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LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY OF THE BRITISH INDIAN TEENAGE DIASPORA: GAUTAM MALKANI'S *LONDONSTANI*, A CASE STUDY.

1. Introduction

The present work represents a preliminary step in the analysis of a topic that is currently being investigated by its author. It aims to shed some light on the role of language during a crucial step of life when it comes to identity, that is to say youth – the age of uncertainty par excellence, in which every convention, every belief is put into question and re-elaborated. Moreover, the analysis will focus on the teenagers of the British Indian diasporic community, for whom the research of an identity also includes the definition of belonging.

In this reconnaissance phase, the issue will be tackled by reading Gautam Malkani's debut novel, *Londonstani* (2006). The amazing ability of Malkani is to disclose how the issue of identity is played into language – each unanswered question, each attempt to find a definition (both failed and successful), to establish or break bonds of belonging, to disobey institutions and to adapt to the rules of a subgroup. That is the reason why the present work will focus on language, trying to reveal how it can simultaneously reflect and determine belonging in itself, thus becoming more than just a tool to communicate: the means becomes the message, transcending its content.

The most striking aspect of the language of the Londonstani teens is that they do not speak “pure” English nor Punjabi, but a language made of encounters, clashes, and hybridization. A “standard” English speaker would remain clueless as to what the Punjabi words and sentences perfectly mixed with English might mean, and puzzled by noticing how often young people (15-35 years old) would resort to calques from African American English.

In fact, Malkani catapults the reader into a completely unknown linguistic and cultural reality, not making any effort to make the reader feel “comfortable.” Words and sentences from different languages and traditions, references coming from Indian and African American culture are constant and rarely explained. Malkani is there to overturn expectations and to show how many languages become one in a land, in a city (London) that is the symbol of diaspora, a great third space of negotiation and fragmentation, where identities are lost to be found again – new, multifaceted, unstable (Bhabha 2).

Thanks to Gautam Malkani's novel, the reader is provided with a snap-shot of a volatile reality. His writing opens new perspectives transcending from territorial specificity and invites to deconstruct all the ideas about identity and language seen as given and unchangeable concepts.

2. Malkani's *Londonstani*: Introducing the Desi² “Rudeboys” from Hounslow

The author of the novel was able to interlace personal experience – he comes from Hounslow, the London suburb where the story is set³ – and scientific awareness – the novel covers themes similar to the author's dissertation in Social and Political Sciences.⁴

That is probably the reason why Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* has the ability to bring to light a whole of complex issues regarding language, identity, diaspora, authenticity, ethnicity – all faced at a young age –

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² Originally meaning “native, autochthonous, local” in Punjabi, it is used in the migration context to talk about a “typical” or authentic Indian.

³ Situated in the West End, Hounslow (Greater London) is adjacent to Heathrow airport. The narrator often indulges in describing the suburb as a depressing area, even if the families of the protagonists are rather wealthy and can afford two-storey houses, cars and mobile phones.

⁴ Gautam Malkani was born in Hounslow, London on August 27, 1976. His mother was a Ugandan of Indian origin. He studied Social and Political Sciences at Christ's College, Cambridge. He has worked for *The Financial Times* since 1998, after joining the company as a graduate trainee. He has written on the media industry, worked in the Washington bureau and edited the FT's Creative Business media and marketing supplement.



with a sparkle of irony (Mitchell 332). A deep awareness of the issues tackled is more evident reading the page “About Londonstani” in the author’s personal website, where Malkani himself offers an insight of the main themes treated in the novel.⁵ He defines the characters of his novels as “a bunch of 19-year, old middle-class mummy’s boys trying to be men – which they do by asserting their cut-and-paste ethnic identities.” (Malkani⁶) Their main means to asserting such identities is speech, as they try “to talk and act as if their affluent corner of a London suburb is some kind of gritty ghetto” (Malkani).

The two themes acting as intertwined backbones of the book are (performed) identities and language. In fact, language is the banner of their identity, as affirmed by Malkani with a series of witty remarks, given that “the English language has always evolved through corruption” (Malkani).

