



Accenting Tamil

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From Accent to Accenting

Linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have long argued that *accents* are not objective modes (or variable fields) of pronounceable and hearable language. Rather, they are situated, sociohistorically contingent, ideological conceptualizations of speech (Lippi-Green 1997; Silverstein 2003; Agha 2007; Gal and Irvine 2019; Rangan et al. 2023). While this makes accent a problematic analytic for the social scientist, it is of course an ethnographic datum, and thus in need of study. Moreover, as these scholars have shown, such cultural models of speech themselves metapragmatically regiment how language is spoken and heard (viz. as accented or not, as with so-called standard languages). As such, accents are real, social facts, even if—indeed, especially because—they cannot be taken at face value.

This is not a new insight. Franz Boas's (1889) critique of Daniel Brinton's racist notion of "alternating sound" as, instead, the "alternating apperception" of the hearer-analyst pointedly demonstrated that one hears the speech of another through one's own phonology and other sedimented habits of hearing; in Brinton's case, through his ethnocentrism. One always hears-as from somewhere, mediated by some perspectival metasemiotic. Miyako Inoue (2006) and Jonathon Rosa (2019) have developed the notion of a "listening subject"—a discursively constructed ideological "position" from which speech is heard as indexically meaningful—to account for the latter. Listening subjects are not biographic individuals or demographic categories of person, however. They are virtual models of indexical meaning that are inhabitable by semiotic agents in discourse, and thus projectible as person types. This understanding is Bakhtinian in spirit: just as we always speak through the voices of others (Bakhtin 1982), we hear through the ears of others (cf. Nakassis 2023), what *Thinking with an Accent* calls "accented perception" (Rangan et al. 2023, 11).

Approaching "accent" in this way, however, is perhaps still too static, for the count nouns "accent," "voice," and "listening subject" seem to imply individuable "things" that are discrete, self-same, and coherent. And while under certain institutional and ideological circumstances we do find the stabilization of certain regimes of speaking and hearing (such that they can be named, e.g.), every such lexicalization only ever exists under conditions of contextualization, cheek and jowl with signs that do not "fit" with the stereotypes that anchor such substantializations. Which is to say that what we find when we ethnographically look at events of discourse

are multiple perspectival formations (multiple voices, multiple listening subjects, multiple accents, smeared in dialogue with each other), but also emergently unique assemblages that shade and blur such voices, subjectivities, and accents in ways hitherto unattested (and unnamed). Such assemblages are not simply event-specific, however. They also are made up of threads of semiosis that stretch across events, that involve rearticulated relays and recursive embeddings of hearing and speaking (voicing voices voicing voices ..., hearing ways of hearing hearing ..., etc.).

Here, we can helpfully think with Bakhtin's (1982) notion of dialogism as an insistent, unrelenting *accenting* of discourse—as an active ideological process of embedding voices within voices in ways that centripetally iterate and transform speech. In contrast to the nominal, substantive noun “accent”—denoting a way of speaking or hearing—we can think of the musical meaning of the verb(al noun) *to accent/accenting*, the act of stressing some note within a rhythmical structure (of other notes, i.e., other accents). In discourse, as in musical performance, accenting is a dynamic relation between signs (notes, words) in an emergent temporal structure of play.

Doing Style

To exemplify the play of accenting, I want to consider an example from my ethnographic fieldwork, published in the book *Doing Style* (Nakassis 2016, chh. 4–5). When conducting this fieldwork—a large part of which was situated in all-male hostels of a historically elite Madurai college and an elite Chennai college—one recurrent response to my non-native Tamil was one of surprise, curiosity, happiness, and even pride that I spoke Tamil in the way I did. These affects (pre)heard my speech as accented in a particular way, from a particular situated perspective, that is, based on a number of assumptions and stereotypes about me, as a speaker; my Tamil, as spoken; and about Tamil in general, as a language among others.

I initially learned Tamil from taking classes from teachers, mainly women, who were middle-aged, upper-caste (Brahmin and non-Brahmin), (upper-)middle-class, and highly educated in the study of Tamil literature. This, and my English-speaking academic background, accented my speech. It tended to be higher register, closer to written standard varieties in lexis and pronunciation, and filled with relatively fewer English borrowings than colloquial Tamil. This often elicited from interlocutors, in the college and outside, statements like “You speak Tamil better than we do!” and “Your Tamil is so pure, so beautiful.” None of the above were true. My Tamil speech was, and is, filled with all sorts of disfluencies, mistakes, mispronunciations, syntactic calques from English, and the like—all things that were also not lost on my interlocutors. Yet while not erased or unheard as such, *these* accents didn't undermine the claim that my speech was “wonderful,” though this is precisely how all such nonstandard “errors” might be heard in other contexts. Why?

It wasn't my Tamil, of course. It was how it was taken up from a reading of me as a particular type of person in a particular set of interactional and institutional contexts: a (to my hostel-mates) white foreigner from an affluent country in the global north (the US) who was studying for a PhD about their region, culture, and language (more particularly, *them*), and who, importantly, was a native speaker of

English who chose to learn and speak to them in Tamil. It was this conjunction that, over the course of the academic year in Madurai, earned me the joking nickname of “*vellai Tamilaṅ*,” ‘white Tamilian.’

