‘How Do I Know You are not a CBI Agent?’:
Examining the Identity of Researcher in
Sociolinguistic Fieldwork

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Prologue
My intellectual engagement with Professor Ramakant Agnihotri started when I was studying for my Master’s degree in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Delhi. As a first year student, I took a course on the principles and methods of language teaching with him. At that time, since I was more interested in the structure of language, I did not take the course very seriously in the beginning. But Rama’s (nay Agni’s, as we used to call him amongst us) innovative way of teaching made the course immensely interesting. Agni encouraged us to think critically and relate theoretical knowledge gained in class to real world experiences. By the end of that term, Agni had kindled a spark of enquiry in me about the social and psychological aspects of language, and my fascination with syntactic theories and the beautiful trees that they generated had started to wane. In the following semester, I decided to sit in his sociolinguistics class as an auditor. An added attraction of the course was that his class had many beautiful girls. The decision to “flirt” with the field of sociolinguistics later turned out to be a serious business. After completing my Master’s degree, I wrote an M. Phil. thesis, under his supervision, examining the sociolinguistic aspects of Urdu and Hindi news bulletins of the All India Radio. By that time, sociolinguistics had become my passion, which culminated into a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA in 2007.

Although it has been more than a decade since I graduated from the University of Delhi and left India in pursuit of my academic career,
I have stayed in touch with Agni through email, phone calls, and personal visits. This attests to the fact that in addition to being a fine scholar, he is an excellent human being. Our last meeting took place at the silver Jubilee celebrations of the South Asian Linguistic Analysis (SALA-25) conference at the University of Illinois, USA, in 2005. He looked as enthusiastic and dynamic as ever; he came to my presentation and asked questions and gave valuable feedback on my paper. I feel privileged to contribute to this festschrift volume in honor of Professor Ramakant Agnihotri. This paper is dedicated to his scholarship in the field of linguistics.

1. Introduction

This paper is not about the findings of a study; it is rather about the sociolinguistic methods that lead us to our research findings. Since our results are based on an interpretation and analysis of the data that we collect from our research participants, the results cannot be separated from the methods that we adopt to collect the data. Results and data are intertwined in a way that they inform each other in significant ways. Mithun, who has conducted extensive fieldwork on a number of American Indian languages notes, ‘...the choice of methodology can also shape the resulting product in ways researchers may not always be aware of’ (2001: 35). In a way, the relationship between data and findings are quite similar to the philosophical position that holds that the means and the end are not separable. In this paper, I will discuss the factors that affect the means that lead us to the end. The paper is based on the pilot study that I conducted in Old Delhi in 2005 and full-fledged fieldwork research that I carried out in 2006 for my Ph.D. dissertation, which I completed at the University of Michigan in 2007.

2. Interconnectedness of methodology, data, and results

The interconnectedness of the methodology, data, and the results has been noted by linguists who are interested in the structure of language and those who study the social and political dimensions of language. Chelliah (2001), whose scholarly interest lies in the structure of Tibeto-Burman languages of North East India, for example, cautions that depending exclusively on direct elicitation methods could lead to incorrect generalizations about the structure of a language. She argues that it is important to combine data obtained through elicitation methods with naturally occurring texts such as conversations and narratives. For Chelliah, the very authenticity and validity of research depends on the right methodology adopted.

In sociolinguistic research, the impact of the methodology we adopt
on our results was pointed out, quite early on, by Labov. Since Labov was interested in variation in speech, he wanted to make sure that the data he obtains is as close to naturally occurring language as possible. He referred to the problem of collecting natural data for sociolinguistic studies as “observer’s paradox”. Labov in his classic work noted, ‘our goal is to observe the way people use language when they are not being observed (1972a: 61)’. The influence that the researcher can have on the quality of data goes far beyond the “naturalness” of data. In cases where the language under study is ethnically marked, the very access to research participants can crucially depend on the researcher’s social and ethnic identity. Moreover, the ethnic identity of the researcher can color the responses that he/she receives from the participants, especially if the study focuses on the social and cultural perceptions about language.

Many studies have demonstrated the role of the researcher not only in the quality of the sociolinguistic data but also obtaining access to speakers and the community at large (e.g. Hazen, 2000; Schilling-Estes, 2000). Although as an outsider fieldworker, it is always difficult to get access to data without establishing a sufficient level of confidence, it becomes more difficult if the fieldworker is perceived as belonging to a community that has a hostile relation with the community being researched. In such cases, access to institutions and speakers for relevant data often depends on the social identity of the fieldworker. Sociolinguistic studies in Northern Ireland, for example, show that, due to heightened ethnic differentiations, it was often difficult for a Protestant fieldworker to conduct research in Catholic areas (McCafferty, 2000).

