Language Shift, Cultural Change and Identity Retention: Indian South Africans in the 1960s and Beyond[*]

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Introduction

Language shift is not a new phenomenon in South Africa: the most significant shifts in the last few centuries have been from Khoe-San languages and Malay to Afrikaans in the Western Cape's Coloured communities and from Indian languages to English among the KwaZulu-Natal Indian communities. This article will focus on the latter, documenting the fate of Indian languages over their 147-year history in South Africa. In this history issues concerning multilingualism, identity and economic integration are of particular significance. The motivation for this article is not to record details concerning the history of Indian languages in South Africa, as this has been done before.[1] Rather it seeks to understand how and why the rich vein of multilingualism within the community eventually yielded to a largely monolingual habitus. An implicit aim of the article is to suggest how the Indian experience in South Africa shows dilemmas significant to the larger black population today. For lack of space, this comparison will remain an implied one.

A Brief Overview of Indian Language History in South Africa

Indian languages have existed in South Africa since the seventeenth century, as a consequence of the Dutch slave trade which brought people from the East Indies

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[1]. R. Mesthrie, *Language in Indenture: A Sociolinguistic History of Bhojpuri-Hindi in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1991); D. Bughwan, 'Language Practices', in B. Pachai, ed., *South Africa's Indians: The Evolution of a Minority* (Washington, 1979), 464–518; A.K. Aziz, 'An Investigation into the Factors Governing the Persistence of Urdu as a Minority Language in South Africa' (MA thesis, University of South Africa, 1988); V. Prabhakaran, *A Language Challenged: The Struggle of a Minority Language in South Africa* (Durban, 1992); U. Desai, 'Investigation of Factors Influencing Maintenance and Shift of the Gujarati Language in South Africa' (PhD dissertation, University of Durban-Westville, 1997).

to Cape Town. Although the lingua franca associated with the slaves is largely Malay and some Creole Portuguese, there were other languages of the Indonesian archipelago (like Buganese),[2] coastal India (like Bengali and Tamil) and Ceylon (like Singhalese), which eventually gave way to Cape Dutch (or Afrikaans) in the formation of a 'Coloured' community.[3] However, the community considered 'Indian' in South Africa today has its roots in another labour migration, the semi-forced scheme of indenture under British government in India and the colony of Natal from 1860 onwards. In the period 1860 to 1911, a total of 152 184 indentured workers was transported to Natal from the Madras Presidency (today's Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh states) and the Bengal Presidency (from what are today's states of Bihar and especially Uttar Pradesh). A parallel stream of trading-class Indians arrived voluntarily from 1875 onwards from the Bombay Presidency (today's Gujarat and Maharashtra). The languages associated with these migrants were as follows:

(a)   Indentured workers from the south spoke Dravidian languages, chiefly Tamil and Telugu.

(b)   Indentured workers from the north spoke a number of closely related varieties which came to be loosely associated with 'Hindi', which was actually the prestige spoken and written language of the north.[4]

(c)   Indentured workers of Islamic background spoke Urdu in addition to the language of their villages.

(d)   Trading-class Indians of the Bombay Presidency mainly spoke Gujarati, though there were some Meman (Sindhi, Urdu and Konkani) speakers too. Like Hindi these are Indo-Aryan languages.

Indians in the late nineteenth century came from various backgrounds involving differences in language and culture. Except for Hindi and Urdu, the languages mentioned above are mutually unintelligible, and the cultural practices of North and South Indians, whilst rooted in Hinduism, differ in matters of detail. Within the sphere of religion Indians were divided between the Hindu majority, the small proportion of Muslims and even smaller number of converts to Christianity from India. Muslims spoke one of the languages cited above, but for cultural and religious purposes identified with Urdu and Arabic. Experiences in South Africa distilled a core sense of Indianness, a kind of unity in diversity. This was later to become – perhaps – diversity in unity, that was possibly ahead of its time compared to India. My main source for this conclusion is the observation made by Mahatma Gandhi, who spent 21 years in South Africa (1893–1913). Years later,

2.   A. Davids, 'Words the Cape Slaves Made: A Socio-Historical-Linguistic Study', *South African Journal of Linguistics*, 8, 1 (1990), 1–24.

3.   K. McCormick, *Language in Cape Town's District Six* (Oxford, 2002), 14–21.

4.   These village and district varieties soon coalesced (around the turn of the nineteenth century) to form a distinctly Natal form of Hindi know variously as Naitali Hindi, Kalkatiya bat, Hindi, Bhojpuri or Bhjojpuri-Hindi. These 'dialect shifts' are not the subject of this article, which is concerned with the language shifts to English much later in the twentieth century.

in trying to unify India in preparation for the national unity and independence he hoped for, he remembered his experiences in South Africa. There he found greater unity between North and South Indians than in British India: 'Little does anyone know that almost all Tamils and the Telugus in South Africa can carry out an intelligent conversation in Hindi.'[5]

Indians became one of the most multilingual communities in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. At that time, it was not unusual for Indians in Natal to have the following repertoire:

(a)   Their home language, for example Hindi,[6] Tamil, Gujarati
(b)   Another Indian language, for example many Tamil-speakers learnt Hindi and vice versa[7]
(c)   Initially, Fanakalo pidgin – for communication with Zulus, whites and even with Indians with whom one couldn't otherwise converse[8]
(d)   English – learnt via the mission schools and at work from the second generation on
(e)   Zulu – by some Indians in rural areas
(f)   Afrikaans – by Indians who settled in the Cape or the Witwatersrand.[9]

