

Mobile language practices in Gujarat: developing the capacity to aspire

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Abstract

This paper promotes the idea that the linguistic and communicative practices associated with digital communication can be encouraged to strengthen people's capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004) through the development of voice (Hymes, 1996). People aspire to all sorts of things – for example, to enhanced educational opportunities, which might in turn lead to a greater material standard of living, social mobility, and political recognition. Voice is not only the ability to speak but more importantly the capacity to be audible, to 'generate an uptake of one's words' (Blommaert, 2005, p.68). Our concern is with the potential of the use of digital technology to enable people to be audible, and the consequent promise of audibility to combat failure of aspiration. We locate voice in terms of what people want to aspire to, and how their interactions and uses of particular linguistic and communicative resources within their networks might support these aspirations. Our paper discusses aspects of a new project in development which will document the communicative practices of marginalised people in the west-Indian state of Gujarat as they use mobile phones. This research aims to ascertain how the use of mobile and networked digital technology might challenge established marginalisation, and will inform other development contexts worldwide.

Poverty is many things, all of them bad (Appadurai, 2004, p.64)

Introduction

Under the umbrella of the Mobigam initiative¹, a team from the University of Leeds and two universities in India are developing a proposal for a study of mobile digital language practices amongst people in the west-Indian state of Gujarat who are in some way marginalised. Our overall aim is to ascertain the potential of the use of mobile and networked digital technology – principally mobile telephones – to challenge established marginalisation, including formal educational deprivation. While this research is located in Gujarat, it speaks to other development contexts both nationally in India and worldwide.

This paper describes an aspect of the research plan and its prospective impact. It is about the textual and communicative practices associated with mobile technology, and how certain specific practices might be strengthening – and might be encouraged to strengthen – the cultural *capacity to aspire* (Appadurai, 2004). In the proposed research project, we intend to examine through a series of case studies the potential of mobile technology to disturb and disrupt patterns of inequality amongst marginalised groups in the state. We contend that how this potential might be supported is central to understanding the impact of the proposed project.

We first outline the capacity to aspire as a theoretical idea which by definition encompasses ‘impact’; then we discuss how we propose to set about our investigation; and finally we sketch out our concrete impact intentions.

The capacity to aspire, voice and mobility

The capacity to aspire

We begin by outlining the theoretical notion put forward by Arjun Appadurai in his landmark 2004 paper ‘The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition’. In this paper, Appadurai challenges an assumption dominant among economists of global development that culture is a conservative force that hampers, rather than contributes positively to, development and poverty reduction. Drawing on anthropological approaches that position norms, beliefs and values as central to culture, he argues that culture is indirectly future-oriented because these collective values can shape ‘collective aspirations’ (Appadurai, 2004, p.61). He thus firmly establishes the importance of cultural values and sociality alongside the orientation towards economic growth, focused as it is on individual needs and wants, that dominates ‘mainstream’ discourses of development and poverty alleviation (Ibrahim, 2011; Genicot and Ray, 2009).

In contrast to understandings of aspiration as immediate, individual wants, Appadurai proposes the capacity to aspire as cultural and navigational capacity. For him, capacity to aspire is cultural in that it derives from shared cultural norms and understandings which at

the same time shape ideas of what a good life might look like. These understandings, in turn, are expressed in concrete wants and choices. Thus aspirations relate to culture, in that individual wants are grounded in collective values. While the capacity to aspire is a 'cultural resource' (Mosse, 2010, p.1171), it is nevertheless also unevenly distributed:

[T]he relatively rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire ... because they have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes, because they are in a better position to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial, because of their many opportunities to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options. (Appadurai, 2004, p.68)

In other words, those who are better off have more resources to map links between concrete aspirations for a good life and more abstract possibilities. These resources derive from a wider repertoire of experiences which accrue from their access to economic opportunity and more highly valued cultural capital. Appadurai directly relates poverty and marginalisation to a diminished capacity to aspire, that is, to have fewer opportunities to experience and navigate these links. Moreover, those with more or better resources shape and produce stronger social narratives. They have a voice that is heard:

