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South Asian Language
Practices: Mother Tongue,
Medium, and Media

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Abstract

Scholars such as Murray Emeneau and John Gumperz made India prominent in the development of sociolinguistics as a field of study through their simultaneous attention to difference and cohesiveness. Later, scholars stressed the ideological mediation of practice, especially the importance of colonial constructions that continue to be relevant in the postcolonial period. Work on specific notions such as mother tongue and medium of instruction, and the salience of English, led scholars to provide insights into multilingual practices in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Finally, a vast scholarship on an array of older and newer media forms ranging from early print publications to social media has posed questions about the possibilities of representation and participation. Ethnographic approaches to digital media that focus on the complex dynamics between ideologies and practices have put South Asia at the forefront of studies of communication.



INTRODUCTION

In his review of monographs on the political economy of India, Gupta (1989) notes that the nation is “more like a continent than a country in its diversity” (p. 787). Scholars involved in early conceptualizations of sociolinguistics in the 1950s and 1960s also characterized India as an area exhibiting abiding differences. In their efforts to draw correlations between linguistic variation, geographical area, and social structure, they offered an understanding of India as a region of regions constituted by languages, some of which are associated with literary traditions, some of which gained constitutional recognition, and all of which belong to larger language families. The major insight that not all of the language variation coincides with social distinctions prompted an interest in the role of social differences in language change. Some scholars argued that linguistic interaction in India encourages an ethos of maintaining difference rather than curtailing it through processes such as standardization. Almost all of the initial work focused on India, and only later would sociolinguists examine language practices in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

In the 1990s, scholars of language in South Asia turned their focus from variation to history and transformation. They began to ask questions about how differentiation emerged. To do so, they pondered the changing sociopolitical functions of languages, the centrality of languages in projects of British colonial rule, and the politics of language legitimacy in independent India. During this time, linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists asked questions about the meanings and social uses of concepts especially germane to South Asian life. They were concerned primarily with the ideological investments of everyday practices and state institutions. Mother tongue, for example, has become so naturalized in certain contexts that it is used as a primary means to describe the self with respect to language, just as medium of instruction has come to differentiate schools across the region, albeit differently depending on the nation. The place of English in South Asian life has always been marked: English is rarely identified, for example, as one’s mother tongue. Many of the reasons lie in power structures initiated during the colonial period that continue to be relevant in the postcolonial period. Every government in South Asia has had to grapple with English as a sociopolitical reality, and educational policies reflect shifting measures with changes in government. Finally, the emergence of social media and smart phone technology has made for especially profound shifts in possibilities and practices of communication in the region. While scholars working in the area have built a rich body of scholarship on performative traditions, digital media has brought new representational possibilities for social groups and for participation and the formation of publics. Recent approaches have moved beyond the study of media discourse to ground old and new media practices in larger-scale social and political processes. Fine-grained ethnographic study is the best means for apprehending the comparative practical and ideological dimensions of new and old media forms so important to contemporary life in South Asia.

SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF INDIA

Two scholars fostered the study of sociolinguistics in India during the 1950s and 1960s, Murray Emeneau and John Gumperz, but differences in their intellectual perspectives and methods made for different emphases. Although he conducted extensive research among Toda- and Kota-speaking people in South India, Emeneau (1956) was best known for his argument that the Indian subcontinent constitutes a vast linguistic area. Using the methods of one of his teachers, Edward Sapir, Emeneau argued that members of the Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, and Munda language families, and other languages, some with disputed genetic links, had come to share traits in the Indian subcontinent. These can be found in vocabulary borrowings, phonological distinctions (especially contrasts with dental consonants), echo word constructions, and classificatory systems (Emeneau 1956). Gumperz (1961) also made frequent appeals to the salience of the Indian subcontinent as