A more concrete bottom-up appraisal of such multilingualism can be gained by examining the repertoires of individuals. For South Indians, Gandhi's description of one of his followers of passive resistance of the early twentieth century is not atypical.[10] Gandhi describes Thambi Naidoo's repertoire as including Tamil and French Creole, which he learnt at his birthplace, Mauritius; and English Telugu and Fanakalo, which he had picked up informally during his residence in South Africa. Gandhi concludes: 'A working knowledge of so many languages was not a rare accomplishment among the Indians of South Africa, hundreds of whom could claim a general acquaintance with all these languages.'[11]

For South Africans of North Indian descent I cite the language biography of Mr J.P., a third-generation South African born c1900, died 1980. His first language was Bhojpuri-Hindi, whose associated standard form (Hindi) he learnt to read and write from his elder brother. He learnt Tamil as second language, since he had been brought up in an area where South Indians predominated over North Indians; and learnt Gujarati from working in a shop in the city. He spoke Fanakalo and could

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5.   *Young India*, 16 June 1920.
6.   I use the traditional term 'Hindi' in this article, though more appropriately it would be termed 'Bhojpuri-Hindi'. These two varieties have a symbiotic relation: the latter being characteristic of colloquial speech, the former being aimed at in formal speech making and writing.
7.   R. Mesthrie, 'Dravidian Hindi in South Africa: An Historical Variety', *The Yearbook of South Asian Languages* (2000), 49–59.
8.   R. Mesthrie, 'The Origins of Fanagalo', *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages*, 4, 2 (1989), 211–40.
9.   This does not apply to the Orange Free State, as Indians were generally barred from that province until the new democracy of 1994.
10.   M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Ahmedabad, 1928), 147.
11.   *Ibid.*, 147.

understand Zulu well enough to be of help to Zulus wanting to benefit from the Ayurvedic folk medicine he practised as a hobby. He spoke English well and could read it, despite only one year of formal schooling. His wife, Mrs R.P., spoke Hindi as first language, and Fanakalo as second. She had three years of schooling during which she learnt some English. She lost touch with English as she grew up, but was reacquainted with it when her own children went to school, and relearnt to read it with her children. She cannot read Hindi and cannot write any language. She could understand some Tamil and Zulu but could not speak them.

The Cause and Course of Shift in South Africa's Indian Community

The repertoires of the succeeding generation to J.P. and R.P. show a decided reversal. The effects of schooling, which only became widespread in the Indian community in the 1950s, brought English to the forefront. Whereas previous generations of children who learned English via primary education did not generally use English in the homes, from the early 1960s onwards children started to make the language a familiar one in the homes and neighbourhoods. Not only did they use it to converse with school friends with whom they did not share an Indian language, but they started to use it with siblings as well. The socio-psychological reason for this is that siblings were treated as part of an emerging social network in which schooling was salient and English a marker of a youthful identity. The eldest child of J.P. and R.P. spoke Hindi to her parents and elders and English to her friends and younger siblings in the 1960s. Parents accepted English from the younger siblings, though they neither encouraged nor discouraged it, and used mainly an Indian language with them. In some families there was a gender difference: in fact, J.P. spoke Hindi to his wife, but English to his children once they went to school and displayed competence in it. Mrs R.P. spoke Hindi to her older children, and both Hindi and English to the younger ones.

At this crucial time Indians did not resist the power of English; but they did not devalue their own languages either. Several community organisations made the promotion of Indian languages a key part of their mission. These organisations include the *Hindi Shiksha Sangh*, the *Tamil Federation*, the *Gujarati Parishad*, *Andhra Maha Sabha* (for Telugu) and *Bazme Adab* (for Urdu). Classes were usually held on a part-time basis in schools, temples or community halls and were usually complementary to the day curriculum of the English schools.[12] For the most part 'vernacular education' (as it was called) played a cultural and religious role, imparting some knowledge of the language and culture of a physically distant but spiritually close homeland. By contrast, the curriculum of day schools was aligned to a professional life and the job market, and associated with English. Gujarati is perhaps an interesting exception here, as I discuss below in a later section. But

12. B. Rambiritch, 'The History of Mother-Tongue Education', in R.S. Nowbath, S. Chotai and B.D. Lalla, eds, *The Hindu Heritage in South Africa* (Durban, 1960), 67–72.

between the late 1950s and the 1980s Indian languages started to give way slowly, even in the home, where they became characteristic of the grandparental generation mainly.

The reasons for the shift are important if repetitions are to be avoided in the wider South African community. In particular, an understanding of language shift in the 1960s will illuminate choices and dilemmas facing middle-class black South Africans today. In earlier work[13] I adduced five main causes relating to language shift: the multiplicity of Indian languages, their relative lack of prestige, low socio-economic value, the lack of a systematic vernacular education, and further competition from Afrikaans, the then co-official language. I will not repeat the arguments here. In order to understand how the multilingualism praised by Gandhi proved susceptible to shift, it must be acknowledged that within the rich fabric of Indian languages, there was always something of a linguistic stalemate. This contrasts with Fiji, where the entire Indian community more or less uses the local variety of Hindi as its lingua franca.[14] Though there was some bilingualism in South Africa between the main Indian languages Tamil and Hindi, neither was sufficiently numerically stronger than the other to become the lingua franca of the community. Whilst Hindi had prestige that was to see it become one of the national languages of India, Tamil leaders also consider their language to have high cultural value, with an unbroken literary tradition of about 2 000 years.[15] And in India itself the province of Tamil Nadu is well known for its resistance to domination from the north via Hindi. Gujarati-speakers in Natal were often fluent in a variety of Hindi (Bombay Bazaar Hindi); and Gandhi, a Gujarati-speaker himself, sought to promote Hindi as the national language of India. Hence Gujarati speakers in South Africa were receptive to Hindi, while holding their own language in equal or greater esteem. According to Rambiritch,[16] two of the twenty periods per week in the full-time Gujarati schools were devoted to Hindi. If anything Gujarati became a class language in Natal, being associated with middle-class Hindus and Muslims.[17] Gujarati, to a certain extent, thus stood in opposition to the languages of the (ex-)indentured class – Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and even Urdu. And even though Hindi was prestigious for its national associations in India, its South African equivalent was a relatively low-status koiné based on provincial varieties (such as Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Magahi and Braj). This is true of most of the languages except for Gujarati. Speakers of Hindi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu have been led to believe by priests and language teachers that their spoken vernaculars fall far short

