Language Shift in Banglatown?
Evaluating Ethnolinguistic Vitality in East London

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I provide a first evaluation of the Ethnolinguistic Vitality of the Bangladeshi Community in East London. Despite a considerable number of social, economical and educational research on the Bangladeshi community, an in-depth study of the community’s vitality has not been carried out yet. This paper summarizes the findings of two preliminary studies in the borough, and provides first results as well as proposals for future research.

In particular, I focus on the use of both the first language (L1) Sylheti and the second language (L2) English in two contexts of interaction: firstly, the home domain, that is, language used in the home/family environment; secondly, the outside home domain which comprises patterns of daily interaction outside the home environment.

The results indicate a clear distinction of language use between certain domains, with English primarily used in formal domains, such as administration, and Sylheti used in most other domains of daily interaction. Nevertheless, data suggests that language use gradually shifts towards the L2, particularly in the home domain. I argue that this shift is likely to be introduced by children.

1. Introduction

The framework of Ethnolinguistic Vitality (henceforth EV) and its application to sociolinguistic research is by no means new. Since one of its first applications by Giles et al. (1977) and Fishman (1977), EV has been in the focus of attention for linguists and social psychologists. Recently, the Multilingual Cities Project (MCP) has evaluated in some detail the situation of immigrant communities in six European cities (Extra and Yagmur, 2004); however, London, with its considerable immigrant population, has not been included in the MCP.

This paper aims at providing a first evaluation of the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Bangladeshi community in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets. In particular, based on qualitative and quantitative data obtained during two studies between 2002 and 2004, I will suggest that while respondents’ first language Sylheti is the language predominantly used in daily life and social networks are primarily Bangladeshi-centric, language use gradually shifts towards the use of the second language English, and interaction becomes increasingly interethnic over time. However, these developments are clearly restricted by external variables.

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2. Setting the scene: Framework and sociocultural context

The concept of Ethnolinguistic Vitality allows to analyse language use and change on a macrosocial level (Landry and Allard, 1994: 15). It comprises sociostructural factors to explain language maintenance and shift within a community. According to Giles (1977: 308), “[t]he vitality of an ethnolinguistic group is that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup relations”. That is, the higher the vitality of an ethnolinguistic group, the higher its chances of survival; the lower its vitality, the higher the risk of its ceasing to exist (1977: 308). In its original version, Giles et al. use three main categories of variables which influence the vitality of an ethnolinguistic group: firstly, the group’s status contributes to its vitality; the higher its economic, social and sociohistorical status is, the higher the group’s status as a collective entity (Giles et al., 1977: 309-311). Furthermore, the status of the group’s language may prove advantageous or disadvantageous: minority groups whose language is of internationally high status, for example, the French speaking minority in Quebec, have a clear advantage over minority groups whose language is internationally hardly recognized (Giles et al., 1977: 311).

Secondly, demographic factors play an important role in generating high group vitality. Large absolute numbers as well as a high proportion of the overall population support a group’s vitality (Giles et al., 1977: 309, 312-15). Also, the proportion of group size and space occupied by the group may influence its survival:

“Minority group speakers who are concentrated in the same geographical area may stand a better chance of surviving as a dynamic linguistic community by virtue of the fact that they are in frequent verbal interaction and can maintain feelings of solidarity.” (Giles et al., 1977: 313)

Thirdly, institutional support can strengthen Ethnolinguistic Vitality. Formal support can be received from official institutions, in some cases the respective government directly, while informal support refers to community-internal institutions, such as pressure groups (Giles et al., 1977: 315-316).