[The rich] are more able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts and to still more abstract norms and beliefs. (Appadurai, 2004, p.68)

Voice

Appadurai (2004) contends that a limited capacity to aspire among the poor entails two largely opposing ways of relating to core values of a society, 'loyalty' and 'exit', rather than the third way of reacting to inequality, namely 'voice'. To have a voice is to question, participate and demand change from within. His use of the notion 'voice' is based on the work of the political economist Albert Hirschman (1970). While Hirschman's model tends to simplify the complex relations that reproduce poverty (see Mosse, 2010), it provides important pointers for our research. 'Exit' from a social structure in its active form relates directly to migration and geographical mobility. 'Voice' on the other hand connects to our interest in whether mobile devices that afford different possibilities to network might disturb, interrupt or otherwise challenge established patterns of marginalisation. In other words, do mobile and networked technologies provide or contribute to new and amplified possibilities for 'voice' and/or make 'exit' a less likely reaction?

In Hirschman's model, loyalty, exit and voice are interdependent variables. Loyalty as opposed to silent exit (in the form of apathy, for example) is a precondition for voice and being heard (Hirschman, 1970). Voice as collective action from within requires engagement with dominant cultural values (Srinivasan, 2012); exit, on the other hand, might be seen as

one way of expressing dissent. From a more sociolinguistic perspective, voice is not only the capacity to speak but more importantly to be heard and to 'generate an uptake of one's words' (Blommaert, 2005, p.68; cf Couldry, 2010). In order for a voice to be heard, some form of legitimisation is needed (Bourdieu 1991): educationalist Jennifer Miller (1999) frames this in terms of 'audibility'. Being audible requires a degree of consensus with – and authorisation by – speakers aligned to the dominant discourse. Having voice and being audible therefore requires collaboration, and in this sense loyalty. It entails a capacity to speak endorsed with power as well as capacity to 'speak to power' (Dyer, 2014, p.67).

Besides its dimensions of politics and power, voice also requires an ethical dimension which Appadurai (2004) incorporates through his interpretation of 'The Politics of Recognition' by the philosopher Charles Taylor (1994). In discussing the consequences of multiculturalism, Taylor problematizes liberal attitudes towards cultures that fundamentally differ from a north-Atlantic mainstream. Without a profound intercultural understanding, this liberalism can result in either 'the inauthentic and homogenizing demand for recognition of equal worth' or a 'self-immurement within ethnocentric standards' (Taylor, 1994, p.72). What is required instead, and is the basis for Appadurai's approach, is a 'politics of dignity' (Taylor, 1994, p.44). This stance requires respect on the basis of universal human potential. Voice and the recognition of voice thus become a mutual requirement for speaker and hearer. Appadurai (2004, p.66) relates this 'ideal of recognition' to an obligation of recognising and respecting the lifeworlds of the poor in contrast to the unequal distribution where recognition largely applies to the cultural categories of the dominant and well resourced. Enhancing the capacity of the marginalised to exercise 'voice' necessitates changing 'the terms of recognition in any particular cultural regime' (Appadurai, 2004, 66). He argues that participation in the public sphere, in turn, increases the capacity to aspire.

This view can be challenged (see Mosse, 2010) for being overly optimistic at the level of the collective (da Costa, 2010), given the vested interests of the powerful in maintaining the bias of existing norms towards their own terms. Nevertheless, strengthening the capacity for voice among the poor becomes an option – perhaps the only realistic option – by which the terms of recognition can be tipped in their favour. We propose the notion of voice as a prism through which to view marginalisation, and the enterprise of strengthening the capacity for voice as central to our understanding of impact in our work. Consequently, we need to ask: what are the means for gaining voice? And how can the poor and marginalised who are often lacking in voice be empowered to gain voice? On what terms might the powerful be persuaded or influenced to cede power and/or change the terms of recognition? And how might mobile technologies be implicated here?