Although the ethnic boundaries and social divisions between Muslims and Hindus, at the time when I conducted my fieldwork in Old Delhi, were not as sharp as the Northern Ireland situation described by McCafferty, the perception of Urdu and Hindi in the twentieth century as languages of Muslims and Hindus did create a methodologically difficult situation for me as a researcher. A good example of how ethnically marked Urdu and Hindi have become can be gleaned from the protest by Hindu fanatics against the introduction of a 10-minute news bulletin in Urdu on Doordarshan in Bangalore in 1994. In this paper I do not go into the history of the formation of the link between Urdu and Hindi and Muslim and Hindu identities. However, the reader can refer to King (1994), Dalmia (1997), Rai (2000), Faruqi (2001), Orsini (2002), and Ahmad (2008).
3. Multiplicity of identity

In the following, I show how Muslims and Hindus of Old Delhi developed different perceptions of my social identity in different social and discourse contexts. I further show that my being Muslim did not automatically make my entry into the Muslim community of Old Delhi easier. Nor did my religious identity prevent access to the Hindu community. In many ways, I was an outsider for both Muslims and Hindus. I was able to gain access to the communities only after I had developed a high degree of trust and confidence with them. The contacts I already had with people of Old Delhi, before I started my fieldwork, helped a great deal in alleviating fears, suspicions, and misgivings among research participants and building trust and confidence. A lot of contacts with Urdu and Hindi speakers that I made on my own, without the help of the local people did not grow to a level of trust and confidence needed for conducting fieldwork research. This tells us so much about the fear that people in general have of outsiders. Once I had a referral from a known dilli wala, a native resident of Old Delhi, people’s perception of my foreignness decreased significantly, and so did their fear and inhibitions. People were willing to discuss the social and cultural aspects of Urdu and Hindi on tape, often running for over an hour.

Since Muslim and Hindu names in India are linguistically distinct, Muslims and Hindus of Old Delhi in general and my research participants in particular did not have any trouble finding out my social identity just by learning my name. In the very first meetings, whenever I introduced myself, or was introduced by others, dilli wala, both Muslims and Hindus, right away knew that I was Muslim. They did not have to wonder about my identity or explicitly ask me for the information. Other relevant social identities are not as easily and clearly gleaned from Muslim names as the religio-ethnic identity. For example, it was not easy for anyone to find out from my name what ber adri, Muslim caste, or ‘mazhab’, religious sect, I belonged to.3

Let me start with how larger social and political contexts of Old Delhi went into the interpretation of my identity by dilli wala. During my very first week in Old Delhi, when I was still trying to establish connections with Urdu and Hindi speakers, I went to a chemist in Churi wala to buy some medication. I wanted to make use of the opportunity to learn about the language situation of Old Delhi. I greeted the shop owner, Shamim, whose Muslim identity was visible in his typical Muslim Topi, cap, with the traditional Muslim greeting ‘as salamu alaikum’ and introduced myself to him.4 I told him my name and my institutional affiliation. To establish my credibility and gain his
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confidence and trust, I further added that before going to the USA for my higher education, I was a student at Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Delhi. I also told him that during my college days, I would frequently come to Old Delhi. Then, I asked him a general question about Urdu and Hindi in Old Delhi. Before answering my question, Shamim asked me for my identity card to verify my identity. I showed him my University of Michigan ID, which had my picture and my name, but Shamim did not look convinced.

He did not believe that I was only interested in the issue of language. He told me that Indian secret service agents of the CID, Criminal Investigation Department and CBI, Central Bureau of Investigations, often come to Old Delhi under cover, looking for other social information. His suspicion grew further, and right in front of me, he told his colleague and friend Mr. Shafiq that I might be an agent of the American CIA, since I came from the US. Mr. Shafiq who was a little less suspicious of my identity than Shamim, told him that some researchers indeed do study languages. Shamim however was not convinced and did not answer my question about Urdu in Old Delhi. He then took me to a professor of Urdu, who lived in the same neighborhood, probably hoping that the professor will be able to figure out my identity better than he could and thus would know how to deal with me accordingly.