13.   Mesthrie, *Language in Indenture*, 130–9.
14.   J. Siegel, *Language Contact in a Plantation Environment: A Sociolinguistic History of Fiji* (Cambridge, 1987), 203–4.
15.   R. Asher, *Tamil* (London, 1985), ix.
16.   Rambiritch, 'The History of Mother-Tongue Education', 71.
17.   Even speakers of Meman (as it is called in South Africa, aka Kacchi), a dialect of Sindhi, used Gujarati occasionally in speech and writing.

of an idealised formal standard.[18] Some rapprochement did occur between speakers: Telugu-speakers became familiar with Tamil[19] and what counted as Urdu and Hindi were in fact quite close to each other and might be termed 'Bhojpuri Hindi-Urdu'. But, on the whole, there was no umbrella language for Indians, and English, originally the language of formal domains, gained from this lack.

Political Developments and Their Impact

Two political developments are noteworthy for their impact upon language choices: the Cape Town Agreement and the Group Areas resettlements in Natal. The Cape Town Agreement (between the governments of India and South Africa) of 1927 is said to be a turning point for the provision of better facilities in education. The agreement was essentially that India would assist in the voluntary repatriation of Indians from Natal, provided that those who chose to remain would be given better educational facilities and living conditions. The agreement arose because of white opposition to Indian competition in business and residence. However, it was the ex-indentured who bore the brunt of the repatriation scheme, not the Indian traders.[20] As many as 9 418 Indians of indentured background were induced to leave in the period between 1927 and 1931.[21] Their departure was hardly voluntary – but subject to inducements that did not necessarily serve their best interests.[22] From that point on, the Indians who remained can be considered 'Indian South Africans', not 'South African Indians'. After the Cape Town Agreement, more primary schools were established, and Sastri College, a high school for boys, opened in 1930. The building of high schools was, on the whole, a gradual process: in 1958, 4 000 Indian pupils were at high school – just 4,4 per cent of the school population. The Cape Town Agreement stressed the importance of English in the future of Indian South Africans. The Natal Indian Congress representation on the Indo-European Joint Council of 1936 put it thus: 'The Indian would then become like the Jew and Malay, he would in all probability to a great extent follow the faith of his fathers and know the language of his fathers, but the language – the language of the world's commerce and intercourse that would predominate him [*sic*] would be English.'[23]

18. Mesthrie, *Language in Indenture*, 132–7.
19. Prabhakaran, *A Language Challenged*, 146–8.
20. U. Mesthrie, 'The Cape Town Agreement and its Effect on Natal Indian Politics' (Paper presented at conference on the History of Natal and Zululand, University of Natal, 2–4 July 1985).
21. U. Mesthrie, 'Reducing the Indian Population to a "Manageable Compass": A Study of the South African Assisted Emigration Scheme of 1927', *Natalia*, 15 (1985), 51.
22. As can be seen by the large numbers of unhappy returnees in India, 200 of whom managed to secure a return to South Africa by paying back their costs of repatriation and bonuses; and see Mesthrie, 'Reducing the Indian Population', 51.
23. *Sunday Times*, 2 Aug. 1936.

At the time of the Cape Town Agreement of 1927, the South African Indian Congress met at Kimberley, to discuss *inter alia* a proposal to incorporate the relevant Indian languages in the education system for Indians in South Africa.[24] There was considerable disagreement on the issue, with Sastri, the first Indian Agent General, opposing the idea, which was in fact rejected. The proposer of the motion, Bhawani Dayal Sanyasi, 'persisted and even staged a walkout in protest against what he termed as the "suicidal policy" of the conference'.[25]

The meeting formalised what had become normal practice: the use of English in education and the teaching of Indian languages by Indian cultural organisations on a part-time basis in schools (after hours), temples, mosques and community halls. While a commitment to Indian languages in the curriculum by the Congress at the Cape Town Agreement would have been significant for the nurturing of bilingual education, it is possible to exaggerate its effect on vernacular usage 'on the ground'. In the 1930s and 1940s Indians continued speaking their languages. Learning English was certainly a priority for economic advancement, but at this stage it did not significantly affect the use of the mother tongues. The effects of English upon the use of languages in the home were to be felt later – towards the end of the 1950s. The warning signs were in the early 1960s when, for the first time, children started arriving in primary schools (which were quite numerous by then) with only a passive knowledge of an Indian language. It is unfortunate that Indian languages were not offered as school subjects at this crucial time, when shift was starting to occur, yet attitudes to the languages and the capacity to reverse shift were still favourable. With a proper level of funding and training of teachers, stable bilingualism could have been achieved. This is, in fact, a familiar refrain (from hindsight) in studies of language endangerment.[26] Indian languages were finally introduced into the mainstream curriculum of Indian Education as optional language subjects in 1984 under the House of Delegates (after an earlier trial period).[27] However, minimum requirements of 20 students per language per grade proved unrealistically high. By then, interest in acquiring the heritage language was not as strong as their propagators had hoped. The intervening shift among the youngest children had rendered what was previously a first or second language into virtually a foreign language.