The framework was subject to several amendments and modifications. In particular, it has been criticized that although the framework allows to objectively measure vitality, that is, from outside the group, it does not necessarily allow conclusion about the group’s perception of its own vitality. That is, although the objective vitality of a group might be low, its own subjective perception of its vitality might be much higher – an important factor in intergroup relationships (Kraemer et al., 1994: 79; Ytsma et al., 1994: 63). Ros et al. (1994) in their study on ingroup bias amongst groups of different languages in Spain (Castilian, Catalan, Basque, Galician) found that high ingroup vitality leads to more persistent ingroup bias – while low vitality causes the opposite. Kraemer et al.’s study on vitality perception and attitudes within the Arab minority in Israel also provided evidence for a strong relationship between the two variables. As such, the concept of a Subjective Ethnolinguistic Vitality is closely related to that of a social identity (Ros et al., 1994: 145; Ytsma et al., 1994: 63).
Previous research suggests that an evaluation of the vitality of the Bangladeshi community in East London is difficult. With about 65,000 people, the Bangladeshi community is relatively large, and makes up for around 33 percent of the borough’s population (National Statistics Office, 2001); Within London, 43 percent of Bangladeshis live in the borough. Eade et al (1996: 158) point out that “nearly a quarter […] of the British total of Bangladeshi residents live in a single London borough”. In addition, the community consists of close-knit intraethnic social networks (Husain, 1991: 83). Hence, one may argue that the demographic factors contribute positively to the vitality of the community. In addition, the community receives considerable support, ranging from mother tongue projects and Bengali mother tongue classroom assistants, to specifically designed EFL courses and Bengali/English translation services with focus on particular domain such as healthcare or administration. Tower Hamlets College offers Bengali GCSE and A-level courses (Tower Hamlets College). Local authorities provide various services in Sylheti.

However, the group’s status, both socially and, more importantly, economically, provides a different picture. Research indicates that, from the very beginning of the settlement in London, Bangladeshis face great social and economic disadvantage, leading to a stark cleavage between Bangladeshis and white residents (Eade, 1989: 29). In particular the disappearance of the shipping and docking industry in the East End had a dramatic effect on the Bangladeshi community in terms of high unemployment and resulting socioeconomic difficulties (Carey and Shukur, 1986: 409); White (2002: 9) reports that around 20 percent of Bangladeshi men who are economically active are unemployed; unemployment is a particular problem amongst young Bangladeshi men: over 40 percent of male Bangladeshis under the age of 25 are without employment.

Economic disadvantage is mainly based on low levels of formal qualification. White concludes that of all ethnic minorities in Britain, Bangladeshis were most likely to be unqualified, with 48 percent of women and 40 percent of men being without formal educational qualification (2002: 12).

This preliminary analysis provides an ambiguous picture of the vitality of the Bangladeshi community: While demographic data and information on community support indicate that the vitality is relatively high, socioeconomic variables paint a less positive picture. The main part of this study will hence focus on the internal organisation of the community, with particular focus on whether and to what extent the Bangladeshis behave as an “active collective entity” (Giles et al., 1977: 308).

Respondents were asked to fill in a questionnaire, comprising 26 questions with 59 variables overall. The majority of questions were taken from the ethnolinguistic studies mentioned above, and were adapted to the needs of this study. The sample comprised 16 respondents. The questionnaire was divided into six thematic blocks, covering biographical and economic data, data on language use in both the home and outside home-domain, as well as a question evaluation Bangladeshi self-perception. Five-point Likert scales were used for quantitative measurement.
A previous study (N=20) aimed primarily at obtaining qualitative data from Bangladeshi respondents, gained through semi-structured ethnographic interviews; in addition, this first phase of the project was designed as a pilot study for obtaining quantitative data about community structures.

3. Results

3.1. Family structures and language use in the home domain

One of the foremost questions of this study was whether the patterns of family structures and language use within families reported in literature could also be found in this sample. Research in Bangladeshi communities in London and throughout the UK has shown that family structures bear a striking resemblance to those in rural Bangladesh: Usually, Bangladeshi households in the UK comprise several families, spanning several generations; the average size of a Bangladeshi household is considerably above the British average (5.3 compared to 2.5 people) (Eade et al., 1996: 153). Roles in families are clearly distributed, with men working in paid employment and women being responsible for domestic tasks and the upbringing of the children. In addition, similar to Bangladesh, Britain’s Bangladeshi communities are characterised by close-knit social networks (Husain, 1991: 81). Marriages take place mainly intra-ethnically, and the vast majority of Bangladeshi women living in Britain are married to a husband of Bangladeshi origin (Phillipson et al., 2003).

Fourteen of the 16 respondents are married, 13 live in intra-ethnic marriages (92.9 percent), 1 respondent (7.1 percent) is married to an ethnically British partner. A similar picture emerged during the pilot phase of the study: again, the majority of married informants were married to a Bangladeshi partner. This supports previous results according to which marriages are predominantly intraethnic. In addition, both studies indicated that most respondents live with an extended rather than a nuclear family, a result that was confirmed during the ethnographic interviews: while families do not necessarily share the same premises, like the homesteads in Sylhet described by Gardner (1995), they often live in close proximity, such as a ward or estate.

