

“She will control my son”: Navigating womanhood, English and social mobility in India

Katy Highet 

Department of Culture, Communication & Media, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

Correspondence

Katy Highet, Department of Culture, Communication & Media, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK
Email: k.highet@ucl.ac.uk

Funding information

ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship,
Grant/Award Number: ES/W006693/1

Abstract

Through its colonial, class- and caste-based history, English in India has come to be seen as a powerful resource that opens doors for those who ‘have’ it and holds back those who do not. For women, English ostensibly offers various promises in addition to employment: progressiveness and ‘empowerment’; and the potential for upward mobility through marriage. Yet, the conversion of English capital for English-speaking Indian women proves to be intensely complex in practice, as many find themselves forced to navigate between shifting moral regimes attached to ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in an NGO in Delhi that offers free English training to ‘disadvantaged youth’, this paper explores how English capital is managed by young women striving to attain middle classness through English, and how their class, caste and gender positionings are negotiated across particular time-space configurations as they seek to become English speakers.

KEYWORDS

English, ethnography, India, social mobility, womanhood

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सारांश

भारत में अपने उपनिवेश, वर्ग और वर्ण पर आधारित इतिहास के द्वारा अंग्रेजी एक प्रभावशाली संसाधन के रूप में देखी जाती है। एक ऐसा संसाधन जिसे प्राप्त करने पर दरवाजे खुल सकते हैं, और जिसे न प्राप्त करने पर प्रगति कठिन है। महिलाओं के लिए अंग्रेजी जाहिरा तौर पर नौकरी के अतिरिक्त प्रगति एवं सशक्तिकरण की संभावना पेश करती है। तथा विवाह के द्वारा सामाजिक गतिशीलता की संभावना पेश करती है। परन्तु व्यवहार में महिलाओं के लिए इस पूँजी का परिवर्तन अत्यंत जटिल है। अनेक महिलाएँ परंपरा और आधुनिकता की लगातार बदलती हुई नैतिक नीतिओ का संचालन करने पे मजबूर होती हैं। यह लेख दिल्ली के एक मुफ्त में अंग्रेजी पढ़ाने वाले NGO में किए हुए नृवंशविज्ञानिक अनुसंधान पर आधारित है। अंग्रेजी भाषी बनके सामाजिक गतिशीलता पामने का प्रयास करने वाली यह युवा महिलाएँ कैसे समय और स्थल के अनुसार अपने वर्ग, वर्ण, एवं लिंग का मोलभाव करती हैं, इसका बयान करता है।

Divya was a young divorcee who had returned from her marital home with her children to live with her mother not long before I arrived at the NGO. She attended the 10 am class and, like her peers, had been attending these free English classes for several months when I joined. This class was attended only by women, not by design – the NGO was co-educational – but because it better suited their schedules. Primarily housewives and mothers, the 10 am time meant they could send their children to school, do housework, come to class and return home in time to cook lunch. Divya ran a small shop with her mother, and they alone were responsible for supporting the family since her father was absent and her only sibling was chronically ill. She had joined the NGO in an attempt to find a more stable job, but with the shop and young children to care for, and nobody to help her with English, she struggled to make progress. One morning, the women were discussing how to practice their English at home, and Divya proudly recounted how she had recently overheard a young man speaking English on the phone in her shop. They chatted, and she gave him her number so that he could help her practice. As she told the class, she appeared visibly proud of herself. Her pride, in my eyes, was understandable. As she saw it, she had followed the rules laid out by the NGO – to constantly seek to self-improve, to be motivated, to keep learning (see Hight & Del Percio, 2021a).

And yet, judging from her crestfallen face upon the reaction of the other women, she did not get the support she expected. The other women were not impressed. Many shared glances of disapproval, others tutted loudly, some asked, with concerned looks, why she had offered her number to a man. She was chastised, it appeared to me, for behaving in ways that were not appropriate for a young (divorced) woman. She had transgressed expectations of how a young respectable woman should behave by offering her number to a man she barely knew, and thus any ‘value’ that she may have hoped to gain through such actions was overlooked.

Divya’s story provides insight into how many of the young women I met attempted to strategize through a web of clashing logics in order to provide themselves with more comfortable futures. As an English-teaching NGO, the women who had enrolled were there at least partly due to a belief that English was necessary for their (or their children’s) social mobility. But their attempts to shore up (or attain) a certain level of middle classness, as Divya’s unfortunate perceived misstep shows, were

always risky, at times engendering unwanted consequences. This risk, I will argue, is fundamentally rooted in discourses of middle classness, caste and gender.

The students were certainly not alone in understanding English as the key to a brighter future: the colonial, class- and caste-based history of the language has shaped English across India as the language of reason, education, money and progress. However, as I will demonstrate, discourses of English as a form of powerful capital conceal the dynamic fluctuations and (re)valuations of English as it is mobilised by particular speakers at particular moments. Taking a cue from Tupas, I argue for a deeper interrogation of how the valuation and conversion of English capital is ‘inextricably embedded in the lives of [...] speakers’ (2020, p. 237). To do this, I explore the struggles that young women face in their pursuit of middle classness through the acquisition of English as they attempt to manage their newly acquired capital, focusing particularly on how the valuation of their capital shifts across the different spatio-temporal configurations in which they move and from which they and others interpret their practices, and in co-articulation with interanimating (Chun, 2019) discourses of caste, class and gender. In doing so, I demonstrate how these young women find themselves enmeshed in complex (and often contradictory) discourses that emerge from the colonial and neoliberal framings of ‘English’, and disputed notions of femininity, modernity and tradition among the heterogeneous Indian middle classes.

