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Locating Voicing:

Multilingualism, Ethnic Conflict and the Configuration of Difference among Sri Lankan Muslims

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Often excluded from mainstream scholarly representations of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, Sri Lankan Muslims were victims of war-related violence, ethnic discrimination, and economic hardship. Since the late 19th century, Sri Lankan Muslims have maintained a separate ethno-religious identity from Sinhalese and Tamils. Muslims living in the Sinhalese-majority South speak Tamil as a first language, but are highly multilingual in Sinhala, Sri Lanka's national language, and English. Drawing on research completed in Kandy, Sri Lanka during the last phase of the civil war (2007-2008), this paper shows how a Muslim family, in interactions in the home, draw on voicing to produce configurations of ethnic difference. I focus on one example where, the speaker, in the context of a conversation about the general nature of the ethnic conflict, employs linguistic resources including code, volume, pitch, and poetic parallelism to imitate the voice of Sinhalese who are voicing the violent inner thoughts of Tamils toward them. This example of embedded voicing reveals the speaker's construal of what Sinhalese believe Tamils are capable of doing to them, as well as how the directive for committing such violent acts may not come from the self but from elsewhere. In addition, the use of embedded voicing allows the speaker to evaluate Tamils while deferring responsibility for this evaluation. This paper argues that such complex and varied positions and meta-positions on morality and agency are involved in the way in which speakers draw on their complex linguistic repertoires to define themselves in relation to other ethnic groups.

Background

In Sri Lanka, the majority of the population is Sinhalese Buddhist. The largest minority group is Tamils, who have been historically differentiated into two sub-groups:
Northern and Eastern Tamils who settled on the island 2,000 years ago;
And Up-country Tamils, who came from South India during the British period to work as

laborers on the plantations in the south-central highland.

The second largest minority group are Muslims.

The Civil war between the Sri Lankan army and a Tamil insurgency group, the LTTE, lasted from 1983 until 2009. Tamil separatism was caused by language and educational policies passed by the post-independence Sinhalese Buddhist government which systematically disenfranchised Tamils. The most significant of these policies was the Sinhala-Only Act of 1956, which declared Sinhala to be the sole official language of Sri Lanka (Devotta 2004). This meant that Jaffna, who had received privileged access to civil service jobs in the British period, were barred from government service, with existing servants needing to pass a proficiency test in Sinhala to keep their jobs. In the early 1970s, the government changed university policies, severely reducing Jaffna Tamils' chances of gaining admissions (Sorenson 2008). The LTTE, which started off as a guerilla movement by disgruntled Tamil youth in the Jaffna peninsula, by the late 1970s had become the predominant Tamil insurgency group. The 1983 anti-Tamil riots plunged Sri Lanka into a civil war between the government and the LTTE. Post-independence educational policies, which segregated Sri Lankan youth on the basis of medium of instruction (Sinhala or Tamil) and religion perpetuated the conflict by promoting interethnic enmity and mistrust.

This paper concerns Southern Muslims who reside in scattered pockets in the Sinhalese-majority South (all areas exclusive of the Northern and Eastern provinces). In the post-independence period, ethnicity, as based upon language emerged as the primary mode of socio-cultural and political identification for Sinhalese and Tamils. Muslims, on the other hand, partly as a way to protect themselves from being enveloped into the Tamil separatist cause, defined their ethnicity on the basis of religion (Islam), rather than language.

In the post-independence period, Southern Muslims, rather than building their own political identity, strategically aligned with the mainstream government political parties, allowing them to gain valuable economic and educational concessions. Though Muslims were traditionally involved in business and trade, in the 1970s and 1980s a new Muslim middle class emerged, interested in education as a vehicle for improving business and obtaining government and private sector jobs.

Muslims were in a precarious position in the Sinhala/Tamil conflict. Though they

weren't directly involved in the conflict, they been indirect victims of violence and interethnic discord. In the South, relations between Muslims and Sinhalese and Tamils is highly complex and the produce of local, national, and transnational circumstances. Mainstream southern Muslim politics dictates that Muslims coexist peacefully with other ethnic groups while maintaining a separate socio-cultural, political, economic, and religious identity. Muslims differentiate themselves from Tamils in their lack of attachment to Tamil. Though currently the majority of Muslims speak Tamil and study in Tamil-medium schools, they claim that their "mother-tongue" is Arabic or that they don't have a mother tongue at all. They also distinguish their own variety of Tamil from the varieties spoken by Tamils by its Arabic and Sinhala borrowings and distinct grammatical features. In different settings and circumstances they frequently codeswitch between Muslim Tamil and more "normalized" Tamil varieties. In addition, they also differentiate themselves from Tamils in terms of their multilingualism in Tamil, Sinhala, and English.