24.   Rambiritch, 'The History of Mother-Tongue Education', 69.
25.   *Ibid.*
26.   This applies to the very period, the 1960s, as remarked from the chair by Nicholas Ostler, president of the Foundation for Endangered Languages, at the ninth conference of the foundation (University of Stellenbosch, Nov. 2005).
27.   Credit for this is due to efforts of language loyalists outside the political system (for example, Dr R. Sitaram and others from the University of Durban-Westville), rather than any political direction from the (Indian) House of Delegates within South Africa's tricameral parliament of the 1980s.

Some Indian languages continue to be taught in some schools where Indian students form a majority.[28] In such primary schools, Zulu-speaking children sometimes take Hindi or Tamil as an optional subject, as do some Indian children from Christian homes. On the whole, though, the post-apartheid open schools make the attainment of minimal numbers even more difficult from the 1990s onwards. The languages of most KwaZulu-Natal high schools are English, Zulu and Afrikaans. While the place of English and Zulu are entirely to be expected, the continuation of Afrikaans beyond the apartheid period, when it was made legally compulsory in schools, is surprising, given that the language is not generally spoken in parts of KwaZulu-Natal where the majority of Indians reside. Whereas Indian-language propagators have long felt that Afrikaans should make way for Indian languages in the province, school principals and parents have not rallied to the call. Some of this is attributable to inertia or an unwillingness to be any different from other schools of the country. The inertia among many principals and teachers from the 1980s onwards is partly attributable to their class position, as people of non-elite backgrounds who entered and succeeded within the system in terms of an education that was western-oriented and geared largely away from community values. It is also attributable to an ideology that attributes propagation of individual Indian languages to sectarianism within the community, rather than modernisation. In fairness to school staff, it must be conceded that the introduction of Indian languages does bring administrative, staffing and timetabling problems to educators who are often overworked with the 'mainstream' curriculum itself. And it has to be acknowledged that some principals did assist in trying to set up Indian languages in their schools.[29]

The second political development of relevance to possibilities of language maintenance is the Group Areas Act of 1950. A cornerstone of apartheid, the Act sought to segregate the races identified by the state from each other. In Durban, there were numerous forced removals of Indians from multiracial areas or from areas identified as slums which were earmarked for clearance and industrial development.[30] They were moved into the large working-class townships of Chatsworth and (later) Phoenix. For the middle-classes there were more affluent middle-class suburbs like Reservoir Hills and Isipingo Beach. The question can be raised whether compelling Indians to live separately from whites, blacks and 'Coloureds' from the 1950s to the 1990s had any positive impact on language maintenance. The reverse is in fact true. Prior to apartheid, Indians hived off on the expected class lines (stemming largely, though not exclusively, from the passenger versus indentured strands). 'Passenger Indians', who had paid their own passage

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28.   In addition, Radio Lotus, aimed primarily at an Indian listenership, introduced lessons in Indian languages in the 1990s. It should be noted that many Indian primary school children study Zulu as well.

29.   Desai, 'Investigation of Factors Influencing Maintenance and Shift'.

30.   B. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban* (Pietermaritzburg, 1995), 64–76.

from India were largely Gujarati-speakers, while indentured Indians were those brought as labourers by the British, and spoke Bhojpuri-Hindi, Urdu, Tamil or Telugu. Some areas had attracted people from the same linguistic affiliation: for example, Magazine Barracks had a clear Tamil majority and Riverside had a larger Hindi-speaking contingent. Puntans Hill had a large number of Telugu speakers.[31] Among Indians in the city centre, Gujarati-speakers predominated. Places like Clairwood and Cato Manor appear to have had speakers of indentured backgrounds from the different language communities. The new townships to which people were removed did not have such relatively organic linguistic enclaves. Furthermore, in contrast to the older area which had a housing pattern geared towards the joint family (with opportunities for extended conversations in the home language), the new townships were built with nuclear families in mind. The only language that gained from the Group Areas Act was therefore English. Segregation led to the stabilisation and focusing of an Indian variety of English, and the prolongation of the lifespan of this social dialect.

While the acquisition of English could be seen as a manifestation of westernisation, matters are more complex than this. Firstly, learning English was part of becoming westernised; it was as much a cause as an effect. The education system played an important role in this process, as Indian education from the 1960s onwards was secular, and overtly oriented towards western values as filtered through South Africa's apartheid ideology. Secondly, westernisation was not always the outcome of using English. Rather, English proved to be a relatively neutral lingua franca (as explained above) with the advantage of being a prestige code and the language of the economy. As I have emphasised elsewhere,[32] the kind of English that evolved was like 'an incarnation of an Indian language', rather than a mere offshoot of Her Majesty's tongue. As English became a first language among Indians, it increased rather than decreased its reliance on vocabulary and certain grammatical and intonational nuances from Indian languages. This apparent paradox can be resolved by recalling that turning English into a first language (L1) meant use over a wide range of contexts as well as greater use in particular domains. In the South African case, this expansion happened while social segregation was rigid and work relations fairly hierarchical. One can still hear older bilingual Indian teachers use correlatives, uninverted auxiliaries in questions, and lack of *do*-support in questions in highly informal speech outside the classroom.[33] Place names of significance to Indians also retain an Indianised pronunciation, rather than what would count within the community as affectations based on white South African English equivalents: Verulam (*'Varlem'*), Mt Edgecombe (*'Maanditchcomb'*), Ottawa (*'Otwa'*), Umkomaas (*'Ahmkumaas'*), Umzinto

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31.   Prabhakaran, *A Language Challenged*, 169.
32.   Mesthrie, *English in Language Shift*, 220–1.
33.   Examples of this are: *Which-people came last time, they were nice* (correlative for Standard English relative clause 'The people who came last time were nice'); *She won't go?* for 'Won't she go?' (uninverted auxiliary); and *She went?* for 'Did she go?' (lack of *do*-support).