1 | ENGLISH AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

While the widely circulating discourse of English as a powerful resource finds its roots in British colonial occupation, it has been further exacerbated by the new economic laws of the 1990s. The neoliberalisation of education in India has been particularly sharp, heralded as it is as a driver of the new economy (Chakravarti, 2013). Following these reforms, there has been a boom in private English-medium schools and coaching institutes to meet the growing demand for access to the language (Fernandes, 2006). This privatisation of education as ‘big business’ has led to a readjustment of education, as it shifts towards becoming ‘an arena of individual achievement and economic success’ (Chakravarti, 2013, p. 42). Through this transformation, students are ‘rethought as entrepreneurial selves who make rational choices’ (Zimmermann & Flubacher, 2017, p. 209), and are responsible for managing their own success through the continuous acquisition of commodifiable skills (Urciuoli, 2008) such as English. Within this framing, accountability is shifted away from social inequalities or state failures and placed squarely on the shoulders of the flexible, competitive, individual (English-speaking) actor.

In the NGO, the shared belief that English would be their ‘escape’ was ever-present. Many shared anecdotes of acquaintances failing to secure jobs due to their lack of English; several recounted rumours of English speakers with no qualifications being hired on the spot. Here, English capital is coveted as the ‘key to material success in the modern world’ (Park, 2011, p. 443), and English incompetence is framed as ‘the only thing holding people back from enjoying the benefits of globalization: upward mobility, better jobs, social betterment, and movement into a “better” culture’ (Proctor, 2014, p. 307). Constructed as such, the problem of social inequality can be ‘ostensibly easily rectified’ (ibid) – English language training can allegedly provide one with the necessary capital to exchange for further economic, cultural and symbolic capital necessary for social mobility. In other words, in such discourses, ‘rather than overcoming inequality, individuals just need to work to appear to be on the right side of the divide – and it is language that promises to do this work, irrelevant of other social categories or dynamics’ (Kraft & Flubacher, 2020, p.3). As one student in the NGO told me, *English is my key*.

Liberalisation brought into play not only shifts in economic policies but also ‘set into motion a broader shift in national political culture’ and sparked ‘changing trends in consumption practices, lifestyles, and aspirations’ (Fernandes, 2006, p. 29) which shaped notions of new middle classness.

Within this, English is perceived as a crucial component in strategising for upward mobility, as access to English remains embedded in the formation of class boundaries. As a 'structural marker of middle class identity', English provides cultural distinction as well as access to the new economy and skilled jobs (ibid, p.69), and the embrace of English as a middle-class pursuit demonstrates a 'relationship to an outside, an external world that is represented alternatively in varying contexts as Westernized, Western, or global' (ibid). The middle classes, however, are far from homogenous, and many scholars are dubious about narratives that claim liberalisation resulted 'in a massively expanded, homogenous mass of wealthy, Indian middle classes' (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2009, p. 2; Fernandes, 2006). However, while the heterogeneity of the middle classes is widely addressed in the literature, the role of gender and its interanimation (Chun, 2019) with class and caste remains relatively underacknowledged (although see Nakassis, 2016 and Hall, 2019, 2021).

While acknowledging the importance of its material foundations, this paper considers class not as 'a social category or empirical condition' but rather 'a cultural project or practice' (Liechty, 2003, p. 21) and, following Donner and De Neve, emphasises the 'everyday practices and idioms through which middle-classness is constructed and expressed' (2011, p.11). Middle classness, as a process, 'must be performed, narrated and put on display in order to become' (Brosius, 2010, p. 263; Liechty, 2003) and is thus always 'in the making' (Donner & De Neve, 2011, p. 13). In this way, we see how access to the middle classes requires more than money, but rather depends also on the acquisition of 'linguistic and aesthetic knowledge and respectability' (Fernandes, 2006, p. 33). In line with Bourdieu's (1977) habitus, this extends equally to embodied practices, to the use of the body while navigating certain spaces: a visible unease with an escalator in a mall is not only an indication of a lack of familiarity, but rather 'marks one's body as incongruous with the very spaces and practices that define the new middle class' (McGuire, 2011, p. 132). As such, aspirational youth invest in a wide range of commodities and practices as a strategy for mobility. For many, this means investing time and money in various forms of cultural capital, a key element of which is coaching centres that offer 'personality development' training (often alongside English) which encompasses a wide range of practices, from style and taste to manners and bodily movement (Highet & Del Percio, 2021b; McGuire, 2013) to ostensibly help students obtain the *savoir-faire* required 'to conform to the cultural standard of the new liberalizing middle class' (Fernandes, 2006, p. 96). Yet, as the concepts of 'speculative' (Duchêne & Daveluy, 2015) and 'fluctuating' (Hassemer & Garrido, 2020) capital demonstrate, English cannot guarantee returns. On the contrary, as we will see, the conversion of English capital is dependent on a whole host of intersecting factors that can only be grasped through a focus on the speaker and the conditions in which she finds herself. As I seek to demonstrate, for young Indian women who are aspiring to middle classness, converting English capital into other forms of cultural, economic or symbolic capital proves to be intensely complex in practice.

2 | ENGLISH AND WOMANHOOD

For women, English ostensibly offers various additional promises. First, through its ideological alignment with liberalism and modernity (Durrani, 2012), English offers progressiveness and 'empowerment' – a discourse heavily rooted in what Deshpande calls 'the fallacy of equating Indian tradition with patriarchy and oppression and Western exposure (especially the influence of British colonialism) with modernity and progress' (2011, p. 141). Second, English is perceived to provide the potential for upward mobility through marriage (Chatterjee & Schluter, 2020). Indeed, as Sandhu argues, English-medium brides are often perceived as 'economically a better prospect' (2018, p. 64), which further exacerbates 'the subordination already operational in the patriarchally constrained lives' (ibid, p. 75)

of Hindi-medium educated women, and can result in spousal contempt or even social ostracism for those unable to demonstrate good competency in the language (ibid).