a sociolinguistic reality but focused on the speech community, patterns of communication usually realized in a locale, for insight. He frequently invoked the isoglossic distinctions characterizing relatively large regional transitions but consistently noted that such features lack social dimensions. Gumperz's (1958) early publications came from fieldwork in the village of Khalapur in Saharanpur district north of Delhi, where several varieties were linked complexly to what he called social functions. Relatively educated villagers controlled a standardized form of Hindi and thus could interact in settings such as schools or development programs. A vernacular was differentiated by whether it was used with the family or servants, or in situations of relative formality underpinned by distance and respect. The vernacular characterized all but a few untouchable groups who could be identified by certain phonetic differences as well as residential segregation. Clothing styles and other aspects of social life coincided in specific ways with linguistic variation. Traveling merchants and performers regularly interacted with locals, giving evidence of yet further variation (Gumperz 1958). A study by Gumperz & Wilson (1971) noted that at the border between two language families, morphosyntactic convergences demonstrated that influence could be seen from both languages. Gumperz (1964) went on to conduct fieldwork in Norway and characterize the sociolinguistic dimensions of Khalapur as complex in comparison. A legacy of this work is the association of the Indian subcontinent with enduring multilingualism, the notion that members of speech communities use and maintain different languages and language varieties tied to social contexts.

The strands of inquiry established by Emeneau and Gumperz shaped subsequent debate profoundly. In her history of language in India, Mohan (2021) reminisces about the mid-1970s, when her teacher Madhav Deshpande argued that Sanskrit gained retroflexion from Dravidian languages and thus lacked the feature in Vedic recitation for hundreds of years—a proposition that “stirred up a hornet’s nest” with Emeneau and other scholars (p. 24). Masica (1991) used the complexity of isoglossic features in the Indo-Aryan language family to show that there is inevitably no single scheme for the relatedness of language varieties. Whereas several scholars focused on caste as a particularly salient feature of Indian society (Bright 1960, Ramanujan 1968), Pandit (1968) argued that caste was not a robust category of sociolinguistic distinction in isolation and asserted that other dimensions of social life must be studied in tandem. He also revised Gumperz’s insights into South Asian sociolinguistic complexity to argue that the region is a place in which multiple languages are needed to fulfill social functions and that people tend to accommodate each other’s multilingual practices, in contrast to the West and its history of standardization through national boundaries and state institutions (see Satyanath 2021). This argument has been influential in more recent work (Canagarajah 2013, Khubchandani 1997). Several important volumes of essays were published, the first as a result of a set of presentations at the 1957 meetings of the American Anthropological Association (Ferguson & Gumperz 1960). The volume did not try to provide comprehensive coverage of South Asia. Rather, contributors analyzed the ways that regional distinctions so often entail the involvement of literary traditions, processes of language standardization, and sociolinguistic variation among caste groups. Further edited volumes followed in which authors elaborated on bilingualism and multilingualism, code-switching, literacy, linguistic minorities, and standardization, among other topics that have become standard fare in sociolinguistic scholarship on South Asia (Kachru et al. 2008, Singh et al. 1995; see Nakassis & Annamalai 2020).

A TURN TO HISTORY

A turn to the past has led scholars to grapple in new ways with the articulation of language with changing sociopolitical formations, whether in terms of classification, function, or recognition. Insights into the ways in which languages functioned politically in premodern India serve as important correctives to the often-repeated idea that Sanskrit’s decline enabled the rise of Prakrit, which



in turn evolved into vernaculars constituting modern languages. Emergent around the beginning of the Common Era was the recognition of Sanskrit as a language of royal power and the subsequent emergence of a “language order” for literary premodern South Asia, exhibiting an asymmetrical relationship between Sanskrit and Prakrit and a peripheral position for Apabhramsha (Ollett 2017, p. 114). In just two centuries, the use of Sanskrit in *kaavya* (a literary style), metal seals, temples, and land grants spread over a vast territory, eventually stretching from modern-day Afghanistan to Bali, in what has been called a Sanskrit cosmopolis (Pollock 2009). This should not, however, imply some sort of uniformity, because Sanskrit’s institutional histories and fortunes were quite uneven over its use (Pollock 2009). Beginning in the tenth century, Persian also gained royal uses and patronage over a vast territory, and scholars have used the term cosmopolis to capture the aesthetic and political dimensions of the language in premodern South Asia (Eaton 2018). The second millennium saw the emergence of vernaculars and a change in the orientation of language toward territory and region. Whereas Sanskrit’s legitimacy rested on cosmopolitanism or a lack of connection to any particular locale (Ramaswamy 1999), the emergent vernaculars began to offer connections to regions via the mediation of a set of literary norms, a process Pollock (2009) has called literarization. Sanskrit maintained a relationship of hyperglossia or superposition with respect to vernaculars like Kannada, which increasingly served to be identified with spaces in which its literature circulated.