(*'Ahmzeentoe'*), Port Shepstone (*'Potchepsten'*).[34] Moreover, some features of the 'learner' English characteristic of less-educated speakers have not been jettisoned: they survive in baby-talk and pet-animal talk registers.[35] In fact, using formal English with 'crossover' accents associated with white speakers was, until the more recent post-apartheid openness, not a feature of casual speech among the generation that grew up under apartheid.

One further issue regarding the 'integrational value' of English within the Indian community is of theoretical interest. That is, for about 120 years in South Africa, inter-marriage among Indians across linguistic groups was rare (with Tamil-Telugu marriages being a slight exception). Maasdorp's socio-economic surveys based at the University of Natal in the 1960s provide valuable clues to patterns of shift in the Verulam-Tongaat area just north of Durban.[36] He gives a percentage of 92,6 of school pupils with parents of the same linguistic stock. This trend changed from the 1980s onwards, with the number of linguistically mixed marriages increasing, especially between Hindus of Hindi and Tamil background. Even the largely endogamous Gujarati community saw a small number of marriages with members of the ex-indentured language communities. Again relations between cause and effect are worth teasing out. One might argue that linguistically exogamous marriages hasten language shift.[37] This might also seem true from Maasdorp's discussion:[38] children whose parents were from different ancestral language groupings used more English than their counterparts. However, hastening shift is not the same as causing it. I propose the reverse – that bilingual-ism that involved English dominance and incipient shift gave rise to a new sense of community that made some of the older values irrelevant to younger educated speakers. The declining use of Indian languages lessened the gulf between Indian communities and may therefore have enabled more inter-marriages. Proof for this causality (shift inducing exogamy, rather than exogamy inducing shift) can be seen from Maasdorp's own survey figures. At the time of his fieldwork in 1964–65, there were very few 'linguistic' intermarriages (7,4 per cent); yet his figures also show that English had already become a significant language of the home. Forty-five per cent of pupils gave English as home language and 95,6 per cent claimed to speak it best.

34.   I have avoided phonetic symbols here, except for the ' to indicate stress upon the following syllable. The indications of pronunciation in brackets are thus not entirely accurate. Note that the 'ah' spelling represents a short vowel as in words like *mum*.
35.   Thus in speaking to little children or pets, Indian South Africans would use features that they might eschew in more formal styles: for example, *You never find it?* for 'Haven't you found it?' or *So naughty you are!* for 'You're so naughty'.
36.   G.G. Maasdorp, 'A Natal Indian Community: A Socioeconomic Survey in the Tongaat-Verulam Area' (Natal Regional Survey, Additional Report No. 5, Department of Economics, University of Natal, 1968), 39.
37.   Desai, 'Investigation of Factors Influencing Maintenance and Shift', 189.
38.   Maasdorp, 'A Natal Indian Community', 43.

Class, Identity and Shift

Fatima Meer describes the social relations and nuances attached to the different languages up to the 1960s:

> The greatest degree of social contact within the Indian community exists among people who share a common language and a common religion. Warm relations, however, also exist across such barriers, and friendships develop among persons who share a common neighbourhood, or are brought together through their professional or other social or cultural interests. Nonetheless there is an awareness of differences, a consciousness of language and religious boundaries that insulate loyalties and even reflect prejudices.[39]

This is an eloquent characterisation of the sociolinguistic fabric of communities involved in language contact. Meer also hints at the need for some symbolic barriers between people in such 'contact communities' for language maintenance to be effective. She does not seem aware, writing in 1969, that shift was starting to take place around her. The old loyalties and prejudices were in fact subtly breaking down amongst the young. This was not a uniform pattern. There were minor differences according to class, language and religion. In his survey undertaken at about the same time, Maasdorp noted that 'the Muslims and the Gujarati Hindus … showed greater overall proficiency [in their home languages] than the Tamil, Hindu and Telugu'.[40] For Gujarati this shows the greater effect of class, rather than religion, since Gujarati – the best maintained Indian language in the twentieth century (see below) – was spoken by Hindus and Muslims of the trading classes. These groups were partly defined by greater business and family contacts in India. In Natal, Hindu Gujaratis tended to run small family-oriented businesses: there was almost no working class. For Muslim Gujaratis this was even more true, and a distinction between Muslims of the middle class who spoke Gujarati and those of the (ex-)indentured classes who spoke Urdu existed to the extent that inter-marriages across these linguistic lines were rare.[41] However, Urdu was valued by Muslims as a language of literature and religious instruction. Gujarati merchants kept their account books in that language until forced to keep them in English by the tax authorities.[42] The language was a viable medium of education in some schools into the 1960s.[43] Its speakers often claimed that their language was superior to English in mastering arithmetic. The other languages, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, often became associated with the experience of

39. F. Meer, *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (Durban, 1969), 62.
40. Maasdorp, 'A Natal Indian Community', 44.
41. *Ibid*., 40.
42. S. Bhana and J.B. Brain, *Setting Down Roots: Indian Migrants in South Africa, 1860–1911* (Johannesburg, 1990).
43. Desai, 'Investigation of Factors Influencing Maintenance and Shift', 110–12.

indenture, in effect class dialects.[44] Escape from the world of indenture and poverty for these speakers came via education and the medium of English. Urdu is a special case here, showing the importance of religion over class. It is well represented in Maasdorp's survey, despite its associations in Natal with the indentured category. Maasdorp reports 60 of 67 pupils being able to speak Urdu in the 1960s. So the Islamic religion and trading-class background appear to be indicators of greater resistance to shift in the 1960s.[45] However, strong claims for Gujarati must be made with caution, if we recall that passenger Indians arrived 15 years after the first indentured Indians. Their languages can therefore be said to have faced 15 fewer years of the onslaught of English. In fact, the census figures for the various Indian languages, though slightly flawed for the period 1960 to 1970, show that the stark reality of shift indeed affected Gujarati and Urdu too.