In tandem with the perceived economic advantages, in certain spaces, English is deeply intertwined with femininity. In Chidsey's ethnographic study of prestigious English-medium girls' schools, participants recounted feeling pressure to speak (only) English and to understate their abilities in Hindi, not only as a means to 'embody English language prestige' (2018, p. 42) but also as part of a gendered performance, as they had to 'mediate or balance displays of class and "appropriate" femininity with linguistic practices deemed "cool" among their peers', including the use of local languages, slang and profanities, for which the boys were not so heavily policed (ibid, pp. 49–50). As such, using English is embedded not only within class projects, but equally within idealised social types of (upper middle class) femininity (see also Hall, 2021). Such a project works by drawing on colonial ideologies that construe colonial languages as more refined, less vulgar (Fanon, 1967), thus allowing their speakers to embody these characteristics. We see here a tension emerge from what Inoue (2004, p. 40) refers to as 'national modernity' in which women become the 'embodiment of the nation's past and tradition' and men 'of the present and "progress"'. Here, too, "'pure" uncontaminated feminine speech' (ibid) is valorised, but this time, through English – the language of 'progress' – as opposed to languages more commonly collocated with 'tradition', such as Hindi. This illustrates the contradiction between the global modernity associated with English and the imagined role of Indian women, a contradiction which, as we will see, proves difficult to navigate for the young women who move through spaces in which the value of these opposing visions of the nation (and their associated languages) are differently weighted depending on how they are perceived to align with notions of either modernity or corrupted morality (Hall, 2019).

Of course, the policing of young middle-class women's behaviour is not only restricted to speech, but rather extends to the entire semiotic packaging of womanhood, including the spaces in which they can move, their interactions with men, and clothing. As Nakassis argues in his exploration of 'style' (of which English is one component) amongst male college students in South India, these dynamics are not in-existent amongst their female peers but are more constrained for women, as the associations that make up the pragmatics of 'style' are 'resolutely problematic for normative femininity' (2016, p.15). This, he argues, is due to how 'the control and containment of the young woman's body, and her sexuality more particularly, underwrite the patriarchal economies and hierarchies of men's status and respectability that *style* plays with, undermines and refashions' (ibid). Women's relationship with *style* is thus an ambivalent one, as they have to contend with a delicate balancing of markers of homeliness and tradition vs. boldness and modernity (ibid, p. 181). These 'ideological sites of tension and contradiction' (ibid) are difficult to reconcile and must be continually managed. On the one hand, then, we have certain young (elite) women feeling a social pressure to align with English in order to successfully perform femininity; on the other hand, we have other (non-elite) women paying careful attention to their alignment with English (and other markers of 'style'), precisely for fear of not adhering to 'appropriate' femininity.

All of this points to the very careful dance which many young women must learn to perform – a dance choreographed around notions of caste, class, colonialism and gender – in which the steps are ever-shifting and need to be continually negotiated across time and space. For Chidsey's (2018) participants in an elite English-medium school, where, one could argue, their class positions are relatively stable, it is the use of Hindi (or certain 'vulgar' uses) that threatens the young girls' performances of femininity. As we will see, for the students (and teachers) at the NGO, the indexicality of English and Hindi (and all of their associated semiotic features) entailed different and shifting moral evaluations that were highly dependent on the different spaces in which women were engaging in such practices. In the

NGO, speaking English also indexes alignments with modernity and progressiveness, but here, these stances sit uncomfortably with certain expectations of 'traditional' womanhood that are tied to class and caste. As young women aspiring to middle classness, the risks inherent to their alignment with English was an ever-present concern, and they found themselves in complex, contradictory situations that they were forced to negotiate carefully for fear of negative consequences. Thus, this paper seeks to dismantle widely circulating discourses of English as a 'powerful vehicle of socio-economic mobility' (Jayadeva, 2018) through a focus on the dynamic fluctuation of English across the particular spaces in which these young women move – and through which they and others evaluate behaviour – and in tandem with competing logics of class, caste and gender that they simultaneously have to navigate.

3 | METHODOLOGY

To explore the complexity of English, social mobility and womanhood in India, I draw on ethnographic data collected over 4 months (2018–2019) at one branch of a large NGO in Delhi which provides a year of free English and personality development training to 'disadvantaged' students as part of drive to combat un(der)employment. The courses are open to anyone over the age of 15, and students attend daily (Monday–Saturday) 1 h 45 min sessions. The sessions are run by 'facilitators', all of whom are Indian, and many, such as Rupal, who I introduce in the next section, were also previously students at the NGO. The majority of the students in this branch hailed from families that encountered financial difficulties, with parents (predominantly fathers) engaging in work that ranged from governmental clerical work and accountancy to rickshaw driving and daily wage labour.

Located on the outskirts of Delhi, close to the Haryana border, the area was rarely frequented by tourists, but it was a notable hub for coaching centres, with posters pasted across every spare piece of wall advertising 'tiffin' (packed lunch/dinner) services or guest houses for the numerous students who relocate from areas outside Delhi to attend one of the many (also widely advertised) paid coaching institutes that train students for highly competitive university entrance exams (which the NGO students could not afford). Education is, of course, not the only reason for the huge migration into Delhi from other states. As the capital city, with a booming tourist trade, growing industries and a constant need for labour, Delhi attracts one of the highest numbers of intra-national migration. While the majority of the NGO students were born and raised in Delhi, many of their (grand)parents had migrated there from other states, notably Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Although migration is common throughout India, there is a particular 'promise' to Delhi, as those seeking work, training and education arrive from smaller cities, villages or less prosperous states in the hope of improving their lives and futures. But, while the city 'represents the promise of freedom and opportunity' in 'the modern imaginary', the deep layers of inequality across Delhi are stark (Heller et al., 2015, p. 1) as massive wealth stands alongside extreme poverty, and all that is in between. As such, the particular location of this branch – as a spatially and symbolically 'between-place' on the outskirts of Delhi – provides an especially interesting vantage point for exploring how young women investing in English seek to manage their newly acquired cultural capital and its dynamic fluctuations.

