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Styling One’s Own in the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora: Implications for Language and Ethnicity

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This study focuses on the ways youth in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Canada, Britain, and the United States construct their ethnic identity when proficiency in their heritage language is limited. Though these youth claim only rudimentary proficiency in Tamil and identify English as their dominant language, they are nonetheless able to claim ethnic identity through strategic language practices. Different from Rampton’s theorization of crossing, such acts involve self-styling. While crossing is transgressive, self-styling is affirmative. While crossing is ludic, self-styling is invested. Furthermore, while crossing has been studied mostly in terms of the tokens produced, this study illustrates the way receptive proficiency and nonverbal participatory practices can help style one’s own. The study illustrates certain new configurations of language and ethnicity in diaspora life.

Key words: styling, diaspora, identity, Sri Lanka, Tamil

Visiting a house in Lancaster, California, one of the newest settlements of Sri Lankan Tamils in the post-1983 exodus from war-torn Sri Lanka, I find that only “grandma” is available for an interview. Our conversation turns quickly to the topics everyone in the community is discussing these days—that the Tamil language is dying in the diaspora as children increasingly adopt English for everyday communication; in the next 50 years there will be no Sri Lankan Tamil (SLT) communities in migrant locations, as ethnic identity will die with the heritage language. Grandma is disappointed that most Tamil children, including her grandchildren, are becoming monolingual in English while people of her age group remain monolingual in Tamil, preventing the groups from establishing strong bonds. As we talk, her teenage grandson Raju comes out of his room. A late riser, ready to have a quick lunch and leave the house, he addresses the grandmother in part-greeting, part-request:

TRANSCRIPT 1.1

1. Raju: Hi, caniyan. Where’s my cooRu (rice)?

1The following special conventions are used for transcriptions:

**Bold**: code-switched items

*italics*: utterances translated by the author

[ ]: overlapping utterance

=: latched utterance

(): glosses and descriptive comments

@@@: laughter

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Raju’s receptive proficiency in Tamil puts into question Grandma’s views on the demise of Tamil language and the decline of intergenerational communication. While I will turn to the implications of this receptive proficiency for identity later, I must first address the more direct signs of the grandson establishing rapport with his grandmother and enjoying an in-group identity. Raju could have easily said “rice” for cooRu, a word that has become a well-used borrowing for most Tamils, which even his grandmother would understand. However, Raju is choosing a Tamil word that would establish a better connection with his grandmother. His nickname for the grandmother, caniyan, is more difficult to translate. Deriving from the planet Saturn (cani in Tamil) which portends misfortune in Hindu astrology, it is a term of insult typically used for those who are unlucky or evil. However, the grandmother doesn’t treat this form of address as an insult. She suspends the usual negative meanings of the word as she is aware of the grandson’s status as lacking full proficiency in Tamil. The coupling of the moniker with the more casual youth greeting “Hi!” also makes it clear to her that he is only half serious, and probably using the moniker for a special rhetorical purpose. Though she could have easily rejected the grandson’s attempts at bonding, she signals uptake by giving him the information he is seeking. Perhaps she is mildly amused, and even appreciative, that her grandson is using Tamil words to establish rapport with her. I will later find from a conversation with her granddaughter (cited below) that children use caniyan in a mock-serious fashion to address family members.

Language practices such as these are important for the new ways in which members of the SLT community, and especially the youth I focus on in this article, establish ethnic identity and community membership in their diaspora lives. Countering the notion that SLT identity will die, these practices show how ethnicity finds new realizations. We are now open to viewing ethnicity as not primordial, but socially constructed. In sociolinguistics, the social constructionist approach has inspired the performative orientation, which treats ethnicity as part of the identification practices people strategically and creatively achieve in context-specific ways. The social constructionist approach helps us to move beyond the complicated debates on the definition and even relevance of ethnicity in the context of migration (see de Fina, 2007 for a review). Affirming the continued relevance of Italian identity in the United States, de Fina argues:

Sociolinguistic studies of the management of ethnic categories in discourse and interaction have shown that ethnic loyalties are not given but negotiated, that they are indexed in subtle ways rather than openly declared, and that they often contradict expectations and stereotypes about received ethnic boundaries. In the social constructionist perspective that these studies support, ethnicity should not be regarded as an abstract attribute of the individual, but rather as an interactional achievement grounded in concrete social contexts and evolving with them. (p. 374)

Furthermore, having decoupled ethnicity from language (among the many essences that traditionally represented identity), in a line of rethinking inspired by Hymes (1968), we are now open to alternate ways in which ethnicity may be constructed as people leave their traditional domains of habitation, open to see the ways in which lack of proficiency in a heritage language
does not prevent one from taking on identities traditionally associated with that language. Even without full bilingual proficiency, speakers are able to shuttle in and out of languages to take on new identities. The performative tradition of sociolinguistics has documented ways in which seemingly insignificant appropriations of lexical, grammatical, or phonological tokens from a community in whose language one doesn’t have substantial competence can still help one make a legitimate identity claim. Such identity work has been labeled *styling* (see Rampton, 1999a). Much of this work on styling has been conducted in relation to the notion of *crossing* (see Rampton, 1999a).

Though continuing this tradition of *styling*, I must point out a significant difference in the activity discussed in this article. As scholars in this tradition have defined it, crossing (or *styling the other*) involves using the codes of the out-group for identity claims. Rampton (1999a) treats crossing as “focussing on a range of ways in which people use language and dialect in discursive practice to appropriate, explore, reproduce or challenge influential images and stereotypes of groups that they *don’t* themselves (straightforwardly) belong to” (p. 421; emphasis in original). In the cases discussed in this article, the subjects are appropriating the language tokens associated with their in-group for in-group identity work, even though they are not proficient in their heritage language. They are not styling the other, but *styling one’s own*.\(^2\) I will call these acts *self-styling* to distinguish them from the notion of *crossing*.

I acknowledge that there is an ambiguity in terms like *in-group* and *out-group* in diasporic contexts.\(^3\) Some may still prefer to use crossing for the identification practices of my subjects—that is, treating SLT youth as English speaking, belonging primarily to the host (American, British, or Canadian) communities, and crossing into Tamil language and identities for which they are outsiders. In fact, both crossing and self-styling occur in the liminal spaces between communities and groups, with speakers crossing into either group boundary to suit their purposes (as Johnstone, 1999, points out). For example, an Anglo-American crossing into Spanish for display purposes will still need some familiarity with the Spanish-speaking community and its norms to gain uptake. Though both self-styling and crossing occur in the in-between spaces of communities, there is a difference in self-styling. For my subjects, who consider themselves virtually monolingual English speakers, Tamil language plays a significant role in their socialization by virtue of their birth and upbringing in SLT families and extended families. More importantly, they identify themselves primarily with the Tamil community, as evident in my interview data below. Such is the case of transnational and diaspora life where individuals don’t always have proficiency in the languages of their “native community” and yet affiliate themselves with it.

It is not only directionality of language borrowing that is distinct about self-styling (i.e., in-group members taking on in-group markers to perform in-group identities, rather than out-group markers to adopt out-group identities), but other features of realization and modality as well, compelling us to theorize this form of language identification practice and representation of ethnicity as a distinct phenomenon in identity performance. While crossing is studied mostly in terms of

\(^2\)Rampton’s data does include self-styling, as in the cases where Asian youth use exaggerated displays of their own varieties of English. Rampton (2009) uses the generic term *styling* for these acts, and doesn’t theorize them separately from crossing.