Another development during the second millennium in South Asia was the rise and eventual preeminence of British colonialism. Cohn’s (1996) work on the ways in which the British used, and helped define and solidify, social forms of widespread recognition such as royal ritual, arrangements and procedures of revenue collection, and caste distinctions and hierarchies has been especially influential. The British focused on language for the possibility of communicating with colonial subjects but also knowing them as objects of study. In so doing, the British established classifications of language varieties for instruction in institutional domains and for crafting accounts of languages as having pasts that might be studied for their relatedness (Cohn 1985). Colonial efforts to know their subjects included the collection and classification of folklore toward the erasure of its pragmatic values and the production of an illusion of consent to colonial rule (Raheja 1996). The colonial disposition to languages of the region changed during British rule. Some colonial officials’ arguments for the study and use of Indian languages during the Orientalist period gave way to the Anglicist period, in which English became the language of rule and knowledge production and Indian languages were used at relatively subordinate levels in administrative hierarchies (Viswanathan 1989). In the former period, Sir William Jones’s philological pursuits in Calcutta led him to call for an Indo-European family of languages where Sanskrit was elevated to the status of Greek and Latin (Trautmann 1997). In addition, Francis Whyte Ellis presented the Dravidian proof, an argument for the existence of a Dravidian family of languages (Trautmann 2006).

Sir George Grierson of the Indian Civil Service initiated the largest colonial project to document and catalog Indian languages, resulting in the publication of the *Linguistic Survey of India (LSI)* (DSAL 2014). Scholars have found the *LSI* to be a fruitful artifact for the exploration of several processes at work in colonial efforts to represent language as a sociohistorical reality in India. The survey work was hardly impartial in that it drew on caste and class distinctions to employ Indians, made distinctions between language and dialect in different ways in different regions, amplified the notion that Muslims were not legitimate occupants of the region, and even provided Grierson with means for cathexis with aspects of the *LSI* (Carlan 2018, Lelyveld 1993, Majeed 2019). Majeed (2019) painstakingly notes the ways, however, in which the *LSI* refused to impose some classificatory habits of the colonial regime, providing an especially rich repository of names for language varieties from which many logics of native classification can be derived.



The colonial milieu did not simply allow for the imposition of English; it also created the opportunity for Indians to attend school and publish in vernacular languages. Indigenous class and caste elites found in the vernacular—Marathi, for example, in Bombay and Pune—the means for identification and the construction of linguistic authority (Naregal 2001). Even more widespread in northern India was a set of efforts by class and caste elites to utilize print cultural forms such as magazines, journals, and textbooks to publicize a standardized Hindi that could stand for a *rashtra* (nation) and a *jati* (cultural type) (Orsini 2002). Despite British attempts to suppress Punjabi for its association with Sikhs via the Gurmukhi script, a performance genre of epics and romances known as *qisse* allowed for religious and contextual complexities that confounded colonial attempts to define languages along communal lines (Mir 2010). Some colonial officials and academics argued that language practices underlying Hindu forms of worship lacked the referential transparency and sincerity of Protestant language practices (Yelle 2013) at the same time that features of Protestant sermons informed emergent political discourse in Tamil (Bate 2021).

The differentiation between Hindi and Urdu has attracted a great deal of scholarly interest, especially for the ways the difference can point to that between Hindu and Muslim religious matters. From the eleventh to the eighteenth century, a common literary vernacular became increasingly distinguished as either Hindi or Urdu. Classic studies attribute the possibility to reformist efforts to replace Sanskrit-derived elements with Persian ones (Rai 1984), or the interjection of Sanskrit-derived elements by Hindi reformists (Ahmad 2011, King 1994). Hakala (2016) shows that lexicographic works emergent from the Persianate literary cultural field of North India predated the arrival of William Jones, but that these “idiomatic” projects gradually gave way to the royal production of a standardized dictionary associated with a “national language,” Urdu (p. 198). While script can be used as a particularly determinative marker of difference between the languages (King 1994), shifts in contemporary practices show that alignments between Hindi, Devanagari, and Hinduism, on the one hand, and Urdu, Nastaliq, and Islam, on the other hand, are hardly inevitable (Ahmad 2011).

