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Gregory Thomson
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Language and Ethnicity

Among a Group of Pentalingual Albuquerqueans

Greg Thomson

The Khoja Ismailis of the Indian subcontinent have spoken two languages in a mildly unstable diglossic relationship for centuries. From the mid-nineteenth century to the 1970s there was a steady, large scale immigration of Khoja Ismailis to East Africa. The changing situation in the subcontinent along with the experience in Africa resulted in many of these people learning three additional languages. Descriptions of the situation in Africa suggested the hypothesis that three of the languages may have stood in a direct relationship to three different concentric levels of ethnic identity, while the other two languages may have been used in different kinds of outgroup interactions. Interviews with Ismailis who have immigrated to Albuquerque from East Africa (and with their ethnic neighbors) indicate that the relationship between language use and ethnic life is not that simple. One unanticipated result of this research is a possible approach to defining ethnic boundaries, an approach involving a notion of shared ethnic sub-categorization systems.

1. Introduction

The research reported here was inspired by an encounter with a shopkeeper in a variety store near Albuquerque, New Mexico. Some female customers had asked the young man whether he was married. He answered in a South Asian-sounding variety of English that he was not. I attempted to speak Urdu to the man, inquiring as to whether he was as yet engaged to be married. Rather than showing surprise that I was speaking Urdu, or simply answering my question, the man said, in Urdu, “How did you find out that I can speak Urdu?” He went on, “I’m not Pakistani. I’m from Africa.” He eventually told me that his language is Kachchi.

It appeared at the time that my use of Urdu with him had raised the issue of his precise ethnic identity. He identified himself as a Kachchi speaker from East Africa, and as an Ismaili (a religious/cultural affiliation).

I had known such people in Canada, who were shop-keepers in our small town. They initially told me that their language was Gujarati, and taught me Gujarati greetings to use with them. But I noticed that on one occasion when some local Native Americans asked them how to say something “in your language” they gave the questioners not Gujarati, but Swahili expressions. I left that town for several years, during which time I learned Urdu. On returning, I was surprised to find that my Gujarati-speaking friends could speak Urdu also. At that time, they informed me that their true first language is not Gujarati, but Kachchi.

The shopkeeper I met near Albuquerque told me that his store belonged to a local chain of stores operated by Ismailis. This led me to believe that there was an East African Kachchi/Gujarati-speaking Ismaili community in Albuquerque similar to those scattered across Canada. I had also observed that Canadian Ismailis from East Africa were at least loosely a part

of a larger South Asian group who frequented common restaurants and food and clothing stores. This larger group included Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus from various backgrounds.

Reflecting on my brief encounter with the Kachchi-speaking shopkeeper near Albuquerque, I wondered if this community might not be an interesting group among whom to explore issues of language and ethnicity. Here are people who speak five languages, and who may well have multiple group identities which correspond in some way to the various languages. I had already encountered other people of South Asian origin in Albuquerque, including a Gujarati-speaking Hindu, also from East Africa, and some Sikhs, who commonly speak some Hindi or Urdu along with their native Punjabi. I hypothesized that the shop-keeper I met would, perhaps tacitly, view himself as having different levels of group identity. At the narrowest level he would be a Kachchi-speaking Ismaili from East Africa. At another level, he would be a Gujarati-speaking “Asian” from East Africa. At yet another level, he would be a member of a broader South Asian community in Albuquerque. Finally, he spent long hours, day after day, relating to members of a local New Mexican community (itself consisting of Anglos, Chicanos, and at least one Native American group).

In terms of language-related group identity, I predicted that this man’s world might be schematically representable by Figure 1. Notice that in the inner circle of Figure 1, representing the hypothesized primary in-group — religion (Ismaili) — is mentioned along with language. My past experience with Ismailis was that they claim a general allegiance to Islam which transcends sectarian boundaries, while *always* being quick to emphasize their distinct identity within Islam, as followers of the true living successor or Ali, the fourth Caliph (i.e., the fourth *substitute* for the Prophet as leader of the community). The current Imam is His Highness Karim, Aga Khan IV. Having a living Imam who is able to adapt the Muslim rule of life to changing times has led to sharp distinctions in the outward form of Ismaili religion/culture when compared with other branches of Islam. I hypothesized that religious group identity would cross-cut linguistic group identity. Religious group identity, I conjectured, would be stronger with Urdu-speaking Sunni Muslims than with Gujarati-speaking Hindus, though linguistic identity would be stronger with the latter than with the former. I predicted that religious identity would be viewed as more important, at least as it applied within the bounds of South Asian community. My previous observation of Ismaili participation in the larger South Asian community in Canada suggested that religious group identity with Muslims outside this community would not be as strong as the cross-religion group identity within it. Hence I did not expect to find any tendency to learn colloquial Arabic or to socialize with Arabs.

Thus it appeared that the experience of Kachchi-speaking Ismailis from East Africa living in Albuquerque should have a bearing on questions regarding the relationship of language to ethnic identity and ethnic group membership. It is widely recognized that there is a common, but not necessarily universal, relationship of language to ethnicity. According to Parsons, sharing a common language is a primary cement of the transgenerational tradition, which in turn is essential to the existence of an ethnic group (1975:56). Fishman tells us, “At every stage, ethnicity is linked to language... There is no escaping the primary symbol system of our species, certainly not where the phenomenology of aggregational definition and boundary maintenance is involved, when ethnic being, doing, and knowing are involved” (1975b:7). He says that far beyond being a mere means of communication, language is the “quintessential symbol” of ethnicity, since it is “the recorder of paternity, the expresser of patrimony, and the carrier of phenomenology” (1989c:32). Paternity, patrimony and phenomenology are for Fishman the three forces which constitute the essence of ethnicity. At the same time, he acknowledges that “many ethnic groups do not have a distinctive language or lose it along the way” (*ibid.*).

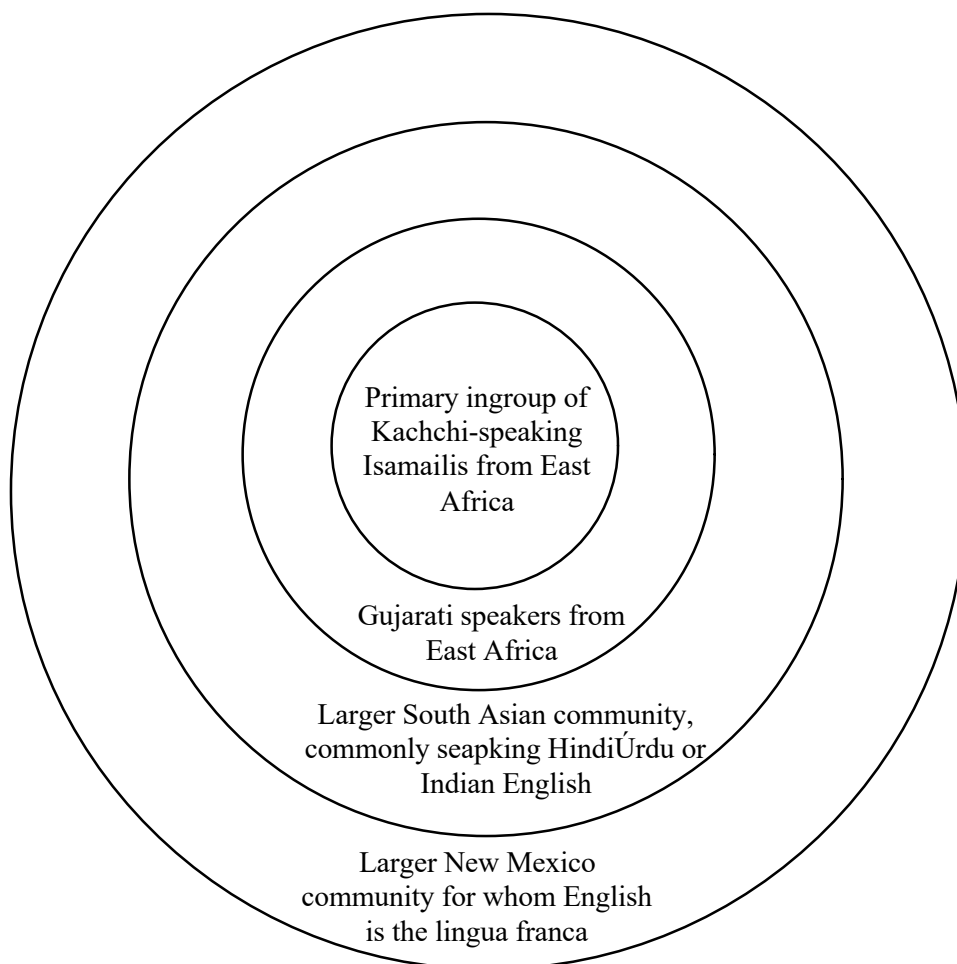


Figure 1: Predicted relationship of languages to layers of group identity

If language is really so important to ethnicity, then we should expect that people's experience of their linguistic repertoire would be linked to their experience of their ethnic repertoire in such a way that insights into the former should yield insights into the latter. It was this possibility that inspired my approach to data-gathering in the field. I attempted to get people to talk about their knowledge and use of languages, asking myself what their comments about the languages presupposed regarding their understanding of their ethnic group identity.

