocence', or the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject.... What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences, and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature. What this brings into play is the recognition of the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experiences of black subjects....

Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject the new essentially good black subject..." (S. Hall 1988 'New Ethnicities'. In J. Donald & A. Rattansi (eds.) 1992 'Race', *Culture & Difference*. London: Sage pp 252-259)

<sup>1</sup> Ethnographic sociolinguistics combines an interest in the forms of language & discourse with ethnography, Goffmanesque interaction analysis, and conversation analysis, drawing also on critical discourse analysis (esp. as articulated by Jan Blommaert 2005 *Discourse: A Critical Introduction* Cambridge: CUP). In its contemporary form, ethnographic sociolinguistics is often seen as starting with John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (though it reaches back to Edward Sapir and links quite easily with Mikhail Bakhtin), and there is an account of recent British work in this area in 'UK Linguistic Ethnography: A discussion document' at [www.ling-ethnog.org.uk](http://www.ling-ethnog.org.uk). Ethnographic sociolinguistics is relatively interdisciplinary in spirit, and our UCCI project team also includes researchers whose principal affiliations are with cultural studies and sociology, media studies, and educational linguistics.

In fact, these discursive contingencies have implications for ethnicity in everyday social relations:

“Britain’s civic life has been endowed with a multi-culture that we do not always value or use wisely. In many instances, *convivial* social forms have sprouted spontaneously and unappreciated from the detritus of Roy Jenkins’ failed mid-1960s experiments with integration. Conviviality is a social pattern in which different metropolitan groups dwell in close proximity but where their racial, linguistic and religious particularities do not – as the logic of ethnic absolutism suggests they must – add up to discontinuities of experience or insuperable problems of communication. In these conditions, a degree of differentiation can be combined with a large measure of overlapping. This was vividly evident in the carnival crowd swirling around Highbury last weekend. There the cosmopolis on the pitch has come to correspond in complex and interesting ways to the cosmopolis around it.

There are institutional, demographic, generational, educational, legal and political commonalities as well as elective variations that inter-cut the dimensions of difference and complicate the desire to possess or manage the cultural habits of others as a function of one’s own relationship with identity. Conviviality acknowledges this complexity and, though it cannot banish conflict, can be shown to have equipped people with means of managing it in their own interests and in the interests of others with whom they can be induced to heteropathically identify.

Recognising conviviality should not signify the absence of racism. Instead, it can convey the idea that alongside its institutional and interpersonal dynamics, the means of racism’s overcoming have also evolved... In this convivial culture, racial and ethnic differences have been rendered unremarkable, in Raymond Williams’ distinctive sense of the word, they have been able to become ‘ordinary’. Instead of adding to the premium of race as political ontology and economic fate, people discover that the things which really divide them are much more profound: taste, life-style, leisure preferences” (P. Gilroy 2006 *Multiculture in Times of War* Inaugural Professorial Lecture, LSE. 10 May. pp 27-29)

So attending to discourse complicates ethnicity (Hall), and opens a window on “positive possibilities” “[l]argely] undetected by either government or media” (Gilroy). These contributions are clearly very important as statements of principle and as general observations of everyday experience in at least some urban spaces, but exactly how do they translate into the analysis of empirical discourse data? How can empirical social science hope to capture the nuances and fleeting but consequential self- and other-positionings that would seem to be involved in Gilroy’s “unruly convivial mode of interaction in which differences have to be negotiated in real-time”? Hall may be right that

“[t]here can... be no simple ‘return’ or ‘recovery’ of the ancestral past which is no re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and identities of the present” (1988:258),

but how do we document this in recordings of ordinary talk and activity?

To address this question, we will first present the radio-microphone recording of three 14 year old girls in a London comprehensive school that the quotation at the start of this paper comes from (Section 2). After that, we’ll outline some sensitising concepts and methods from sociolinguistics (Section 3), and then we’ll begin – but leave still very much unfinished – a process of analysis designed to lead to a differentiating but fairly systematic account of ethnicity amidst the “commonalities as well as elective variations that inter-cut the dimensions of difference” (Section 4). We will end by trying to identify some of the some broader questions and issues thrown up by the (initial) data analysis (Section 5).

## 2. An episode in which ethnicity becomes salient

*Background:* Wednesday 18 May 2005 – Asha is wearing a lapel radio-microphone (see lines 127-8 & 132 below). A drama lesson, in which as a ‘treat’, the class is watching a video because quite a lot of pupils are absent at a residential week (including Asif – see line 240). But Asha and Rachel aren’t interested, and have instead been chatting near the door, singing duets for the last 10 minutes or so. At the start of the episode, they are joined by Fatima, who has left the video viewing motivated, it seems, by a text message she’s just received on her mobile. So far this morning, Asha and Rachel’s relations with Fatima have been strained, following an

incident the day before, and later on, A & R say it's been about a week or two since they were chatting with her (HE1b: 76.xx; HE1b: 150:54, 152).