Although the issue was considered by the colonial government, independence brought urgency to questions of how language might reflect official distinctions of the polity. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, after an initial period of reluctance, called for the formation of the States Reorganisation Commission in 1953 (King 1997, Sarangi 2011). Inclusion in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India—there are currently 22 languages—brings certain rights (Gupta et al. 1995). English is not listed, and its planned replacement by Hindi as the official language in 1965 was curtailed by the Official Languages Act in 1963, which allowed for the continued use of English for official purposes (Das Gupta 1970). Subsequent legislation included the three-language formula in 1968 that sought to unite the country through targeted multilingual instruction (Brass 1990), as well as state-level attempts to provide tribal or Adivasi students instruction in their languages (Mohanty 2019). Nag (2011) explains that development discourses have come to replace arguments fueled by language difference in recent movements for state formation.

The Subaltern Studies Collective was founded by a group of scholars in the early 1980s to remedy the elitist and colonialist bias in scholarship on India and the rest of South Asia by rewriting history from the point of view of the subaltern (Guha 1982). In the multivolume series titled *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, scholars largely turned to oral histories and previously unexamined documents often found in smaller archives (Chatterjee 2012). Chaudhury (1987) questioned the types of sources, methods, and logics that should be applied, but there was little attention given to language even though many of the materials studied were in regional vernaculars. The fourth volume refocused the tradition by incorporating the works of two scholars who looked at language and discursive power, Cohn (1985) and Spivak (1985) (see Ludden 2002). Spivak’s (1988) chapter, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” though not published in the



series, was highly influential in considering how scholars can access the subjectivity of the Indigenous colonial dispossessed, a topic that remains of central concern in studies of Adivasis and other subordinated groups. The fifth volume addressed the omission of gender in the first four volumes with Guha's (1987) examination of women's agency, but gender was not discussed in relation to language. Language difference was addressed specifically in the seventh volume in the series, in which Kaviraj (1992) considers the narrative modes through which Indians conceptualized the past of the nation. He shows that though language is the dominant way in which different regions have been defined, the formation of linguistic regions did not predate anticolonial consciousness and was rooted in colonial developments.

Chatterjee (2012), in reviewing *Subaltern Studies*, observes that the Collective's initial concern with locating peasant consciousness ended up leading to an interest in the vernacular print literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The interest, in turn, revealed new spaces for the production of modern mass cultural forms and demonstrated how different regional language formations had different imaginings of modernity and nationhood. He also notes how the different languages used by various minority cultures led to different representations of gender, class, caste, power, and hierarchy. Chatterjee (2012) argues that interdisciplinary work on popular culture in South Asia has moved away from the concern with "uncovering the implicit conceptual structures that supposedly underlie the practical activities of people who do not produce large bodies of texts of their own" and toward understanding "embodied practices as activities that people carry out for their own sake" (p. 49). This new approach, which relies on ethnography as a primary method, involves treating language or discourse not as text but as situated practice that both reflects and produces social formations. Practice-focused approaches have significantly contributed to understandings of language in relation to caste, class, gender, and sexuality in performative traditions, media, and everyday social life, as highlighted below.

MOTHER TONGUE

Many scholars left aside issues related to linguistic variation configured by social distinction and region to ponder a pervasive means by which language is imagined as a social reality in South Asia, the idea of mother tongue. The concept, which dates back to Europe, gained salience in South Asia in the mid-nineteenth century and has been pervasive ever since (Ramaswamy 1997; see Bénéï 2008). Pattanayak (1981) examines how the term gained institutional legitimacy by looking at how it came to be used in the Indian census, and scholarship carefully traces the various and sometimes incompatible definitions of the concept among its iterations since 1872 (see Khubchandani 1997, Mitchell 2009). Ramaswamy's (1997) study of Tamil devotion in South India rejects the universalizing discourses of linguistic nationalism to investigate how mother tongue was variously imagined by different individuals and groups. She argues that from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries the Tamil language and its speakers were conceived as "inextricably intertwined" for the first time (Ramaswamy 1997, p. 244). Tamil devotionalists equated the Tamil language with a mother to the extent that their mothers and their language were foundational to the very imagining of Tamils as a community. While some people began to integrate mother tongue within the nation in seeing Tamil to be part of a larger family of mother tongues in India, others stressed its exceptionalism as the "one and only mother/tongue to which its speakers owe total and unconditional allegiance, the language of their (Tamil) nation" (Ramaswamy 1997, p. 245).