In a somewhat related vein, Santa Ana (1993) suggests that "variation in speech provides much more nimble and convenient features to study the ethnicity of the group" than "ponderous components such as 'cultural awareness' and 'ethnic loyalty'...." The same may be true of language choice, code-switching, language shift, and related issues which deal with the interplay of distinct codes as opposed to variable features within a relatively homogeneous code. Santa Ana urges that the study of ethnicity in speech follow the lead of the study of ethnicity in the social sciences, where the older tendency to approach ethnicity as "a fixed attribute of a population" has been replaced by a newer approach to ethnicity as "a social construct". This is related to the view of Cohen (1978) and Fishman (1989c) that ethnicity is a repertoireal phenomenon. An individual has a variety of social identities, and at any moment certain of them may be more or less salient than others. For example, when a doctor deals with a patient, her occupational identity will be salient, while her gender identity and ethnic identity may be largely

or entirely out of focus. Ethnicity can also be thought of as repertoireal in the sense that a single individual may belong to a range of groups that are ethnically based in a broad sense, along the lines suggested above in Figure 1. Once again, I suspected that as people talked about their linguistic repertoire they would reveal aspects of their understanding of their social repertoire, including their ethnic repertoire.

Granted, this approach yields only qualitative data, originating from only a small sample of subjects. Yet I believe that this is one variety of information which must go into a total picture of ethnicity, and of the relationship of language to ethnicity. It is in harmony with Santa Ana's (1993) appeal for the use of ethnographic techniques which can "lead to emic values and perspectives and groupings on ethnicity in speech, which in turn will inform us about the kinds of people to interview, and what kinds of questions to pose in which settings...."

2. Sociohistorical Context

2.1 *Indian origins*

Dobbin (1970) refers to the Khojas as a Hindu trading class which abandoned Hinduism, possibly in the thirteenth century at the time when Nizari Ismaili Muslims fleeing persecution entered South Asia preaching their particular brand of Islam (Titus 1930). One of the two groups referred to by the name Khoja is the Ismaili group which includes the Kachchi-speaking Ismailis in East Africa. Bharati (1972) asserts that these Ismailis were converted Lohana Hindus, and says that this is common knowledge among South Asian Hindus and Muslims in East Africa. Dobbin's picture, by contrast is that of an intact social unit converting to the new religion, reminiscent of the movement of Chuhra Hindus in the Punjab to Christianity early in this century (Stock 1975). If so, this group may have been an endogamous unit prior to the thirteenth century. This has certainly been the case in recent centuries. According to Nanji (1974) the conversion process was complete by the fifteenth century. From then on the Khoja Ismailis were one of several endogamous Kachchi-speaking Muslim and Hindu groups who arguably fit many of the criteria of distinct ethnic identity mentioned by Parsons (1975): they were a transgenerational collectivity, they viewed themselves as a distinct group and were so viewed by others, sharing a common culture. In the case of Hinduism and Islam, religious differences come to be reflected in linguistic differences, as with of Hindu Hindi and Muslim Urdu, Hindu Sindhi and Muslim Sindhi, Hindu Dhatki and Muslim Dhatki, etc. For instance, basic greeting and leave-taking formulas will differ, giving instant religiously significant linguistic marking to interactional encounters.

The Kachchi language can be considered, somewhat prejudicially, to be a dialect of Sindhi (Grierson 1919). However, long-standing contact with Gujarati speakers had led to extensive lexical borrowing, especially among Kachchi speakers in Gujarat. Grierson found about 30% Gujarati lexical borrowings in the Kachchi spoken in Bombay. Gujarati was the language used for written communication by all educated Kachchis at the time. Bharati (1972) mentions the use of Gujarati and Sindhi scripts to write Kachchi. However, in the view of the Kachchi-speaking Ismailis whom I interviewed, Kachchi has no written form, and Gujarati is their traditional language of literacy and literature, including being the vehicle for some important religious writings which arose during the first generations of Khoja Ismailis, suggesting a centuries-long history of Kachchi speakers using Gujarati as their language of literacy. This fact, along with the extensive unidirectional lexical borrowings Grierson refers to, suggest that Kachchi has been under pressure from Gujarati for many generations. This would be especially the case for the large numbers of Ismailis who migrated to Kathiawar and Bombay, and from there to East Africa. The apparent tendency I noticed in Canada for Kachchi speakers to report Gujarati as their language even though they primarily speak Kachchi is consistent with this picture. Yet at

the same time when Kachchi has been under pressure from Gujarati as the prestige language, there appears to have been a clear enough separation of language functions to allow the two languages to live side by side, with Kachchi remaining the language of home life for many families.

2.2 *East African settlement*

The East African coast was long familiar to the trading castes from India, with historical records going back to 100 AD or earlier (Singh 1965). In the sixteenth century the Portuguese found the ports of East Africa “filled with Indian ships” (Singh 1965:2). During the period of Portuguese ascendancy in the Indian Ocean, the volume of Indian trade declined, but it appears that Khoja Ismaili merchants continued to be based in the Persian Gulf, and moved with Sultan Seyyid Said from Muscat to Zanzibar in 1840 when he moved his capital there (Delf 1963). In 1866 a British vice-consul reported that there were 6,000 Indians in Zanzibar (*ibid.*). Another report in 1860 had the Indian population in Zanzibar and the East African coast increasing by five to six thousand a year, and a population breakdown recorded in 1873 indicated that over half of these immigrants were Ismailis, while the remainder of the population was divided among groups that were considerably smaller (Rai 1979). At that time, one British visitor to the east coast of Africa noted that nearly all of the shopkeepers he met from Zanzibar southward were Indian (Singh 1965:3). In Zanzibar, the commercial center of the region, a Hindu firm under Jairam Sweju and an Ismaili firm under Tary Topan competed for dominance in regional trade.

Emigrants from India to East Africa by no means severed ties with their land of origin. A young man might be lured to join relatives and advance himself financially by participating in commercial ventures overseas, but would commonly, once financially established, return to Kutch or Gujarat to secure a wife (Mangat 1969:14). Likewise, family members in the homeland were ever aware of the potential financial benefits of life across the Indian Ocean. For a time, even members of poorer laboring classes were attracted to the land of opportunity when the British offered jobs in railway construction to willing workers. About 32,000 Indians were thus involved temporarily in building the railroad deep into Uganda. The Indian laborers were naturally followed by the “old established merchants from Katch and Bombay in Zanzibar and along the coast” (Mangat 1969:49) who followed the railroad deep into East Africa and remained there to serve Africans after the overwhelming majority of the Indian laborers had returned home.

New opportunity continued to attract increasing numbers of relatives from the homeland. From the late nineteenth century until the mid twentieth century the Indian population in East Africa grew by about thirty percent per year (Bharati 1972:11). By 1948 there were nearly 200,000 people of Indian ancestry spread out over Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar. In addition to their traditional roles in commerce, the Indians were employed by the British (and the Germans in Tanganyika) as skilled laborers, and as lower and mid-level administrative staff (Mangat 1969, ch. 3). In 1969, people of Indian ancestry in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania totaled about 300,000, and were engaged in a wide range of occupations (Delf 1963; Tandon 1973). As the Indian population grew, it was inevitable that Hindus, who vastly outnumbered Ismailis in the region of India from which the Ismailis came, would begin to outnumber them in East Africa as well. Bharati (1972) reported that during the period of peak population 70% of the people of Indian origin in East Africa were Gujarati- and Kachchi-speaking Hindus. Nevertheless, Ismailis continued to form a substantial segment of over 50,000 (Delf 1963).