4 | ENGLISH AS FLUCTUATING CAPITAL

When I met Rupal, one of the facilitators, she was an unmarried woman in her early twenties. She had completed her education at a Hindi-medium government¹ school in Delhi and, shortly after, joined the

NGO as a student to improve her English after struggling with it at school. She excelled on the course and was invited to undergo in-house training to become a facilitator 3 years before I arrived. Rupal was in many ways a poster child for the NGO. Although she was from the 'highest caste' (Brahmin), she and her older sisters had grown up in poverty.² Her mother had never attended school, her father had left education at 15, and for most of Rupal's childhood, her parents worked in a factory for 'like I remember 20 rupees per day it was/ I don't know/ means/ it was so low'. Her elder sister dropped out of school at 14 and joined their parents in the factory so that Rupal could continue her education, reasoning that, in Rupal's voicing, 'if she learns, the youngest one, so maybe she can take us to the bright future'. As teenagers, Rupal and another sister began offering tuition to younger peers alongside their own school education, and the family's rather dire financial situation eventually began to shift. In 2018, when I met Rupal, her parents ran a small tailoring shop, and her work as an English teacher contributed enormously to the family income. Rupal was the only English-speaking member of her family and, as she told me, her wider community too: 'even in my whole village only I am the girl who speaks English'. The pride that both she and her family felt was palpable in the stories she told. She recounted to me an anecdote from her parents' shop in which she demonstrated the perceived surprise that 'foreigners' showed when they realised that she could speak English:

Extract 1 (see Appendix 1 for transcription conventions)

1	So my mother quickly she calls me that please come here somebody wants
2	something/so they ask// it's just a normal thing that they are asking the
3	prices but my parents don't understand/ they call me and then they/so over
4	there those people who talk in English they get surprised/ so when I come
5	and I talk to them in English I communicate so/ as they see my parents that
6	they are selling something and then they get surprised that/ oho (smile
7	voice) nice here your daughter is speaking in English

While encountering English speakers at a range of levels across various spaces in India is hardly a rare occurrence for tourists, scholars have documented the persistence of colonial stereotypes that paint Indians as unable to speak English competently (e.g., in call centre interactions (Pal & Buzzanell, 2013)). However, in Rupal's interpretation, the surprise does not only arise from her Indianness. With the interjection 'oho' (used to express surprise, wonder), accompanied by a widening of the eyes and a sing-song voice, and the use of deixis ('here' and 'your daughter'), Rupal demonstrates her interpretation of the customers' surprise as emanating from a spatial and embodied juxtaposition of English skills with the market seller, which is class, race and gender infused: *they* didn't expect *me* to be speaking English *here*. Thus, Rupal recognises not only the economic capital of her English skills (through becoming a teacher), but also the potential for symbolic capital through prestige.

Rupal was understandably very proud of becoming an English speaker against the odds. She spoke to me at length of the benefits that she perceives English to have provided for her. In addition to the pride that she and her family feel through her new categorisation as 'English speaker', as a young woman of marriageable age, she also knew that her English capital could have further material benefits: it could be deployed to negotiate a 'better' husband. A short while before we met, her parents had been searching for a husband for her older sister. When they found a potentially suitable match, they learned that the man's family was also searching for second woman to marry his brother, and they were interested in Rupal. However, Rupal's parents refused this offer of marriage on her behalf because the male suitor, educated to secondary school level, did not speak English:

Extract 2

1	He didn't know English and he was just 12th pass [completed secondary
2	school] and I knew English and I was graduated [from college] but he was at the same
3	age of mine/ so when they asked my father told no/ my my
4	daughter is an English teacher/ so they [Rupal's parents] denied by
5	themselves/ like no/no/ that she is so educated

English and her education confer to Rupal a privileged status, and this capital can be used as a card to play when seeking a partner in an arranged marriage. Indeed, as Chatterjee and Schluter note, language plays a key role for women in upward mobility through marriage in India, particularly when women are lacking in other 'concrete skills and activities that are exchanged for material profit' (2020, p. 74). In the context of Kolkata, where the 'strong influence of gender roles that link women with household duties further diminishes the likelihood of women's social mobility in Kolkata through an earned income' (ibid), they argue that the practice of marriage as a form of social mobility for women is widespread and is thus one of the ways in which English can become a 'powerful resource' (ibid). For Rupal, her status as an English teacher accorded her a certain leverage that her sister was not able to draw on in these marital negotiations, despite being from the same family. However, immediately after this comment, Rupal shows how her capital becomes unstable when it meets ideologies of gender. She describes the reaction of another man's parents, who did not agree to her marriage with their son, precisely because she speaks English:

Extract 3

1	Rupal:	and there are differences// one/ er it happened two times/ they said er like
2		no/ she is so educated/ our son will be under/ under her only/ because she
3		knows English and er she is educated/ so she will like she will control my er
4		my son like/ she will not allow him to do anything else/ she will like order
5	Katy:	oh really
6	Rupal:	yes (smiles) it happens here/ so if the girl is so educated more educated
7		than/ like if the girl is educated more than husband/ so it happens/ so like
8		people think oh she is more educated like she has a lot of knowledge than
9		you so they don't ask the husband they ask to the wife only (smiles)
10	Katy:	Hmm hmm
11	Rupal:	so that er then again then jealousy starts
12	Katy:	= right right right
13	Rupal:	= coming
14		then the husband feels disrespect/ yes I think it will happen like that and one
15		family was there they said no er/ she knows English and our son doesn't
16		know anything and then they were blaming their son only that why didn't
17		you learn anything
18	Katy:	ooh
19	Rupal:	the girl is going from our hand like that she is/ nice girl everything she
20		knows/ cooking and everything she knows so they were blaming// blaming
21		him only
22	Katy	(laughs)
23	Rupal:	it happened two times right