*Transcription conventions:*

/	the point in a turn where the utterance of the next speaker begins to overlap
=	two utterances closely connected without a noticeable overlap, or different parts of a single speaker's turn
(            )	speech that can't be deciphered
(text)	analyst's guess at speech that's hard to decipher
(( <i>italics</i> ))	stage directions
(1.)	approximate length of a pause in seconds
[kɑ̃e:]	phonetic transcription
te::xt	the colons indicate that the word is stretched out
>text<	words spoken more rapidly
<u>text</u>	stressed words
TEXT	capitals indicate words spoken more loudly

1 Asha: ((referring to trainers which they've found in a boy's bag by the  
2 door:))  
3 he's got some big feet boy  
4 (.)  
5 ((Fatima comes up))  
6 /fuck you scared me  
7 Ftma: (            ) pick it up and say  
8 "Um she left my phone with you"  
9 I was so fuckin scar/ed  
10 Ash: >woa::h< ((sounds excited))  
11 who is it (.)  
12 who is it  
13 Ftma: I just got this text (.)  
14 Ash: sha' I answer it (.)  
15 ((proposing a response:))  
16 "well can you fuckin fuckin stop callin' my fuckin phone  
17 what the fuck is your problem bitch="

18 Rachel: = >no no< I'll do it  
19 I'll do it  
20 Ftma: I'm gonna missed call the person  
21 I don' wanna look  
22 I'm so scared now (.)  
23 Ash: ((reading the text message slowly and in monotone: ))  
24 "do you (want) me  
25 I /want you"  
26 Ftma: I don't like=  
27 Ash: = "(it's) me=  
28 Ftma: =/this black boy  
29 I don't know who the FUCK he is  
30 /he knows who I am  
31 Ash&Rach: = "(the black boy)  
32 /come to (my house)  
33 my name is  
34 Ash: /ANDREW  
35 Rach: /black boy come to=  
36 Ash: =call me /or  
37 Rach: /see me I  
38 Ash: me and you can do something today  
39 so call me  
40 you've seen me  
41 and I want you to be //(            )"   
42 Ftma: give me it  
43 Ash: what  
44 I know what number it is  
45 Rach: missed call him then init=  
46 Ftma: =yeah  
47 Rach: and then if he-  
48 when he ring/s I'll answer

49 Ftma: Rachel I want you to do it  
50 I'm so scared  
51 I ain't jokin  
52 I'm so scared  
53 Rach: I'll do it  
54 I'm a gangster  
55 I'll do it  
56 (.) /gangsta  
57 Ash: what shall I say  
58 can I do it  
59 /I know I know  
60 Ftma: any of you two  
61 as long as one of you two do it  
62 Rach: /let me do it let me do it  
63 Ash: yeh go on  
64 what you gonna say  
65 Rach: I'm gonna say ( )--  
66 Ash: =shall I fuck him off  
67 (.)  
68 boy him off  
69 Rach: no I'll /(fucking )  
70 Ash: ((rehearsing reply:)) "cn can you stop fucking fucking calling my phone  
71 yeh  
72 /don't fucking call my phone" 01.08  
73 ((some conversation in the background too))  
74 Ftma: I missed called him  
75 (/and it's gonna )  
76 Rach: when it ring yeah  
77 I'll go like this yeah  
78 I'll go "hello  
79 (West ) yeah  
80 Fatima left her phone"  
81 can /I-  
82 Ftma: NO no 25.20  
83 he doesn't know my name  
84 Rach: /alright  
85 Ftma: /my name  
86 he thinks my name is Aisha  
87 yeh  
88 Rach: alright=  
89 Ftma: =Aisha  
90 Alright I'll say 'hi' >yeah yeah yeah<  
91 Ash: ((directing her attention to Fatima in particular:))  
92 see! [kɑ̃e:] (('kale:' = 'black boys'))  
93 /that's it you're gone  
94 Rach: /why d-you why d-you keep ringin' me  
95 Ftma: NO I didn't  
96 no::  
97 I I know one of his friends  
98 that's why  
99 (.)  
100 Rach: that's a /lie  
101 Ftma: I know one of his friends  
102 I don't-  
103 I d-  
104 A- A- Asha  
105 I don't mix with [kɑ̃e:]  
106 I don't like [kɑ̃e:]  
107 cos they're  
108 cos you know what they're like  
109 that's why /I don't like them  
110 ((banging noise. Opening and closing the door))  
111 Rach: stop stop stop  
112 (Miss ) gonna come (.)  
113 I'll say why-  
114 Ftma: >Mena stop it<  
115 Ash: Mena stop  
116 Ftma: /cos they're tryin to-

117 Rach: ( )  
118 ( )plea:se  
119 (.)  
120 Ftma: I've got credit ((for the phone))  
121 Ash: ((singing to herself:)) "when you're not here  
122 I sleep in your T-shirt"  
123 Ftma: don't understand [why]  
124 Ash: [eh ]eh  
125 speak speak  
126 Rach: 'ello Moto'  
127 Ash: Fatima say something (.)  
128 ((into the radiomicrophone))  
129 Ftma: oh  
130 Rach: 'ello Mo/to'  
131 Ash: ((laughs))  
132 >no no don't take it off<  
133 (.)  
134 ((sings: )) "when you're not here  
135 I sleep in your T-shirt"  
136 (.)  
137 Ftma: /that's why I don't like [ka]e:] man  
138 Ash: /"wish you were here=  
139 Ftma: oh  
140 Ash: /=to sleep in your T-shirt"  
141 Rach: there's some buff black boys man  
142 seriously  
143 Ash: half-caste (I go)  
144 Ftma: />half-caste<  
145 Rach: /na na  
146 Ftma: yeah but this guy is blick  
147 this er- bu- /not  
148 Rach: na blood  
149 I'm not fucking about  
150 (.) /(d-you know that )  
151 Ftma: /he's burnt toast  
152 Rach: buff man  
153 that boy  
154 that tall black boy is  
155 (.)  
156 buff  
157 don't fuck about  
158 Ftma: ((smile voice hint of laughter))  
159 he's bu::rnt toast man  
160 ((constricted:)) he's burnt toast  
161 Rach: ((exhaling:)) na::  
162 Ash: fucking why's it not ringing  
163 Rach: ((quieter, with the argument dying down:)) he's bu::ff  
164 ((very quietly:)) (buff)  
165 (.)  
166 Ash: how the fuck did he get your number  
167 Ftma: I don't know  
168 (.)  
169 cos I don't- /  
170 Ash: ((singing:)) "I wish you were here  
171 to sleep in your T Shirt  
172 (.)  
173 then we make lo::ve  
174 (.)  
175 I sleep in your T-shirt"  
176 Ftma: (he picked up  
177 ((half-laughing:)) (jus as you were singing)  
178 Rach?: did he pick it up  
179 Ftma: yeh he picked it up (.)  
180 just (killed it)  
181 (4.0) ((teacher talking in the background))  
182 Rach: mad cow  
183 Ash: does he go to this school  
184 Ftma: no