Kandy

The research for this project was conducted in Kandy from 2007-2008, during the last phase of the Civil War. Located in the center of the tea plantation region in the South-Central highlands, Kandy is a multilingual and multiethnic urban center.

During my research period, the Sri Lankan army was in the midst of a large military campaign to gain control of LTTE territory in the north. Though Sri Lankans in Kandy and elsewhere in the South were at a safe distance from battle zones in the North and East, they lived in fear of civilian targeted violence, arrest, or disappearance. Divisions among Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims, as legitimized in state structures, pervaded everyday interactions.

I got to know Meena through her sister, who was a teacher in the school where I was conducting research. Meena lives with her husband, their four daughters, and Meena's mother. Meena's unmarried and unemployed younger brother, who plays a crucial role in the interaction I discuss, lived in a nearby Muslim majority town.

Coming over to the house in the evenings, I had frequent conversations with Meena and her family members about Sri Lankan history, society, and the ethnic conflict. As consistent with mainstream southern Muslim political stances, Meena continually emphasized the need to coexist peacefully with other ethnic groups. In addition, because of my status as a foreign researcher with an affiliation with her daughter's school, she felt a responsibility to represent Sri

Lankan society and the ethnic conflict in an informed and responsible way. It was evident that though they may claim impartiality to Sinhalese and Tamils, they had a stronger identification with Tamils as fellow ethnic-minorities as related to their strong ties to the tea plantation region, their former business relationship with Jaffna Tamil Hindus, and their history studying in Tamil-medium schools.

The family mainly uses Tamil in the home, frequently mixing Sinhala, and English words and expressions. When analyzing 20 hours of recorded data of this family interacting in the home with the help of my research assistant (an Up-country Tamil Hindu), I only found only a few examples of a substantial codeswitch from Tamil to Sinhala. Interestingly, in all of these examples, the speakers associated Sinhala voices with suspicion toward others. In this paper, I focus on one particularly rich example where, in the context of a general discussion on the ethnic conflict, Meena's younger brother, through embedded voicing, presents a complex and multilayered moral and agentic evaluation of himself (or Muslims in general) in relation to Sinhalese and Tamils. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term moral to refer to what people are willing to do and think about. Drawing on Ahearn, I take a view of agency as linguistically and socioculturally constructed, defining it as "causality and responsibility for events." I show how, in contrast to individual's more explicit statements, a close attention to such complex uses of voicing are crucial in showing how tacit configurations of ethnic difference and meta-positions on accountability and responsibility are configured in everyday interactions.

Example

On June 6th, 2008, I came over to Meena's house at around 4pm. I joined Meena, her mother, her older brother's wife, and her younger brother in the outdoor kitchen in the back of the house. Meena's four children (ages 6-12) were doing their homework at the dining room table inside, but were still in hearing range of the conversation. That day, there had been two incidences of civilian targeted violence, which they had heard about on the radio and through word of mouth in the street. A claymore mine exploded in a public bus near the University of Moratuwa in a Colombo suburb, killing twenty people and injuring more than sixty. Later that afternoon a bus exploded in Wategama, a town 8 km north of Kandy, injuring more than twenty people. The interaction begins with a general discussion about the nature of the ethnic conflict. The grandmother starts talking to me about how behind the individual persons who commit acts of violence are influential people organizing the violence. The conversation continues:

[In this transcript, the Sinhala is underlined>. Use of “we,” “them,” and “they” are in italics. I also marked volume and pitch.]

(1) **Grandmother:**

appaDi modallarundu uvoru naaTTula
naDakkudu daanee. anda iyakkattilee *avanga*
seera veeNum. seeraaTTi *avanga*
kolluvaanga. illayaa?

(2) **Christie:**

mm...

(3) **Grandmother:**

aanaa irundaalum kuDimakkaL enna
ceyvaanga?

(4) **Christie:**

kuDimakkaL

(5) **Grandmother:**

kuDimakkaL kashDam daanee.
ippa *naanga* teliva irundaa *naanga* adula
ellaam seeradillaiyee
engaLukkum paavam daanee.