To be bad boys they have to dress, act, but most of all talk, like bad boys. And while they use a stereotyped ghetto language borrowed from gangsta rap clichés, their families (and especially their mothers) use the language of their origins – with all its heritage – to keep them bound, as stated by the author (Malkani) At the same time, they carefully and respectfully use this heritage language (mixed with the stereotyped gangsta one) to mark their difference from standard English users, an attitude which is embodied by a series of institutions as the author himself states:

Also, “proper English” is a symbol of the dominant culture and system that the main characters are trying to disrespect. So while the young men express their disrespect for mainstream society by carefully pulping the English language, the Panjabi dialogue in the book (spelt the local way rather than the British “Punjabi”) had to observe strict grammatical rules and silent letters, etc. Alongside “proper English,” the book’s other symbols for dominant, mainstream society include the education system; public transport; public institutions and the taxation system that funds them; and the BBC. (Malkani)

This proves the indissoluble bond between identity and language in the author’s vision of reality. The first question to be answered in order to understand *Londonstani* concerns performed identity. Dressing style, mannerism and language serve the individuals to fit in “socially recognized categories” (Garot 1) and guide interactions. This means that mainly exterior traits significantly contribute to the determination of who someone is and where s/he belongs. Therefore, people are sorted out or can sort themselves out in categories through the selection of certain elements, “acting like” the specific category they aspire to be part of. As affirmed by Judith Butler (XV), identity is but a performance. It achieves its effects through its consistency that generates credibility, thus allowing the actors to create an acceptable self-image for themselves to present to others (Goffman 213).

It is indeed the performative aspect to add a new piece to the already complex identity puzzle of the British, Indian, wealthy, young, bored Londonstani: wannabe bad boys (or, as they define themselves, “rudeboys”), pretending to be tough kids grown up in the streets. Identity can often be the product of a conscious performance, as Malkani specifies in his description of the novel, using the digital metaphor of identity “selection;” he also uses the word “switch,” which recalls the linguistic phenomenon of code-switching: “you can switch it (identity) on or off depending on the context. After all, we all select our identities (...) we just have to “be” us by selecting our “self” from different sources” (Malkani).

Although this role model was chosen to better fit in with society (Husain 551-568), it ends up complicating their identity and swathing them in inauthenticity. With such premises, Malkani uses language as a symbol of the strive to conciliate all the aspects of identity, and at the same time as the field where the battle for identity takes place.

⁵ The personal website of the author: <http://www.gautammalkani.com/>. The page dedicated to the novel: http://www.gautammalkani.com/about_londonstani.htm. This page is particularly useful to the analysis of the book, since the author offers a detailed analysis of his own work, from a both sociological and linguistic point of view.

⁶ From now on, the quotations from Malkani’s personal website page dedicated to the novel *Londonstani* (http://www.gautammalkani.com/about_londonstani.htm, last visited 20/10/2015) will be simply referenced as (Malkani).



3. Teenage Language: The Battlefield of Identity

While striving for recognition, the second and third-generation migrants also have to work to define their own identity, fighting against those who want to reduce them to the “fresh off the boat” status, but without forgetting their diasporic heritage. Stuart Hall (1987, 44) provides an illuminating description of how being a migrant ingenerates a peculiar sense of identity as an invention:

Thinking about my own sense of identity, I realise that it has always depended on the fact of being a migrant, on the difference from the rest of you (...) I was aware of the fact that identity is an invention from the very beginning, long before I understood any of this theoretically. (Hall 1987: 44)

Thinking of identity as an invention implies the ineluctable loss of the illusion of “purity,” since no cultural identity is ever pure. Hall states he somehow “sensed” his difference, his marginality well before being able to conceptualize it. An instinctive, subconscious awareness that passes through skin color and the peculiarity of speech, and pervades the migrant subject throughout his/her life. It is then possible to imagine that this kind of consciousness might be latent in all the young migrants long before they can fully understand it.

An element that seems to be able to bear a clear trace of the complexity of the self, and at the same time has a strong role in the definition of relations, is language. In fact, language is not something neutral coming from archetypical abstractions (Ochs 2000, 230); it can be imagined like the result of multiple layers that can mingle with each other, cover or suffocate each other, and cause unpredictable combinations. A first set of layers consists in social history – nationality, ethnic group, gender, social class/caste, religion to mention some – and it is received by the speakers as a sort of heritage when they are born. Later in life, other layers pile up, depending on memberships and affiliations to all groups the speakers will have access to during their life (e.g. social groups, schools, professional groups, religious communities), each group with a peculiar language. It cannot be ignored that such a process plays a pivotal role in the development of social identity, which consists in “participant roles, positions, relationships, reputations, and other dimensions of social personae, which are conventionally linked to epistemic and affective stances.” (Ochs 1996, 424) This means that language activates a socialization process; it is a tool that enables individuals to move into social contexts, to understand themselves and to be understood by others (Ochs 2000, 232).