Mobility

We examine processes of aspiration, voice, audibility, and shifts in the terms of recognition through an investigation of the use of mobile technology, which now penetrates most areas of social life in Gujarat. We link digital mobility to geographical mobility – as one form of ‘exit’ – as well as to economic and social mobility. We understand, however, that while the different types of mobilities are related in multiple ways, they operate on different conceptual levels. Geographical mobility, such as migration, encompasses movement through time and space. Digital mobility shares this relation, albeit in different and potentially more subversive ways. Economic mobility and social mobility are metaphorical rather than physical movements. They are more directly connected to the capacity to aspire as they relate to navigating concrete aspirations with regard to cultural values. More precisely, economic mobility relates to the capacity to aspire in that ‘people’s aspirations for their own future or for their children’s future affects their incentives to invest, and other people’s experience helps shape one’s aspirations’ (Genicot and Ray, 2009, p.17). Social mobility relates to resources of economic and cultural capital, not least education. And both social and economic mobility intersect with digital mobility through enhanced and transformed possibilities of networking and opportunities for sharing experiences of a wider range of aspirations and connected outcomes.

How might rapidly-spreading mobile technologies be implemented as cultural tools in the complex web of social and economic relations? For instance, seasonal migrant workers can bargain their wages across different sites through the use of mobile telephony. They can connect to people in different places at the same time. Here, bodies do not travel, but text messages and voices do.

We will conduct our examination through a study of mobile language practices. In cases such as the one above, the sociolinguistic detail of language use of people who are on the move is important. Blommaert describes a sociolinguistics of mobility, focusing on language-in-motion, ‘with various spatiotemporal frames interacting with one another’ (2010, p.5). These frames are known as sociolinguistic scales. Sociolinguists working in the area of migration and mobility in a globalised world draw on the geographical concept of scale to understand language patterns, as with other social events and processes, ‘on a continuum of layered scales’ (Blommaert, 2007, p.1), access to and control of which is unevenly and unequally distributed. For instance, the language and literacy resources required for access to high-status jobs or educational opportunities – which tend to be neither local nor specific to a particular situation – are by no means available to all.

Moreover, particular aspects of language use point to or index particular things. Elements of dialects might index geographical place, of course. Differences in language use, as with (in the Gujarat context) people’s names, can also index social standing. Individuals have linguistic repertoires with a more or less broad or narrow range. The extent of that range, and the competence to deploy it in particular communicative situations (face-to-face or – as

with our research – mediated by mobile technology), will thus relate to another mobility, social mobility. In short the sociolinguistic study of language in use can illuminate at a tangible textual level the interplay of geographical and social mobility. As Blommaert and Dong put it:

Movement of people across space is therefore never a move across empty spaces. The spaces are always someone's space, and they are filled with norms, expectations, conceptions of what counts as proper and normal (indexical) language use and what does not counts as such. Mobility, sociolinguistically speaking, is therefore a trajectory through different stratified, controlled and monitored spaces in which language 'gives you away'. Big and small differences in language use locate the speaker in particular indexical – that is, identity and role – ascriptive categories, and ... this is rarely inconsequential. (Blommaert and Dong, 2007, p.6)

Language on the move in Gujarat

Having established our concern with inequalities and marginalisation, we consider now whether, and if so how, these might be countered by the use of mobile technologies. Such technologies can of course be used to reproduce existing structures of inequality (see for example work in Indian contexts by Tenhunen, 2008, on changes in social systems, Doron, 2012, for discussion in relation to gender roles, Sreekumar, 2011, on communal actions in business). Nevertheless, when people use mobile and wireless technology (phones, tablets, etc.) they can radically extend their networks and alter their relationships. It is this potential enhancement to the navigational capacity of the marginalised, and its contribution to developing voice and changing the terms of recognition, that we seek to explore.

Governments make mobile networks accessible, enabling participation in practices involving – for instance – phone calls, text (SMS) messaging, engagement with social network sites (SNSs), and the internet. In India, mobile telephony has expanded rapidly: Gujarat has reached a tele-density (telephones per 100 inhabitants) of over 85%, well above the Indian average, and mobile phones outnumber land-line phones by 25 to 1 (TRAI, 2013; Government of India, 2012). Although governments which put in place the infrastructure for mobile communication primarily invoke the benefits to economic growth, this is often also done with a nod to social inclusion. Yet it is well-established that simple access to hardware or to infrastructural networks cannot of itself address inequality (Warschauer, 2003).