(6) **Meena:** summaa uLLa manusara [aDicci
kolRa]

(7) **Sister-in-Law:** [aDicci kolRa]

(8) **Brother:**

[illelle. ippa *naanga* nenakkiRo summaa
singaLa aaLE ninaikkiRa illaa tamizh aaLum
tiger solli.]

(9) **Meena, the Grandmother, and the
Sister in Law:** [inaudible talk]

(10) **Brother:** *naanga*NDa paavam paakkiRa.
singalaa aakkaL pakkiRa illayee.

(1) **Grandmother:**

Like this, from the beginning it happens in
certain countries. *They* have to join (transitive)
the organization. If *they* don't join, they kill
them. Isn't it so?

(2) **Christie:**

mm...

(3) **Grandmother:**

But even though, what can the citizens do?

(4) **Christie:**

Citizens

(5) **Grandmother:**

It's difficult for the citizens
We are very much clear [about what these
organizations are doing], so *we* do not join
them. *We* are also suffering, isn't it so?

(6) **Meena:** Innocent people, [[they] kill]

(7) **Sister-in-Law:** [[they] kill]

(8) **Brother:**

[No, no. Now, Sinhalese people don't think the
way *we* think. Sinhalese people think all
Tamils are Tigers.]

(9) **Meena, the Grandmother, and the
Sister-in-Law:** [inaudible talk]

(10) **Brother:** *We*, of course, feel sympathetic
toward them. Sinhalese people won't
sympathize.

(volume ↓ pitch↓)busekee uuvə maranda
onee

kapanDa onee

kappanəwaa uuvə

uuvə naetikaranDa oonee

naetikaranəwaa uuvə

naanga daan paavam. singala aakkaL
paavam sollamaTTanga.

(11) Sister-in-law:

Illa. ippa yaazhpaaNattula pooyiTTu
meelaavula ellaam aDikkiRanga.

avaLoo peerayum kolRaanga.

avanga ingaala aDikkiRaanga.

adaan ceyRaanga.

(12) Meena:

adi mahinda raajapaksavum sariyilla.

Foreignla poyTTu...

(13) Brother:

president[sariyille]

(14) Meena:

[President sariyille]

(volume ↓ pitch↓)Must kill it in the bus

Must cut

Will cut it

Must destroy it

Will destroy it

We only feel sorry, but Sinhala people won't
say sorry.

(11) Sister-in-Law:

No. Now [they] go to Jaffna and attack from
the sky.

[They] are killing so many people.

They are attacking this side.

This is what [they] are doing

(12) Meena:

that Mahinda Rajapaksa (the Sri Lankan
President) is not okay.

[He] went abroad...

(13) Brother:

The President is [not good].

(14) Meena:

[The President is not good].

The discussion from lines 1-7 primarily concerns the culpability and responsibility for violent events and the suffering of innocent victims. Throughout the interaction, the grandmother distinguishes Muslims from Tamils and Sinhalese through the use of “we” and “they.” In line 1, she comments on how Tamils, as is common in certain countries, are forced to join organizations (referring to the LTTE). Her pointing to Tamils’ lack of full culpability in acts of violence may be interpreted as an expression of compassion toward Tamils in their current situation, or, alternatively as a way to talk about the conflict without making any direct accusations against

Tamils.

In line 5 she explains (using a generic “we”) that if people were clear about what these organizations were actually doing, they would not join them. Switching to a conventional “we,” she then differentiates Tamils from Muslims saying, “We are also suffering, aren’t we?” Thus, in lines 2–4, she emphasizes that though Muslims are not involved in the ethnic conflict at all (in direct contrast to Tamils), they still suffer. Referring to LTTE violence, Meena interjects in line 6 and says, “Innocent people [they] kill,” with her sister-in-law echoing her in line 7 with the phrase, “[they] kill.”