The analysis of language use at home provided similar results in both samples; I will, however, focus on the main sample here. With a mean of $x=4.75$ out of a 5-point Likert scale, Bengali, or rather Sylheti, is the preferred language used at home, compared to a mean usage of English of $x=3.19$ points. The respective medians are 5 (Sylheti at home) and 3 (English at home). Also, as before, the distribution of values clearly shows a preference for Sylheti: the minimum value for Sylheti
is 4 (“much”), while the minimum value for English is as low as 2 (“rarely”). Similarly, no respondent indicated using only English at home; the maximum value for English is 4 (“much”). However, all respondents reported using English at home to some extent, with no respondent indicating a Likert score 1 (“never”) for English.

A Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was conducted to explore whether the difference in language use is statistically significant. Thirteen respondents use more Sylheti at home than English, while three respondents use more English. With $p=0.001$, the difference between use of English and use of Sylheti is highly significant, that is, we can indeed claim that Sylheti is the preferred language used in the home/family domain. Again, this result was supported by the results of the pilot study. Communication within the ethnically almost exclusively Bangladeshi home/family domain is mainly conducted in the L1. This is not surprising: it seems natural that an ethnically homogenous group uses its L1 rather than L2 in the home/family domain. Nevertheless, a considerable proportion of respondents indicated that they use English at least sometimes at home: 11 respondents (68.8 percent) indicated they use English “sometimes”, that is a Likert score (LS) of 3 out of 5, at home, an additional 4 (25 percent) even reported using English “often” (LS 4). In sum, 98.8 percent use English “sometimes” (LS 3) or “often” (LS 4), only 6.3 percent use English “rarely” (LS 2) at home.

The analysis also provides interesting insights into which languages are used when addressing children within the home/family domain, and also which languages children use to address their parents or each other. Twelve respondents (75 percent) have children; eleven of them have children who are either currently attending a school, or who were in full-time education in the UK. That is, we can assume that children have significant English language input from both school and peers, and we may imply that children have a relatively high English language proficiency.

As would be expected, Sylheti is the preferred language to address children, with 41.7 percent of the respondents indicating they use Sylheti “always” (LS 5) and a further 33.3 percent of parents using the Sylheti “often” (LS 4); in sum 75 percent of respondents use predominantly their L1 to address their children. However, a remarkable 91.7 percent of respondents reported using English “sometimes” (66.7 percent) and even “often” (25 percent). Only 8.3 percent indicated that they use English rarely. Moreover, one quarter of the informants indicated they use Sylheti only “sometimes” when addressing their children. Given that generally no other languages are used in spoken family discourse, it seems to be the logical consequence that English is being used instead. Unequal group sizes did not allow for a direct comparison of the two groups (with/without children).

We can thus conclude that if English is used at home, it is predominantly used to address children, while Sylheti is the main language of communication within the home/family domain in general. The question remains, is there any evidence about what causes the increased use of English in communication with children? Two directions of causality are possible: first, parents use English in order to actively encourage their children to speak English and hence to facilitate their children’s English language proficiency, which is considered important (cf. Kershen 2000). Secondly, child
could increasingly use English at home, possibly up to a complete refusal of communicating in Sylheti, hence forcing their parents to use English. This equivocality provides room for further investigation in a separate study.

3.2. Interactional Patterns and Language use outside home

Having analysed language use within Bangladeshi families to some extent, the remainder of this paper focuses on interactional pattern outside the family domain. Language use outside home was divided into three sub-domains: first, language used in informal situations, such as shops, markets etc, where language is presumably relatively informal. It was assumed beforehand that encounters in these situations are likely to be with both native speakers of English, Bangladeshi speakers of English, and speakers of other languages.

Second, language use in formal situations, such as in banks or at hospitals, was explored. Unlike the first context, it was assumed that the proportion of Bangladeshis (or native speakers of Sylheti) is considerably lower. Encounters may involve a considerable proportion of native speakers of English, hence forcing Bangladeshis to use the L2 – simply because Sylheti is not spoken during these encounters.

The third question focuses on the language used in all other situations outside the home/family domain, and hence allows a rather broad spectrum of answers. However, given the dense Bangladeshi network in the area, the majority of encounters might be intraethnic, that is, between Bangladeshis.