185 (2.0)  
186 somewhere in (Shepherd's Bush)  
187 (5.0)  
188 ?Ftma: is it ringing  
189 Ash: how the fuck do you get  
190 yeh- pass-  
191 (.)  
192 Rtma: yeah ( just) flash  
193 (( 'flash' = let the phone ring once and hang up))  
194 /(cz my minutes)  
195 ( )  
196 Rach: (that's what I thought)  
197 and then I go  
198 "eh eh  
199 (.)  
200 (ex-blood)"  
201 (.)  
202 Ash: Say  
203 ((in Indian English)) "hell:o who this calling me  
204 don't call me next time"  
205 Rach: I'll go like this  
206 ((carrying on in Indian English)) "eh hello please  
207 who you ringing  
208 this my phone (not )  
209 gil/this ol lady"  
210 Ftma: and ( wants ) to  
211 come to ((St Mary's)) on Friday  
212 Ash: ((laughs))  
213 Rach: ((continuing in IE)) "this is ol' lady"  
214 Ash: ((deeper voice, Elvis impersonation?)) 'hello hello'  
215 Rach: I'll be like /hello  
216 Ash: shall I do that  
217 do you dare me to  
218 ((deeper voice, Elvis impersonation?)) 'hello'  
219 Rach: /( )  
220 Ftma: /( )  
221 Ash: ((in IE:)) "this is her dad  
222 leave her alone"  
223 Girls: ((/loud laughs))  
224 Ash: ((not in IE:)) "I'm gonna kill /you"  
225 Rach: let do  
226 do you dare me to do that-  
227 do you dare me to do that  
228 Ash: yeh go on  
229 if you can but don't laugh  
230 Rach: ((in Indian English:)) 'hello hello  
231 this her dad  
232 how can I help you  
233 Girls: ((laughter))  
234 Rach: okay bye bye'  
235 Girls: ((laughs & giggles))  
236 Ash: no let's talk normal  
237 Rach: yeh >I'll be like<  
238 hi (.)  
239 yeah (.)  
240 yeah I-  
241 Ash: >>oh he's (ringing)<<  
242 Ftma: pick it up  
243 Rach: (J ) (it's flashed) again  
244 Ftma oh you fucking shit  
245 is that the number though that he (gave) me?  
246 ?: (I bet-)  
247 Ftma: Yeaj this is what Asif sent to me (.) 132.24/3.45  
248 ?: Sshhh (1.0)  
249 Ftma: ((reads Asif's text message))  
250 "I'm thinking of you while I'm in bed"  
251 Ash: ((light laugh))  
252 Ftma: and then I go to him (.) ((looking through messages))  
253 what did I say to him

254 (4.0)  
255 I go to him ((*reading message, half-laughing:*))  
256 "oh shut up  
257 I never think of you  
258 I just don't want you to come back  
259 (love th )  
260 what you up to"  
261 (1.)  
262 and then he goes to me  
263 I don't know what that means  
264 No I ain't sent him that 132.44

Before starting the analysis of ethnicity in this episode, we need to say something about the kind of perspective on ethnicity offered in ethnographic sociolinguistics.

### 3. Ethnicity in ethnographic sociolinguistics

Contemporary ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistics generally takes a 'practice' view of ethnicity, concentrating on how ethnicities affect and get configured in people's social activity together. In studying their embedding in everyday life, sociolinguistics tries to understand the significance of ethnicities without either exaggerating this significance or ignoring the flexible agency with which people process ethnicities in everyday encounters. More specifically, sociolinguistics tends to conceive of ethnicity<sup>2</sup> in three (inter-connected) ways:

- focusing on the *actor*, ethnicity is construed as those aspects of a person's resources, knowledge, capacities and physical appearance that have been shaped over time in networks noticed as different/foreign (resources, habitus & embodiment);
- focusing on *institutional processes*, race and ethnicity are elements in ideologies that both pre-structure situations and reconstrue them afterwards, inclining actors to particular kinds of action and interpretation (ideologies & discourses)
- focusing on *communication*, race and ethnicity reside in whichever signs, actions and practices reflect, invoke or produce these resources, capacities and ideologies (semiotic activity).

At the same time, it is assumed that ethnic identifications exist alongside a great many other role & category enactments, even in highly racialised relationships, and it is in the dynamic interaction with these other identity articulations that the meanings of ethnicity and race actually take shape.