	1951	1960	1970	1980	1991
Tamil	120 981	141 977	153 645	24 720	4 103
Hindi	89 145	126 067	116 485	25 900	4 969
Gujarati	39 495	53 910	46 039	25 120	7 456
Urdu	13 842	35 789	-	13 280	3 760
Telegu	25 077	34 483	30 690	4 000	638
Other	26 090	2 053	71 070	-	-

Census Figures for Indian Languages in South Africa, 1951–1991[46]

The census figures are in need of interpretation, as the figures for the 1970s are probably too high and for 1980 too low.[47] The fact that younger people spoke an Indian language as a second rather than a first language in the late 1960s and 1970s is not recorded in the figures for 1970, where respondents appear to supply answers in terms of 'ancestral language' rather than language most used. Halving

44.   I use the term 'dialects' advisedly, since these were far removed from the standard forms of 'high' style and print literacy.
45.   Maasdorp's figures also show a slightly higher rate of retention of Gujarati in Hindu, rather than Muslim homes in Verulam-Tongaat.
46.   Due to an oversight on the part of the census planners, Urdu was not included or mentioned in the censuses of 1970.
47.   Mesthrie, *Language in Indenture*, 16.

the figures yields a more accurate representation of actual L1 use. The 1980 figures are possibly correct for L1 usage. For the historian of Indian languages, however, they conceal the important fact that many more people still used an Indian language as a second language. The statistics for the 1990s show a reversal, with Gujarati becoming the most-spoken Indian language as L1 – see the figure, which gives comparative bar graphs for Tamil, once the most-spoken Indian language, and Gujarati. However, the decline of Gujarati itself from 1970 makes this something of a Phyrric result. Even Urdu, well represented among young children in Maasdorp's survey of the 1960s, appears to go the same way as the languages associated with Hindus.[48]

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48.   None of the Indian languages are reflected in the 1995 and 2001 censuses, as the census enumerated only the 11 official languages of the country. The numbers of speakers declined even further in this period, though some new immigration from India and Pakistan has to be taken into account.

Language shift went hand in hand with certain changes in attitudes towards key cultural practices like naming and musical tastes. It is a reinforcing factor that the period of shift coincided with the explosion in Anglo-American pop music, which initiated a wave of new influences among young people. Meer describes these changes in Tin Town, an Indian slum or informal settlement in Durban in the 1960s:

Others still have fallen under the sway of the modern pop cult. Elvis, the Beatles, and Cliff Richard are hot favourites who often share the corrugated wall of the living room with the venerated deities and Indian film stars. On evening [*sic*] a guitar is pulled out, and just as their fathers intoned old Indian folk lyrics, the young swains wail out, or jerk forth the lamentations or ecstasies of youth the world over.[49]

This must be taken as an account of cultural hybridity (rather than erosion), as can be seen from Meer's qualification that while the young boys of Tin Town in the 1960s 'may model themselves on the Beatles, but their beauty queens are drawn from the Indian screen, and it is *their* pictures that are found to be most common, framed, or pasted on walls'.[50] For many youngsters, especially of a South Indian background, westernisation extended to the partial adoption of new names for boys. This was usually not done at a formal level, with traditional Indian names being recorded at birth registration and used in the homes. Only a few Christian names in the 1960s were officially recorded by Hindus: Ronnie was one common name (there were two Ronnies at my primary school in KwaZulu-Natal). However, children of this period accepted western nicknames at the workplace (from white and Indian fellow workers), which often became the usual name they were known by (except by the older generation). Suddenly *Timmies*, *Tommies*, *Bobbies* and *Johnnies* began to proliferate. In the next generation, some people even registered names such as these. This was more common among working-class Hindus who had converted to Christianity, but it became acceptable in some Hindu homes, especially among people of South Indian descent. However, it was not a full-scale tilt towards English: some Tamil families emulated North Indian names (or what were associated with North Indian names in South Africa), while others maintained names traditionally associated with their community. It is fair to say (though a statistical study is needed) that traditional South Indian first names are slightly on the decline in South Africa. There is a gender effect too: the practice of acquiring western names applies less to females than males. This is probably because they were less integrated into workplaces in the 1960s and 1970s, and associated more with the home. But the resistance to onomastic change also ties in with women being better retainers of styles of dress and dancing traditions.

On the whole, changes in naming and other practices for males did not result in a radical change of identity. Like language shift, cultural shift has been gradual

49.   Meer, *Portrait of Indian South Africans*, 114.
50.   *Ibid*., 115; emphasis Meer's.

and often imperceptible. Cooppan spoke of the 'silent linguistic revolution' taking place towards the end of the 1960s.[51] To a large extent, Indian cultural identity can be said to have survived the revolution of language shift (though there are complications that I discuss below). Young speakers losing touch with their ancestral languages did not think of themselves as any less 'Indian'. And elders long seem to have accepted that an inevitable outcome of the school system was that children would become not just proficient, but dominant, in English. As in other countries, some parents seemed to assume that as their children got older they would somehow get better in their ancestral language. This amounts almost to a folk theory that a 'Language Acquisition Device' like that of Chomskyan theory would kick in culturally at about the age of 40 to give fluency in the ancestral language.[52] In one small respect this is applicable, at least within the shifting generation. Some people who did not speak much Hindi in their youth start using it to some extent upon becoming parents, as a secret language to hide things from their children or other younger relatives. But this is not possible for those who lacked any spoken competence in the language to begin with. In the 1980s, some Indian South African parents meeting young Indian nationals for the first time expressed surprise and delight at their proficiency in Tamil.[53] They had tacitly assumed that the dominance of English among young Indian South Africans, to the extent of impinging on the mother tongue, was an Indian subcontinent phenomenon too (if not a universal trend).