Language use at home was measured by means of one 5-point scale (that is, potential maximum score is 5), language use outside home was measured by means of 3 questions with a 5-point Likert scale each, allowing for a maximum of 15 points (that is, score 5 in all three sub-questions).

It is noticeable that unlike in the home/family domain, English is the language used more often outside home: while 50 percent score 14 and more out of 15 points for using English outside home, the median for Sylheti is 8 (out of 15) points. As before, a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks test was conducted. The results indicate that English is used significantly more often outside the home/family domain than Sylheti (p=0.012); 11 out of 16 respondents use more English than Sylheti outside home, four respondents use the L1 more frequently.

The above provides a first insight into language use outside the home domain. It was of further interest whether differences can be identified between the different sub-domains, namely informal (shopping etc), formal (banks, hospital etc) and any other context outside home/family. It is notable, though not surprising, that the largest difference between the use of English and Sylheti occurs in formal situations: 50 percent of the informants indicated they use only English in formal situations (score 5); for Sylheti, the median is considerably lower, with 50 percent reporting to use Sylheti rarely
(score 2) or not at all (score 1) in formal situations. According to a Wilcoxon test, the difference is highly significant with $\rho=0.007$.

In informal situations, English is also used to a significantly higher extent than Sylheti. This is not surprising: although Bangladeshis are the second largest ethnic group in the borough, much of the commercial infrastructure is dominated by other ethnic groups, such as Pakistanis (see Kershen, 1997). Hence, communication between groups with different mother tongues will inevitably take place in the most common vernacular, English.

The picture is remarkably different for the less defined “other situations outside home”-domain: the medians for both English and Sylheti are almost identical with 4 and 3.5 respectively. This difference is statistically not significant. The result is open to interpretation, but the most likely and reasonable explanation is that English is predominantly used in situations where encounters with other ethnic groups are likely to happen (shops, market, bank, hospital), that is, domains which are less Bangladeshi-centric. Based on socioeconomic research in the area, I assume at this point that the “formal” domain is dominated by ethnically British people, or at least people who are native speakers of English or people with a very high command of English. The language of communication in these contexts would then inevitably be English. The “shopping” domain, although dominated by non-Sylheti speakers, still requires a high proportion of English usage; however, the proportion of encounters between Bangladeshis is likely to be higher than in the “formal”-domain.

Lastly, I suggest that the “anywhere else outside home”-domain mainly consists of intra-ethnic encounters between Bangladeshis, that is, refer to encounters between people who belong to the core of the social network, such as friends or acquaintances. As a result, the L1 is used as the predominant language of communication. Other languages are hardly ever used in discourse outside home, and have not been included in the analysis.

In summary, we have seen that both contact with ethnically British speakers and the use of English seem to be restricted to a limited number of domains, namely formal-administrative contexts, which are likely to be dominated by ethnically British people and/or native speakers of English, and the more informal “shopping”-domain. In other words, these are domains where the interlocutor cannot be freely chosen, but is determined by the context (for example, bank clerk, shop assistant, hospital nurse). If respondents have a choice of interaction partners, they seem to tend towards interlocutors of their own ethnic background.

### 3.3. **Deliberate dissociation or lack of opportunity?**

This hypothesis of deliberate isolation, that is, the argument that Bangladeshis deliberately dissociate themselves from other groups may not be tenable. In fact, many informants reported in the course of this project that they were actively seeking contact with British people in order to integrate into the
British society and larger community. The following passages are excerpts of the ethnographic interviews conducted in the course of this project.

In particular, the lack of sufficient competence in communicating in English with either native or fluent speakers of English seems to constitute a major problem for speakers of lower proficiency; learners are willing to use English, but are hindered by insufficient L2 competence:

**MT:** I like it. I’m interested in English language. Speaking, learn speaking. I like the English language but not speaking very good.

**MT:** My mother language is Bengali. And (all the) time Bengali speaking. Now, one and half years (try to) English speaking...

Listening comprehension, and in particular the comprehension of local accents and dialects seem a major difficulty for speakers of lower proficiency:

**SR:** *Is that a problem you have? That people talk too fast?*
**NA:** Yeah, we have problem. We can’t catch they are/ what are they saying.
**MMA:** Also, we feel problem. When/ Because we can their accent exactly. But- but we can understand teachers said to us anything (… ...) But we can’t understand local languages the difference.