The concept of mother tongue is widely employed in sociolinguistic literature on language policy, multilingualism, and education in South Asia. Academic studies and national-level policy documents often contrast mother tongue education with English education, assuming that mother tongue corresponds to the languages students speak at home or with their family members. But,



often, children who are identified as studying in their mother tongue are actually being instructed not in their first or primary language but rather in a relatively standardized regional or national vernacular in which they may not have full competency. Thus, the concept of mother tongue is used to represent students' language identities in schooling contexts when their language practices, and associations with those practices, are far more varied (Khubchandani 2003). India's 2009 Right to Education Act specifies that children should be taught in their mother tongue. Several scholars have discussed the fact that because only a small percentage of the language varieties spoken in India are available as mediums of instruction in government schools, linguistic minorities often have to study in a language with which they are not entirely familiar, thus placing them at an educational disadvantage (Bhattacharya & Jiang 2022, Sadgopal 2010).

While some South Asians may be able to unproblematically name a mother tongue, others have complex affiliations with different national, regional, and local linguistic varieties. Annamalai (2018) significantly contributes to scholarship on this topic in India by articulating the multiple, and sometimes contradictory, ways mother tongue is employed in practice. It is used to refer to a language of one's mother, a language of primary socialization, a language of communicative competency, and a language of sociocultural or political identification (Annamalai 2018; see Pattanayak 1981). Rather than simplifying complex and nuanced sociolinguistic situations by glossing mother tongue as something like first language, recent approaches treat it as an ideologically mediated concept (Davis 2022, Hastings 2008, LaDousa 2010, Mills 2004). As Mitchell (2009) discusses, when a person names a mother tongue, either on the Indian census or in other contexts, they are not simply claiming a language but positioning themselves in relation to a sociolinguistic situation in a way that reflects their desired identifications and aspirations.

MEDIUM (OF INSTRUCTION)

With its juxtaposition to Western nations with their standardized languages and emphasis on the goal of monolingual unity, South Asia was imagined in sociolinguistic literature as a place of fluid multilingualism and accommodation to commonalities between interlocutors in terms of language, dialect, and context (see the section titled Sociolinguistics of India) (Dasgupta 1993, Pattanayak 1981). Schools and their standardized languages did not initially become sites of sociolinguistic interest because their very means of identification, medium of instruction, or medium sat uneasily with notions of South Asian multilingualism (LaDousa & Davis 2022). Some sociolinguistic work explicitly mentions the school as unnatural in the South Asian sociolinguistic environment by virtue of its imposition of boundaries between home and institution and home language and unfamiliar language (Dasgupta 1993, Pattanayak 1981). More recent work treats medium as a profoundly ideological concept that is salient to issues of education and social inequality (Ramanathan 2005). As distinct from the range of meanings possible when people invoke the notion of mother tongue, medium consistently refers to the language in which instruction and curricular materials are offered. However, the concept extends into social and institutional life because it can be used to describe a school, university, or coaching center (LaDousa 2014, LaDousa & Davis 2022).

Recent work examines the importance of medium to colonial and postcolonial national histories (Sah 2020). Scholars have looked at how ethnic, religious, gender, and class identities are expressed and challenged in relation to medium distinctions in schools in Bangladesh (Hamid et al. 2014), India (Chidsey 2018, LaDousa 2014), Nepal (Phyak 2013, Pradhan 2020), Pakistan (Rahman 2002), and Sri Lanka (Davis 2020). Other work considers the centrality of medium in practices outside pedagogical contexts—in how people communicate, consume mass media, make a living, and reflect on themselves and others—in Bangladesh (Jahan & Hamid 2019), India



(LaDousa 2020, Sandhu 2016), and Pakistan (Farooqui 2022). Medium is a pan-South Asian phenomenon, but scholars cited here elucidate how the particular significance of medium varies in relation to national contexts.