\(^3\)Rampton is himself aware of this ambiguity when he qualifies his definition by saying “groups that they *don’t themselves* (straightforwardly) belong to.” Note the parentheses and the added emphasis.
self-styling occurs in a range of interactions and contexts with different social meanings and consequences. To begin with family contexts, many children and parents confirmed that self-styling is an important means for them to interact at homes and to strengthen their family bonds. Raju’s sister narrated in her interview how she uses self-styling with her brother. I present below a lengthy excerpt, where Vishi goes on to discuss self-styling in other types of interactions outside the family. She shows a remarkable level of self-awareness of self-styling strategies and illustrates the range of meanings and associations self-styling gains in diverse practices. Her statements are valuable also as insider explanation of the attitudes and intentions that inform these self-styling strategies. They also confirm the range of functions I recorded in other contexts and sites:

TRANScriPt 2:
1. ASC: With the siblings, with your brothers and sisters, what (language) do you use?
2. Vishi: English. Yeah. Sometimes when I curse or when I am mad I call him paNTi (pig) or something a@@@ and my brother is funny cause he calls my grandmother caniyan.
3. ASC: Right right.
4. V: Just like even when he e-mails, he calls one of his co-workers caniyan.
5. ASC: Does he do that? a@@@
6. V: He says, “Hi caniyan, how are you?” [@@@]
7. ASC: [@@@] With most friends?
8. V: With most of my my Tamil friends, I’ll call them paNTi, but that’s actually their name, a term of endearment almost, you know. Like “paNTi come here and show me this please,” like that. With them it is always Tamil things here and there, especially for inside jokes and stuff.

9. ASC: Are they in school or-

10. V: Yeah, they are all in school, you know, college, or some of them in their last years of high school. ( ) Hm, one of my friends though, we are very close, we used to date a while ago, we kind of would talk in Tamil once in a way, a little vague, not a huge conversation, little things like that.

11. ASC: I see, yeah, so it will be like formal English with a little mixture [of Tamil]–

12. V: [Oh yeah. definitely.] It’s funny because even with my White friends, if I get mad at them or something, I’ll say “You panTi, you are that bad?” And they go, “What?”

13. ASC: How do you relate to your Tamil identity? Do you feel, and how do you feel about it. like, are you under pressure to be American, or=

14. V: = No, you know, I’m not like that. I mean I think I tend to be more Americanized anyway, right? But I do, I love my culture. I, I, you know I am really really keen on keeping it, you know even keep giving it to my children and stuff. It’s even in things I want them to have that American people don’t have. Hm kind of I feel something special that I have that they don’t have. . .

15. ASC: You never had American friends- lose friends or something like that, because you are Tamil? From their point of view, from your American friends’ point of view, do they feel uncomfortable?

16. V: =no, not uncomfortable=

17. ASC: =in their circles, you felt accepted?

18. V: Yeah, always felt accepted.

19. ASC: Suppose, when you raise a family would you feel it’s important to, you know, have a place for Tamil? You know, I am just thinking of the second generation of Tamils.

20. V: Yes, I will do some. I mean I’ll teach them all the bad words, @ @ @ what little I know I’ll try to teach. [F; 18 years; student; Lancaster]

To begin with functions within the family, Vishi confirms her brother’s practice of using derogatory words in Tamil to address their grandmother. She herself uses paNTi (pig) to call her brother. These are playful uses of insult words. Though she might occasionally use them when she is angry, the insult words are also mixed with levity, as she goes on to mention in relation to the words used for their grandmother. It is significant that these uses of insult words don’t damage family relationships. Her use of paNTi likely has the same effect that caniyan (uttered to the grandmother) has. She considers this act of self-styling “funny” (2)—presumably the way the grandmother also interprets it without taking offense. It is possible, as in other cultures, that such terms may even have an endearing effect or be a sign of intimacy (8), as Vishi confirms when she goes on to discuss how she and her brother use the same words to call their SLT college friends or co-workers. While the emotional effects might be similar, acts of self-styling with
peers outside the home have some additional functions. Since these words are uttered in the context of non-Tamil colleagues in school or the workplace, self-styling can help build in-group solidarity among Tamil youth. Vishi considers this function as “inside jokes and stuff” (8). The fact that their non-Tamil friends won’t understand the meaning of these words qualifies them as “inside jokes.” They serve to enhance the possibility of bonding among Tamil diasporic youth. Self-styling serves to define SLT youth as unified by a code that others can’t understand, in effect, constituting a community distinguished from others.