**MMA:** But- think so- if I try to understand- (… ...) Listening is the great problem for (me). I can speak English something. I’m not good at all English. But I can speak English. But I’m not good listener. This is a problem for us. (…)

English is hardly used in daily discourse and its usage is often restricted to the EFL classroom and workplace:

**SR:** *Do you have any problems in your daily life? Where you have to speak English? Do you get along or is it very difficult?*
**MA:** This class (for two hours) And it not enough. I want to more- more time.

**SR:** *Do you use English only in the class or do you use it…?*
**MA:** Only- no sometimes (reading for book) (television watching television)
**MT:** I use in this class and my work and shop and bars (… …)

In particular speakers with lower L2 proficiency almost always mentioned lack of English language practice together with lack of contact with native speakers of English, although better contact and practice is highly desired, and informants seem keen on communicating cross-ethnically (or cross-linguistically) in order to both improve their L2 and facilitate their social networks beyond their own ethnic group:

**SR:** *How many hours a day so you usually spend with English people?*
**MA:** (…) (I) Can’t find English people. (…) I can’t talk with English people.
**SR:** So you don’t speak much English...
**MA:** Sometime is speaking for my child. (.. ...) I like talk to English.
SR: You don’t have English friends?
MA: I have no friend- English friend.

MA: I like English people, I like Bengali, both of them

SR: Do you have much contact with people who speak English? At work, or- Do you have ern- much- or- in your everyday life do you use the English language quite often or-
MMA: No, no, because- because just when I stay my customer- customers, than I speak English. And when I'm my living room- my living room (… …) then there I speak Bengali- Sylheti. They don’t know any others languages. They only Bengali language. This a great problem for us.

SR: What is it that it's- is it difficult to make contact to English people?
SB: Yes.
MMA: Sometimes, sometimes.
NA: Yes, we don’t understand what they saying. And we know a little bit. So- when I go to bank or any office or anywhere ern- I don’t speak much because in- there were some Bengali people they can underst/ they maybe, you know- they maybe undermined [sic] me because I can’t speak very well.

MMA: Very problem. And- sometimes I feel problem about customers. When they speaks their local languages-

Interestingly, informants with higher L2 performance\(^i\) seem to perceive the situation differently. AZ reports that she has regular contact with people of other ethnic backgrounds, who she mainly meets at the community centre she visits regularly. Also, L2 comprehension is less of a problem, and interaction between native and non-native speakers takes place more effectively:

SR: Do you have- may I ask you- do you have many English friends, or…? Do you have- your friends, are they more other people from Bangladesh, or are they also British people…or…?
AZ: No. There is more closely working with British people, Mexico (…) British, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian—mix, you know?

SR: Are people- English people are usually helpful when they realize that you have difficulties?
SB: Yeah. They’re really helpful. They can understand you a little bit, then they cover rest of them. [LAUGHS]

A particularly remarkable statement was made by UIR and other women who were interviewed as a group at Tower Hamlets College in the course of the first part of this project: although all respondents reported to be content with their situation in Tower Hamlets and their integration into an almost exclusively Bangladeshi network, they also expressed a certain discontent about the strong Bangladeshi-centricity:

SR: Are most of your friends and acquaintances Bengali, or do you have much contact with English people?
UIR: This area is too much Bengali. And people just friendly. Bengali. No English friend.
In fact, the group repeatedly stated that there were “too many Bangladeshis in the area” which led to “not enough contact with English people”. Although this had not been mentioned so explicitly by other informants, we have seen that the lack of interethnic interaction has been criticized before:

MA:  
(...)(I) Can’t find English people. (...) I can’t talk with English people.

It is obvious that there is indeed the desire to meet and interact with non-Bangladeshi people. However, interethnic contact takes place only infrequently. Lack of English language proficiency is one possible explanation. We may imagine situations during which contact between native speakers and non-native speakers of English is initiated, but subsequently fails due to problems in comprehension. This, in turn, may lead to discouragement of the non-native speakers, as implied by AZ:

AZ:  
Whenever you talking, you know, by the time, you talk more. But otherwise you feel ohh... I’m scared, what (am I) gonna say, what (am I) gonna say.

Moreover, the dense social network within the Bangladeshi community makes interethnic contact not imminently necessary. Family and social life is mainly centred around people of the same ethnic and linguistic descent, providing a safe and stable social environment. Although contact with other ethnic groups, in particular with the dominant British, might be desirable, it is not immediately vital in order to ensure a stable social network.