2.3 *East Africa and Indian ethnicities*

Horowitz (1975:129) says that the partition of India and Pakistan led to a neutral renaming of Indians in East Africa as “Asians”. He neglects to say who was in charge of the renaming, or

what its implications were in terms of group identity. I suspect the term was in use long before that. The British saw the inhabitants of their East African colonies as consisting of Africans, Whites, and Asians. Despite the long-established position of the latter in the local economy, and their generally high level of occupational skill and educational background, the British passed snobbish and demeaning laws prohibiting Asians from settling in the agriculturally attractive highlands, and segregated them to specific sections of Nairobi (Singh 1965; Rai 1979). In Uganda they were barred from first class train compartments. At various times they were barred from hotels and European hospitals (Rai 1979). Most of these discriminatory policies were the direct result of unabashed White supremacist lobbying pressures. In 1917 the lobbyists managed to secure a voting franchise restricted to people classed as Europeans. Of course, the lot of the Asians was considerably better than that of Africans, because of their financial role and their educational level. However, it appears that this merely made them special objects of animosity from European settlers.

In all of this, people of South Asian ancestry were indeed lumped together by the British as though they were a single ethnic group. The rise of African governments did not change this. If anything, it made matters worse for those thus lumped together. Kenyan leader Jomo Kenyatta occasionally informed the Asians publicly that “if they were unwilling to show respect to the African, they should go back to their country and their rotalis” (Prem 1972:53). Idi Amin ordered almost all Asians in Uganda to abandon their possessions and leave the country on short notice. During the exodus there were countless incidents of degrading and brutal treatment (Twaddle 1974).

But it seems likely that the grouping represented by the label “Asian” was far less important to the people thus designated than it was to those who applied the label to them. Bharati presents a picture in which people of Indian ancestry felt a strong need to present a united front, while the realities of multiple historical origins continued to hold sway:

While the caste system as such could not operate in East Africa, the social mobility of the individual and frequently his choice of employment continued to be influenced by consideration of caste and creed. This was true, for example, of much of Indian commercial enterprise in East Africa, where traditional trading groups—Bhattias, Khojas, Lohanas, Bohras, and Vantias—continued to play the dominant role.... (Mangat 1969:141)

And in addition to these groups, there were groups from Indian ancestry as divergent as Punjabi Sikhs and Goan Christians. Certainly, the “Asians” were able to politically mobilize for the sake of promoting common interests. During the worst period of British discrimination early in this century the Bombay-based Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Ismailis, lobbied on behalf of all East Africans of Indian descent, regardless of sectarian, regional or linguistic background (Singh 1965:6), as did the Indian government, for that matter. And the various Indian groups within East Africa cooperated in electing representatives to a legislative council starting in 1933 (Singh 1965:152).

Given the fact that the “Asians” were thus categorized by the British and mistreated on the basis of that categorization, and were noticing similar collective prejudice on the horizon coming from the direction of the rising Black African powers, they would appear to be a cardinal case of “members of a societal sector that has some potential for ethnic identity [and] are barred from achieving desired ends because of sociocultural distinctions...” (Cohen 1978:396). That is, in Horowitz’s (1975) terms, they were ideal candidates for emergence as an ethnic amalgam.

Yet the various distinct communities remained for the most part just that. The contributors to Twaddle (1974) give separate descriptions of the life of various of these communities. Of no sector is this commitment to corporate survival more true than of the Ismailis, who had extensive

local and translocal organization based around the *jamaat khana* “meeting hall”, which in addition to being a place of daily worship is the hub of a close-knit community life. It may well be that the outside pressures toward amalgamation served only to galvanize commitment to differentiation.

2.4 *Language and group identity in East Africa*

Of special interest here is the pattern of language use as an indicator of intergroup dynamics among people of Indian ancestry in East Africa. I have already noted that among the groups who immigrated, Kachchi was already losing ground to Gujarati in India prior to immigration. This process continued in East Africa, but there is evidence from various comments by Bharati (1972) that the pace of language shift related to ethnic identity. The East African Ithna Ashari Muslims have a loose historical relationship to the Ismailis, yet culturally they contrast starkly in terms of their Islamic conservatism (Bharati 1972:83). Bharati refers to them as a “one-time Cutchi [Kachchi]-speaking” group. We could speculate on the basis of Giles’ ethnolinguistic identity theory (Giles & Johnson 1987) that abandoning Kachchi would have increased their sense of psychological distinctiveness from Ismailis. The same factor could have simultaneously inhibited the shift to Gujarati among Ismailis, despite the unique role of Gujarati as the language of literacy, liturgy and religious literature for them.

Bharati appears to have found East African Lohana Hindus to be intermediate between Ithna Asharis and Ismailis in their degree of language shift.

...the Lohanas spoke Cutchi [Kachchi] in India in earlier days, but the younger generation in East Africa no longer speaks Cutchi, and looks at old Cutchi speakers with that typical blend of embarrassment, respect, and disdain which we find diffusely present wherever one speech form has gained higher prestige than the other in a linguistically mixed area. (1972:17)

In the case of the Lohanas, I do not need to speculate regarding the dynamics of language shift in relation to the desire for ethnolinguistic distinctiveness since Bharati himself speculates for us along the very same lines:

The Lohanas... were all Cutchi speakers, and still are, though the new generation in East Africa hardly speaks it, their ancestral language having been absorbed in the more stylish, more prestigious Gujarati. ... There is an unconscious attempt at de-emphasizing the Cutchi background of the group. The fact that the Ismaili Muslims have been speaking Cutchi with no embarrassment or diffidence might have prompted the Lohanas *not* to perpetuate it. Ismailis were converts from Lohanas—a fact known to all Asians in East Africa, Hindu and Muslim. (1972:53).

Finally, Bharati observed that language shift was well under way, though not as far along, among the East African Ismailis as well. In this case he observed that almost everyone had receptive competence, though younger people were all showing a preference for Gujarati (1972:80). (The exact stage of language shift may have differed from one part of East Africa to another. Ismailis from Tanzania living in Albuquerque do not appear to fit Bharati’s picture as we shall see.)

In addition to Kachchi and Gujarati, Ismailis in East Africa used English as the primary language of education (along with Gujarati), and also commonly spoke “the *lingua franca* of East African Asians, a kind of pidgeon [sic] Hindustani” (Bharati 1972:17).

A fifth language in common use among East African Ismailis was the indigenous East African *lingua franca* Swahili, which rose to a new level of importance with the return of African

political independence and nationhood. Rattansi & Abdull (1969:126) went so far as to predict the decline of all Indian languages with the increased use of Swahili following independence.

A sixth language, Arabic, came to play an important ceremonial role for Ismailis in Africa, replacing Gujarati for some liturgical purposes. But it was a specialist language used for specialist purposes, and was not widely understood by the majority (Bharati 1972:321). This move was apparently inspired by a desire to be more clearly identified as Muslims (Nanji 1974:134). Since Arabic served no function in interpersonal communication I will not consider it as part of the East African Ismaili communicative repertoire in the narrowest sense.

The five primary languages in use in the East African Ismaili community had varying levels of institutional support. The East African Indians came to maintain an extensive school system (Rattansi & Abdulla 1965). These schools were mainly taught by teachers from India and Pakistan prior to 1949, after which time it became possible to train teachers in Nairobi (*ibid.*, 119). In Tanganyika in 1959 there were 122 Indian schools, of which 54 were Ismaili schools, and sixteen more were geared to specific Indian ethnic groups (*ibid.*, 114). The remainder were called Indian public schools. A similar situation existed in Uganda. The primary medium of education was English. Gujarati was used to some extent in schools, and there was extracurricular training in Gujarati literacy as well. Bharati gives some indication of the extent of literacy in Indian languages:

Books and magazines in [Urdu, Punjabi, and Gujarati] are read at least as much as English-language publications; and dozens of periodicals as well as some books and a considerable number of monographs relating to the Asian settlers themselves, are being published in Gujarati in East Africa. (1972:258)

Cohen (1978:395) provides a helpful view of ethnicity as “more or less fluid, more or less multiple, forming nesting hierarchies of we/they dichotomizations.” To what extent might the linguistic repertoire of Ismailis in East Africa mirror such a nesting hierarchy of we/they dichotomizations? And to what extent might they actually use this repertoire to situationally and fluidly define the meanings of “we” and “they”? And if the linguistic repertoire is involved in the creation and maintenance of “we-ness”, to what extent do linguistic we-nesses correspond to ethnic we-nesses.