When a social identity has to deal with the coexistence of apparently distant backgrounds, language is able to account for such syncretism and give it coherence, thanks to its composite nature. Thus, language is also the channel that allows blending multiple identities into one. Self-narration and language are intertwined; the story is not just made by what one says, but it mainly depends on the way in which it is narrated.

Adolescence (the age targeted in the book) is a critical phase for language socialization, as the individuals start acting in the society independently from the family: they use language in a more autonomous way to narrate themselves – while still struggling to understand their own identity – and become members of groups, taking distance from some elements and assimilating to others. Language becomes the field where the battle for identity takes place.

4. The Language of *Londonstani*: A Case Study.

The linguistic quest for identity starts from title of the book, *Londonstani*. On the one hand there is London, the capital of the United Kingdom, on the other the suffix “-stani,” borrowed from the nationality term “Pakistani,” which of course denotes the provenience. At a first glance, it may recall the term “Londonistan” (London + Pak-istan, Afghan-istan etc.), invented by the French intelligence and widespread by the media after the 2005 London bombing. Its pejorative intent is clear in Melanie Phillip’s words:

For more than a decade, London had been the epicentre of Islamic militancy in Europe. Under the noses of successive British governments, Britain’s capital had turned into “Londonistan” – a mocking play on the names of such states sponsors of terrorism as Afghanistan – and become the major European centre for the promotion, recruitment and financing of Islamic terror and extremism. (Phillips X, XI)



Overlooking political and social considerations about such statements, Malkani himself specified that his intention was not to evoke these memories – quite the opposite he used the term *Londonstani* in a very positive acceptance:

The fact is, some British Asian kids had been using the word *Londonstani* long before it was applied to radicalised Muslims. (...) it was a much more positive term – a celebration of London's multiculturalism rather than a criticism of it. (...) I'm proud to be a Londoner because it's a place where I can be both British and Asian and still feel 100 per cent like I belong – like I'm a native. It's like desi slang for the word "Londoner," it means the same thing (except that "Londoner" sounded Victorian and cockney, whereas "Londonstani" sounded much more relevant in the late 20th Century). That's why I call it a celebratory term. (Malkani)

There is a subtle linguistic hint that marks the difference between *Londonistan* and *Londonstani*: the former recalls the name of a state, turning London in one of these far and feared Middle East states defined "sponsors of terrorism." The latter marks an original belonging, as if the diasporic subjects had become part of a new, trans-ethnic and transcultural place. In other words, the hybrid, unstable, complex and transcultural nature of the contemporary London makes it a place where diasporic subjects can feel they belong – it is the portrait of each and every person making it what it is.

Another important aspect of the title of *Londonstani* is the fact that it contains traces of the main issue tackled throughout the book: language. The English language spoken by the *Londonstani* teens is "contaminated" by three main influences: Punjabi, African American English and teenage spelling. It is crucial at this point to specify that the *Londonstani* teens' code-mixing is not compensative for lacks in one or more of the used language. It stems from a full proficiency in all the codes, consciously mixed respecting the rules of each of them, to obtain a result that seems to create a (sub)urban variation by its own right, with a specific cultural value. The cultural value of code mixing is intrinsic to its own essence, given its importance within the sociocultural phenomena that take place in a certain area or region. The linguistic choices are both cause and consequence of the social aspects (Coulmas 92).

Like any language, code-mixing itself has to follow precise rules in order to sound natural: the key to a good command of code-mixing lays in the ability to respect the rules of each code mixed, and to make sure the point of transition is smooth – each part must be likely as a combination or continuation of what precedes and follows. Failure to do so generates derision towards the "unskilled mixers."⁷ The necessity to preserve the rules of each language makes the nouns the most easily borrowed elements.⁸ The following paragraphs have the objective to separate the mixed elements in order to understand how they interact with each other.