GLOBAL ENGLISH

English has long been associated with power and inequality in South Asia (Bharadwaj 2017, Ramanathan 2005). British colonizers contributed to creating class hierarchies by providing a small elite with access to English-medium schools so they could occupy civil service jobs (Kumar 2005, Seth 2007, Viswanathan 1989). In the postindependence period, the hierarchies of colonialism were replicated because children of the Anglophone elite who could afford to attend high-quality English-medium schools were given differential access to government and private-sector jobs at home and abroad (Annamalai 2004, Sandhu 2016). In the past two decades, processes of globalization and neoliberalism have led to an ever-increasing demand for English education among people of all ethnic, religious, caste, class, and gender backgrounds (Highet & Del Percio 2021, Lukose 2009, Proctor 2014).

Works on English in South Asia have investigated its colonial and postcolonial history and its complex role in social life (Auddy 2019, Bharadwaj 2017, Chatterjee & Schluter 2020, Dasgupta 1993, Orsini 2015). Chandra (2012) underscores sexuality and power by showing how English was molded in colonial India through the sexual experiences of Indians and their attempts to create a normative sexual subject. Scholars have also brought nuance to understandings of English by detailing the numerous regional and local English varieties spoken in the region (Gunasekera 2005, Kachru 1983, Kothari & Snell 2011). Kachru (1997) argues that English dialects in South Asia and other postcolonial contexts should be considered world Englishes in their own right. Parakrama (1995), however, notes in the context of Sri Lanka that the identification of legitimate English dialects is an ideological move that valorizes the educated varieties of English at the expense of other varieties.

Scholarship on postcolonial South Asia has elucidated different imaginings of English in everyday practices (Aravamudan 2006). Most South Asian youth desire to improve their spoken or written English because of its robust association with middle-class status and the opportunity for social and spatial mobility (Davis 2022, Weinberg 2022), but it is also widely associated with colonialism and Western imperialism (Kandiah 2010, Khubchandani 2003, Sadana 2012). The problematic disposition of English is apparent in India's National Education Policy, released by the National Democratic Alliance government in 2020 (MHRD 2020). The policy emphasizes the need for mother tongue education and mentions English only in the context of its offering as a subject and the need for bilingual textbooks and instructions in mathematics, science, and law education. In comments written in response to the draft National Education Policy, E. Annamalai (unpublished manuscript) explains that the policy embodies "the dream of becoming the third largest economy of the world" and that technological skills coupled with English serve as the vehicle for making that possible. The current government is thus extending a "nativist" ideological position taken by several previous governments to promote Indian languages and avoid ties between English and foreignness, but it also banks on the implications of English for development.

Recent work in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology has contributed to understandings of English practices across institutional and noninstitutional settings (Agnihotri & Khanna 1997, Kothari & Snell 2011). Ganti (2016) describes the paradox whereby actors in Bollywood films increasingly use regional rather than standardized varieties of Hindi while English has become the dominant language of interaction in the industry off-screen. Scholars observe that while English is ideologically contrasted with regional and local vernaculars, English words and phrases are also deeply integrated into local linguistic practices (Canagarajah 2013, Ramanathan 2005). Nakassis



(2016) shows how young adults in Tamil Nadu, India, adjust the amount of English in their Tamil speech according to the norms of particular groups. If they do not speak English well enough they may be thought to be “local” or uneducated, but if they speak it “too well” they may be considered snobbish (Nakassis 2016, p. 112). Canagarajah (2005), in his research in northern Sri Lanka during the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam’s de facto state in the 1990s, examines Tamil and English practices across various contexts, including songs, police interactions, and job interviews. He demonstrates that while the regime actively policed the use of English, people nevertheless continued to mix English in their Tamil speech to strategically position themselves as educated and middle class. Hall (2021) articulates the ways in which interaction in Hinglish, in contrast to Hindi or English, has provided a means for engaging in discourse about sexuality not available in medicalized registers of English traceable to the colonial past. She argues that this new possibility rests on and helps to create associations between Hindi, stigmatized sexual identities such as Hijras and subordinate class positions. To capture the complexity of English practices in postcolonial South Asia, more work is needed that examines people’s multilingual practices across various settings and situations in relation to their commentary on those practices. It is also important to realize that ideological reflections on English and vernacular languages are constructed with respect to one another, whether in national and local language policies or everyday practices.