That English was by this time a marker of an Indian South African identity can be seen from the denigration of accents of visiting Indian nationals. A famous case reported in the newspapers was the amused and disrespectful reaction of some audiences to the devotional singer, Pithukuli Murugudas, in the 1970s. This reaction was incorporated as an anecdote by one of the characters, Sunny, in Ronnie Govender's play *The Lahnee's Pleasure*:

Talking about Indian fullers[54] I remember something. You know when that great Indian singer Pithukuli Murugudas came to this country he said, you'll laughing because I'm speaking English this way.[55] Just imagine how I'm laughing when you-all talking Tamil'.[56]

This incident illustrates the differential appraisal of cultural retention/loss in the two communities. While Indian South Africans do not think of themselves as any

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51.   n.d. (c1968), cited in Maasdorp, 'A Natal Indian Community', 48.
52.   Jane Simpson (personal communication, Ninth Federation of Endangered Languages Conference, 2005) informs me that a similar expectation holds among Aboriginal Australian parents.
53.   South African laws prevented Indian immigration after 1913 and India prevented Indian citizens from travelling to South Africa in the apartheid era. The Indian High Commission in South Africa was closed in 1954 and only reopened in post-apartheid South Africa of the 1990s.
54.   *Fuller* is from English 'fellow'; the phrase here means 'people from India'.
55.   *You'll* is better rendered orthographically as *y'all.*
56.   R. Govender, *The Lahnee's Pleasure* (Johannesburg, c1972), 35.

less Indian for using English as their primary language, it is a moot question how they are judged by Indian nationals. In my experience, Indian nationals find it strange that their diasporic fellows maintain traditions in culture, music, religion and cooking, but do not (or cannot) speak an Indian language. Language shift for them does confer a sense of difference, though it does not preclude a broad sense of unity. This is the sense in which something has been lost in language shift, albeit more from the outside perspective of the 'mother country', rather than shifting immigrant community.

Economy and Language Shift

So far I have focused on internal cultural realignments in language shift. The second aspect to be considered is the outward pull of economy. The links between language and economy are important: for most migrants new workplaces demand new language codes. A key question debated amongst applied linguists in South Africa is the extent to which English facilitates entry into the South African economy.[57] The link may seem obvious, but certain nuances from the Indian South African experience are worth teasing out. The plantations of nineteenth and twentieth-century Natal used English at the highest echelons; but it was not the language of the Indian workers. Plantation owners usually hired Indian *sirdars* ('overseers') who communicated with workers in their own language. Some white planters and officials knew an Indian language from experience in India.[58] But the first language that Indians learnt for communication was Fanakalo, a pidgin whose vocabulary derived mostly from Zulu. Fanakalo proved useful for communication with Zulus, whites and sometimes even among Indian themselves, especially across the great Indo-Aryan/Dravidian divide. Indians in the cities doing domestic service or hawking after being freed of their indentures also found Fanakalo a useful medium in communicating with white customers.[59] The pidgin was useful for two reasons: (a) it enabled widespread communication without privileging any group of participants and without any cultural dominance and (b) it prevented the rise of an English-based pidgin. In other words, Fanakalo helped Indians buy time before mastering the dominant social and educational language, English. This pattern also applies to trading-class Indians, who built up an informal economy via retail shops in Durban and subsequently in other parts of Natal and beyond.[60] Zulu (as opposed to Fanakalo pidgin) was in fact mastered by some Indians, usually in remoter rural settings.

57.   For example, N. Alexander, 'Linguistic Rights, Language Planning and Democracy in Post-Apartheid South Africa', in S.J. Baker, ed., *Language Policy Lessons from Global Models* (Monterey, 2002).
58.   On Anglo-Indians as interpreters ,see P. Badassy, 'Turbans and Top Hats: Indian Interpreters in the Colony of Natal, 1880–1910' (BA Hons thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2002).
59.   Mesthrie, *English in Language Shift,* 28–9.
60.   Bhana and Brain, *Setting Down Roots*, 63–97.

The link between English and the economy is not entirely straightforward. The English that emerged among the workers was too far removed from the standard variety to be a source of symbolic capital (in the sense of prestige).[61] Indeed the Indian English of the indentured class was frequently denigrated by white English-speakers.[62] However, it did serve as a kind of cultural capital (in the sense of forms of knowledge and skills), allowing access to labour markets beyond those of Fanakalo. English education was very much part of the formation of a new elite among the descendants of indentured workers from the 1920s onwards. A mastery of English (sometimes accompanied by tertiary education abroad) gave special status and opportunities to the new elites. This close-to-standard English variety (except perhaps for accent) also gave people access to a wider world of ideas and politics, beyond the discrimination of colonial Natal and (later) apartheid South Africa. And the impulse towards shift was probably greatest among the descendants of these new elites.[63]

Gujarati is a special case within the fabric of language and economy. Largely the language of the trading class, Gujarati – as mentioned above – was prized for cultural and economic reasons. Hence, whilst Gujarati-speakers were the most successful economically, they were not the first ones to shift to English. As long as it was largely a commercially based community, with significant trade and personal ties with India, the 'passenger' class valued bilingualism, rather than a straight-for-English attitude. This can be seen from the census statistics, which once showed Gujarati as the third most-spoken Indian language in Natal to being currently the most spoken. That there is shift within this community too is undeniable; but it has come at a time of diversification, with younger people identifying with a broader Indian South African identity and a range of jobs open to the highly educated, rather than one built around a family business and economic ties with India. To continue with Bourdieu's terminology, Gujarati, once high up in the 'linguistic market', is experiencing devaluation today.[64]

Conclusion – Something Lost, Something Gained

The gains of becoming bilingual in English and the home language were significant. It enabled vertical communication with white L1 speakers, the controllers of the economy, and more recently communication of a more egalitarian nature with this group. It enabled communication with other educated black groups ('Africans' and 'Coloureds'). It facilitated horizontal communication among

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61.   See P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power,* J.B. Thomson, ed., G. Raymond and M. Adamson, trans., (Cambridge, MA, 1991).
62.   R. Mesthrie, 'Mock Languages and Symbolic Power: The South African Radio Series *Applesammy and Naidoo*', *World Englishes*, 21, 1 (2002), 99–112.
63.   M. Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (Johannesburg, 1985), 11; Mesthrie, *English in Language Shift*, 27–30.
64.   Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 57–8.