The range of identities potentially in play in any social encounter vary in their durability, and Zimmerman (1998)<sup>3</sup> usefully differentiates:

- *discourse (or interactional) identities*, such as 'story teller', 'story recipient', 'questioner', 'answerer', 'inviter', 'invitee' etc, which people are continuously taking on and leaving as talk progresses;
- *situated (or institutional) identities*, such 'teacher', 'student', 'doctor' & 'patient', which come into play in particular kinds of institutional setting;
- *'transportable' identities* which are latent, travel with individuals across situations, and are potentially relevant at any time (e.g 'middle-aged white man', 'working class woman')

These identities can either be 'oriented to', actively influencing the way that people try to shape both their own actions and the subsequent actions of others, or they may be merely 'apprehended' tacitly, noticed but not treated as immediately relevant to the interaction on hand. And the interactional and institutional identities that a person projects at any moment may be ratified, reformulated or resisted in the actions of the people that immediately follow.

To see how different kinds of identity get activated, displayed and processed in situated interaction, sociolinguists focus on the ways in which the participants handle a wide range of linguistic/semiotic materials in their exchanges together – pronunciations, accents, words, utterances,

---

<sup>2</sup> To distinguish ethnicity from e.g. gender, generation and class, race & ethnicity can be broadly characterised as "social categories used [by both analysts and participants] to explain a highly complex set of territorial relationships; these involve conquests of some territorial groups by others, the historical development of nation states, and associated migrations around the globe" (H. Bradley 1996 *Fractured Identities* Oxford: Polity Press pp 19-20).

<sup>3</sup> D. Zimmerman 1998. Identity, context, interaction. In C. Antaki & S. Widdicombe (eds) *Identities in Talk* London: Sage. 87-106.

ways of speaking, modes of address, texts, genres etc etc. But the meaning and interpretation of a linguistic or semiotic form is always influenced by the way in which people read its *context*, with context understood as

- the *institutional and social network relations* among the participants and their *histories of interaction* both together and apart
- the *type of activity* in which participants are currently engaged, the stage they've reached in the activity, and their different interactional roles & positionings within it
- their position and manoeuvring in & around institutional *discourses* and circumambient *ideologies*
- what's just been said & done, and the options for doing something right now (*the moment-by-moment unfolding of activity*)

It is often hard knowing exactly which aspect of context is relevant to an utterance (and how), and it only takes a small shift in how you conceive of the context to change your understanding of what an utterance means. In fact, this is a potential problem both for participants and analysts, and to try to prevent their own analyses becoming interpretive free-for-alls, sociolinguists try to track the way in which participants develop, monitor and repair an inter-subjective understanding together from one moment to the next. This analytic strategy follows from the view that communication is an 'on-line', moment-to-moment process of improvisation in which speakers

- try to construct their utterances broadly in line with their recipients' understanding/ experience of the social world, their communicative history together, and their own sense of the interactional priorities, constraints & possibilities on hand,
- provide and draw on a very large number of different kinds of verbal and non-verbal sign to steer listeners in the interpretation of their words and utterances, at the same time as
- continuously monitoring listeners' semiotic displays to see whether they are all more or less in tune, reshaping or repairing their utterance if the recipients are showing signs of difficulty

Overall, this kind of analysis can take a long time, and it isn't realistic trying to work through all of the implications for the interaction in Section 2. But in the notes in the next section, we can at least start to map out the central processes and dimensions that (a) frame the girls' ethnic identifications, and that (b) necessarily qualify and nuance any claims we might want to make about what ethnicity means in these data.

#### **4. Some preliminary sociolinguistic analysis of the girls' interaction**

Analysts interested in race and ethnicity could no doubt draw attention to a lot of different aspects of what's going on in Section 2, and there are a lot of different ways in which the girls are living the historical and institutional effects of ethnic process well beyond what they are either consciously aware of, or actually talk about. Even so, for any analysis interested in the *meaning* of ethnicity – and indeed, maybe for any analysis of ethnicity at all – it's important to account for at least two very conspicuous moments in the interaction when the girls themselves orient actively to ethnicity:

- lines 91-160, from Asha's "see! *kale*" to Fatima's "he's burnt toast"
- lines 202-236 when the girls switch into Indian English in their rehearsals of speaking to Andrew over the phone

Exactly what a sociolinguist ultimately wanted to say about these two strips of interaction would depend (a) on their connection with other relevant episodes and pieces of data (their specificity, typicality etc), as well, of course, as on (b) the wider academic or public arguments that s/he sought to use the research to engage with. But in line with the injunctions of Hall, Gilroy and the methodological tenets of sociolinguistics, s/he would insist that an account of these moments of racialisation/ethnicification reckoned properly with their contexts. And following the sketch in the Section immediately above, their contexts would embrace:

- the institutional and social network relations among the girls, and their (recent) histories of interaction together:- Yr 9 schoolgirls; family links to India and Pakistan as well as England; stressed friendship



- the types of activity they are involved in: responding to a text-message from a member of the opposite sex; navigating a running dispute; solo humming & singing; avoiding trouble from the teacher
- the broader discourses, ideologies and moralities they live amidst – the norms, sanctions, expectations and prohibitions associated with being a school student, with being a friend, with heterosexual relationships, including heterosexual relationships if you're a girl with South Asian family connections
- the acts and utterances immediately leading up to ethnifying utterances, the way they are delivered and the responses that they get

Guided by these overlapping takes on 'context', the tables below represent an attempt to specify what's going on in a bit more detail:

TABLE 1: INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL NETWORK RELATIONS, HISTORIES OF INTERACTION ETC		
INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITIES	Schoolgirls in Yr 9 (aged 13-14) -	
FAMILY NETWORKS	Family links with different countries: Asha – India; Fatima – Pakistan; Rachel – (white) England; Mena – Pakistan	
PEER RELATIONS & RECENT INTERACTIONAL HISTORY	Asha & Rachel are good friends, and they spend a lot of time together talking about boys. Fatima has recently fallen out with them, but is keen to re-establish friendship (later in break, she gets a friend to tell Asha that she wants to say sorry for anything she's done, but Asha tells the friend not to interfere & to get lost).	