In the second phase of my fieldwork in 2006, while roaming around the Matia Mahal neighborhood in search of right research participants, I went into a small shop for a cup of tea. As usual I started to talk to the shop-owner in order to listen to his Urdu. I found his language very interesting since he did not pronounce “correctly” a couple of the Urdu phonemes, namely /kh/, in words such as ‘khayal’, ‘thought’ and /gh/, in words such as ‘ghalat’, ‘wrong’. It is worth noting that these phonemes are considered to be shibboleths of the Urdu language. In order to make sure that he and his family were originally from Old Delhi and not migrated recently from outside, I asked the gentleman about the original homes of his parents. He told me that they are khalis dilliwalas, pure natives of Old Delhi. In fact, in order to prove his ancestry in Old Delhi, he showed me a 19th century land document of his great grandfather written in Persian. Since he could not read the document himself, he asked me if I could read it to him. With my smattering of Persian, I was able to figure out the names of the seller and the buyer and the witnesses. He was very happy to know that his great grandfather’s name was mentioned in the document. Once I ascertained that he was a native of Old Delhi, I wanted to interview him. I introduced myself in more detail and told him that I am a research
student and that I would like to tape an interview with him. He told me that he was not free that day, but he could do it the following day. I came to him at the time of his choosing, the following day, with my recording equipment. He talked and talked but did not agree for a taped interview. He made several promises later, and did not fulfill any. He knew I was Muslim, but I was an outsider who did not enjoy his confidence and trust. My being Muslim was not enough.

In Old Delhi, for even Muslim dilliwalas, I was an outsider in another way. I was Bihari—someone who came from the state of Bihar. The word ‘Bihari’ has become a term of abuse and insult in Delhi. It is not uncommon to hear people in a fight calling each other ‘Bihari’. A few years ago, I noticed two people fighting over a seat in a Blueline bus. One of them, in a raised pitch called the other ‘abē oē bihārī’, ‘you Bihari!’ The other in response yelled, ‘bihārī hōgā tū’ ‘you are Bihari, (not me!)’. The emergence of Bihari as a term of insult is beyond the scope of this paper. However, what I want to underscore is the stigmatized meaning that the word ‘Bihari’ connotes in Delhi. Among dilliwalas too, Biharis constitute an out-group that serves as the ‘other’ of who they are.

Since I was born and raised in North Bihar, I retain a distinct Bihari accent when I speak Urdu. Often, Old Delhi Muslims commented on my lack of control of Urdu and/or my Bihari accent. While interviewing a Muslim research participant, Mr. Nazir Quraishi, who lives in Haveli Azam Khan, I asked him to tell me something about a neighborhood in Old Delhi known as Chitli Qabar. I was interested in hearing the pronunciation of the Urdu phoneme /q/ in ‘qabar’. In order to help him locate the neighborhood, I added ‘wōbāzār jahā aurtē hi aurtē dikhī hāi’, ‘the market where a lot of women are seen’. I used ‘dikhī hāi’, a passive form of the verb root ‘dēkh’, ‘see’, which, I realized later, is not common in Old Delhi Urdu. Mr. Quraishi commented on my “incorrect” use of the verb right away, ‘āp kī bihū urdū sahī naḥī hāi’ ‘your Urdu is not correct either’, indicating probably that my Urdu is as bad as other younger generation speakers or as bad as that spoken by other Biharis living in Old Delhi. He then provided the correct passive form of the verb ‘dikhāī dēṭī hāi’. This incident shows that I was not seen as an insider linguistically and socially. My Muslim identity was just not relevant for this conversational context.

Another similar incident took place at the Jāmā Masjid, where I went to offer my Friday prayer. I was not particularly dressed for the occasion. I was wearing a T-shirt and a pair of jeans. On Fridays, most Old Delhi Muslims wear a white kurtā-shalwār, ‘a loose two-piece outfit’, and a Tōpī, ‘cap’. I was offering ‘sunnat’, a non-mandatory
prayer, before the beginning of the sermon and the mandatory prayer. As soon I was done, somebody from the row behind me pulled me by the shoulder and, in what I considered quite a rude way, pointed at my uncovered head and elbows and unreasonably long trousers that went beyond my ankles. In a very harsh and a tone filled with anger, he told me how careless I was not to get a cap worth 10 rupees. It is widely believed by Muslims that it is forbidden in Islam for men to cover ankles and leave the elbows uncovered. It is also recommended that you cover your head. The gentleman thought that I was an outsider, and I needed to be taught a lesson. The notion of insider-outsider is complex and my being Muslim was not always interpreted as an in-group marker.