It is evident that there are many other self-styling acts that the SLT youth perform “always” (8) to maintain in-group solidarity. In other words, self-styling is a frequent strategy of identification for SLT diaspora youth. It also appears that in these contexts insult words are uttered, not only in situations of anger, but to hail each other in friendly interactions. It is not clear what Vishi means when she says “but that actually is their name” in reference to calling her friends “pig” (8). It is possible that she treats these words as nicknames for people or for her community of SLT friends in general. Yet, these acts have a transgressive quality, and an edge to them. They court the danger of breaking relationships if coded ineffectively. Self-styling thus enables SLT youth to use terms they wouldn’t otherwise use in polite conversation with friends at work or at school. It enables SLT youth to use unconventional language to test the boundaries of their relationship. However, uptake is important. If the acts are misconstrued, they can have serious consequences for breaking friendships or family relationships. Unlike crossing in out-group contexts where failure of uptake doesn’t involve serious consequences (cf. the example from Lo, 1999, where the Chinese subject’s use of Korean fails to receive uptake from his Korean friend, but passes without any serious repercussions), self-styling is performed in in-group relationships in which subjects are deeply invested. Consider the consequences of failure of uptake in the dating situation Vishi discusses. She says that self-styling was common with her SLT boyfriend (10). Though the use of Tamil with her boyfriend in out-group contexts is a more personal and intense way of enjoying a private relationship, it could also break their relationship if it is coded ineffectively and fails to gain uptake. It is not clear from Vishi’s examples above if they are performed in front of or within hearing distance of non-Tamil friends, in which case they would play the function of drawing an “elite closure” (Myers-Scotton, 1990), a topic that will be addressed later. I did observe other instances in which SLT youth use Tamil in the midst of Anglo friends or a teacher to share inside jokes and information behind their backs.

Vishi’s use of panTi with Anglo-American friends (12) constitutes a different performance. Here, she is using in-group language for out-group members. The word serves certain rhetorical purposes as the switch draws more attention (even without the meaning of the word being fully understood). It might give force to her anger, yet in a playful and modified way, as both parties know that the word is not understood and not meant to be understood. However, as she herself interprets the act (in 14), this self-styling is a way of showing “something special that I have that they don’t have”—that is, her multimembership in other communities. This is also an act of drawing boundaries and showing how she enjoys other identities not shared by her out-group friends. This has the effect of one-upmanship. It’s a special form of identity claim. When I ask how she relates to her Tamil identity in mainstream life, Vishi professes pride in her ethnic identity. Her acts of self-styling gain more significance in this context. They enable one to claim ethnicity without full proficiency in the heritage language. More importantly, uses of self-styling in out-group contexts serve purposes of self-identification. This is different from crossing, used in out-group contexts for other-identification.
Vishi clearly sees the Tamil words she knows as a resource for identity and community construction and is committed to passing them on to her children. She ascribes a powerful role to her use of Tamil. Her comments in 14 show that self-styling is enough to symbolize and even embody her love for her “culture.” Ironically, passing on even “bad words” (20) for acts of self-styling still constitutes preservation of Tamil identity. Her comments in 16 and 18 show that there is uptake from her Anglo-American friends. They recognize the intentions behind self-styling and neither party experiences any damage to their relationship. This probably inspires Vishi to feel that such acts of self-styling can be passed on to her children.

More complicated in self-styling is the way it is realized. I found many contexts of Tamil conversation where youth use their receptive proficiency to understand Tamil and participate in Tamil conversations while using English for their responses. It appears that language tokens can be beside the point in styling. Communicative practices help some to self-style and enjoy ingroup identity. In the following extended conversation, Rajani uses her receptive proficiency to participate in a conversation with her mother, her uncle, and me, which the elders conducted in Tamil:

TRANSCRIPT 3:

1. ASC: makaL tamiL kataikka maaTTaa enRu worry paNNuriinkaLoo?

   Do you worry that your daughter can’t speak Tamil?