TABLE 2: TYPES OF ACTIVITY		
<b>MAIN ACTIVITY</b> - actively protected from interruption/disruption		
A. RESPONDING TOGETHER TO A TEXT MESSAGE FROM A MEMBER OF THE OPPOSITE SEX - Fatima, Asha & Rachel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ reading the message, evaluating the situation that is developing (Andrew, the sender, and his past and potential future relationship with Fatima, the recipient)</li> <li>▪ deciding on who's going to reply, how (the stances, the wordings, the technological staging ['missed-calling'; 'flashing'])</li> <li>▪ telling stories of other loosely comparable text-message exchanges (247-264)</li> <li>▪ phoning back &amp; waiting for a response; receiving &amp; reporting the response (?162ff)</li> </ul>	13-264
<b>SUBSIDIARY ACTIVITIES</b> - either abbreviated or ignored as attention transitions back to texting/phoning, the main activity		
B. AVOIDING INTERRUPTION FROM THE TEACHER	Rachel, Fatima & Asha tell another girl (Mena) not to make a noise that might draw the teacher's attention to them (the teacher has told them earlier that they can sit away from the rest of the class on the condition that they are quiet and don't leave the classroom). (More generally during the conversation, they keep their voices down)	111-115
C. RESUMING A DISPUTE - Asha & Fatima	Prompted by the discovery that Fatima has actually played an active part soliciting the text-message (telling the boy she was called Aisha), Asha puts an accusation to Fatima ("See! [kale] That's it, you're gone") which Fatima denies. (Later in the same recording, Asha comments: "that was funny, boy... see, see, how the fuck did she get in contact with those boys, and then she calling me a whore")	91-109; 137; 146-160
D. SOLO-HUMMING & SINGING – Asha	Asha sings snatches of a song by Destiny's Child to herself ('T shirt')	121-122; 134-135; 138 -140; 170-175

E. BEING RESEARCHED – Asha, Rachel, Fatima	Asha tells Fatima to speak into the radio-mic, which they then fiddle with briefly	125-132
---	--	---------

**TABLE 3: IDEOLOGIES AND INSTITUTIONAL & MORAL CODES IN PLAY DURING THE INTERACTION**

A. THE PROPRIETIES & POSSIBILITIES OF CONDUCT & CONVERSATION DURING LESSONS:  These are largely <b>suspended</b> (though still pending)	A ‘treat lesson’ when instead of drama, students are being allowed to watch a video, but Asha, Rachel and now Fatima have left the main video-viewing group and are close to the door.	
B. THE CONVENTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP:  These are largely <b>enacted</b> – negotiated/implicit/ questioned in the way these girls initiate, reciprocate or refuse actions and activity together during the extract.	Fatima invites Asha & Rachel to participate in responding to the text message, and for the most part, they join in enthusiastically (the main activity)  Asha accuses Fatima of transgression (“that’s it – you’re gone”). Later in the recording, Asha says: “that was funny, boy... see, see, how the fuck did she get in contact with those boys, and then she calling me a whore”. So her “See! – <i>kale</i> ” probably alludes to the defamatory claims that she thinks Fatima has made about Asha’s contact with boys, implying that Fatima is a hypocrite. But Fatima doesn’t address any implicit accusations of defamation & hypocrisy here, and instead she responds by denying an interest in black boys. Asha never explicitly accepts this – she never lets her off with e.g. an ‘okay’. Instead she carries on with questions about the contact (“how the fuck did he get your number” [166, 189]), and blanks Fatima’s answer by singing to herself (170-5)  <i>Comment:</i> there may be some tensions here expressed in indirectness and non-acknowledgment.	7-264  91-109; 137; 146-160
C. THE PROPRIETIES & POSSIBILITIES OF CONTACT BETWEEN GIRLS & BOYS/ WOMEN & MEN.  These are <b>explicitly debated in talk, written in texts, and sung</b> – they constitute topic that all the girls are interested in, and that serve as a source of laughter, excitement, stories, and argument (both more & less light-hearted) etc	The moral codes here are inherently unstable, given the complicated human mixture of desire, fear, physical change, prohibition etc. But in one way or another, a lot of the talk focuses on the gap between sexual desire and fulfilment, and this gap gets elaborated in a lot of very varied social and cultural activity, <i>viz</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Andrew’s text message, the discussions about responding &amp; the return call</li> <li>▪ the longing in Destiny Child’s ‘T-shirt’</li> <li>▪ the voicing of Punjabi prohibition</li> <li>▪ the (jokey) text-message from Asif (“I’m thinking of you while I’m in bed” 250)</li> </ul> Mediation between individuals and the focus of their desire plays an important role in the interaction, taking a range of different forms. There is <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ the technological mediation of the mobile phone (with all the opportunities it provides for dissimulation, its vulnerability to collective scrutiny and interception by people other than the desired)</li> <li>▪ the importance attached to meeting someone through friends, and the imputed impropriety of direct contact (Fatima’s defence: “I know one of his friends” 97, 101; Asha: “how the fuck did he get your number” 166)</li> <li>▪ the T-shirt’s surrogate value to Beyonce</li> </ul> Maybe this prominence given to mediation is intensified by the stress adolescents often experience in direct face-to-face encounters with the people they’re attracted to.  None of the girls are particularly highly rated in the heterosexual ‘market place’.	
<i>Turning to some of the most salient ethnic signs in the interaction:</i>		
D. PUNJABI PROHIBITIONS ON GIRLS ASSOCIATING WITH (BLACK) BOYS:  These are <b>evoked for</b>	Asha: “See! <i>kale</i> ” (‘ <i>black boys</i> ’ in Punjabi). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Asha’s switch to Punjabi introduces a co-ethnic angle on her “See! That’s it – you’re gone”. This seems to be forceful. Rather than responding to Asha’s “See!” with ‘So what?’, or to “you’re gone” with ‘why?’ or ‘how’, Fatima dwells on the issue of black boys in her rebuttal, first appealing to shared</li> </ul>	91ff