What is under-explored, and what our research seeks to identify and examine, is the actual nature of people's repeated and patterned mediated interactions using mobile technology – their situated mobile digital language practices and communicative practices more generally – and how these might contribute to enabling them to counter the inequalities that they experience. These inequalities relate to poverty in its material and economic forms, and to

other dimensions of inequality, including the caste system, landlessness, urban-rural distinctions, educational marginalization, and gender.

Research plan

Step by step, our research plan is structured around these questions:

- How can one examine the mobile communicative practices of specific marginalised groups?
- Can such an examination focus on identifying those of their practices which increase their capacity to exercise voice, to express views and get them heard more loudly within the cultural regime?
- How can the development of such practices be optimized and supported within the group?
- And consequently, how can the practices be disseminated in meaningful and productive ways amongst similar groups locally and distant, and amongst different communities (policy, academic) at more macro and global scales?

We locate our study in Gujarat, a rapidly globalising Indian State. Gujarat's current government, positioned on the right of the political spectrum, champions e-expansion and an industry-orientated development trajectory, undergirded by a neo-liberal alliance of the state and corporate business made possible by national economic liberalisation in 1991 (Dyer, forthcoming 2014). Economic growth outstrips national norms (IHDR, 2011), yet on indicators of human development, inequalities are growing rather than diminishing (IHDR, 2011; GSHDR, 2004). Reflecting wider global trends, labour mobility in Gujarat is extensive: it is a 'receiving' state for external migrant labour, and there are well established patterns of internal labour mobility in pursuit of seasonal and more permanent opportunities.

Our research seeks to develop six case studies that draw on culturally-informed notions of voice and aspiration to examine how mobile interaction in the socio-economic networks of marginalised groups might challenge aspects of the established status quo, and how our study might in turn support this. In order to exploit the potential of mobile networking and the links between individual and community aspirations, all of our cases feature groups who deploy geographical mobility as a means of accessing opportunities that reflect and potentially broaden their 'stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes', as Appadurai, cited above, puts it. We have identified the following cases:

1. Labourers drawn from Adivasi (tribal) communities in the eastern, less 'developed' area of Gujarat who migrate to work in the construction industry. Our sample will comprise workers on two or three building sites in one major city.
2. Diamond polishers, migrant workers from the rural hinterland employed in an urban-based industry. The centre of this industry, and where our case study will be sited, is the Surat/Navsari area.
3. Female university or college students who travel long distances to study. Our research site is in Bhavnagar, in the Saurashtra region, well known as an education centre.
4. Mobile pastoralists who are adjusting to pressures on the land and natural resources created by globalisation by sedentarising and participating in the market economy. The groups we have contact with are in the northern region of Kachchh.
5. Embroidery factory workers in Surat. This case will examine local, in-migrated management, out-State male workers hailing from Bengal and Bihar, and female workers who are from Surat itself.
6. Female rural-urban migrant workers in Ahmedabad, in unorganised and unregulated labour markets. We will recruit participants through the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Ahmedabad.

For each case we plan three levels of research activity:

- Macro-level survey work to establish the background patterns of mobile use in each case;
- Meso-level analyses of spoken and written mobile texts (mobile conversations, SMS messages, SNS interaction) in combination with interviews about those texts and their production, to achieve an understanding of the networks with which people engage in their mobile interaction, and the linguistic repertoires which they deploy as they do so;
- Micro-level critical linguistic ethnographies involving in-depth study of mobile communicative events and practices. Working with participant co-researchers, our focus will be on both oral and literacy events (i.e. occasions where 'a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes' – Heath, 1982, p.50) and practices (mobile-mediated 'culturally-recognisable patterns for constructing texts' – Tusting et al., 2000, p.213).