MEDIA

Just as in sociolinguistic scholarly legacies, South Asia became an especially rich region for the investigation of performance, and initial scholarship focused on India. The early use of terms such as media and cultural performance can be found in Singer’s (1972) work on a Radha-Krishna *bhajan* (devotional songfest) movement in Madras. The significance of urbane Brahmins drawing on the pastoral setting of a deity served an anthropological fascination with the effects of urbanization on traditional cultural forms. Some scholars treat individual performers as subjects in fine-grained studies of motif, genre, and audience appreciation (Gold 1992, Wadley 2004). The ability of women to utilize specific performance contexts to describe or voice criticisms of patriarchal dominance and forms of subordination, often shaped by dynamics of caste and labor, is an especially prominent theme in several studies (Raheja & Gold 1994, Seizer 2005, Trawick 2017, Wilce 1998). Gender is also prevalent in several edited volumes on performance (Appadurai et al. 1991, Blackburn & Ramanujan 1986).

Writing, radio, cinema, television, and advertising have provided fruitful avenues for thinking about the ways modes of communication help create different kinds of audiences, mediate the possibilities of agency in practice, and enable different forms of political action. The broadcasting of the *Ramayana* in serial form on Indian state television from 1987 to 1989 contributed to building Hindu nationalist sentiment in India and symbolized new possibilities for an Indian politics that was at once more inclusive and authoritarian (Rajagopal 2001). Cinema provided for the representation of regional nationalisms (Hardy 2010), as well as for the affective possibilities of voice in playback singing (Weidman 2021). A literacy movement in southern India has come to be the world’s largest, and participants strive to take part in consequential acts addressed to figures of power while also implicating themselves in the limitations of literate practices (Cody 2013). Literacy has characterized the efforts of marginalized Adivasi advocates of Santali in eastern India. The presence of different scripts in public places is understood in different ways as political action (Choksi 2021). Scholarship looks at multilingual public signage more generally, in India and Sri Lanka (and different diasporas), in relation to issues of the representation of ethnolinguistic groups, institutions, and places (Das 2020, Davis 2020, LaDousa 2020). Markings on paper, including visiting cards, files, and maps, become a trace of bureaucratic communication in Pakistan



that is further subject to framing or erasure, and provide an important basis for understanding government and development (Hull 2012). In Nepal, what constitutes communicative practice in the public sphere is bifurcated as two voices, or realizations of subject positions. One has become entangled with consequential action and the realm of politics, and the other has become associated with emotional interiority and the possibilities of intimacy (Kunreuther 2014; see Ahearn 2001). Deaf people in Nepal must contend with nationalist modes of signing that are often derived from hearing people and contexts. While hegemonically Hindu nationalist symbols are often chosen to represent the community, deaf Nepalis engage in a plethora of relatively unrecognized practices (Hoffmann-Dilloway 2016).

The Internet and social media, enabled by smart phone technology, have created new forums for self-expression and for social and political engagement (Chakravarty & Roy 2015, Davis & LaDousa 2020, Mukherjee 2019, Venkatraman 2017). The recent exponential growth of vernacular online practices challenges English-centric notions of digital cultures (Punathambekar & Mohan 2019a). Studies of digital media have analyzed the affordances of digital technologies in structuring social practices while also considering how new media forms articulate with older ones (Choksi 2021, Cody 2020, Dattatreyan 2020, Mazzarella 2010, Punathambekar & Mohan 2019b). Cody (2020) investigates how digital technologies of image production have led to a transformation in mass politics in South India. By analyzing encounters between mass publics and emerging network publics through news media, he demonstrates how the distinction between leaders and the masses seen in cinematic party politics has been fragmented, leading to new claims of popular sovereignty. Mankekar & Carlan (2019) focus on discourses surrounding the 2016 arrest of a Jawaharlal Nehru University student to examine how digital media, in combination with print and televised media, contributed to the remediation of nationalism in India as both visceral and viral. Crucial to their approach is that they look beyond the production of media content to examine how political discourses are taken up by media users to increase affective engagement.