4.1 Punjabi⁹

Punjabi mostly appears in the form of lexical loans, both when English translation is possible or a term is linked to untranslatable aspects of Indian culture. The characters will also activate the same loan process in reverse order (i.e. borrowing English words into Punjabi) when talking to old people, and especially to their mothers, for example:

Hahn, Mama, Ravi goes into his phone, – detention nahi hai, cricket club vich si... (Malkani 76)

⁷ While living in the Punjabi Sikh community of Bilston, the author studied attentively the code mixing phenomena enacted by the speakers, in search of their main features. Then, she tried to replicate the patterns she identified: the success in such operation depended on the acquired ability of understanding how and when to "drop Punjabi into English" – thus confirming once again the existence of unwritten rules determining credible code mixing.

⁸ The rules of code-mixing are explained in detail by S.N and K.K Sridhar (407-416), Poplack (583-585), Lipski (230).

⁹ The reported terms, collected from the book and whose use has been verified on-field by the author of this paper (who is investigating in the Punjabi Sikh community of Bilston, West Midlands, United Kingdom), have been searched and verified in the Punjabi/English-English Punjabi Dictionary by K.K. Goswami (2000) and on the online dictionary www.shabdkosh.com/pa/, Last visited 20/10/2015.



Mennu CORM-PEW-TAR di zaruraht, hai, Mama. (69)

In this case, the characters are borrowing words like *detention* (that exists in Punjabi, but is said in English to give it the specific meaning it has at school, where they speak English with the teachers) and the locution *cricket club*, currently used in Punjabi – and also linked to the school dimension. The word “computer” is currently used in India, too, but its pronunciation is nativized, as the author makes evident through the spelling (Mehrotra 15-18). Moreover, the nativized word is written in capital letters by the author, with the result of making it look as ‘alien’ to the Punjabi discourse – while the Punjabi words in the English speech are never written in capitals or italics: they ‘blend in’ and look as a natural component of English.

Nativization is another relevant aspect of the Asian language influence (Kachru 166-168), and is most evident in the use of the contraction of “isn’t it” into “innit” and its universal use at the end of a sentence as a form of reinforcement and confirmation of what has been said. It is widespread in the United Kingdom and typically linked to the British Asian communities, also thanks to popular characters like Ali G (Baron Cohen ix).

For what concerns the Punjabi lexical and phrasal loans, since the Londonstani are sons of Asian migrants, it is easy to imagine how Punjabi would be linked to familiar situations, racial allusions, religious terms and food lexicon (the food will often be named in Punjabi even when there is an acceptable English equivalent, like in the case of “lentils,” always called “daal”): in fact, religion and food represent a crucial part of the Punjabi heritage for British Indian diasporic communities (Eames and Robboy 213-214). The Londonstani teens also use Punjabi when talking to their mothers or to other elders (calling them Auntyji and Uncleji).¹⁰ Rather less expectable is its – abundant – use in insults and aggressive remarks, which might be linked to a research of emphasis in the spoken discourse (Gardner-Chloros, Charles and Cheshire 1306). The Punjabi loans used in the book are hereby reported.¹¹

Familiar words

Acha: ok

Auntyji: respectful term for elder Indian women

Bache: kids

Banan: bra

Bhainji: older sister

Bhaji: older brother

Bhangra: Punjabi dance

Beita: son/daughter

Beycharay: poor thing

Chacha: the dad’s younger brother (of who is using the term)

Chapples: flip flops

Chuddies: underwear

Desi: a typical Indian person

Dhol: Indian percussions

Gandh: dirt

Izzat: “the Muslim word for a family’s honour (...), but non-Muslims use it too.” (Malkani 93)

Juldi chal: hurry up

Kachha: men’s underwear

Kachhi: women’s panties

Kiddan (used with friends, informal): how are you?

Koi gal nahi: you’re welcome

¹⁰ The suffix –ji is used to mark respect and devotion for older members of the family and elders in general. It can also be found in Bhaji/Bhainji (elder brother/sister).

¹¹ Malkani does not provide a glossary of the Punjabi terms, which have been collected, translated/explained and divided in categories by the author of the present work. The terms are transliterated in Latin letters by Malkani, and his transliteration scheme was used in the present list.