When the brother begins to speak in line 8, the other participants talk over him (content of their utterances were inaudible). Distinguishing Muslims from Sinhalese through the use of “we,” he says, “Now, Sinhalese people don’t think the way we think. Sinhala people think all Tamils are Tigers.” As the other participants stop talking and physically turn toward him, he utters the next phrase, “We, of course, feel sympathetic toward them. Sinhala people won’t sympathize.” Here, the brother explains that although Sinhalese think all Tamils are LTTE Muslims, indicated by “we,” show compassion toward them. Thus, while in lines 3 and 5 the grandmother compares Muslims to Tamils in terms of their involvement in the ethnic conflict, the brother’s utterances in lines 8 and 10 compare Muslims to Sinhalese in terms of their capacity to feel sympathy for Tamils. Following the first utterance in line 10, the brother switches from Tamil to Sinhala to present the voice of Sinhalese who are themselves voicing the violent inner thoughts of Tamils toward them (I analyze these utterances in the next section).

After these five phrases, the brother switches back to Tamil with the use of “we,” reiterating his prior statement that Muslims feel pity for Tamils while Sinhalese do not. He states, “We only feel sorry, but Sinhala people won’t say sorry.”

In line 11, Meena’s older brother’s wife shifts the conversation topic by commenting about the Sri Lankan army’s recent air raids in Jaffna. This utterance appears to be more of a response to the discussion of the suffering of innocent civilians in lines 5–7 than the brother’s comments in lines 8 and 10. The sister-in-law and the other participants may not have picked up on the brother’s utterances or may have—intentionally or not—skipped over them.

Embedded Voicing

When the brother began the Sinhala utterances in line 10, I could not understand the content of what he was saying because of the significant background noise. However, from the

context of his utterance and other interactional cues—putting his head down and lowering his voice and tone—I had a strong impression that he was saying something of a dark or violent nature. When I returned home, I discovered my recorder (which was positioned on the arm rest of the chair near the brother) had picked up his utterances very clearly. I sent a recording of this interaction to my research assistant. She transcribed the entire recording in Tamil script. She represented the Sinhala utterances in roman script, and accompanied them with an English translation, which she had not done on any of the other transcriptions. She also underlined the Sinhala utterances, pointing my attention to them. The transcription and translation showed that she had found it significant as well.

(volume ↓ pitch↓)

(a) busekee uuvə maranda onee

in bus-it-must kill

Must kill it in the bus

(b) kapaṇḍa onee

must cut

must cut

(c) kappanəwaa uuvə

will cut-it

will cut it

(d) uuvə naetikaraṇḍa oonee

it-must destroy

must destroy it

(e) naetikaraṇəwaa uuvə

will destroy-it

will destroy it

The brother's use of voicing is distinguished from the rest of the utterances by a shift in code from Tamil to Sinhala, the lowering of volume and pitch, and parallelism. When I received the transcript, I initially thought the brother was voicing the violent inner thoughts of Sinhalese toward Tamils on the bus. However, after re-listening to the recording and consulting

Sri Lankan informants and colleagues, it seems most likely that he was employing voice of Sinhalese who are in turn representing the inner thoughts of Tamils toward them on the bus. This interpretation is consistent with the content of the brother's utterances preceding and following the Sinhala utterances, in which he emphasizes how Sinhalese, in contrast to Muslims, think all Tamils are LTTE, and, as implied, potential bus bombers. In addition, in the sociohistorical context, it is highly improbable that the brother would attribute violent acts on the bus to Sinhalese, because bus bombings were widely linked to Tamils.

Through embedded voicing, the brother not only positions himself (as a Muslim) with respect to Sinhalese and Tamils, but also shows how Sinhalese and Tamils position themselves with respect to each other (Wortham and Locher 1999).

In these five utterances, the brother presents an evaluation of the first voice (Sinhalese) with regard to its evaluation of the second voice (the inner thoughts of Tamils).

Speaker: the brother

First voice: Sinhalese (on the bus)

Second voice: Tamils' inner thoughts (on the bus)

He shows that Sinhalese imagine Tamils as capable of having murderous inner thoughts towards them on the bus. Because the second voice is embedded within the first, the brother defers responsibility for this evaluation. However, the brother's relationship to the evaluation of the second voice (Tamils) is more complex than this. Though the evaluation of the inner thoughts of Tamils he presents (the second voice) is attributed to the Sinhalese, it is still expressed through his own voice. Thus, as Bakhtin (1986) describes in his discussion of the dual nature of voicing, a conflict takes place between the speaker and the voice he represents: though the brother is removed from the evaluation of the second voice, he is the architect or principal of the interaction, and thus bears some connection to it.

(in lines 1-7, we see the other participants, through a skillful use of language, avoiding placing blame for the violence on one particular ethnic group. Here, the brother, through this embedded voicing structure, defers responsibility for the construal of Tamils' violent inner thoughts).