What we have seen so far from the evidence, particularly as presented by Bharati (1972), is that Kachchi had become the only unique in-group language of Ismailis, and yet it was rapidly declining. English was used within the community in the educational setting. For people of Indian ancestry employed by the British as skilled laborers, and mid-level administrators and civil servants, English would have had an important role in the workplace, though it is unclear how many of these workers were Ismaili. For Ismailis, English probably had little if any role in day-to-day interaction within the community. It may have had more of a function of defining communication with ethnic outgroup members. The same can be said for Swahili. Yet there was a difference in that speaking Swahili apparently related to a feeling of Africanness. Mangat (1969: 174) reported a decreasing “sympathy” on the part of East African Ismailis for the places of their ancestry, and “a greater consciousness of their countries of adoption.” The “highly urbanized East African environment”, among other factors, was resulting in “marked changes in food habits, mode of dress, and language—the last being influenced by their greater fluency in both English and Swahili” (*loc. cit.*). Bharati informs us that the Ismailis truly considered themselves African and at the time of independence were open to virtually any area of “cultural and social interchange”. The Ismailis, in contrast with other immigrant minorities, integrated their schools before the return of African independence (Nanji 1974:135), and generally showed every intention of being enthusiastic citizens of Black-led African states. What appears to have been

developing was a concept of national citizenship as a level of identity shared with other ethnic groups, and Swahili was the symbol and vehicle of that new level of identity.

If Kachchi was the unique in-group language, English largely defined a set of ethnic outgroup interactions, and Swahili related to a non-ethnic level of group identity as citizens alongside fellow Africans of indigenous origins, where did Gujarati and Hindustani fit in? Gujarati appears to have been of comparable importance to Kachchi within the Ismaili community, and to have enjoyed greater prestige than Kachchi. But it was also the language of 70% of the East African Asians. Did this represent a level of group identity? That is, was there a level of *we-ness* which included speakers of Gujarati and excluded non-Gujarati-speaking Asians? I have found little evidence for this in the literature surveyed, and I do not feel it needs to be the case. As noted above, there would be certain conspicuous linguistic markers of religious group membership. A common language can be a source of common identity, but it may also be a tool for clearly marking social distinctions.

That leaves (pidgin) Hindustani which Bharati (1972:17) referred to as “the *lingua franca* of East African Asians”. Here we must seriously consider the possibility that the language use pattern reflects social grouping. Both English and Swahili were available as *lingua francas*, and as a matter of fact, had just that role in the wider society. So why was there a need to learn a specifically Asian *lingua franca*? And if 70% of the Asians already spoke Gujarati, a language with a distinguished literary form, would that not be a better candidate for use as a *lingua franca* than (pidginized) Hindustani? One possible explanation has to do with the rise of Hindi and Urdu as national languages of India and Pakistan respectively. Spoken Hindustani is often described as the spoken vernacular common denominator of Hindi and Urdu. Hindustani might then relate to another sense of national identity parallel to that reflected in the increasing popularity of Swahili.

This section has laced fact with speculation in attempting to make sense out of the pentalingual nature of Ismaili society in East Africa. All the same, I hope it provides a helpful context for exploration as we turn to the linguistic experience of East African Ismailis in Albuquerque, and explore the relationship of linguistic experience to ethnic experience.

3. East African Ismailis in Albuquerque

3.1 Whither pentalingualism

In the foreword to Parmatma and Eames (1980:vii-viii) Nathan Glazer makes a remarkable prediction regarding “Asian Indians” in the United States:

We have a new and rapidly growing ethnic group fed by immigration. It is not like any of the others. It is marked off by a high commitment to maintaining family connections, both here in the United States and between the United States and India. It is also marked by no particular animus against the mother country, indeed, rather a strong desire to maintain the Indian connection. It arrives at a time when Americanization is a word in bad odor, and the efforts to change immigrant groups in culture and loyalty operate more slackly, if at all, than ever before. Indeed, American political institutions now stand ready to maintain foreign languages and foreign cultures, through bilingual and bicultural programs which, regardless of the groups for which they were established, are now available for all. Asian Indians are only at the beginning of acculturation and adaptation, and it will be interesting to see how they, in a new age, manage the process.

How the world appears to have changed! The United States has long been a country where immigrant bilingualism was a transitional state between the “abnormal” state of not knowing

English and the “normal” state of knowing nothing but English (Grojean 1982, ch. 2, especially pp. 56-57). Glazer’s prediction relates to people from India. The East African Ismailis are especially interesting in this connection as they had already long been an immigrant minority before coming to North America. At the time of much of the immigration to Africa, the majority were bilingual in Kachchi and Gujarati. By the time they re-immigrated to North America they commonly spoke five languages.

If anyone could fulfill Glazer’s prediction and survive the linguistic black hole of North America, the East African Ismailis should.

Fishman (1989d:202-232) holds that immigrants become relinguified as a result of the “decompartmentalization of social interaction, such that the ethnically encumbered domains (...home, community, church) respond to the same hierarchy of rewards and statuses as do the ethnically unencumbered domains (school, work sphere, government).” In Fishman’s picture of language shift, later immigrants arrive in a setting where the new norms are already established for what constitutes being a hyphenated American of that particular ancestry, including the new system of rewards and statuses tied to the use of English in home, community, and church, and the newcomers are relinguified by their well-established fellow-ethnic role models.

In this regard, like most immigrants to the U.S. from India (Parmatma and Eames, 1980), most East African Ismailis arrived in the U.S. with “a working or excellent knowledge of English.” We might predict from this that there would be less pressure to abandon the language(s) of home, community and church (or rather, home, community and *jamaat khana* “meeting hall”). There would be no need to develop compartmentalized functions for the various languages, as those already existed. We might predict that there would cease to be any domain for maintenance of Swahili, but that of the three Indian languages one or more would survive in a diglossic relationship with English. Alternatively, we might wonder whether Glazer is justified in his optimism, based, as it is, on his belief that stable bilingualism is valued in contemporary American society.

With these possibilities in mind, I turn to the evidence provided me by East African Ismailis in Albuquerque and their close associates.

3.2 *The interviews*

The shopkeeper who inspired this research expressed readiness to be interviewed, though he had no free days, and only one free evening when he needed to go to what he called “church”. I ended up meeting with him after church, and found it necessary to conduct the interview across the front desk of a busy motel office which opened into an Ismail residence. As a possibility for a further interview, he gave me the name of relative. I found another East African Ismaili operating an Indian restaurant. She was unwilling to be interviewed, but gave me the name of a prominent community leader. I began contacting these people, and others to whom they referred me, by telephone, and it quickly became apparent that this approach would lead to few if any additional interviews.

One problem in explaining my purpose was that it was difficult to specify the group of people I wished to learn about. If I used the label “Ismaili” the reaction was that I was investigating the religion. Two community leaders told me that Ismailis are “multiethnic”. In order to make clear that my focus was on language and language use, I found it best to say that I was interested in meeting “people from East Africa who speak Kachchi.”

Rather than continue getting leads and phoning people, I decided to start knocking on doors and inquiring as to the presence of Kachchi speakers from East Africa. It was possible to do this because, as I quickly discovered, Ismailis are heavily involved in the motel business. In this way, I located a number of Kachchi speakers from East Africa. There was some understandable

puzzlement, and, no doubt, concern, over my purposes, and in the end I found that usually the most I could do was to conduct the interview as an informal conversation, and make summary notes immediately afterward, including verbatim quotes that particularly impressed me. In the end, I was able to tape-record one additional interview, and I believe that in a longer study I should be able to do a larger amount of tape-recorded interviewing, as these people were most gracious and helpful once they understood my purpose. As it was, I conducted extended conversations or interviews with seven Ismailis from East Africa, some of whom had actually been born in India and immigrated to East Africa as children or adolescents. In the process of locating these people, I had conversations of various lengths with five Gujarati-speaking Hindus, and treated these as part of my overall data gathering. Finally, I had briefer interactions with a number of Ismaili shopkeepers who came directly to the U.S. from India and Pakistan. The communities from which they came are the ones from which the East African Ismailis or their ancestors came, but these people did not share in the East African experience. It turned out that the majority of Ismailis in Albuquerque, unlike those in Canada, fall into this latter category. Those from East Africa are a minority in the Ismaili community in Albuquerque.