Here, we see the English capital that Rupal wields fluctuate across interactions with different families. In the first anecdote, (lines 1–4), her English capital loses its leverage. This does not mean that speaking English has no value in this space. Quite the opposite – superiority is granted to Rupal as an English speaker through the process of fractal recursivity (Irvine & Gal, 2000), by which the indexical relationship of English-speaking classes and superiority at a national level is reproduced, positioning her as superior within her particular social class. This poses to her non-English speaking suitor the threat of losing face if his wife has the upper hand: ‘the husband feels disrespect’ (lines 11–14). With the indexicality of English speakers as modern and well educated, Rupal is positioned as a woman who may refuse to follow patriarchal norms, and thus as a potentially controlling, un-submissive wife. The rejection reflects how, for some, English is not a celebrated torchbearer of progress, but rather ‘a carrier of moral decay’ (Hall, 2019, p. 498) that poses a threat to ‘tradition’ (and, here most explicitly, to ‘traditional’ expectations of wifehood). Importantly, the traditional expectations of womanhood and wifehood evoked here are deeply embedded in Rupal’s caste position. As mentioned, Rupal belongs to the ‘highest’ caste – Brahmins – for whom the policing of women’s virtue and chastity has historically been heightened in order to ensure their endogamous reproduction and therefore ‘purity’ (Chakravarti, 1993, p. 579; see also Velaskar, 2016). This policing extends to a wide range of practices, from vegetarianism and menstruation taboos to moral values and social interactions. A Brahmin woman is traditionally expected to be demure and chaste (ibid), and anything that may index a deviation from this, such as an alignment with English, is potentially threatening. In Rupal’s own family, she acknowledges how her parents have allowed her more interactional freedom than her sisters. She described how, had she not joined the NGO and pursued English, her life may have been very different, ‘because my parents also didn’t allow earlier like my sisters they never went out/ I’m the only girl who came out who is talking to boys like this/ who is teaching’. In Rupal’s understanding, her pursuit of English and, through this, a ‘bright future’ is what has allowed her parents to justify their relaxation of behavioural expectations by letting Rupal interact with men outside the home. It is nevertheless risky, because the acquisition of English, and how she mobilises this for economic gain, sit uncomfortably alongside certain valued aspects of Brahminical womanhood and wifehood that Rupal may well be expected to adhere to by the family of her future husband. The point here is certainly not to imply that Brahmin women bear the brunt of misogyny in India – as many have shown, poor, Dalit women occupy the most acutely abused and disenfranchised positions in Indian society (Deshpande, 2011). Rather, what I seek to highlight here is how Rupal’s English capital fluctuates through its interanimation (Chun, 2019) with discourses of womanhood. These discourses are, in turn, indissociable from both her class and caste positions, as she seeks to reinforce her middle-class aspirations through the acquisition of English, but in doing so, must monitor her adherence to norms of Brahminical middle-class femininity in order to mobilise her caste capital. As we will see, this careful adherence to feminine respectability is particularly acute for those aspiring to middle classness, due to their insecure class position and their relative inability to ‘effectively communicate their middle-class status through material goods’ (Gilbertson 2014, pp. 137–38).

In the latter part of the extract (lines 14–20), Rupal relays comments from another man’s family who also dismissed her as an appropriate match because she speaks English. This time, however, the other family acknowledges her morally laden, gendered virtues that she has been able to demonstrate (‘nice girl’; ‘cooking’) which index her suitability as a wife, thereby alleviating any suspicion that may have been aroused by her proximity to English. In Rupal’s retelling, this second family are therefore disappointed, but firm in their understanding that their son is not a good enough match *for her*. She is the girl who has everything – she adheres to tradition while being educated and fluent in English – and the parents of the prospective suitor berate him for his relative lack of achievements (lines 16–17). Reactions from potential in-laws to Rupal’s qualities and virtues are thus constantly shifting: she cannot

be sure of the uptake of her English capital as it fluctuates across interactions and interanimates with other moral and ideological orders. This fluctuation, which has produced material problems for Rupal that she needs to navigate as she seeks a partner, is demonstrative of the ongoing tensions over what modernity means to the heterogeneous Indian middle classes, with their conflicting interests, values and visions for the Indian nation, and how this is embedded within language.

Rupal's capital is thus not only speculative (Duchêne & Daveluy, 2015), but also fluctuating (Hassemer & Garrido, 2020): it gains and loses value across time and space as it interanimates with other discourses – particularly, here, Brahminical patriarchal discourses of what constitutes a 'good' wife. Much like the case of Arabic in Hassemer and Garrido's study, the indexicalities attributed to English and English speakers 'encompass cultural and professional values with both positive and negative symbolic and material consequences that go beyond straightforward capital conversion' (2020, p. 138). Thus, we see the ostensibly straightforward discursive construction of English as capital unravel as its speakers, with their social positionings and life trajectories, attempt to put it into practice, and are forced to negotiate its shifting value, its 'enabling and hindering potential' (ibid, p. 157).