Kurhiyaan: girls

Milni: traditional moment when new family members united by the wedding of two respective members introduce to each other

Mohti: fatty

Munda: boy

Nakhra: drama

Oye, tennu pasand hai?: do you like it?

Puther: darling son

Salwar kameez: Punjabi outfit for men and women

Satsriakaal: formal greeting that can be used at any time of the day

Shareef: innocent

Sher: lion

Sherwani: men's clothes, especially for weddings

Shukriya: thank you

Sona: nice

Sub theekh?: is everything ok?

Tamasha: covering someone with shame, especially in public

Tennu ni pata: you don't know

Thapparh: slap

Theekh hai: ok; good

Uncleji: respectful term for elder Indian men

Wah bai wah!: oh wow!

Religious words

Bhajans: religious hymns

Bindi: traditional red dot on a bride's forehead, used by women during weddings or other traditional ceremonies

Brahmin: Hindu caste

Diwali: the Indian festival of lights, symbolizing the victory of light over darkness

Eid: normally refers to Eid-al-Fitr, the conclusion of Muslim Ramadan.

Garba sticks for doing dandia dancing: Dandia is a Gujarat and Hindu religious celebration, which includes a traditional dance with garba sticks

Guru Granth Sahib: Sikh holy book

Hindu pandit: Hindu vicar

Karha: Sikh religious bangle worn by men and women

Mandap: Hindu or Jain bridal structure, covered with fabric and supported by columns, where the ceremony takes place

Mehndi: bridal henna tattoo for women

Rakhi: a Sikh and Hindu traditional bracelet, as the narrator explains "is a special thread your sister ties on your right wrist, meanin you're their brother an you'll always do your duty and protect them, uphold their honour, that kind a thing." (Malkani 175)

Rokka: a newly engaged couple has a house reception, for the family of the husband-to-be to declare the wife-to-be is now part of their family

Sardarji: a respectful term for Sikh men wearing the turban, a symbol of religious devotion and hence of elegance but also good heart and respectability

Satsang: religious meetings finalised to the reading of the scriptures, meditation and discussion of religious, philosophical and everyday life topics

Shaadi: Indian wedding

(Sikh) Khanda: the Sikh religious symbol (corresponding to Christian cross or Muslim crescent)

Food

Having an English equivalent



Aloo: potatoes
Bhindee: ladyfingers
Chai: tea
Chana (daal): yellow lentils
Daal: lentils
Oolti: vomit
Pani: water
Saag: spinach

Typical, not translatable with a single word

Jalabi: dessert where sugar is the main ingredient
Ladoo: Indian dessert
Lassi: drink with milk as a base ingredient
Masala: herbs and spices mixed for Indian cuisine
Mithai: Indian sweets with various tastes
Naan: tandoori style cooked Indian flat bread, thicker than roti
Pakora: fried dough
Rasmalai: milky dessert
Roti: Indian flat bread
Samosa: triangular fried starter
Subjhi: Indian vegetarian dish (often in combination with the main ingredients e.g. aloo ki subjhi)
Tandoori: Indian barbecue

Racial words

Gora (pl. gore, f. gori, f.pl. goriyan): white person. Although it would not have a pejorative meaning, it is often used to define White British people with a strongly pejorative meaning, to the point it can be seen as a racial insult – especially when preceded by “dirty” (at times in Punjabi “gandah,” otherwise in English but spelled in the rap-like style “dirrtty”). This term is omnipresent throughout the book.
Kaala: black person. Similarly to ‘gora,’ but less frequently, it can assume a pejorative meaning.

Insults

Bhanchod: motherfucker (literally, it would mean “sisterfucker”)
Chota dick: small dick (here the English swearword for penis is kept)
Gandah: dirty (often in combination with other words, e.g. gandah gora)
Khota: donkey – stupid
Kuthe da puther: son of a dog
Pehndu: someone from a village – stupid
Sala kutta: dirty dog
Tutty: shit; shitty

Aggressive remarks

Ehh ki hai?: what is this?
Ki dekh da payeh?: what are you looking at?
Tere kaprhe kithe ne?: where are your clothes? (to a half-naked woman)
Tere ma!: your mom!
Tu ki samajda hai?: who do you think you are?