My initial interview was conducted in English, though I sensed the man preferred using Urdu with me. Two additional interviews/conversations were in English. The remainder were in Urdu, including the second tape-recorded interview. Switching to Urdu turned out to be a major breakthrough in terms of its effect on people's willingness to talk to me.

I organize my findings here in terms of languages and their status in the lives of the Kachchi speakers from East Africa, considering Kachchi, Gujarati, Hindi/Urdu, Swahili and English in that order, paying special attention to remarks which tied language to a sense of group identity.

3.2.1 *Kachchi*

Some families use Kachchi as their primary language of home life. I observed this in two homes I was in, and in these homes the people I interviewed were clear that Kachchi is the home language. One of these, a man in his mid twenties who has lived in Albuquerque for ten years, said Kachchi is "the most, you know, fastest [language] I can speak." He told me that Ismaili families from East Africa in Albuquerque are a mix. Some speak Kachchi in their homes and some speak Gujarati:

...a lot of people, Ismailis, you know, they speak Kachchi, they speak Gujarati, you know, it depends on how they grew up. You know, if their parents are speaking Gujarati, if they're speaking Kachchi, but mostly it's Kachchi, is like the main language.

This gives an impression of two linguistic subvarieties of East African Ismaili homes: those in which Kachchi is spoken, and those in which only Gujarati is spoken (ignoring the use of English by the children). We might expect the fact that different families use a different language in the home to reflect an ethnic subcategorization. But recall that the shift from Kachchi to Gujarati is a process internal to this group, as well as a process shared with other groups.

If Gujarati has more prestige than Kachchi, it only points out that prestige is a complicated, if not misguided, concept. In the case of one of the most prominent families in the community, I had separate conversations with the mother and a son. The mother told me that Kachchi was the language she used with her children and the son verified this. He said he speaks Kachchi to his mother, but mainly English to Ismaili friends and to his siblings. Later I met him in a mall with two female cousins and some other Ismaili friends (all speaking English). He asked the cousins if they could speak Kachchi, and they insisted they could not. He quickly attributed this to the fact that they are seven years younger than he.

One couple, approximately in their sixties, told me that they always speak Kachchi in their home to each other and to their kids, and that their grandchildren who were born in the U.S. also speak to them in Kachchi. This case was particularly interesting in that when the man immigrated to Africa from India as an adolescent he could not speak Kachchi. He learned Kachchi in Africa. His wife was born in Africa in a Kachchi-speaking family. Though she could speak Gujarati, the couple chose Kachchi as their home language, and my observations of their interaction with their son confirmed this. These people told me that about half of the Ismailis in Albuquerque (250 in all, by this man's estimate) are from East Africa, and they said that all Ismailis from East Africa speak Kachchi.

Another man who claimed Kachchi as his primary language told me that he has only ever spoken English to his children (now grown), and they know no Indian language whatsoever.

Another man presented quite a different picture. He is a close relative of a family which I observed to be thoroughly Kachchi-speaking, but he immigrated to Africa as a small child speaking only Gujarati. He said that his father could speak several languages, but not Kachchi. He went on to learn Kachchi in Africa, but he says he doesn't speak it well, and rarely uses it. He said that if he is with a friend who speaks Kachchi he will use it sometimes, but could not remember having done so in the previous month. In his own home Kachchi is not used, and he said that very few families speak Kachchi at home. However, when he expressed concern over the fact that many children in the group speak only English he said (here I translate from Urdu):

“Before children go to school, they know either Kachchi or Gujarati well. After they start school, they speak little Gujarati. This is the parents' problem because they don't talk Gujarati with the children.”

So although he is speaking of Gujarati as the language that is being lost, by referring to preschoolers as speaking “either Kachchi or Gujarati” he makes the same subclassification of families that we saw earlier. Still, he clearly downplayed the place of Kachchi in his own life and in the community as a whole.

At this point, the emerging picture suggests that although speaking Kachchi may serve to distinguish one nuclear family from another within the group, it is not seen as a marker of Ismaili group (or subgroup) identity. One couple did associate it with being from East Africa as opposed to being direct from India. Yet I did meet Ismailis from Pakistan who speak Kachchi, although their children are reported to know only Urdu and English. However, the Kachchi spoken in East Africa is unique in that it contains borrowings from Swahili. One man gave as examples the words for “egg” and “shovel”. In the case of “shovel”, the Swahili loan was the only word he knew, though he did not know Swahili, having grown up largely in North America.

If this picture is approximately correct, it contrasts with the view of at least some non-Ismailis of Indian origin. Although interviewing such people was not part of my original plan, I found myself talking with them as I continued my search for East African Ismailis, and I believe that their perspective on the language use of Ismailis was revealing. With respect to the man who downplayed the role of Kachchi in the community, his next door neighbor (a Hindu) said (gesturing toward the neighbor's yard):

“Whenever their community is together they speak Kachchi, but when he talks to me he talks in Gujarati. They speak Gujarati and Kachchi, but their original language is Kachchi.”

He further identified his neighbors as “Muslims”, while emphasizing that they are from India. He also mentioned that they are from Africa, but again emphasized that they are originally from India. He had already identified himself as from India, and he came closer to displaying Cohen's (1978) proposed pattern of nesting we/they dichotomizations than did any of the

Ismailis I talked to. He emphasized his commonality with the neighbors as being from India and speaking Gujarati, but emphasized the differences of language, religion, and the African sojourn, and spoke of “their community”. He exhibited unselfconscious warmth toward his “Muslim” neighbor.

Another Gujarati-speaking Hindu, himself from East Africa, made a similarly strong association of Kachchi with Ismailis: “The ones that speak Kachchi are all Muslims.” Later he speculated that there must be Hindus who speak Kachchi, but said that he had never heard of one. Like the previous man, this man said that Ismailis always speak to him in Gujarati, and never in English.

It is worth pointing out that “Muslim” was not a common self-designation among Ismailis I talked to. They almost exclusively referred to themselves as simply Ismailis. One man identified himself spontaneously as a Shia Muslim, and one woman said “No, Muslim” in response to my question “Are you a Hindu?” However, as soon as I displayed some insider knowledge she began referring to herself as Ismaili. One Ismaili man made a clear three-way distinction among the Indians in East Africa as “Hindus, Ismailis, Muslims”. He also said that if he were marooned in a strange city, he would look in a phone book for Ismaili names, or Hindu names, but would not particularly expect sympathy from Muslims. By contrast, none of the Hindus I talked to used “Ismaili” as a group designation for Ismailis, instead referring to them simply as Muslims. Ismailis are Muslims, but being Ismaili appears to be far more salient to Ismailis themselves, while the fact that they are Muslims may be more salient to Hindus. I mention this because there is a parallel difference in the significance attached to speaking Kachchi. To Ismailis, whether one speaks Kachchi or Gujarati at home appeared to have little bearing on group identity as Ismailis. By contrast, to Gujarati-speaking Hindus in Albuquerque speaking Kachchi clearly marks someone as “Muslim”. At least that is the impression given by emphatic statements from two Gujarati-speaking Hindus. (A third who, it happens, in contrast with the first two, has little to do with Ismailis, did not know they speak Kachchi, and told me that Ismailis speak Gujarati because “they used to be Gujaratis.”)

3.2.2 *Gujarati*

I met only one East African Ismaili who said she could not speak Kachchi. She speaks Gujarati in her home and she said her grown children, who were young adolescents at the time of immigration to the U.S., speak Gujarati as their “main language”. She was emphatic that children should learn Gujarati and that English should not be spoken in the home. She said that English is important as a world language, but that they will learn it at school. (Her own English was quite adequate though she expressed a desire to improve it, and preferred to speak to me in Hindustani). She said that she can only understand “a little” Kachchi.