<p><b>rhetorical effect</b>, drawing on the socio-symbolic connotations of specific linguistic forms.</p>	<p>understanding (“I don’t like ‘kale’ cos you know what they’re like”) and then claiming that Andrew is “burnt toast” (159,160).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ But Asha maybe more concerned with Fatima’s hypocrisy and gossiping than her contact with boys of the wrong race and colour – she certainly isn’t speaking here as a paragon of ethno-moral virtue in sexual matters, and elsewhere she spends a great deal of time talking about boys she likes.</li> <li>▪ In a subsequent playback session with Lauren, Fatima and Asha are embarrassed about referring to ‘kale’. Though she says she knows some, Fatima denies going out with black boys. In contrast, Asha claims to do so, and Fatima backs her up in this (Asha: “I think they’re buff, innit”).</li> </ul> <p>Stylised performances of Indian English voices speaking to Andrew on the phone – Asha &amp; Rachel (white anglo).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Indian English is widely used as a stereotypic voice, even by Rachel (Fatima: “Rachel uses it A LOT. I’ve got this video clip in my phone – oh my gosh – she done this Indian accent, it was so funny”)</li> <li>▪ Having seen Asha being severely reprimanded by her father for being alone with some of the boys from school, “don’t look at ‘em” has become a temporary Indian English-accented catch-phrase directed at Asha.</li> <li>▪ Asha’s dad doesn’t like her hanging around with boys, he doesn’t allow her a mobile, and he has cut back on her MSN contact list. But he doesn’t actually speak English with an Indian accent (“my dad don’t speak like that, my dad speaks proper English” [playback]); she partly understands his views (“it looked wrong [being alone with the boys], but still... I wasn’t doing anything wrong” [playback]); her mum “understands everything... she knows I won’t do anything wrong”; and her parents are “not strict, they have- we have limits like” [playback]).</li> </ul> <p><i>Comment:</i> In both episodes, linguistic elements from Punjabi are linked to a view that Asian girls shouldn’t associate with (black) boys. But the girls’ evaluative orientation to this (stable) view shifts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ in the argument about, Fatima appears to accept the prohibition, and denies that she’s transgressed</li> <li>▪ in the phone voicings, the prohibition is subject to comic impersonation</li> </ul> <p>These shifts are an effect &amp; articulation of fluctuations in the tone of Asha’s relationship with Fatima.</p>	<p>203ff</p>
---	---	--------------

To take the analysis of these moments of ethnification further, a sociolinguistic treatment might well shift towards (broadly) conversation analytic treatment of the specific sequences in which *kale* and Indian English voices are produced, but there is already probably enough micro-ethnographic description here to allow us to turn to wider issues in the interpretation of ethnicities in situated interaction.

## 5. Questions and issues arising

Moving from the specific to the more general, there are at least three points to draw out from this data description.

### 5.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF ETHNICITY IN THIS EPISODE:

If we allowed our interest in ethnicity to take us straight to *kale* and the use of Indian English voices, hurrying past the contexts that ethnographic sociolinguistic description dwells on, there might be a risk of:

- *treating Asha’s ‘kale’ primarily as (a) the expression of an ethno-moral purist, a guardian of traditional values upheld in the face of Fatima’s deviation, and/or (b) as an instance of ongoing clash between the home and school norms governing hetero-sexual contact.*

In fact, though, Asha’s interests and activity both prior and subsequent to this episode controvert this ‘purist’ interpretation. For sure, there are often serious differences between sexual codes at home and school, but a shared interest in boys constitutes a major strand in Asha’s friendship with Fatima, and for most of the time, there’s tacit agreement between them on how to navigate these home-school differences. So rather than reflecting the irrepressible dictates of a compelling

ethno-moral conscience, *kale* points to the fragility of their on-and-off friendship, involving a moment of retaliation to the moral character-derogation that Asha thinks Fatima's been engaged in.

- *seeing the switch between relatively serious and very light-hearted treatments of Punjabi sexual codes ('kale' vs the Indian English voicings) as 'contradiction', even confusion.*

If we reckon, though, with the interactional purposes driving these invocations of ethno-morality at the particular moments when they're produced, then the girls' utterances seemed perfectly coherent, very effective (in terms of their impact on the recipients), and actually rather assured.<sup>4</sup> If there is trouble and contradiction, it resides much more obviously in Asha and Fatima's friendship, as well as in the much more general business of male-female relations.