3.4. Identifying underlying factors

So far, I have shown that Sylheti is the preferred language spoken in the home domain; English is used only occasionally. At the same time, it has been illustrated that English is increasingly used in families with children. In addition, this paper has so far evaluated intra- and interethnic contact, and I have attempted to sketch a model of a social network for the Bangladeshi community.

One aspect is yet to be addressed, and that is the change in language use and contact over time. The following section seeks to address the question whether the use of English in both domains (home and outside home) changes over time. In addition, the extra-linguistic factors gender and children are considered in the analysis.

In a first step, a Spearman rank correlation was carried out to evaluate whether Length of Residence (henceforth LoR) correlates with language use at home and outside home, and with contact with British or Bangladeshi people. In order to increase the chance of detecting a correlation, the 5-point-scale questions “How much time a day do you interact with British/Bengali people?” and “How many of your friends are of British/Bengali origin?” were merged into two new variables: Sum of contact British, and sum of contact Bengali. Each variable has a 10 point scale.

While the general analysis provided no significant results, two constellations of variables approached significance: contact with ethnically British people increases over time with r=0.416 (p=0.061), while simultaneously the use of English outside home increases slightly (r=0.82, p=0.381).
The latter result is supported by a slight trend indicating that the use of Sylheti outside home decreases $(r=-0.360, \rho=0.085)$. In other words, the longer respondents live in Tower Hamlets, the more interethnic contact with ethnically British people they establish, and the more they use English outside home – given that few British people in Tower Hamlets speak Sylheti, this is a logical consequence. Even further, I suggest that the assumption that the social distance between the two groups becomes smaller over time, with the Bangladeshi social network expanding beyond the own ethnic boundaries, cannot be completely rejected. However, there are certain restrictions to it.

Information obtained during ethnographic interviews suggests that unlike men, women in general have less difficulty in achieving interethnic contact. For example, male informant MA, who has been living in Tower Hamlets for 12 years, reports:

\textbf{MA:} (…) I can’t find English people. (…) I can’t talk with English people.

AZ, a female informant who has been living in the borough for approximately the same time (15 years), has not only a much better L2 proficiency, but also reports of regular interaction with people of other ethnic origins, including British:

\textbf{AF:} No. In this area, in Tower Hamlets, we’re all— we’re closely and friendly, and you know? We don’t have any problem of this. But in other side, I tend?think? But I dunno in– in Tower Hamlets. But I never had this, you know? They’re all friend and nice and everybody worked each other closely.\textsuperscript{iii}

\textbf{AZ:} No. There is more closely working with British people, Mexico (…) British, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian—mix, you know?

A Wilcoxon Signed Rank test indicates no significant difference between respondents with children and those without for language use and intra- and interethnic contact, nor between men and women. Language use and ethnic contact seems to be independent from both sex and the issue of whether or not a respondent has children.

However, the Wilcoxon test is based on cross-sectional data; when considering the variables over time, however, the situation changes. An additional Spearman correlation reveals differences between sexes in language use and interethnic contact over time: with increasing length of residence in the borough, male respondents use significantly more Sylheti at home $(r=0.718, \rho=0.035)$, while women tend to use less Sylheti at home over time $(r=-0.518, \rho=0.077)$.

At the same time, women establish more interethnic contact with British people the longer they live in Tower Hamlets $(r=0.599, \rho=0.044)$ and use less Sylheti at home with increasing contact with British people $(r=-0.524, \rho=0.074)$. Similar differences exist between respondents with and without children. In the group of respondents with children, contact with British people increases over time with $r=0.425, (\rho=0.084)$, and an increased degree of contact with British people also leads to an increase in use of English at home $(r=0.513, \rho=0.044)$. That is, over time interethnic contact increases,
and with it the use of English at home. In addition, there is a tendency to use less Sylheti in general with increased LoR. No such relationships exist for respondents without children.