Indians themselves and entry into the formal economy. Proficiency in English enabled working-class Indians to obtain economic opportunities in urban white-collar jobs as clerks and salespersons in Natal.

None of these factors is a necessary condition for shift, since they do not preclude stable multilingualism in English, an Indian language and Zulu (or Fanakalo). Shift took place because a change in ideology among young Indians bred solidarity and modernity across linguistic groups from the 1960s onwards. Prior to this, the different Indian linguistic groups evinced a sense of friendly rivalry (hinted at in the first quote from Meer above). The silent linguistic revolution was perhaps part of a larger, quiet social revolution, which culminated in an acceptance of 'interlinguistic' marriages from the 1980s onwards and a new Indian South African identity. Indian South African English became the covert badge of identity representing the new solidarity. It signified that Indians were part of South Africa and not a transient Asian population identifying chiefly with India. Like all dialects, it was not homogeneous, but further differentiated by class, education and (recessively) by ancestral language groupings. However, processes of levelling (accommodation across ancestral language lines) were also under way, to the extent that it is today harder to make out the ancestral language background of middle-class, younger Indians just from their English, the way it was up to about the late 1980s. The gains of becoming bilingual in English were thus 'outward' in terms of economic mobility and social integration within the broader South African society; while the subsequent impulse towards shift was more 'inward' in terms of new identity formation as a close-knit Indian South African minority. In more prosaic sociolinguistic terms, the primary social networks of young people changed beyond those of their parental generation, which had been restricted largely by language. In the 1980s, the phrase 'our language' became ambiguous: by then some speakers in my interviews still meant their ancestral language, while others used it in reference to English.

Just when Indians in KwaZulu-Natal had mastered the dominant language of their province, English, to the extent of becoming virtually monolingual,[65] large-scale changes have been set in motion constitutionally in the country that stress the value of multilingualism. But what exactly are the losses associated with the language shift? Indian cultural leaders have always stressed the religious and cultural values of the various 'mother tongues'. A shift to English obviously threatens access to all of these traditions. While the dynamic between an Indian language and English might seem a clash between tradition and modernity in a

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65.   In describing Indians of Natal thus, I am discounting Fanakalo pidgin, which has little status or recognition. However, Fanakalo remains an important, if slightly receding, means of communication across language barriers in labouring contexts in the province, so only in the sense of official multilingualism are Indians becoming monolingual.

country that was frequently hostile to Asians,[66] most Indians have struck a balance between these two poles. Religious, musical, culinary and (for females) sartorial traditions, for example, show cultural survival with adaptations.[67] The diglossia model of language in which one language is used in the home and in informal and religious contexts, while another in more public and formal domains, has given way; but a 'diglossic' sort of behaviour remains. That is, though young people at school or university may appear fully acculturated to western styles of dress, music, dance, language and cuisine, many of them may express different preferences in the home setting or settings in which Indian culture becomes salient (weddings, funerals, and prayers). Traditionalists, however, fear that just as language gave way, so too some important cultural values associated with them have receded and will erode further. With westernisation, they argue, has come not only financial success, but a culture of materialism.

While there is a growing awareness in India of people in the diaspora, and some pride in their successes abroad, the westernised, English-monolingual, Indian South African does not easily fit into multilingual India. However, there are some saving considerations. One has to do with the immense popularity of Bollywood films, which now frequently highlight themes relating to the Indian diaspora, albeit with a bias towards the United States and the United Kingdom. A second consideration is the pace with which India itself has become westernised since the 1990s. Whereas after independence in 1947 it was officially 'non-aligned' between the superpowers and closed to large-scale economic infiltration from the west, the 1990s has seen what is sometimes termed the 'Coca-colonisation' and 'Macdonaldisation' of India and other countries. This restricts the divergence between Indians and South Africans. For Indian South Africans there are some ironies, however. While the generations that were fluent in an Indian language frequently could not afford to travel to India, those who have achieved the economic level to do so have largely lost touch with the languages of their forebears. It is, of course, possible to touch significant chords with Indian nationals via English, but the special bond via an Indian language is now mainly open to the oldest of Indian South Africans.

Freund wrote that '… in South Africa Hindu villagers became "Indian". They did coalesce in a process, still very shadowily understood, into an ethnic group identified as such despite the internal differences.'[68] I propose that language played

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66.   B. Pachai, 'Aliens in the Political Hierarchy', in P. Pachai, ed., *South Africa's Indians: The Evolution of a Minority* (Washington, 1979); M. Yap, *Colour, Confusion and Concessions: The History of the Chinese in South Africa* (Hong Kong, c1996).
67.   Meer, *Portrait of Indian South Africans*; U. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *Canefields to Freedom: A Chronicle of Indian South African Life* (Cape Town, 2000); Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*; A. Diesel and P. Maxwell, *Hinduism in Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, 1993).
68.   Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders,* 10. Freund really means 'Hindus, Muslims and a few Christian Indians', no doubt avoiding the co-ordinated phrase for stylistic, rather than factual reasons.

a central (but not exclusive) role in this coalescence, and that language shift was the seal on this new identity.