Following on from this, it's important

5.2 RECKONING WITH THE RANGE OF DIFFERENT WAYS IN WHICH THE GIRLS ORIENT TO THE SOCIAL RELATIONS AND MORAL DISCOURSES ACTIVE IN THE INTERACTION (VARIATIONS IN SALIENCE): Table 3 identified a range of social relations and moral codes that the girls' interaction appears to engage with – the rights and wrongs of conduct in lessons, of friendship, of heterosexual interaction, and of heterosexual interaction for Punjabi girls. But these vary in their salience for the girls:

- *heterosexual relations* are explicitly addressed as a big topic in most their talk together, as well as in Asha's solo humming
- for the most part, the girls' activity enacts friendship, though there is a concern about lapse in the possibilities and proprieties of friendship which runs as an potentially troublesome but temporarily suppressed under-current in the interaction between Asha and Fatima, only surfacing briefly in Asha's comments and questions about Fatima's initial contact with Andrew
- although they have been temporarily loosened, the constraints of *being pupils in class* form part of the girls' background awareness, moving into the foreground when Mena's noisiness threatens to attract the teacher, but otherwise getting registered more generally in the way the girls keep their voices down
- *Punjabi strictures on heterosexual relations* are widely enough recognized/established to be reliably evoked/alluded to simply by a switch of language and accent. The girls manipulate this conventional discourse/imagery as a relatively dependable rhetorical resource for carrying forward their (non-canonically Punjabi) discussion of boys (strengthening Asha's accusation with '*kale*', and entertaining each other with Indian English voices).

These differences in modes of orientation to – or 'levels of consciousness' of - different kinds of social relation seem important, and could be carried a lot further empirically (who, what, where, when, how, why & with what consequences?). If one is interested in ethnicity in particular, it's surely worth trying to assess the manner and extent to which ethnic identity is explicitly addressed, gets enacted, runs as a troublesome undercurrent, forms part of people's background awareness, or gets used as non-propositional resource for the pursuit of non-ethnic issues. And if these differences in modes of consciousness are important, there is a serious methodological question:

- how far can social scientists expect **interviews** to pick up on ethnicity's weight and significance amidst all the other social relations lived by their informants? In the radio-microphone data in Section 2, the talk is jostling, multi-focused, allusive, partisan, stylized, multi-voiced, and interwoven with physical movement and action, whereas in contrast, interviews often privilege orderly progression, explicitness, relatively detached meta-commentary, narrative, and speech apart from movement and action. So how far do the semiotic affordances of the interview provide an opening into the different ways of experiencing social relations that we can see in Section 2?

---

<sup>4</sup> In relation to analytic attribution of 'contradiction', see e.g Bourdieu 1977:106-107 on 'monothesis', exemplified in "[t]he totalisation which the *diagram* effects by juxtaposing in the simultaneity of a single space the complete series of the temporal oppositions applied successively by different agents at different times, which can never all be mobilized together in practice (because the necessities of existence never require this sort of synoptic apprehension, tending rather to discourage it by their urgency)" (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* Cambridge: CUP p 106).

In fact, this methodological question about the possibilities and constraints of different kinds of data-elicitation site – ‘interviews’ as a particular kind of activity as opposed to ‘responding to text-messages’ – leads into a more general claim about analytic starting points.

5.3 PRIORITISING ACTIVITIES & ‘ACTIVITY TYPES’ AS DIMENSIONS OF CONTEXT: The analysis in Section 4 covered several ‘levels’ of context: ‘Institutional & social network relations and histories of interaction’; ‘Types of activity’, ‘Ideologies and institutional codes (and discourses)’. But there’s a case for advocating ‘activities’ and ‘activity types’ as be the first point of entry into analysis of the context of actions and utterances.<sup>5</sup>

Activities and activity types vary quite a lot in their size, scope, duration and conventionality, and though some activity types are quite clearly classified (e.g. ‘a coronation’, ‘a poker game’, ‘telling a joke’), the labeling of others looks rather improvised/*ad hoc* –e.g. ‘Responding together to a text-message from a boy’; ‘Avoiding interruption by the teacher’; ‘(Resuming) a dispute’ in Table 2. Nevertheless, people’s interactions are usually geared to distinguishable sets of broadly expectable purposes, practices, resources, identity/role-relations, sequential stages, and constraints on what’s recognizable/acceptable as a contribution to the particular activity on-hand (a ‘dispute’; ‘being researched’). These expectations certainly don’t tie people down rigidly, what actually happens in an interaction may not conform very closely to what’s expected, and one activity may be embedded in or interrupted by another. But participants’ sense of what’s going on and what to do is guided by their normative apprehension of the activity types they’re engaged in, and if there are substantial deviations, they’ll often address them explicitly.

The advantage of starting analysis by looking at activity and activity types lies in the way that they open both ‘upwards’ into more macro-social structure and ‘downwards’ into more micro-social actions.<sup>6</sup>

*Looking upwards:* social institutions like friendship, hetero-sexual relations, schooling etc are partially instantiated and lived through different sets of activity types. In the quotation in Section 1, Gilroy proposes a redirection of attention from ethnicity to the “things which really divide [people] ...: taste, life-style, leisure preferences”. ‘Taste’, ‘life-style’ and ‘leisure preferences’ certainly count as cultural structures, but we can break these down into types of activity (‘going to the opera’, ‘shopping at Gap’) and then watch them being prepared for, produced, contested, recounted etc in what people do and say together when we record them in and around these activities. Schooling, friendship, hetero-sexuality, ethnicity and so forth all have discourses associated with them that circulate far beyond any particular episode we might be examining, but by focusing on activity, we can describe the manner and extent to which these are suspended, enacted, suppressed, debated and/or merely evoked as a taken-for-granted. The analysis of activity, one might say, reveals the regularities, intricacies, divisions and ambiguities involved Gilroy’s ‘conviviality’.