From what accented perception, shaded by what listening subjects, from what relay of voices was I so heard? *Doing Style* unpacks some of the dynamics involved. There, I argue that multiple histories of accenting were at play, from the colonial institutionalization of English as a language of governance and metropolitan whiteness, in relationship to both devalued Indic “vernacular” languages and “classical” (and purified) languages (viz. *centamil*), to the postcolonial deferral and undermining of regional Tamil-Dravidian sovereignty in relationship to the nation-state (organized around both English and, from the Tamil perspective, Hindi), to the postliberalization valorization of English as a cosmopolitan vehicle of wealth, modernity, and global mobility. My linguistic presence cut across and re-accented these scales, situated precisely in an institution (the college) that my primarily Tamil-speaking hostelmates inhabited with hedged hopes of accessing the English-dominated, transnational economy.

Yet this turned on a profound ambivalence about and desire for both Tamil and English. For these college students, Tamil was a language of deep history, culture, literature, one which they felt deep investment and pride in; yet it was also a language they experienced as unstatusful and marginal, from the global economy (it was a language that “couldn’t get you anywhere,” as students often lamented); from the nation-state (it was a language that, as my interlocutors also lamented, was devalued by north Indians); and even by they themselves, as when they teased each other for their being too “local,” for speaking too much Tamil, or for pretending they didn’t speak Tamil (when they did), in effect hearing their own Tamil from the ears of non-local others. Students often spoke of their “inferiority complex” (*tālvu manappānmai*) as an explanation for their desire and yet hesitation to speak in English and, at the same time, of the “false prestige” they and others invested in English.

Statements like “You speak better Tamil than we do!” ultimately, then, should be heard not as praises of my Tamil, not as simple statements of how I was heard, and not as self-deprecations of how they spoke. Rather, they should be taken as circuitous self-laudations that travel through (and hear-from) and condemn a whole order of status that they felt entrapped by: by regimes of regionalist pride in the Tamil language; by desires for an English they felt was always out of their reach; by marginalization from the Hindi-centered national public sphere. That I spoke in Tamil, and in a Tamil relatively free from the English emblems of status that most young people peppered their speech with to “do *style*,” thus gave value to Tamil speech—their speech—which they otherwise felt to be devalued and at times even to be avoided.

Each of these contexts (and more; e.g., the epithet *vellai Tamilaṅ* was a citation of the 2007 film *Sivaji*, wherein the character played by the hero-star Rajinikanth, himself not a Tamil by birth, is referred to with that moniker; see Nakassis 2016, 152–155), thus preheard and prefigured—it accented—my own speech as a sort of virtual possibility that deconstructed, while not really upsetting, the “accents” that functioned as the matrix of value within which these students spoke and were heard.

As an inverted echo of that assemblage, my speech was simultaneously heard from multiple perspectives and bore multiple accents—Dravidianist valorizations of Tamil; foreignness and whiteness of English—and was felt to speak back to many other such accents: of the educated rich; the English-medium mass media (regional, national, and global); the Hindi Center and nationalist public who didn't recognize the value of Tamil; the snobs (or “Peters” as they called them) who pretended not to speak Tamil; the global economy that demanded English of them; and so on.

Ironically, then, such reaccentings—as enunciated in the praise of my own non-fluent speech and in nicknames like “white Tamilian”—were always already folded within the very regimes of language that this hearing-as critiques. After all, it is a certain whiteness (Rosa 2019; Ke-Schutte 2023; cf. Fanon 2008) that is called on—as embodied by my speech, in my body in these encounters—as the arbiter of value of Tamil *precisely* because it is understood to be situated in the white body of an English speaker who *chooses* not to speak in English, but to speak in Tamil instead, because of—as my interlocutors constantly attributed to me or hoped for me—my love for Tamil, my recognition of its value, its ancientness, its genius, its wealth. (They did this, often, by asking how I came to speak Tamil: was it because it was such a beautiful, literary, and ancient language, they leadingly asked? Similarly, I was often introduced to others as someone who was doing a PhD in Tamil [which I wasn't] or as an literary or philological expert on the language [which I am not].) Whiteness, here, became proof of the value of Tamil, and spoke *against* the ideologies that would invest its linguistic proxies (English) with local value in their peer groups, in their colleges, in their state, in their country. Such an accent, thus, echoed and amplified the very processes of accenting that, at another scale, it also disrupted and repurposed.

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In *Thinking with an Accent*, the authors suggest that thinking with accent(s) requires a particular method and epistemological ethics, the eponymous thinking with *an* accent, the presence or absence of the indefinite article shifting the meaning of “with” from an associative sense (some instrumental object that is thought *about*, viz. the phenomenon of accent in general) to an adjectival sense of manner (viz. accented thinking; thinking in an accented way). Returning to Boas, and the longer American anthropological tradition he anchors, recall that to (mis)hear an accent *qua* accent presupposes a subject position outside the phenomenon where, at some level, that subject is unable, or refuses, to take on the ear of the other. To understand and study accent *as* a cultural/ideological object, by contrast, requires us to inhabit and breach such an object at one and the same time. To do so is to refuse to treat accents as substantial entities, instead hearing them as shifting points in a field of relations (accents, in the plural), and thus engage in a comparative enterprise whose object of analysis is the field of relations itself (not its *relata*). This, in turn, requires that we see our own thinking (and sensing) as accented, as always already epistemologically located in such a field, and thus also an object of alterity for some other position. Which is to say, thinking with an accent as method and epistemology already implies the possibility and necessity of displacing of one's own accented perception, of hearing with *other* ears. Such a method, thus, is simultaneously comparative and immanentist, committed to reconstructing phenomena from within themselves in relation to other such phenomena. It is in the friction and gaps

between the two that propels a certain deconstructive motion of accenting and unaccenting, a pragmaticist thinking-with that is the basis of our inquiries as much as a way of being in the world.

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Notes on Contributor

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