2. Mother: worry paNNNi enna, onRum ceiya eelaatu enna? viLankum taanee avavukku?

   We can’t achieve anything by worrying, can we? Isn’t the fact that she understands enough?

3. Uncle: caappaaTu atukaLilai she is more.

   She is more (traditional) in food and things like that.

4. Mother: oom. maTRatu paavaaTaI caTTai atukaL pooTa konca naaL pooTaamal iruntava, piraku orumaatiri friends aakalooTai ceerntu skirt pooTa atukaL itukal. ellaam viruppan.

   Yes. She was earlier disinterested in wearing skirt and things like that. After joining some friends, she now likes to wear skirt and stuff.

5. ASC: Temple atukaL ellaam?

   What about temple and things like that?

6. Rajani: Not regularly, but yeah. [Mother: 45 yrs; Uncle: 54 yrs, teacher; Rajani, 16 yrs, student; London]

   In choosing to interject meaningfully and strategically in contexts where the mother, uncle, and I talk in Tamil, Rajani displays her Tamil identity and establishes community with us. As the mother apologizes for Rajani’s lack of Tamil proficiency by saying that she adopts other cultural practices in food and dress, I ask the mother if her daughter goes to the temple (in 5). Rajani chooses to answer herself and gives a more qualified response, as her mother and uncle seem to have exaggerated her adoption of Tamil practices in the previous turns. Rajani shows that she has processed the Tamil conversation to intervene critically in English. Note that though I had myself used a borrowing (“temple”), which Rajani would have understood, she wouldn’t
have understood the force of the question or the context of the utterance by that word alone. She needed to have understood the previous sequence of utterances in Tamil in order to answer meaningfully in English. Though I was new to this communicative practice, I later realized that the mother and uncle assumed throughout that Rajani was part of the conversation taking place in Tamil. Their assumptions and practices suggest that such conversational strategies are everyday reality for such families. This is how family conversation takes place in many diasporic homes.

We now have a body of research on receptive multilingualism (Braunmüller, 2006) and other forms of polyglot dialog (Posner, 1991) to theorize what my subjects are engaged in. Such practices are a special feature of globalization and its linguascapes. Many people can understand more languages than they can speak or write. Through such multilingual competence, we have cases where a “conversation” can feature more than one language. In the cases of Tamil diasporic communication where children responded in English (often in the locally dominant British or American variety) while the elders spoke in Tamil, this practice not only helped maintain communication, it also served to build and sustain Tamil identity. By utilizing their receptive proficiency, subjects are still bonding and/or establishing solidarity with the SLT community. Note that the youth still have the choice of walking away from the conversation or feigning ignorance of Tamil if they want to. The fact that they participate in the conversation through such creative strategies is an indication of self-styling—the desire to “perform” Tamil ethnic identity. Such identification practices suggest that we have to move styling beyond the simple act of producing stereotypical tokens. We have to consider identification practices in a more process-oriented and practice-based manner, moving self-styling beyond product-oriented considerations. Crossing and self-styling can occur, I contend, through more subtle means. Showing comprehension in a group’s language while participating in a conversation through different codes can perform identities.

More importantly, styling can occur through participation in communicative practices without proficiency in either productive or receptive skills (as traditionally defined). I found that SLT youth can participate in communicative events through knowledge of the practices involved in those events and by using Tamil words emblematically even if they didn’t know the meaning of those words. Consider Niranjan’s strategies below:

TRANSCRIPT 4:

1. ASC: So what is it that you consider is your dominant language now? Tamil or English?

2. Niranjan: I don’t speak Tamil.

3. ASC: At all? ( ) I see.

4. Niranjan: So far everything is in English. @@@

5. ASC: @@@ yeah? ( ) Do you- you don’t- ( ) say, a lot of people understand Tamil. Suppose somebody speaks=

6. Niranjan: =sometimes I do. I can understand Appa and Amma. But I don’t understand anybody else. Like basics. If it’s somebody familiar. But sometimes I use the body language as well, than the language. Suppose somebody unfamiliar speaks to me I don’t understand what the, what the heck they are saying. [M, 22 years; medical student; Lancaster]