Another interesting aspect is the way Londonstani resort to Indian celebrities as icons of style and beauty, both male and female, rejecting the “white” models of beauty for a more “desi” one. In fact, the media “supply referents and contexts for talk which is explicitly or implicitly about identities and identity positions (Gillespie 25) for the British Indian community. The most mentioned male star is Shah Rukh Khan, so famous to be known as “the King of Bollywood,” who is taken as a symbol of heroic attitude and handsomeness for desi



men.¹² Two women are also mentioned by the characters: Kareena Kapoor (a rather young female Bollywood star) whose poster is on the gang leader's room wall that symbolises the preference for desi youth idols,¹³ and Aishwarya Rai (Bollywood superstar and Miss World 1994), the legendary icon of the incomparable Desi females' beauty and grace.¹⁴

Desi icons establish the beauty standard for both females and males:

No *Playboys* in here. You's a desi, innit. You's gonna b havin copies a *Asian Babes!* G-strings always look better on some nice Indian butt. At da end a da day, you b wantin yo meat proply cooked not raw, you get me (Malkani 54)

Sometimes I practised it (catch-up lines to impress his crush) as Johnny Depp, sometimes as Pierce Brosnan, sometimes as Brad Pitt. But in the end I went with this cross between Andy Garcia¹⁵ an Shah Rukh Khan cos it just worked for me. (Malkani 149)

4.2 Rap-Like Stereotyped Black Talk

Stereotyped Black talk is omnipresent in the book, both in reported speech and narration. It appears on both morpho-syntactic and lexical levels. Moreover, many expressions used by the Londonstani teens are calques of 'speech events' that are typical of the African American Variety of English (AAVE).¹⁶

Far from being spontaneous, the Londonstani speech is especially created for turning them from wannabes into rudeboys with street credibility. Their replication of stereotyped Black talk comes from a keen replica of African American English – or, better, of its media stereotypes, seen on MTV and copied without a thorough analysis of its history and meaning. The protagonist, while wondering the reasons of his limited skills in talking like his friends specifies: "I swear I've watched as much *MTV Base* an *Juggy D* videos as they have" (Malkani 5-6). The importance of speaking a credible rap-like slang depends on the fact that their level of proficiency in using AAVE talks for their street credibility level. The author himself, speaking about his characters, reveals their different levels of street credibility can be evinced from their way of speaking:

I adapted the slang for different characters depending on how hardcore they were. (...) For example, Jas (the newbie of the gang) always says "in't" instead of "ain't" – which hopefully shows how Jas tries too hard to be a bad-boy while Hardjit (the gang leader) is comfortable and secure using the British mainstream slang "ain't."

(Malkani, www.gautammalkani.com/about_londonstani.htm)

¹² Further details on the actor: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Shahrukh-Khan> (Last visited September 16 2015)

¹³ Further details on the actress: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Kareena-Kapoor> (Last visited September 16, 2015)

¹⁴ Further details on the actress: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Aishwarya-Rai> (Last visited September 16, 2015)

¹⁵ Even if Andy Garcia is not an Indian celebrity, he still symbolizes a valid alternative (dark hair and eyes, olive skin) to the classic WASP Hollywood actor.

¹⁶ AAVE is rooted into a mainly spoken set of practices, called *Speech Events* by Lisa J. Green. *Speech Events* are "common strategies of conversational interaction" (Green 134), characterized by a deep connection between verbal and non-verbal expressive language and an even deeper understanding among speakers and listeners. One of the most representative speech events is Signifying or, better, Signifyin', defined by Geneva Smitherman (1972: 118; 1994: 8) as "the verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles – that is, signifies on – the Listener." Henry Louis Gates Jr. concentrated his work on this phenomenon and found its origin in the traditional African American tale of The Signifying Monkey, where the Monkey uses its rhetorical skills to prove that the Lion is not the king of the forest – using intelligence to demystify a fake reality imposed with physical strength (Gates Jr. 56). The speech events here reported (only a small part of the whole) have been chosen as they are the most frequent and stereotyped in rap music and, consequently, the most used by the Londonstani teenagers.



Hence, unlike Punjabi elements that come natural and are common to the whole gang, Black talk needs to be learned in order to “tut like a black brother” (Malkani 15) and be “hardcore.” Some of the recurring calques are worth mentioning for each level.