My access to the Hindu community for data was expected to be difficult. I did not have any key contacts among the Hindu community of Old Delhi, before starting my fieldwork. I made some efforts, on my own, to establish contacts with Hindus in Bāzār Sitārām and other neighborhoods, but I was not successful at all. The successful entry into the community was facilitated by the contacts I developed with people of influence and established credibility in the neighborhoods. My contacts among the Muslim community became helpful in that they introduced me to some known figures among the Hindu community, who in turn put me in touch with speakers who became my research participants. Once the key figures introduced me to possible research participants and, in a way, vouched for my authenticity and credibility, they were able to cooperate with me in my research. Without these key contacts, I would not have been able to gain the confidence and trust of the Hindu community. The struggle to find a way into the Hindu community was in no way different from the struggle to gain access into the Muslim community.

My Muslim identity, however, did play a positive role in obtaining access to Islamic institutions such as mosques. As a Muslim, my entry into mosques was not restricted. This was helpful in collecting data in an indirect way. Since a large number of homes in Old Delhi do not have enough 'public' space for outsiders like me, many people who were interested in helping me with my research were not able to meet with me in their homes. Those who had businesses would often invite me to their work place. Those who didn't often invited me to meet with them on the premises of the mosques. So, I used the mosque premises as a meeting venue, where I had several meetings with research participants. Since Turkaman Gate is a very crowded neighborhood, I used KalāN Masjid located in the vicinity as a meeting place. Secondly, I also observed the use of Urdu in mosques and recorded some ‘khutbās’, ‘sermons’. As a Muslim I exercised my right to gain entry into mosques
and established contacts with the ‘imāms’, people who lead the prayers. It would have been difficult for me to gather data from the mosque, if I were not Muslim.

In a methodologically non-significant way, my Muslim identity was once treated as an in-group marker. While I was doing my research at Zakir Husain College with the third generation Urdu speakers, who were born in the 1980’s, I contacted a young man from PhāTak Tēliyān through a friend of his, whom I had known for a long time. After I explained my research to him, I asked him if he would be willing to participate in my research. He showed his willingness to participate in my research and commented that it was good to know that I was working on Urdu. If “I” did not do research on Urdu, he argued, why would ‘others’ do. For this Muslim gentleman, Urdu was the language of Muslims and it was “natural” that I, being a Muslim, was doing research on it.

The social and contextual nature of my social identity notwithstanding, I hired a Hindu research assistant to conduct some of the interviews for me, with Hindu research participants. I did this in order to make sure that I was not influencing the quality of the data I was getting from Hindu participants. My research assistant, a female undergraduate student, was born in the city of Old Delhi. She conducted interviews with some Hindu participants including P. K. Chōprā, whom I also interviewed. I studied the two interviews with reference to the use of the Urdu phonemes and found that there were no differences in terms of frequency distributions between the two interviews. This way of triangulating my methods assured me that the data I was getting was a broader pattern and not because of my influence on the participants.

4. Conclusion
I have shown through the above discussion that the notion of insider and outsider related to the social identity of the researcher conducting sociolinguistic fieldwork research is quite complex. Different social, political, and other contextual factors go into the construction of an identity of the researcher. My Muslim identity did not automatically facilitate my entry into the Muslim community of Old Delhi, nor did it prohibit access into the Hindu community. I was an outsider for both Muslims and Hindus of Old Delhi. Since I was an outsider, it was quite natural that they treated me with fear and suspicion, especially given the subject of my study—Urdu and Hindi. I have shown that the best way to win the trust and confidence of the community you want to study is through establishing contact with key personalities in the
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community. Once you have established your credibility and authenticity to them, they will vouch for you and provide you with the contacts with research participants of your interest. This of course takes a lot of time. But you will be rewarded with rich and authentic data that one cannot obtain in a short period. In sociolinguistic research, there are no quick recipes, like McDonalds.

Appendix

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<td>/C/ (capital letter)</td>
<td>Retroflex e.g. /T/ stands for /t/</td>
<td>v Short vowel</td>
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<td>ch (consonant followed by 'h')</td>
<td>Indicates aspiration, e.g. /th/ stands for /tʰ/</td>
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<td>/ch/</td>
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REFERENCES


among Muslims in India. 119-52. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.


NOTES

1. See Engineer (1994) for communal color that the language riot of Bangalore acquired.
2. See Ahmad (2007, 2008b) for the complexity of social meanings of Urdu in India.
3. For a discussion on caste among Muslims in India, see Ahmad (1973). For a discussion on caste and status among Old Delhi Muslims, see Goodfriend (1983).
4. In order to protect the privacy of the research participants, I use pseudonyms.
5. See a key to the transcription system in the Appendix at the end of the paper.