There are apparently many Ismailis in Albuquerque who speak Gujarati and cannot speak Kachchi, but they are mostly from India. The Ismaili community is close-knit, and so Kachchi speakers are involved in frequent interaction with those from India who speak only Gujarati. My limited impression is that most of those from East Africa (specifically, Tanzania) do speak Kachchi as their home language. However, it also appears to be the case that all Ismailis from East Africa know Gujarati. Those from India are from Gujarat state, and speak, read and write Gujarati, though one told me that her home language growing up was Kachchi, while she also learned Hindi and English in the convent school. Some Ismailis from Pakistan do not speak Kachchi or Gujarati, while others speak both, or at least Gujarati, (all of the ones from Pakistan can speak Urdu, and some can only speak Urdu, or Urdu and English).

We might say then, ignoring children raised in America, that Gujarati is the primary shared language of the community above the level of the nuclear family. So if there is to be a language of overall group identity, we would expect it to be Gujarati, at least among adults. The problem

with this is that Gujarati also appears to be the primary language among Hindus in Albuquerque. Thus it would appear that while Kachchi cannot be a language of group identity because it takes in too few, Gujarati cannot be a language of group identity because it takes in too many.

In addition to being the home language of some, Gujarati had an indispensable role as the language of literacy among Ismailis first in India and then in Africa. This position was strengthened considerably by the fact that liturgical and other important religious writings are in Gujarati. Any East African Ismailis I talked to who immigrated to the U.S. as adults are literate in Gujarati. Though none appeared to be avid readers of Gujarati literature, one man said that he does read books in Gujarati periodically, and never reads books in English. All of these adults said they occasionally write letters in Gujarati.

In addition, everyone reported Gujarati as the language of speeches, announcements, and other official functions in the *jamaat khana* (variously referred to as the church and the mosque). Other languages may be used for official functions, including Kachchi and Urdu, but Gujarati is the normal one, with translation into English for the children.

One woman told me that Ismailis from East Africa speak *three* languages. She said those are Swahili, English and Gujarati. But she had already told me that her home language was Kachchi. So I asked her, "What about Kachchi, and Urdu?" to which she responded, "Those are one. Kachchi, Gujarati and Hindustani are one language." Though she said these three are one, the name by which she referred to this "one" was Gujarati. This reminded me of the Kachchi speakers I knew in Canada who reported their language to be Gujarati.

3.2.3 *Hindustani*

I found that the language names Hindi, Urdu, and Hindustani were used somewhat interchangeably. One Ismaili from Pakistan referred to his language first as Indian when I asked about it. I asked, "Which Indian language?" and he said, "Hindi." It was then that I revealed I could speak Urdu and learned that he was from Pakistan where the language in all its spoken varieties is exclusively referred to as Urdu. In the case of the woman who said "Kachchi, Gujarati and Hindustani are one language," she substituted "Hindustani" for my "Urdu".

With one exception, everyone I met who had immigrated to the U.S. as an adult could speak Hindustani. I also found that people preferred speaking Hindustani to me even when it was obvious that communication would have been easier in English. One man who came to Albuquerque as an adolescent learned Urdu naturalistically in Albuquerque from extensive association with Ismaili friends from Pakistan. He was the shopkeeper who expressed surprise that I thought he would know Urdu. Today he speaks Urdu at his workplace, since it is the primary language of his coworkers. Another young person told me he had recently started trying to learn Urdu with the help of a young friend recently arrived from Pakistan.

If it is true, as it appears to be, that the majority of people of South Asian backgrounds in Albuquerque speak Gujarati, then we might wonder whether Hindustani functions as a lingua franca for South Asians in Albuquerque in general as it was said to in East Africa (Bharati 1972). I heard a Hindu Gujarati shopkeeper conversing with a Sikh customer in Hindi until some Gujarati Hindus stepped through the door. The shopkeeper began at once to speak to them in Gujarati, and the Sikh instantly fell silent and slipped out the door. However, the Ismailis whom I questioned said they speak English to Sikhs, although one said that in Africa he spoke to them in Hindi or Punjabi. On the other hand, we will see below that for those who speak it, Hindustani (specifically, Urdu), can suddenly rise to define a new level of we-ness.

There is however, one level at which Hindi does link people together from various Indian backgrounds: entertainment. One young man told me that he listens to Hindi popular music cassettes on a daily basis. The woman I interviewed who uses Gujarati as her home language was

playing a Hindi video in her small store when I entered. Many people rent Hindi videos (as well as Gujarati videos) for home entertainment. Once or twice a month there is a Hindi movie in a local theater which draws people together from various backgrounds, including Sikh and Hindu, as well as many Ismailis (the man responsible for scheduling the movies is Ismaili). One woman told me that she has learned to understand Hindi in Albuquerque (though not to speak it) from watching Hindi movies. And a Gujarati-speaking Hindu told me, “Everyone watches the films, only in Hindi, and so they learn it.”

3.2.4 *Swahili*

In Figure 1 I made no mention of Swahili, and did not expect it to have any role in the life of East African Ismailis in Albuquerque. Most of those I interviewed mentioned speaking Swahili periodically or frequently in Albuquerque. One who did not mention speaking it showed visible enthusiasm for it nevertheless, commenting that Black Africans are wonderful people. One man laughed aloud each time he mentioned conversing with his friends in Swahili. Another said he speaks Swahili with friends when cutting up, and gave the example of greeting one another and making small talk in Swahili. One twenty-year-old man said that he speaks Swahili with friends so as not to lose it. A woman told me she tried to get her children to take Swahili in university because she really wants them to learn it, but they preferred to learn Spanish. A man in his mid-twenties said that when he is with friends from “back home”, they often suddenly switch to Swahili:

Just like that, you know, just like right now, just talking in Kachchi or English, all of a sudden, you know, just change the topic, not change the topic, just while talking, just start speaking in Swahili... just kind of remember, you know, oh it's be nice to speak a language after a long time. There's a lot of people here normally don't speak and then all of a sudden this other person comes and starts talking in Swahili. “Oh you still remember Swahili, oh?” And then we start talking Swahili, you know, “How you doing and everything,” and start talking Swahili.

One hypothesis suggested by such remarks is that Swahili serves a solidarity function for people from “back home”, to use the one man's term. For him, people from “back home” appeared to be a subcategory of Ismailis:

All the people I meet, is from Africa, you know, from my country, that's Africa... but people from Pakistan or India ...I met these people, I mean, our community Ismaili, they came from Pakistan... When we came down here, you know, went to church and stuff, you know, we tried to know... “These guys are from Pakistan, these are, you know, these are from back home.”

This reflects a level of sub-group identity which is available to the speaker. Speaking Swahili would be a clear way of invoking this identity and expressing solidarity in relationships where it is available.

3.2.5 *English*

English is what one person called “the normal language”. Another said “In America, I speak English; at home [i.e., in his house], I speak Gujarati.” As already noted English has long been an important language in the Ismaili community, and whether a person is educated in Africa or India, English will have been a major language of education. This is less true in Pakistan. In East Africa, English was the language of social interaction with whites, as Swahili was with blacks. It was the only language of government bureaucracy.

In America, English continued to be the language of education. There were major differences in the English education in the U.S., however. In Africa, the teachers were Indians, who in addition to English spoke one or more Indian languages, providing relevant bilingual or multilingual role models. And, prior to integration with Black Africans, one's classmates came from homes which were linguistically the same as, or similar to, one's own.

The common picture I ran into in Albuquerque suggests a rapid shift toward monolingualism in English among the younger people. Parents told me that their children speak Kachchi or Gujarati to them, but English to one another and to friends. In every case the younger people show a decrease in the use of Indian languages. The parents may speak Kachchi and Gujarati, but the child can only speak Kachchi. If the child can speak both Kachchi and Gujarati, the child will have no ability to read or write Gujarati, unlike the parents. There was much evidence that few of the younger children are learning any Indian language.

This has had a major impact on the linguistic complexion of community life as experienced in the *jamait khana*. Now instead of simply making announcements and giving teachings in Gujarati, everything must be translated into English for the younger people.

3.2.6 *Spanish*

Two or three people mentioned the desire of their children to learn Spanish. One man told me that several Ismailis, including the man himself, can speak some Spanish. I observed that some of the motel proprietors were in essence landlords for small communities of long-term Spanish-speaking tenants. This particular man said that he has a hard time understanding Spanish, but he really works at it.