Morpho-syntactic level

Some of the morpho-syntactic elements listed in chapter two are particularly recurrent throughout the book.¹⁷ The use of auxiliaries are often calqued from AAVE, mostly their frequent omission, e.g. I been there, man (Malkani 193), or in the construction of questions without “do,” e.g. Hear wat my bredren b sayin, sala kutta? (Malkani 3). Negations are also adapted to AAVE, for example with negative inversions and multiple negations, like in the sentence “ain’t nobody callin nothing off” (Malkani 189). In addition, the verb “to be” (often spelled “b”) is used as uninflected auxiliary or omitted completely (Tottie 221-222).

Lexical level

The lexical loans also come from the media representations of rappers and tough ghetto people (Taronna 2005). Thus, they mainly pertain friendship in the gang and competition with other gangs, coolness, sexually and racially allusive insults.

Gang friendship and competition

Beef: feud

Blud: mate

Bredren: brother, homeboy, close friend

Bruv: brother, friend

Chirps: insult; chat up

Diss, dissin: shorter version of “disrespect,” (Tottie 225) someone that has been dissed can start a fight or a feud against the dissers. It is interesting how the broad American use of this term in the family field fits in particularly well with the Londonstani speech, who are deeply bound to their families and especially to their mothers e.g. u dissin ma mum? (10)

Gyal: the typical reggaeton-and-rap-like spelling for “girl”

Wassup, ssup: contraction of “What’s up?” (also widespread among American students)

Wha guanin?: Jamaican patois greeting coming from “what is going on?” – originally used in Jamaica, it has been adopted by the Londonstani teens through the spread of reggaeton.

Coolness

Bling: the definition in Urban Dictionary seems to fit particularly well: “Jamaican slang that has been adopted by some African American rappers and inserted into popular culture. The term ‘Bling Bling’ refers to the imaginary ‘sound’ that is produced from light reflected by a diamond.”¹⁸ In the African American rap speech, it is especially referred to those gangsta rappers wearing remarkable quantities of heavy jewelry, and especially chain necklaces that jingle one against the other producing the “bling bling” onomatopoeic sound.

Da G: someone really cool, who has everything to be the best

Da mack: often referred to a pimp, in AAVE is used for a man who is “conspicuously successful, especially through the use of flattery or deceiving talk” (Lighter 493)

Da man: the best

Diggin: to like something

Feds: originally shortening for FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), is referred to police officers in general.

Fly: cool, stylish

Frontin: to fake one’s personality to impress others

Get jiggy wid it: moving in a cool way on the dance floor; also, sexual allusion concerning the movements of

¹⁷ The page of the quoted sentence is not reported where a recurrent expression has been used as an example.

¹⁸ More definitions of the term on Urban Dictionary: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bling>. Last visited 18/10/2015.



the woman

Insults

Batty boy: originally Jamaican; “batty” is someone’s back. Homophobic insult, can be referred to someone that actually is homosexual or just is not being “man” enough in a given situation

Ho: the typical rap-like spelling for “whore”

Muthafucka: the typical rap-like spelling for “motherfucker”

Ras clat: a really offensive insult, used to give someone the lowest consideration possible

Racial insults

Honky: derogatory term for a white person, normally used by black people only (Cagliero and Spallino 371).

Nigga: the typical rap-like spelling for “nigger.” The difference between the two terms within African American culture is not just about spelling, but also and especially about meaning, as provided by Tupac:

Niggers was the ones on the rope hanging out on the field. Niggas is the ones with gold ropes hanging out at clubs (...) Everyone: if you’re not a nigga and you don’t use that word. You don’t have to understand it. It’s not one of those things. (Soren, Tabitha <https://www.youtube.com/>)

The Londonstani even go one step beyond the simple nativization in this case, using the originally derogatory term “paki” with similar intentions: from the racial insult from white people towards Pakistani, Muslims and brown skinned Asians in general, it becomes a term that, similarly to “nigga,” becomes prerogative of the Desi rudeboys – any gora using it will receive a severe beating, as it happens to a white kid accused of calling the protagonists ‘pakis.’ Such a strong episode, posed right at the beginning of the book, has the great power of reversing the ‘Paki-bashing,’ widespread in Britain during the Seventies, where Asians were victims of unmotivated aggressions by racist groups of white people (Mitchell 330):