Rupal has quite the balancing act on her hands. When I left the NGO, she was undertaking a teaching degree, and was hoping to complete this before her parents found her a suitable husband. She knew they respected her wishes, and that she would have the final say, but she was glad that their attention was focused for the moment on her older unmarried sister for whom finding a husband was a bigger priority. Rupal was unsure of what her future had in store but was nonetheless adamant that her training and experience would allow her to retain some financial independence. Worried that her future in-laws would object to her continuing to work full-time, she had prepared several contingency plans such as offering home tuition. As such, Rupal demonstrates a keen awareness of the contradictory nature of the multiple logics at play, in particular how neoliberal discourses of freedom and liberation through English clash with her lived experience, and she tempers her hope in ways that allow her to exercise agency within the confines of a patriarchal system.

5 | BETWEEN *UNMODERN* AND *TOO MODERN*

Rupal and Divya's stories demonstrate the challenges faced by (certain) Indian women in their pursuit of English, and the careful art of striking a balance. One misstep, as we have seen, can engender social and material consequences. These women thus often find themselves forced to navigate a tightrope walk between what we could loosely term as the 'un-modern' (lack of English skills) and the 'too modern' (deviation from moralised 'traditional' norms of woman/wifedom). While this appeared a more pressing issue for the women who were already married or were in the process of negotiating a marriage, it also arose in different forms for the teenage girls. Shama, a Brahmin student, was in her final year of school and was attending the NGO to reinforce her English skills so that she could get a place at university. She attended the local government (i.e., not fee-paying) school but had been enrolled in their English-medium section since 6th grade. When I asked her to tell me about herself, she told me she was from Bihar, a state around 1000 km south-east of Delhi, later referring to this as her 'hometown', that is, where her parents migrated from, although she was born and raised in Delhi:

Extract 4

1	Katy:	and what is that hometown like/ tell me about that place
2	Shama:	hometown
3	Katy:	yeah

(Continues)

4	Shama:	er like er have you seen in TV like er/ greenery everywhere greenery there
5		are not/ there are buildings but not like Delhi and there are you know very
6		less pollutions and when you go there you forget your er problems and
7		stress you do enjoy a lot
8	Katy:	hmmm
9	Shama:	because there are so many/ er I have so many friends there those are er
10		really good like they have you know honesty/ here we have competitions
11		of every/ means like in school I have friends but/ we do competition from
12		each other but there is no competition/ means we play anything/ and I
13		don't feel shamed also/ here if we wear anything like suit salwar and all
14		people think yeah she is not literate like this by wearing they judge people/
15		but at home whatever you want you can wear like I like to wear <i>payal</i> do
16		you know <i>payal</i>
17	Katy:	no/ what is that
18	Shama:	er like er we we wear it like/ like here we wear (points at my ankle)
19	Katy:	It's/ what for your feet or// oh like a bracelet er anklet
20	Shama:	= yeah like
21	Katy:	= ok yeah
22	Shama:	anklet yeah so there I can er wear means wear so many people wear so I
23		also can
24	Katy:	hm and what do you mean people erm judge you here if you wear things
25	Shama:	= see
26	Katy:	= like that
27	Shama:	at my/ you know/ not so many people/ like at school if I wear anything//
28		which thing I really like so my friend will say you/ that day I saw you you
29		were you were wearing suit salwar and all then I feel very bad because
30		they/ means I also wear jeans top and all/ but I want to wear that thing
31		also so (x)
32	Katy:	but what do they think about you if you're wearing salwar kameez and all//
33		what is the problem with that
34	Shama:	no/ there is no problem but they think that she is from like/ their family
35		didn't /don't give don't give too much/don't give me freedom for wearing
36		anything so they think like that

Shama begins with a contrastive image, in which she compares her 'hometown' with Delhi, evoking rural images through her repetition of 'greenery, everywhere greenery' and the reported relative lack of 'buildings' and 'pollutions', *contra* Delhi. Through this, she invokes two contrasting spatio-temporal configurations, or chronotopes, to which she aligns herself differently: Delhi is pollution, buildings and stress; her hometown is nature and enjoyment. These contrasting configurations emerge from 'the ideology of colonial modernity [which] posited a duality between the city and country' (Kaviraj, 1997, p. 84). Drawing on Williams (1973), Heller and McElhinny describe how, through the enlightenment period, tensions between nationalism and romanticism were spatialised and temporalized, and the city 'was seen as modern, civilized, progressive, sophisticated, and exciting; it is fully in the present. But it is also dangerous, possibly corrupt, a difficult place for a person to find a mooring' (2017, p. 111). Conversely, the countryside is 'pure, close to nature, rooted, and living in some timeless past [...] But it is also backward and simple, pre-modern, possibly somewhat stupid' (ibid). Such chronotopic configurations are not only spatiotemporal but are 'peopled by particular social types and associated

with specific moral norms' (Agha, 2007, p. 321). Indeed, as I demonstrate elsewhere, the chronotope of the village was often invoked in students' interviews: Sakshi, a young woman a few years older than Shama, dreamt of returning to her family's village one day to open an English language school, which she understood as a way to change their 'narrow-minded' thinking around what she described as oppressive patriarchal norms (Hight & Del Percio, 2021b). We see then how, within this chronotopic packaging, language too becomes an integral component of the associated social types and ensuing moral judgments. Narrowing down the broader contrastive chronotope, Shama takes us from the wider setting of Delhi to her school, which we see framed as a place of 'competition' and shame' where people 'judge', and which is marked as standing in contrast with her hometown as a place of 'honesty' and 'play'. Unlike Sakshi, Shama does not invoke languages explicitly. She does, however, do this implicitly through reference to her school – we recall that Shama studies in the English-medium section of her government school. Thus, while left implicit in the extract, language – or more specifically, English – is nevertheless coarticulated in the packaging of social types and social behaviours that form the spatio-temporal configurations that she discursively differentiates.