3.2.7 *Linguistic Maneuvering*

The following incident describes a situation in which there was ambiguity with regard to language choice, and how it was resolved:

Some of the customers that came by the store, they used to speak, you know, Bengali. You know, I didn't know what they were talking about. I know it's like, you know, it's like, a similar language, you know, I said, these guys are not Spanish or French, you know, this is probably a Bengali, probably Punjabi, you know. And then I asked them, "What kind of language you guys speak?" and he told me it's Punjabi. "So do you speak Punjabi too". I said "Not Punjabi, I speak Urdu or Kachchi," and he started talking to me in Urdu. Well, I was pretty much sure, you know, this is not a language from here. I know he was either a Punjabi or a Bengali.

This narrative is interesting in various respects. The easy equivocation between "Bengali" and "Punjabi" did not come across as a slip of the tongue. The meaning that came through was "a speaker of a non-descript Indian language of some sort." It appeared to reflect a categorization of non-Gujarati-speaking, non-Kachchi-speaking, non-Urdu-speaking people from South Asian as a "they" with a potential for being part of a "we". Contrary to the impression given by many writers, there is not one set of ethnic boundaries, however fluid (Barth 1969). The ethnic universe of each ethnic group is defined by that group, based on criteria relevant to that group. In discovering a shared knowledge of Urdu, I would suggest that both the "Bengali/Punjabi" customers and the person who to them was probably a "Gujarati", found a level of group identity in common which was preferable, for whatever reasons, to the level of we-ness reflected in their use of English. There is no reason to believe the same we-ness was being experienced on both sides of the interchange. But the we-nesses were at least compatible in the context and for the purposes at hand.

I know nothing about the background of the “Bengali/Punjabis”, but I know that the man I talked to, like the woman mentioned earlier, had a tendency to equate his three Indian languages. With regard to Kachchi and Gujarati, he told that they are different but “not really separate.” With regard to Urdu, he told me of someone who can only speak Urdu, and to whom he always speaks Urdu, and described this by saying, “I mean he can’t speak English. So like, I have to talk with him in our language.” Here “our language” means Urdu. At another point, he asked if I wanted him to say something in his language, and when I said yes he began speaking Urdu. Yet Kachchi is his mother tongue, and only household language.

In the account of a very different encounter, I believe we can detect similar forces at work:

I mean, there’s one guy that I know, and he’s from Kenya. Like, you know, he works down here in [the supermarket]... I don’t even remember where I met him, but you know he told me that “I’m from Kenya”, so “Well, I’m from Tanzania” and we started talking Swahili and stuff. And some other people from Africa were like people from Nigeria or Libya and stuff, but they don’t speak Swahili. You know, they just speak the Nigerian language.

Within the Ismaili community, language choice decisions do not appear to be a major issue. The same person talked of attending Gujarati Hindu functions with Ismaili friends. I asked him what language they spoke at those functions, and the answer was the following:

It depends. I mean, if he’s from Pakistan, start with him in Urdu. If he’s from Africa, start with him in Kachchi or Gujarati, you know, whichever language they speak.

And in free socializing at the *jamait khana*? “Kachchi, Gujarati, Urdu.”

When I asked him whether he uses English at home the answer was as follows:

No, not at home. But when I go out with my friends, we mostly, my friends you know, we just talk in English.

Yet it was also from hanging around with his friends that he acquired Urdu in Albuquerque.

3.3 Discussion

The group I began searching for was Kachchi speakers from East Africa. This is a classic example of a category defined by the researcher rather than the researched. It had the advantage of being objective and easy to apply. And unlike the alternative category of “Ismailis from East Africa” it avoided placing the emphasis on religion. We might now ask what relevance my chosen categorization criterion had for the people of whom it held true.

What, if anything, does it mean to someone to be a Kachchi speaker from East Africa? The evidence suggests that to be a Kachchi speaker from East Africa is to be a kind of Ismaili from East Africa, while to be an Ismaili from East Africa is to be a kind of Ismaili with attachments to South Asia. This category in turn appears to be a subcategory of a larger category of people with attachments to South Asia. However, although Kachchi speakers are a kind of Ismailis they are not a group of Ismailis in any socially significant sense. Rather, speaking Kachchi appears to be a trait of some nuclear families and not of others. Families with and without this trait are closely linked by kinship. ¹ If you are dominant in Kachchi, then in informal interaction you speak

¹An Ismaili university student whom I just met mentioned families where a child speaks Gujarati to one parent and Kachchi to the other. She also mentioned families in which the parents speak to the children in Swahili, but I assume she was referring to families in Africa rather than in Albuquerque.

Kachchi to any East African Ismaili who is dominant in Kachchi. To other East African Ismailis you speak Gujarati, the language of official community life.

Being from East Africa, unlike being Kachchi-speaking, does seem to define a grouping of some significance within the community. East African Kachchi is marked by Swahili loans. I have not yet determined whether this is the case with East African Gujarati. But East African Ismaili social interaction is occasionally sprinkled with Swahili interchanges, often in a jocular key, serving to highlight a shared background in life experience and family history.

The more important grouping is that of Ismailis of South Asian background, which in Albuquerque, as in East Africa and South Asia, is the only variety of Ismaili one normally encounters. There are various clues that this is the primary grouping. We are mainly interested in linguistic clues. Recall the woman who said Kachchi, Gujarati, and Hindustani are one. And recall the young man who said Kachchi is the language he speaks the “fastest” and speaks with his parents and siblings, yet when he said he always speaks to a certain man in “our language” and I asked if he meant Kachchi, he simply responded “Urdu”.

By a linguist’s criteria they are not one.² And for speakers of related dialects this claim would not be acceptable. In southern Pakistan there is a major civil conflict between speakers of Sindhi (of which Grierson says Kachchi is a dialect), and Urdu (of which the common spoken variety is Hindustani), and the media commonly characterize this as a linguistically based conflict, an assessment which is easy to support. You would not find Sindhi speakers and Urdu speakers in Pakistan claiming the two are one! Who is right about this? Objectively, by a linguist’s criteria, the Sindhi and Urdu speakers in Pakistan are right. Yet Indo-Aryan languages are recognizably similar, which strong structural parallelism, similar phonological inventories, and extensive lexical overlap due to both borrowing and cognates. And the areas of meaning mapped out by their lexicons are comparable to the extent that the cultures are comparable. When these languages are contrasted with Swahili or English, we can be sympathetic with the claim that they are one. But in Albuquerque, it happens to be that Gujarati, Kachchi and Hindustani designate the dominant languages of the immigrant generation of the Ismaili community. None of the three is spoken by every member of this group. But everyone does speak one or more of these three. Considering just the immigrant generation, only one of the seven people I interviewed could not speak Urdu. And of the seven or eight Ismailis I encountered from India and Pakistan, only one could not speak Gujarati. In social gatherings, I’m told that all three will be heard simultaneously. It does appear that Urdu marks people as from Pakistan, and Kachchi marks people as from East Africa, making Gujarati the least marked language in terms of internal differences.

There is a nonlinguistic basis for considering “Ismaili with attachments to South Asia” to be the primary grouping. That is the fact that it is the level at which the grouping criteria cease to be entirely shared. Anyone in the group will agree with respect to distinctions such as belonging to a Kachchi-speaking family, being from Pakistan, being from East Africa, or being Ismaili. That is, the people applying these distinctions and the people to whom they are applied, are using the same categorization system. But beyond that level this ceases to be the case. One man referred to non-Ismailis with South Asian attachments as “the other community”. Of course, “the other community” consists of varieties of groups who do not view themselves as a community. The Bengali/Punjabi equivocation we saw involves a lumping which would not be accepted by those so lumped. Conversely, Gujarati-speaking Hindus appeared to lump Ismailis with Muslims, and considered speaking Kachchi to be a major diacritic of being “Muslim”. No doubt the general

²I established this beyond question by eliciting fifteen diagnostic sentences in Kachchi and Gujarati as translations of Urdu models.

Albuquerque population would lump all of these people together as East Indians (one white motel proprietor told me they are Arabs).