An out a us four bredrens, none a us got a mum n dad wat actually come from Pakistan, innit. So don’t u b tellin any a us Pakis dat we b Pakis like our Paki bredren from Pakistan, u get me. (...) An dat’s da rule. can’t be callin someone a Paki less u also call’d a Paki, innit. (...) it was the exact same for black people. They could call each other nigger but even us desi bredrens couldn’t call them niggers. (...) a Paki is someone who comes from Pakistan. Us bredrens who don’t come from Pakistan can still b call’d Paki by other bredrens if it means we can call dem Paki in return. But u (white) people ain’t allow’d 2 join in, u get me? (Malkani 5-7)

Rap-like expressions and speech events

Thanks to their keen listening of MTV rap music, the Londonstani teens also make sure they “play the role” of their TV idols, and start impersonating characters of dangerous men who have to run away from the police, that are ready to beat their enemies up, and that have a long list of women they have been with, as can be evinced by the following quotes:

Don’t b needin no shit wid da feds (132)

Yeh, bredren, knock his fuckin teeth out (9)

Fuck you, man. Do you think you da only one who’s been there, done dat, shagged that bitch, done dat ho? (20)

Many times they will recall speech events, and especially woofing:¹⁹

¹⁹ Before getting into a physical fight, boasting to intimidate the opponent can avoid the confrontation or encourage the woofers. Maybe the best-known media woofers is the boxer Muhammad Ali, who very wittily created a media image using “the skills of ritualized insult” (Gorn 40), and winning his opponents by verbally putting them down.



Come out wid dat shit again n l'ma knock you so hard u'll b shittin out yo mouth 4 real (3)
Fuckin five-ounce white gold, innit. Call me a Paki n I whip yo ass wid it (4)

They will also resort to toasts filled with *braggadocio* boasting:²⁰

Yeh you know it, Ravi. Back then when I boned Mandeep I was jus using a large size (condom).
Now I need extra large, you get me? (20)

An as 4 dis organised trouble u chattin bout, u'd b surprised how organised our shit (illegal
business) can b when we prople incentivised. (118)

Yeh, man, nobody mess wid us, we bad muthafuckas (...) da gangsta, da killa n da dope dealer
(122)

All my sperms are men, innit. Matter a fact, my sperm cells got bigger dicks then that chota
maggot you got between your legs, you get me. (180)

Nevertheless, when the Londonstani teens get involved in real trouble (they would say that “shit gets real”) – or simply when their mums are on the phone – they tend to diminish or eliminate the rap-like black and switch back to their nice and polite “shareef munde” patterns, revealing a remarkable code mixing proficiency.

4.3 Teenage Spelling

The fact that Londonstani imitate Black talk because they saw it on MTV is already a marker of their teenage attempt to sound “cool” by adopting what is in fashion at a certain point of media history (Stenström 9). The same can be said by the use of Punjabi words to mark their identities as distant from “gore” (white people) and “coconuts” (Asians wannabe whites) because they represent the institutions.

However, the main means through which Malkani conveys the teenage of his characters is the teenage-like spelling, full of shortenings that are typical of text messaging and social networks (Zimmermann 27-41).²¹

5. Conclusion

Far from providing a definitive answer to the question of the language of British Indian diasporic youth, the present work had the objective to underline the importance of the issue and incite further debates.

The code-mixing as a vehicle of identity starts from the title of the novel. Being *Londonstani* is an existential condition, it means being a new kind of Londoners, which better represents the transcultural and trans-ethnic identity of the contemporary London. Such a message of re-appropriation and commonality is but a small part of a global process of re-writing that involves renegotiating identity, belonging and borders.

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²⁰ First-person narrated tributes, generally hymns to “fearless, defiant, openly rebellious, and full of *braggadocio* about his masculinity, sexuality, fighting ability, and general badness” (Smitherman 1972: 157) characters. Male rappers often use this strategy. *Braggadocio* in rap mainly consists in “bragging and boasting,” according to Paul Edwards (25).

²¹ Some recurrent examples: You > u; Of > a; And > an; Th > d (e.g. dey, dat, da, dis, wid); Th > f, ff (e.g. fink, nuffin); Ph > f (e.g. fone); Because > cos.



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