Moving between the contrasted worlds that Shama evokes has resulted in negative affective responses, as she feels 'shamed' when embracing behaviour associated with the hometown within the context of her English-medium school, another time-space in which particular participation frameworks and figures of personhood are constructed. In other words, it is within and through the spatio-temporal conditions of one chronotope (her English-medium section of her government school in Delhi) that the chronotope of the village is 'produced, interpreted, and evaluated' (Karimzad & Catedral, 2021, p.20). This interpretative and evaluative work is enacted upon two particular objects that form part of the chronotope of the village – the *suit salwar* and *payal* – which become indicative of stance alignments that entail particular moral judgments that Shama has to carefully navigate within her school, but which she claims she is free to wear without judgment in her hometown. The 'suit salwar' refers to the *salwar kameez*, a popular suit composed of trousers and a *kurta* (tunic), often accompanied by a *dupatta* (shawl), and worn commonly in North India. As Bahl (2005) writes, the indexicality of the *salwar kameez* is dynamic, as it takes on more 'modern' tones when contrasted with other 'traditional' attire for women such as the *sari* but is read as distinctly less 'modern' or 'progressive' than 'western wear' such as jeans. To wear 'jeans top' is thus to index an alignment with modernity. Nevertheless, the semiotics of the *salwar kameez*, and indeed of other clothing options for young Indian women, are highly contextual and dependent on their combination with a range of other semiotised markers, such as a particular haircut or the choice of accessories and, of course, the particular chronotopic configuration. The shifting semiosis of the *salwar kameez*, then, is what induces the feeling of 'shame' for Shama. Through the perspective of the chronotope of the school, the *salwar kameez* is configured as belonging to the village, and thus indexically mapped onto moral judgments of 'village' women – here, in terms of illiteracy and oppressive parental control. While, for Shama, these clothes are what she 'really likes' to wear, she does not feel comfortable doing so in this space: it does not align with the personhoods configured within the chronotope of the 'modern' English-medium Delhi school. Shama is careful to remind me that she *does* wear 'jeans top' (indeed, she was wearing this for the interview), thereby reinforcing her claims to modernity, but she also acknowledges how her agency is compromised, as to embrace 'traditional' clothes is to indexically signal a departure from the English-Medium social type in her school and thus risk entailing judgment from her friends. Of course, fretting over what is 'cool' is often an unfortunate rite of passage for teenagers. Adolescence is a salient moment of exploring identity and belonging, of learning to navigate between styles and orient to differentiated communities of practice, of which clothing is often an integral part (Eckert, 1989). But, while teenage anxieties over fashion choices are not out of the ordinary, the categorisations through which young people 'claim space for their experience of the world and their identification with parts of that world'

(Van Wessel, 2011, p. 104) are ‘rooted in broader social differences and index class through reference to gendered patterns of behaviour and style, educational pursuits and moral assumptions’ (ibid).

On the surface, Shama’s dilemma appears to be a dichotomous pull between the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional’, discursively represented through chronotopes of the village and the city/the English-medium school and the social practices contained within these spatio-temporal configurations. However, as Bahl argues, ‘any style of dress is not inherently either “traditional” or “modern”, but rather is a product of the historical process within which these labels are assigned’ (2005, p. 115). In the 1970s, certain traditional wear came to be repackaged as ‘ethnic chic’ (Tarlo, 1996) as ‘western’ fashion became more widely available, and elite populations sought to differentiate themselves through adopting ‘village dress’ as ‘a statement of “high” fashion’ (Bahl, 2005, p. 103). Of course, however, practices of distinction which have re-semiotised ‘traditional’ wear as elegant, high-class, and modernised are not ubiquitous – rather, this process is dependent upon the body that wears the dress: ‘for the real village women, who were and are wearing their routine village dress, the stigma of “backward and illiterate” remained intact’ (ibid). Thus, *who Shama is* (i.e., how other various semiotic markers – including language – coarticulate her location in a particular class-caste nexus at particular moments) when she is wearing the *salwar kameez* is extremely important. Given her aspirational (precarious) middle-class status, the *salwar kameez* is not read on her body as ‘ethnic chic’ (and therefore modern) but rather, she is read as an unmodern subject by her peers who likely struggle with similar anxieties around their own aspirational class status. This, in turn, has consequences on the uptake of her language practices, as the ability to perform associated class behaviours informs the interpretation and perception of her English skills (Jayadeva, 2018, p. 605).

6 | DISCUSSION

The stories of Divya, Rupal and Shama shed light on the complex discursive webs that young women must negotiate in the pursuit of social mobility through English. Despite following the modern imperative to speak English and become an entrepreneurial learner, they found themselves at times penalised for their efforts – for Divya by the other women learning English alongside her, for Rupal, by the family of a prospective husband, and for Shama, by her English-medium peers. While clothing rarely came up in conversations with Rupal, the push-and-pull between the ‘jeans top’ and the ‘suit salwar’ for Shama illustrates in many ways the same tensions that Rupal encountered through the shifting semiotics of her displayed English skills. This balance that they have to negotiate is thus both highly personal (imbricated as it is in the performance of the self) and a shared condition for young Indian women whose class status is precarious, and who seek to consolidate it through proximity to English speakerhood (Highet & Del Percio, 2021b). As Gilbertson writes, the performance of middle-class respectability places demands upon women to adopt a particularly careful balance between ‘respectable but not backward, conservative or orthodox; open-minded and “in touch” with global trends, but not too “fast” or overly “Westernized”’ (2014, p. 124). As such, clothing choices – as semiotic markers – become key sites of performance and (dis)alignment towards shifting concepts of modernity and tradition, and thus require ‘constant self-regulation and monitoring’ (ibid, p. 155) from women in order to ‘position their practices as simultaneously conforming to the polarized categories of traditional and modern’ (Mount, 2017, p. 168). English, as we have seen, becomes the terrain through which they must navigate these competing forces of middle-class aspirations and traditional (caste- and class-based) gender expectations. This balancing act is made evermore contingent by the instability of categories of femininity, tradition and modernity: what is ‘backward’ for one, may be ‘traditional’ for another; what is ‘dishonourable’ for one may be ‘cosmopolitan’ for another (Gilbertson, 2014). Thus, young women have to

retain a constant vigilance to the shifting spatio-temporal contexts in which they move, which entail shifts in normative behavioural expectations and constraints (Blommaert & De Fina, 2017; see also Karimzad & Catedral, 2021), and subsequently carefully tailor their (dis)alignments in order to avoid undesirable social consequences, even if this means choosing not to wear the clothes that they feel most comfortable in, or giving up their profession.