We do not discuss here the proposed analysis and what it must account for in a study of communicative activity where mobile technology is implicated. Suffice to say, the identification and analysis of language events involving mobile technology will inevitably need to engage with: the mobility of the oral and textual message; the instability, intertextuality and multimodality of written and spoken mobile texts; the hazy boundaries between online and offline interaction with mobile devices and their domains of use; the propensity of communicative activities involving mobile technology to extend over time and space in different locations (Kell, 2009).

Impact

Our research speaks directly to the strategic priorities of the ESRC, the potential funder of this study. Not only are we taking an inclusive approach with our participant-co-researchers, we also place the promotion of recognition and equality at the heart of the proposal. Mobile technologies have fast become commonplace, indeed in some contexts ubiquitous, and hence communication with these devices is now, for many of their users, unremarkable. Yet these are relatively new arrivals on the communicative landscape, particularly in development and rapidly globalising contexts. As such they are deserving of research attention, not least because the effects of the circumstances of their use – as they intertwine with geographical, social and economic mobility – are little understood. Our work examines local, situated digital mobile communicative practices of potentially marginalised groups whose own mobility is enmeshed with globalisation: our research will show if and how digital mobility can shed light on – and indeed support – their capacity to aspire in social and economic terms. This is the primary dimension of the impact of our work, and is deeply integrated within the theoretical framework of our study. Moreover investigating the potential of voice through digital mobility with implications for geographical, social and economic mobility has relevance for other developmental contexts beyond the locality of our cases in Gujarat. It can inform UK development aid strategies as well as further economic collaborations with India, which the British Government has earmarked as a priority in bilateral relations with India (DfID, 2013).

Impact can be generated at various scales and by addressing specific audiences. One expected outcome of this research is to have identified and described in detail the mobile literacy practices in which our participants engage which ‘positively tilt the terms of recognition’ (Appadurai, 2004, p.83). By answering Appadurai’s call for encouragement to ‘report, record and repeat’ (ibid.), the research offers the potential to impact positively on recognition by validating the voices of respondents. In theoretical terms, it can be expected that such discussions would extend the horizons of experience that Appadurai claims will augment the capacity to aspire. In this respect we anticipate that our research will positively impact, in ways currently difficult to anticipate, upon the lives of respondents across the case studies.

In addition, the array of online spaces already in place for the Mobigam initiative will continue to be actively employed as loci of information and dissemination for this and other projects under the same umbrella. At a local scale the India-based members of the project team, all users of social networking sites (SNSs, e.g. Facebook, Twitter) for academic as well as social purposes, could support development of an online presence through setting up spaces on SNSs, the purposes of which would be defined for participants in the specific case studies. At a more global scale the experience of all members of the project team – UK- and India-based – spans a range of possibilities for interactions and dissemination of findings at international conferences on development, education, literacy studies, applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, and publications arising from them.

We envisage that as a first step towards policy-level impact, findings from our case studies would be summarised and presented in policy-oriented documents, state-level and national-level stakeholder seminars. The project team has thus, in its early inception phase, visited ministers and senior officials of the government of Gujarat to introduce our research ideas to these influential stakeholders. We have begun to create a platform for engagement, enabling us to move from dissemination as the preliminary step towards more significant impact on addressing any gaps that these stakeholders may be able to address through policy adjustment/alternative strategies.

In a similar vein, we will seek to identify significant NGO and other civil society organisations as well as think tanks that engage with social inequalities. We will work with organisations that have authored the State and National Human Development Reports cited in this paper, for example, offering our cases as illustrations of the trends in equalities they have documented. We expect to work with these organisations to impact on future reporting by shaping analyses that stress the agency of disadvantaged groups and calling for policy strategies that support this agency.

In sum, our understanding of impact resonates with a notion of voice as value, and our contribution aligns with the promotion of the capacity to have – and be recognised as having – a voice.

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ⁱ Mobigam is a partnership between academics at the University of Leeds, Central University of Gujarat, and HM Patel Institute, also in Gujarat. It is currently funded (2012-2013) by the British Academy's Academic International Partnership and Mobility Scheme. The name Mobigam is a composite of *mobile* and *gam*, a 'rural area' in Gujarati. See <http://mobigam.wordpress.com/> for details.