Data suggests that children play an important role in both language use and interethnic contact between Bangladeshi and British people. However, data also indicates another relationship, which has not become immediately apparent during the analysis: children seem to primarily influence language use and interethnic contact of women. To be more precise, given the traditional family structure of the Bangladeshi community, with women being responsible for household and family, children seem to influence language use and interaction patterns of their mothers over time. The difference between men and women is not visible on a cross-sectional basis, because language use and interaction patterns change over time, and this process takes place in two stages: first, UK born children grow up in Tower Hamlets, interact with both Bangladeshi and British (and other) peers and acquire English more or less simultaneously with Sylheti. Growing up bilingual, they will subsequently use English in the home/family domain, as outlined above. In addition, mothers, responsible for the upbringing of the children, will come into more and more contact with people of other ethnic origins via the children’s schools, teacher, peers’ parents and other child-related issues. This results in the inevitable increase of the use of English outside home, although this could not be proven statistically. This, in turn, might be an explanation for the fact that women’s use of Sylheti at home decreases over time: English becomes more and more familiar as a means of communication, its usage even at home might seem less unusual.

Men, whose responsibilities lie predominantly in the economic security of the family (that is, in paid employment)\textsuperscript{iv}, have less contribution on the daily, practical child-related issues and hence are likely to have less contact with other ethnic groups and, as a result, are less subject to changes in language use.

The 2-stage process also explains the time-delay and the fact that differences are not immediately visible on a cross-sectional analysis: the shift in parents’ (or rather mothers’) interaction and language usage patterns follows children’s interaction patterns, resulting in a delay – the change is only visible over time.

\subsection{3.5. Bangladeshi self-perception}

As a final step, the aspect of the Bangladeshis’ self-perception was analysed. As explained at the beginning of this paper, while EV as originally proposed by Giles focuses on objectively measurable variables, Subjective EV focuses on groups’ self-perception, that is, how groups perceive their own vitality. While a full SEV study was beyond the scope of this study, it was of interest to obtain trends about the self-perception of the Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets. Respondents were asked to indicate their attitudes on 5-point scales for both Bangladeshi and British residents in the borough:

\begin{itemize}
  \item [a)] \textit{How well-represented are the following groups in the cultural life in Tower Hamlets, for example, at festivals, concerts, community centres?}
\end{itemize}
b) *How strong and active do you feel the following groups are in Tower Hamlets? For example, do they have borough councillors representing them, do they have a voice in matters regarding them, or are they members of social or political groups or parties?*

c) *How proud of their cultural origin and their traditions do you think the following groups in Tower Hamlets are?*

The scores for each of the three questions were added up into 2 variables: $SP_{\text{British}}$ and $SP_{\text{Bengali}}$ with each new variable having a potential maximum value of 15 (3*5) points. The median score for $SP_{\text{British}}$ was calculated as 12.5 (out of 15) points, and the mean for $SP_{\text{Bengali}}$ as $x=10.80$. That is, Bangladeshis perceive their own status lower than they perceive the British status. With $\rho=0.066$, this difference is statistically almost significant, in particular when we take the small size of the sample into consideration.

A notable result occurred when analysing the three variables separately: while there was no significant difference in perception of Bangladeshis and British in the two community-related variables, the difference in perception of political power is remarkable: the median of $SP_{\text{Bengali}}$ is 3, while the median of $SP_{\text{British}}$ is 4. That is, Bangladeshis perceive the political influence of ethnically British people in the borough as stronger than the influence of Bangladeshi people. With $\rho=0.01$, the difference is highly significant. At the same time, a substantial number of Bangladeshi people reported in the course of this study that they were not aware of a substantial number of Bangladeshi councillors in the borough council. As such, respondents in the sample perceive the Bangladeshi community as being in an inferior position politically, albeit only slightly.

Hardly any information about the social and political status of the groups living in Tower Hamlets could be obtained during the interviews. Only one respondent referred extensively to the vital role Bangladeshis play in the restaurant sector, with most of so-called Indian restaurants being owned by Bangladeshis. Also, the respondent provided information about Bangladeshis’ political representation in the borough council as well as a historic overview of Bangladeshi settlement in East London. That is, a proportion of the Bangladeshis may have political and economic power to a certain extent. In the course of the fieldwork, my personal perception was that “being Bangladeshi in East London” for many people represented the status quo, with which people are fairly content and which is not being questioned. Nevertheless, interviews have supported previous research according to which Bangladeshis are economically disadvantaged.

Lastly, respondents were asked about the perceived strength of the general contact between the two ethnic groups (Bangladeshi and British). With a mean of 3.5 (out of 5) points, the result is rather neutral; 3.5 represents the middle of the scale (some contact), with half of the respondents indicating there was more than “some”, and the other half indicating there was less than “some” contact between the two largest ethnic groups in the borough.