Though Niranjan first says that he doesn’t speak Tamil, following the traditional assumption of full proficiency, he later acknowledges that he uses gestures and “body language” as a resource
to understand them, and is presumably not always aware of the meaning potential of the Tamil words. Though Niranjan may not understand their referential meaning always, the words of his parents are embedded in habitual and regular practices at home in specific interactions, specific participants, and specific contexts. Thus families do things with words even when some members don’t understand the meaning potential of all the words. In this type of analysis, then, we have to expand our notion of communication to include the ways words function in the context of objects and other ecological resources to create meaning.

There are other contexts such as *poojas, bajans* (i.e., religious hymns), weddings, and cultural rituals where a person lacking proficiency in Tamil is able to participate without understanding the meaning potential of the words used. SLT youth would memorize these Tamil discourses transliterated into an English writing system. These recitations would function emblematically to help self-style their Tamil identities. Similarly, they could follow religious, social, and cultural rituals through a knowledge of the discourse conventions. In a Tamil Christian worship service in a church, for example, I found that youth would stand up with others for hymns, kneel and bow their heads for prayer, walk up the aisle for communion, and even utter some responses for choral reading in Tamil, even if they didn’t understand the whole service being conducted in Tamil. They could do this because they knew the stages and procedures of the worship service and also participate in these activities in the context of other clues from the other participants and objects. (This phenomena of religious participation in a language that is largely not (fully) understood is well known, for example, through the use of Latin in some Roman churches, and Hebrew in synagogues.) Through these procedures, these youth could enjoy in-group status with their community in events that are culturally important.

**THEORIZING SELF-STYLING**

Self-styling owes its purchase to crossing in many ways; it’s effectiveness lies in the referential relationship it has with crossing. For instance, both crossing and self-styling are performed. There is no assumption that the user has full proficiency (whether in the linguistic or cognitive sense) in the language being crossed or styled. They are both framed and used in relative detachment from other linguistic tokens of the same language for specific display purposes. They are both marked uses, to evoke specific identities in an unconventional and self-conscious manner. Everyone is aware that the speaker is using the marked linguistic token without complete proficiency in the language, for a specific purpose in a specific context. Furthermore, both practices occur at the border zones of speech communities. As such, both require multilingual *awareness* (though not proficiency) and interstitial community membership, as I mentioned in the beginning.

In terms of the objective of both styling acts, we must note that the subjects engaged in crossing are not asking to be treated as in-group members of the other group (though they are claiming a special affinity relationship). The goals of crossing are short-term relationships, tentative displays of identity, speech accommodation, or rhetorical effect. The act gains significance only in the context that both parties know that the speaker is using a seemingly in-group item as an outsider (for special display purposes). In self-styling, the agents of these acts are asking to be treated as insiders to their ethnic community in addition to achieving specific rhetorical purposes. Therefore, while crossing is practiced for tentative identity with a community, self-styling has the additional objective of claiming in-group status within that community.
Furthermore, there are differences in levels of solidarity achieved with the groups whose language is borrowed. There is greater solidarity sought in self-styling, even through playful and insulting speech acts. Crossing doesn’t seek deep levels of solidarity and, in fact, violates solidarity in many cases. For example, Rampton’s (1999b) famous subject Hanif is definitely not seeking solidarity with Germans when he repeats the word “Aufmachen.” Their speech acts are loaded with sarcasm. Ranjan, Vishi, and Niranjan go beyond that in their self-styling usage. They are seeking to be identified as ethnic SLT, and celebrating their mutual affiliation when they use their Tamil tokens. An indication of this valuation is that failure of uptake would have dire consequences for self-stylers. It might constitute damage to one’s self-worth and community standing.