This paper has sought to contribute to scholarship on language, class and gender by displaying their inherent co-articulation, which complicates our understandings of language as capital. For these young women, who find themselves at the locus of patriarchy, colonialism, neoliberalism, class and caste, their middle classness must be constantly discursively achieved, which they manage more or less successfully. In other words, their middle classness is not produced in isolation, but rather takes on meaning in articulation with 'other systems of social stratification' (Hall, 2021, p.307) which renders their performances at times unstable. Taking a cue from Chun's (2019) theorisation of interanimation I have demonstrated the semiotic dynamism of these women's language practices as they have been shown to be interpreted differently across different spaces in which these women move: in spaces that make claims to 'eliteness' their use of English can work to 'feminise' them and make them appear modern and progressive; in other spaces, their proximity to English-ness can index a rejection of tradition and particular caste and class-infused constructions of womanhood and wifeness. As I have argued, these interpretations depend upon the particular spatio-temporal configurations in which these young women engage in English practices but also, importantly, hinge upon the entire embodied performance – that is, the presentation of their English skills in combination with a range of other semiotic markers on display that index alignment (or not) to appropriate middle classness. For Rupal, the interpretation of her English skills was seen to shift according to how well she could perform other valued aspects of wifeness such as cooking. For Shama, it was not enough to simply demonstrate English competency – she must also extend this performance to, among other practices, her clothing choices. Even while she speaks in English, if she is dressed in a *salwar kameez* and *payal*, she remains, through the eyes of her English-medium peers, a 'village girl' – uneducated and oppressed. Both women are learning to balance this, to choose who they want to be seen as – and it takes much more than English. Against a background of tensions over the definition of the Indian nation – and particularly with the rise of right-wing Hindu nationalism and all of its associated patriarchy (Banaji, 2018; Narayanan, 2019) – these young women must remain constantly alert, as they attempt to manage a series of (often contradictory) regimes of value and morality, regimes which most certainly will continue to be re-negotiated and reshaped. For the moment, Shama is still a teenager, and thoughts of marriage and career remain relegated to an (albeit near) future: it remains to be seen how she will manage such practices in her own romantic relationships and professional pursuits.

When viewed from this interanimating perspective, which emphasises the co-articulation, dynamism and instability of these social processes, we can see the limited use of 'capital' to capture these women's experiences with English – at least, in how the concept tends to be deployed. Although Bourdieu outlined how the concept of capital is inherently meaningless without its interrelation with field and habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), there remains nonetheless a tendency across both academic and popular discourse to take for granted the 'capital' of English (or, indeed, any dominant language). If, as I have shown, English takes on its meaning in interanimation with other semiotic features and across time and place – much like how the *Salwar Kameez* is read as modern or traditional across time, spaces and bodies – then 'English' reveals itself to be a slippery semiotic marker, which has consequences on its 'value'. By shifting the focus from the language to the spatio-temporal configurations in which these young women move, and through which they and others interpret certain practices and behaviour, I have shown how claims of the 'powerful' capital of English conceal the complex material and symbolic issues

navigated by young women in the struggle for social mobility. Of course, this is not to say that English has *not* provided these women with material and symbolic benefits – to do so would be to ignore the real inequalities perpetuated through restricted access to English, which this NGO strives to redress. But rather, these young women's stories demonstrate how approaches to tracking the power (and indeed *meaning*) of English must always be *embodied* – that is, explored in relation to how particular people within collective conditions manage the shifting valuations of their alignments, qualities, competencies and personhood. As Urciuoli reminds us, it is not languages that come into contact; it is speakers (1985, p. 363).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publication of this research was funded through an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship (ES/W006693/1). The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged. My thanks and appreciation go to Ruanni Tupas, Cat Tebaldi and Will Simpson for their thoughts and feedback on this paper, to John O'Regan for his support with earlier versions, and to Teesta Pandya for the translation of the abstract. I am also grateful to the reviewers whose suggestions helped strengthen the paper. Any errors and oversights are my own.

ORCID

Katy Highet  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4706-0601>

ENDNOTES

Earlier versions of parts of this paper appear in my doctoral thesis (Highet, K., 2021 'Becoming English Speakers: a critical sociolinguistic ethnography of English, inequality and social mobility in Delhi: UCL Institute of Education).

¹ 'Government' schools refer to free, state-run education (see e.g. Mohanty, 2019).

² While caste and class are inseparable, they are not synonymous. As a 'high' caste woman raised in poverty, Rupal's case exemplifies the complexity of the caste/class nexus (see e.g. Searle-Chatterjee & Sharma 1994; Sharma 1998)

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How to cite this article: Highet, K. (2022). “She will control my son”: Navigating womanhood, English and social mobility in India. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12567>

APPENDIX 1

Transcript conventions

AB	Named speaker
/	Short pause
//	Pause
=	Overlapping speech
(x)	Inaudible
<i>italics</i>	Other language
word	Emphasis
[word]	Translation/gloss
(laughs)	Non-linguistic