The results on the perceived contact, too, allow us to assume that contact is mainly intra-ethnic, and suggests dense intra-ethnic networks.
4. Evaluation and discussion

We have seen that the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets is indeed a close-knit social network, in which ethnically Bangladeshi people are at the core, and people from other ethnic groups exist on the periphery of the network. This leads to Sylheti being the preferred language in the home/family domain; English is extensively used only outside home and only in specific contexts, for example in the formal “administration” sector.

However, both interethnic contact and language use are subject to changes over time. In particular, I have illustrated how language use changes in the family domain over time, and that this change is particularly noticeable in families with children. This is consistent with findings in the pilot study and provides further evidence for the hypothesis of an intra-family language shift which is emanates from children (see also Hamers and Blanc (2000)). I suggest that English is introduced into the family domain by children, and is subsequently and increasingly used in family discourse.

Furthermore, children influence interactional patterns in such a way that respondents with children show increasing contact with British people over time. While clear relationships cannot be proven statistically at this point, due to the small sample size, it seems reasonable to make the following assumptions: an increased contact with ethnically British people, and thus native speakers of English, seems to constitute a means to improve English language proficiency. This is supported by results of ethnographic interviews conducted with Bangladeshi residents in the borough. In particular people with children feel the need to learn English in order to communicate efficiently with native speakers of English, for example, children’s teachers, or in order to deal with administrative tasks better. At the same time, many interviewees stated a clear wish for increased contact with British people. From a long-term perspective, for social integration, it seems inevitable to respondents to establish interethnic contacts and good English proficiency.

A rather traditional distribution of roles within Bangladeshi families can account for the differences in interethnic contact between genders: it is indeed the women who primarily look after children, and, via schools, teachers and other (British) parents, have increased contact with British people, and thus a need to use English more frequently. During the ethnographic interviews, Bangladeshi parents specifically mentioned the need to learn English in order to “understand our children”.

Finally, the aspect of SEV has to be addressed. I have already discussed demographic, institutional and economic factors, and have suggested that despite socioeconomic disadvantage, the vitality of the Bangladeshi community is rather high. Giles et al. originally defined EV as

“that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and collective entity in intergroup relations” (Giles et al., 1977: 308).

Data analysis in this study has shown that the Bangladeshi community is a close-knit social entity with a high degree of intra-group interaction. Community life is mainly based on intraethnic interaction;
interaction with other ethnic groups is infrequent and only restricted to certain domains. In particular, data from both surveys suggests that interethnic contact is again divided into two patterns: contact with the dominant group, that is, ethnically British people, occurs more frequently than contact with any other ethnic group in the borough. That is, the Bangladeshi community seems to rarely interact with other minority groups in Tower Hamlets. In fact, considering the size of the Bangladeshi community and its presence in the borough – physically, socially and politically – it seems worth arguing that the Bangladeshi community is not necessarily a minority group in the traditional sense of being “inferior” to a “dominant” white British group. One may then suggest that Tower Hamlets has in fact two dominant ethnic groups: white British and Bangladeshi. Interaction patterns could be generally described as

1. Primarily intraethnic
2. between the two dominant groups
3. between dominant and minority groups

Data suggest that the vitality of the Bangladeshi community is relatively high; strong demographic and social factors and a close-knit internal organisation make the community appear as a collective entity, as defined by Giles. There is a tendency for English to be used increasingly, and I assume at this point that with increasing numbers of second and third generation children English will come to have a more and more important status, both inside the family domain and outside. Also, it seems reasonable to assume that (ethnic) identity is moving away from a traditional understanding; Eade (1997) suggests that identity cannot be easily defined for the second, UK born generation of Bangladeshis. However, given the strong demographic and social factors, it seems unlikely that the Bangladeshi community will disappear as a social entity within a foreseeable period of time.

Rather, it seems that within the next generations the social distance between two dominant groups in the borough, Bangladeshis and British, will become smaller. It seems reasonable to suggest that patterns of interactions will increase both quantitatively and qualitatively between second generation Bangladeshis and other ethnic groups.


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ii respondents’ L2 performance was measured for a separate study

iii AZ uses work/working not for referring to paid employment (as she is unemployed), but as a generic term for all types of activities she does in her spare time.

iv This by no means implies that men do not have any responsibility in the children’s upbringing.