Social media has led to the formation and articulation of national and transnational publics, which have influenced political practices in South Asia and the diaspora (Kumar 2010, Osman 2019, Whitaker 2004). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have created opportunities for marginalized groups to engage with and contest dominant forms of representation and reconfigure commonalities and differences related to language, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, caste, class, and region (Das 2019, Losh 2014, Shahani 2008, Subramanian 2015). Davis (2021), for instance, examines Facebook interactions around images of Tamil-language errors in trilingual public signs. She shows how emojis, by virtue of their ambiguity, are an important resource in allowing Tamil speakers (Tamils and Muslims) to create shared affective stances around the images but also to demarcate differences between Tamil speakers and Sinhalese.

While there has been a great deal of emphasis on the democratization of online spaces, digital publics are infused with power inequalities, and online participation can reproduce dominant discourses and exacerbate inequalities (Mankekar & Carlan 2019). In her study of Hindu nationalist and Dalit websites, Chopra (2006) shows that although Dalit discourses oppose Hindu nationalism, the assertions underlying Dalit and Hindu nationalist identities are similar due to the pervasiveness of a new mode of representing collective identity, global primordiality, in online spaces. Udupa (2018) examines how urban middle-class residents of Mumbai engage in online abuse as a form of privileged political participation that then gets circulated to a wider audience via television and newspapers. She argues that the abuse discourse opens up new possibilities for political practice but also provides gendered ways of reproducing social dominance. Also focused on a new online discursive genre, Jahan & Hamid (2022) analyze how Bangladeshi youth engage in Facebook debates over the utility of Bangla- versus English-medium education that involve mixed Bangla and English expressions rich in crudeness and vulgarity. They show that by



employing different linguistic and nonlinguistic class markers, these youth creatively reformulate class divisions in relation to notions of the self. Explicitly focused on practice, rather than language, recent studies consider the massive popularity of social media in South Asia, particularly among the region's poorest groups, and the concerns that raises in terms of digital surveillance (Arora & Scheiber 2017, Gupta 2020), and the role of viral social media posts in fueling rumors and misinformation that foment political violence (Punathambekar & Mohan 2019b, Zuberi 2019).

CONCLUSION

Sociolinguistics began with the assumption that scalar notions such as village, region, and nation might be reflected in linguistic variation. Historical and field studies sought to identify difference so that the relative complexity of India could be asserted and appreciated. Scholarship on language practices in South Asia has come to view sources of distinction as historically situated, ideologically motivated, and emergent in social action. The nation and its regions, for example, are no longer assumed to exist as realms within which variation can be identified but are seen as constituted by the performative effects of social practices, often embedded in artifacts traceable to colonial origins and purposes. Ideological constructs such as mother tongue and medium of instruction not only called for historical contextualization but also prompted scholars to consider social situations in South Asian countries other than India. Especially important themes in recent work on South Asian language practices include the efforts of social groups to gain recognition through newer venues such as social media and older media forms such as literary traditions, newspapers, and educational texts. Scholars have considered the ways inequalities can often be reproduced, exacerbated, or even created anew through such efforts. Even though marginalized groups have found new avenues of participation in social media, the ideological assumptions of dominant groups often emerge as those that structure discourse and representation.

A general shift in the work reviewed here has been toward the study of the complexity of everyday social practice. The shift has created new methodological challenges with regard to the multifaceted publics enabled and sustained by digital media technologies. Rather than sharply differentiating new and old media forms, scholars have sought to examine how they are entangled in the same social processes. It is particularly important to ground media discourses in larger-scale social and political practices in ways that attend to historicity, transformation, and emergence. Studies must also account for the fact that different media forms do not presuppose dynamics of participation just as they must pay careful attention to the constitution of domination and subordination through media practices. The study of digital media demands fine-grained ethnographic work to investigate the ways in which practice and ideology are mutually implicated. Practices draw on changing ideologies just as ideologies are constituted in practice. Once again, South Asia is at the forefront of the study of communication, although now practices are mediated by technological possibilities that have reshaped what it means to live and study life in the region.

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