*Looking downwards:* At the same time, of course, activities are constituted in sequences of words, utterances and actions which are themselves held to account by the participants’ normative expectations about the type of activity they’re engaged in. Much of the participants’ production and scrutiny of these actions can be captured in audio and video recording, and here we can see individuals *exercising their agency* from one moment to the next, formulating a response to what’s just happened/been said, accepting or refusing the expected response-types, trying steer the activity in the direction they want etc. Of course it’s important not to exaggerate the importance of what people do in particular activities and activity types, and a lot of the significance of what happens in a particular activity is shaped by activities before, after and elsewhere. Still, when Hall insists that

---

<sup>5</sup> Levinson defines activity types as “culturally recognised units of interaction that are identifiable by constraints on (a) goals/purposes, (b) roles activated in the activity, (c) [sequential] structure/stages, and (to some extent) (d) participants and setting” (S. Levinson 1979. Activity types and language. *Linguistics* 17 (5/6):356-399). There are many points of contact with Bakhtin’s account of genre (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* Austin: Univ. of Texas Press 1986), as well as with notions of ‘framing’ more generally (e.g. E. Goffman 1974 *Frame Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell)

<sup>6</sup> Cf Bakhtin on genres being “the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language” (1986:65).

“traditional forms” are continually “transformed by the technologies and identities of the present”, the analysis of activity and activity types provides a very useful point of entry into what “the technologies and identities of the present” are and could be.

---

### **Urban Classroom Culture & Interaction project team**

- Ben Rampton, Director ([ben.rampton@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:ben.rampton@kcl.ac.uk))
- Roxy Harris, Deputy Director ([roxy.harris@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:roxy.harris@kcl.ac.uk))
- Caroline Dover ([c.j.dover@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:c.j.dover@westminster.ac.uk))
- Alexandra Georgakopoulou ([alexandra.georgakopoulou@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:alexandra.georgakopoulou@kcl.ac.uk))
- Constant Leung ([constant.leung@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:constant.leung@kcl.ac.uk))
- Lauren Small, Research Officer ([lauren.small@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:lauren.small@kcl.ac.uk))

Project affiliates:

Adam Lefstein ([adam.lefstein@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:adam.lefstein@kcl.ac.uk)), Annabel Tremlett ([Annabel.tremlett@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:Annabel.tremlett@kcl.ac.uk))

### **Related publications:**

- Androutsopoulos, J & A Georgakopoulou (eds) 2003 *Discourse Constructions of Youth Identities*. Amsterdam: Benjamins
- Creese A and C. Leung 2003. Teachers' discursive constructions of ethno-linguistic difference: Professional issues in working with inclusive policy. *Prospect*, 18(2), 3-19. (with A Creese)
- Dover, C. 2006. 'Popular Culture Consumption and Identities in School'. *Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies* no 35, King's College London. [www.kcl.ac.uk/education/wpull.html](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/education/wpull.html)
- Georgakopoulou, A. & D. Goutsos 2004 *Discourse Analysis: An Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ Press.
- Georgakopoulou, A. 1998 Narrative. In J Verschueren et al (eds) *Handbook of Pragmatics*. Benjamins
- Georgakopoulou, A. 2002 Narrative & identity management: discourse & social identities in a tale of tomorrow. *Res. Lang. & Soc. Int.* 35: 427-451
- Georgakopoulou, A. 2005. 'Stories as talk-in-interaction: Implications for narrative and identity analysis' [www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/identities/identity\\_analysis.pdf](http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/identities/identity_analysis.pdf)
- Harris, R. 2003 Language & new ethnicities - multilingual youth & diaspora. *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies* 22. KCL. <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/education/wpull.html>
- Harris, R. 2005. 'New ethnicities and cultural practice[s]'. Text of presentation given a Programme Launch Event, April. [www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/identities/launch\\_transcripts.pdf](http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/identities/launch_transcripts.pdf)
- Harris, R. 2006 (at press). *New Ethnicities and Language Use*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Harris, R. & B. Rampton 2002 Creole metaphors in cultural analysis: On the limits & possibilities of (socio-)linguistics. *Critique of Anthropology* 21/1:31-51
- Harris, R. & B. Rampton 2003. *The Language, Ethnicity and Race Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Mohan, B., C. Leung & C. Davison 2001. *English as a Second Language in the Mainstream: Teaching, Learning, and Identity*. London: Longman.
- Rampton, B. 1995. *Crossing: Language & Ethnicity among Adolescents*. London: Longman.
- Rampton, B. 2005. 'Identity in sociolinguistics'. Text of presentation given at first Programme Workshop. January. <http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/identities/Ben%20Rampton.doc>
- Rampton, B. 2006. *Language in Late Modernity: Interaction in an Urban School*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Rampton, B., R. Harris & C. Dover 2002 Interaction, media culture & adolescents at school: End of project report. *Working Papers in Urban Language & Literacies* 20. KCL. <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/education/wpull.html>. Also at [www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/identities/adolescents\\_at\\_school.pdf](http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/identities/adolescents_at_school.pdf)
- Rampton, B., K. Tusting, J. Maybin, et al 2004. *Linguistic ethnography in the UK: A discussion paper*. At [www.ling-ethnog.org.uk](http://www.ling-ethnog.org.uk)