Complete sharing of an ethnic subcategorization system, which includes both subdivisions among those sharing the system, and lumpings of people not sharing the system, provides one of the better diagnostics I have seen for determining ethnic boundaries. The divisions within the group so defined are sub-ethnic. But what about the sort of we-ness that arose in the incidents where the man found a common non-English language with people from India and East Africa. I referred to this in terms of activating a potential for making “we-they’s” into “we’s”, a potential rooted in shared codes which in turn exclude a newly defined outgroup. Such groupings appear to arise situationally, and perhaps fluidly. However, it is best to think of such a grouping as a quasi-ethnicity rather than a super-ethnicity, since it does not really involve a long term shared understanding of how the world is grouped into varieties of people. The attraction for Indian entertainment draws people together at this level. As in Africa, it could provide a basis for mobilization in defense of shared interest. But Ismailis appeared to be at home in Albuquerque, and the youngest people I talked to seemed secure and confident in their Americanness.³

The ethnic boundaries defined in terms of people sharing a common system of categorization of humanity appear to coincide with the boundaries reflected by the comments about language use made by the Ismailis I interviewed. This lends support to both approaches to locating true and (at least temporarily) stable ethnic boundaries.

With the new generation born in the U.S., the picture is rapidly changing. For some, distinctions no longer relate to the languages one uses, but to the languages one hears at home and in other settings. Being monolingual in English defines a grouping that is not ethnic but generational. The North American linguistic black hole marches on. But the pattern of endogamy and shared community life centered around the *jamaat khana* guarantees a continued ethnic unit.

4. Conclusion

The nested hierarchy of we-they dichotomizations predicted in Figure 1 can now be revised as in Figure 2. In Figure 2 the subgroupings within the Ismaili community are shown by shapes, and relate to country of most recent origin. The shadings represent the home languages most characteristic of each group, but the entire group is identified as Gujarati-Urdu-Kachchi-speaking. I suggest at this point that language may be a significant as a source of situational quasi-ethnic identification with non-Ismailis, but not a social grouping factor within a larger ethnic grouping.

What is still somewhat of a puzzle to me is the fact that even people with excellent English who are in the habit of talking to people such as myself in English on a frequent daily basis appeared to be most comfortable speaking to me in Urdu, despite the relative limitations of my Urdu. Our respective abilities in English and Urdu seemed not to be a factor in language choice. This leads me to hypothesize the following hierarchy of preferences in informal communication for Kachchi speakers. If the interlocutor is a native Kachchi speaker, use Kachchi. If not, then if s/he is a Gujarati speaker, use Gujarati. If s/he speaks neither Kachchi nor Gujarati but speaks Hindustani, speak Hindustani, regardless of whether or not the two of you actually speak English better than Hindustani. This pattern might be modified if there is reason to diverge from the

³The only hint I saw of racism in Albuquerque was signs on a few motels on Central Avenue which read “American Owned”. Of course, the real meaning is “Anglo-owned”, since those against whom this is aimed are also Americans for the most part. Such apparently blatant racism may be a mild reminder of some painful experiences in Africa. I was delighted to learn that one Ismaili family purchased a motel which sported an “American Owned” sign, and left the sign posted since they are, after all, American.

interlocutor (Giles and Coupland 1991). Otherwise, the rule may be to maximize we-ness, that is to highlight what distinguishes the speaker and the interlocutor from the largest possible number of others. The we-ness thus created may be sub-ethnic, ethnic, or quasi-ethnic.

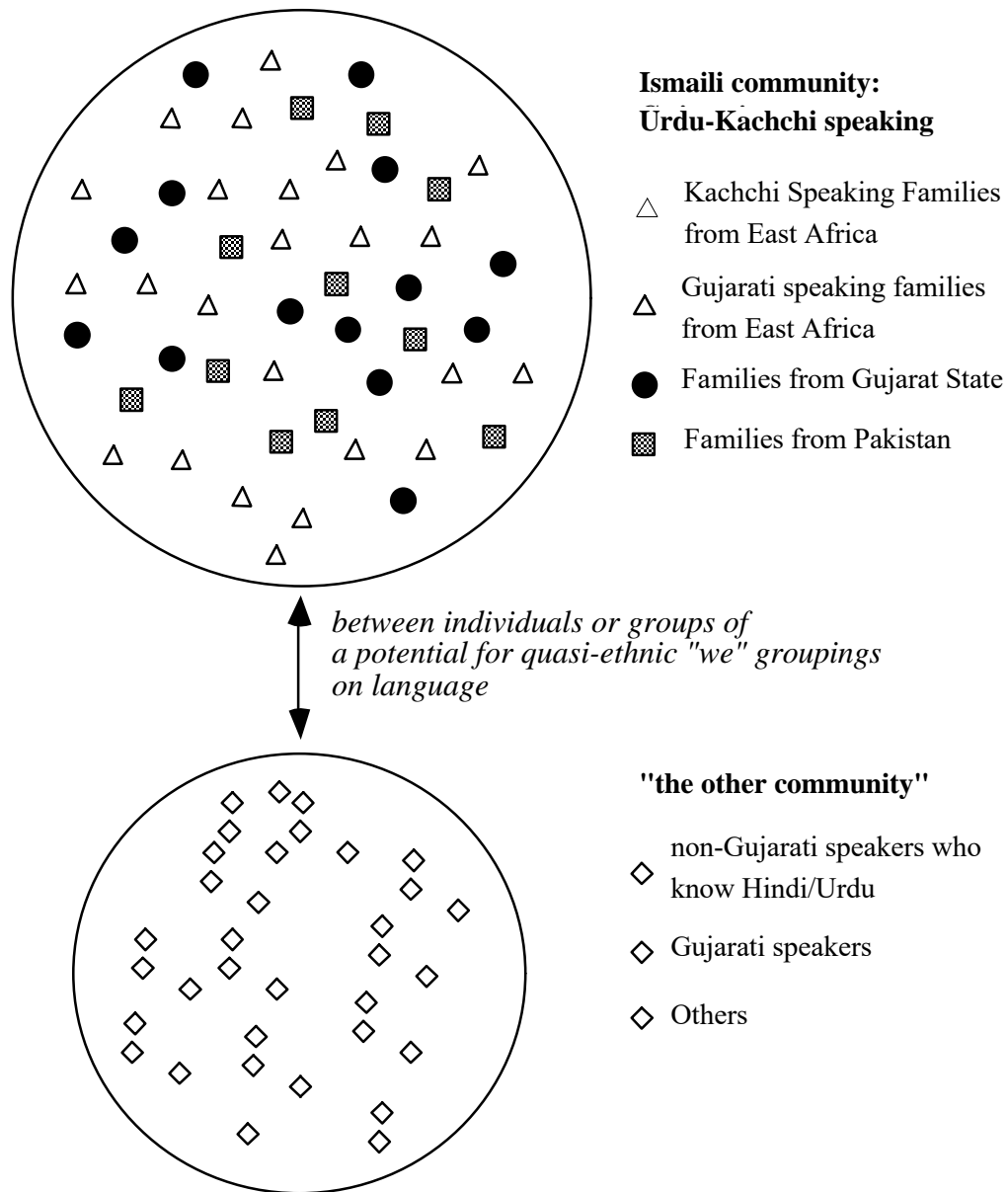


Figure 2: Revised hypothesis regarding language and ethnicity relations for Ismailis in Albuquerque

The relationship of language to ethnicity for Ismailis in Albuquerque is complex. Gujarati has important symbolic and social functions, but does not distinguish Ismailis from Hindus. Kachchi is a marker of Ismailiness in Albuquerque, but more so to outsiders than insiders. For insiders it is a detail of variation in the practices of nuclear families.

In the final analysis, it appears unlikely that there is any simple relationship between language and ethnicity for pentalingual New Mexicans from East Africa, and their fellow Ismailis. To understand the pattern of their multilingualism, it appears to be necessary to take their ethnic experience into account. To understand the nature of their ethnic experience, it appears to be necessary to take their linguistic experience into account. Further exploration of the language-ethnicity interdependence in the Albuquerque Ismaili community could not help but yield rich rewards in terms of insights into the dynamics of language in society. It has been a great privilege to have a small peek into the rich world of these warm-hearted and enthusiastic Albuquerqueans.

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42038 Millbourne R.P.O.
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
T6K 4C4

gthomson@mac.com