The stakes are certainly higher in self-styling, and there is greater investment accompanying these acts. However, in the mostly “ludic and aesthetic modalities” of crossing (Rampton, 1999b, p. 499), there is much less at stake. The acts of Hanif are clearly playful. While crossing is mostly used for humor, irony, and half-serious rapport with others, self-styling has more serious objectives and consequences in addition to its playfulness and humor. Children have to establish their place in the family; individuals have to affirm their place in the community; and everyone struggles for solidarity, esteem, power, and status within their community through these linguistic acts. Though self-styling also has an element of playfulness (as when Ranjan calls his grandma caniyan), the serious bonding functions are equally or more important. Furthermore, we might also say that while crossing’s objectives are short term (having few implications beyond the local context in which it is practiced), self-styling has more long-term implications. Through these acts of self-styling, the subjects are developing bonds with their family and community in addition to getting socialized into their linguistic and cultural practices. Though this doesn’t discount the possibility that SLT youth may enjoy other group affiliations and also have comparatively more emotional affiliation with non-Tamil groups, their identification and status with the Tamil community matters to them deeply. Therefore, compared to the primarily ludic acts of crossing, self-styling has greater investment.

The more functional nature of self-styling cannot be overemphasized. At the level of meaning, too, the referential and purposive functions are of more importance for self-styling than for crossing. A clue is the fact that crossing is always marked for the occasion. Self-styling is relatively closer to the conventional code for the functions in that context. When Ranjan says cooRu, he approximates the conventional code for such contexts, Tamil. The propositional content is more or equally important as the playfulness of an English-dominant speaker using Tamil. From that point of view, Hanif’s German token of crossing has more rhetorical functions, whereas Ranjan’s Tamil token of self-styling has more referential functions (though both tokens do not exclude the other function).

Furthermore, the largely affirmative nature of self-styling also differs from the transgressive nature of crossing. Crossing into the boundaries of another linguistic community and laying claim to the identities of a secondary or additional group of socialization is a provocative activity. There is also an essentialism involved in treating a token (usually a stereotyped and stigmatized item—that is, mock Spanish items such as “no problemo”) to represent the community or its language. However, self-styling is affirmative. It is performed to establish one’s insider status in one’s “native community.” An insider’s borrowing of in-group tokens is not loaded with the negative, transgressive, and provocative implications of crossing. Hill (1999) notes, speaking particularly about the appropriation of African American English or Spanish in the U.S. context,
“Even though individual utterances may be playful and benign, the larger impact of such usages is to continually, covertly, reproduce the racialization of Latino and Black populations. . . . It is clear that crossings are often seen by source populations as theft, as the illegitimate use of a resource” (pp. 553–554). SLT youth don’t evoke the negative associations Hill describes because of their objective of establishing in-group status, their relatively greater proficiency, and their investment in the language.

Self-styling probably gains more currency in the context of diaspora and transnational relationships. There is a greater need for diasporic communities to resort to self-styling for ethnic identification purposes. People lose their traditional identity kits and symbolic capital when they migrate. Their own “native community” cannot be taken for granted. Community membership has to be constructed anew all the time. However, thankfully, language provides them new symbolic resources for identification practices. More importantly, symbols belonging to one language or another become open to multiple associations and identities. Blommaert’s (2010) argument to treat language as a mobile resource rather than a static and monolithic system enables us to appreciate how ethnicity is expressed through new language resources in diaspora contexts.

Ethnicity and community identity are particularly challenging for diaspora communities as they have lost their traditional sense of boundedness, territoriality, and cohesion. For such communities, identity is fluid. It is constantly reconstructed according to one’s changing contexts, interests, and purposes. As Stuart Hall (1997) puts it: “The diaspora experience . . . is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (p. 235). It is for such groups that one’s own community has to be styled. Language is an important resource to construct and negotiate such nontraditional identities. Self-styling is one of the many practices diaspora groups adopt for identification. This study affirms the vitality of ethnicity even in migrant and diaspora contexts, thanks to the creativity of language. Language provides diaspora groups the nimbleness to shuttle between different communities, resolve tensions in diverse identities, and construct new selves.

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