The subject of the five utterances is dropped. The object is the spoken Sinhala singular third person, non-human animate pronoun "uu." This pronoun is used to indicate an animate non-human (e.g., cow, dog, or insect), a derogatory human, or even a very close friend (Gair and Lust 1998). My Sinhala teacher thought that the use of "uu" in this example refers to a

derogatory human. In this interaction, the use of “it” shows that within their inner thoughts, Tamils (as voiced through the Sinhalese) view Sinhalese as barely human, and thus have no qualms committing violent acts against them.

In addition to the shift in code, volume, and pitch, the five utterances are distinguished from the rest of the utterances in the interaction by a high degree of parallelism in the repetition of lexical and grammatical features. The brother repeats the pronoun “*uu*” and the phrases “must-do-x” (a, b, and d) and “x-will-do” (c and e). The verbs “cut” (b, c) and “destroy” (d, e) are also both repeated twice. I suggest that more than the other features, the use of parallelism creates an internal consistency in the inner thoughts of Tamils. Thus, rather than representing the voice of one Tamil person, they represent the voice of Tamils in general, as a token or instance of a more general type (Silverstein 2005). Thus, the Sinhalese (as voiced through the brother) are voicing not just the inner thoughts of one Tamil person, but of all Tamils.

In a, b, and d, the brother makes use of verb, *onne* (must), which, as an auxiliary verb, gives information about the main verb that follows it: kill (a), cut (b), and destroy (d). This verb is of the deontic modal type as it indicates the second speakers’ (Tamils) commitment to the desirability or necessity of what he or she is predicting. An instance of the obligative form, the use of *onne* implies not that the action is done, but that it *must be* done. Deontic modal verbs encode morality in that they concern what people are obligated to do, think, or say by others (Rumsey 2010). Thus, the brother’s use of voicing encodes morality in showing his construal of what Sinhalese view Tamils as obligated to do to them.

In these five phrases, the use of the deontic modal auxiliary verb (*onne*) plus verb construction along with the dropping of the subject, parallelism, and the lowering of volume and tone can be interpreted as suggesting that this is the voice or inner thoughts of someone who is preprogrammed by another to fulfill a certain duty or obligation (similar to the voice of a robot preprogrammed for a task-must kill, must cut, must destroy). Thus, the use of the modal auxiliary deontic verb plus verb structure not only encodes the moral obligation to perform a task, but also implies that this moral obligation has been preprogrammed into a person’s head by someone else (possibly LTTE leaders/brainwashers). In this interaction, the brother’s use of voicing not only creates a moral taxonomy of what one social group is capable of doing to others, but also presents a position on agency. Through embedded voicing, the brother represents the Sinhalese’ imaginings of the murderous inner thoughts of Tamils (or their

directive to kill by planting bus bombs) as being almost robotically preprogrammed by others.

In his prior utterances in lines 8 and 10, the brother, through the use of personal pronouns expresses how Sinhalese, in contrast to Muslims, are not capable of feeling sympathy toward Tamils. This configuration of ethnic difference is morally relevant in showing what one ethnic group is capable of feeling or thinking toward another. However, brother's voicing presents a much more complex and embedded evaluation of ethnic difference. It shows that evaluations of other social groups do not just pertain to what one group is obligated to do toward another (directly encoding morality), but who is responsible for that action.

In addition, the brother's use of embedded voicing also presents a meta-position on his own agency-in differing responsibility for the evaluation of Tamils' preprogrammed murderous thoughts.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how a close attention to voicing can reveal important aspects about the way individuals subtly configure ethnic difference in everyday interactions. This analysis demonstrates how responsibility and accountability are deeply embedded in the way these speakers construe other ethnic groups. As important as the way other ethnic groups are represented-is the question of who is responsible for that representation. In this sense, embedded voicing is a useful strategy in differing responsibility for the evaluation of the speaker.

Also relating to responsibility and accountability, it also shows a greater emphasis not on what an individual is capable of doing or thinking about (morality), but where the directive for that action comes from. Is a person responsible for their own actions or words, or are others?

These configurations of ethnic difference, as well as complex metaconstructions of agency are not emergent in these interactions, but draw on ideologies that circulate more broadly. But particularly in complex multilingual situations, attention to voicing can reveal how such tacit configurations are reconfigured and circulated in socially occurring talk.