

# INVESTIGATING BRITISH ASIAN ACCENTS STUDIES FROM GLASGOW

*Kirsten Lambert<sup>1</sup>, Farhana Alam<sup>2</sup> and Jane Stuart-Smith<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh; <sup>2</sup>Glasgow University  
j.stuart-smith@englang.arts.gla.ac.uk

## ABSTRACT

Despite the substantial Asian community in the UK, there has been very little phonetic work on British Asian accents. The complementary results from two small-scale studies of Glasgow Asian accent confirm the identification of Glasgow Asian as an recognizable accent, identify accent features particular to Glasgow Asian and not found in Glaswegian more generally, and confirm their use – with specific social-indexical functions – in everyday speech.

**Keywords:** sociophonetics; accents of English; minority ethnic accents; postalveolar articulation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 2001 Census of England and Wales reported an increase in the proportion of minority ethnic groups from 6% in 1991 to 9%. An increase was also reported in Scotland. And whilst these figures appear low, the residential distribution of ethnic communities leads to some areas with substantial minority populations (e.g. the Yorkshire conurbations). Against this backdrop, it seems somewhat surprising that Foulkes and Docherty's [4: 16] observation of the conspicuous lack of published work on ethnic English accents still holds today (though cf [12], [13], [5]). Recent sociophonetic work on urban accents, e.g. [6], does include Black and Asian informants, but investigates accent features from the perspective of variation and change in majority varieties of English, and not minority ethnic English per se.

### 1.1. The Glasgow Asian community

The British Asian community, which consists of a number of communities originally from the Indian subcontinent, is the main ethnic community in Great Britain. Minority groups mainly from Pakistan, India and to a much lesser extent Bangladesh and elsewhere, also make up the largest proportion of the ethnic population in Scotland's largest city, Glasgow.

The notion of a Glasgow Asian accent alongside 'Glaswegian' is accepted informally within the city, and reflected albeit as stereotypically, in the accent of the Asian character, 'Navid', in a local TV comedy show.

This paper presents the results of two small-scale complementary studies into 'Glasgow Asian', and starts to ask the following questions: Is there such a phenomenon as a Glasgow Asian accent? If so, can it be distinguished from native Glaswegian accents? How is it manifested phonetically? And, how and why might it vary within the Glasgow Asian community?

## 2. STUDY ONE

### 2.1. Method

The first study [8] was carried out in 2004 by a monolingual Scottish English speaker, with 6 second-generation Asian informants, 5 male and 1 female, all bilingual in Punjabi and 2 also in Urdu, living in the Glasgow conurbation, average age 24 years. All stated that they thought there was a Glasgow Asian accent, and all bar one reported that they spoke this accent. Control speech was recorded from 4 Glaswegian monolingual speakers, 2 male/ 2 female, average age 27 years.

Digital recordings were made in people's homes or the University phonetics laboratory using a clip-on condenser microphone into a Sony TCD-D7 DAT recorder while speakers read a short wordlist of common words [9], and the passage 'Comma gets a cure', containing instances of all English vowels and consonants. The recordings were digitized into a CSL at 11025Hz.

The study had two parts, the first was a small accent judgment task to ascertain the extent to which others might recognize a Glasgow Asian accent, the second an auditory and acoustic analysis to compare features of read speech from Glasgow Asians with monolingual Glaswegians.

## 2.2. Accent judgment

The same section of the reading passage was extracted for two Glasgow Asian speakers and two Glaswegians, with a male and a female in both groups. Six judges were recruited, 3 were phonetically trained, and 3 were naïve listeners. All were from Scotland, and two were Asian. The judges listened to each recording once, and then completed a short questionnaire, which asked where the speaker was from, and later, whether or not they thought that the speaker might belong to an ethnic group.

The results were unanimous: all 6 judges placed the speakers as Glaswegian, and also all correctly identified the two Glasgow Asian recordings as 'Asian'. The phonetically trained judges commented on retroflex articulations of /l/ and /r/, and remarks from naïve judges also seemed to refer to retroflexion in /l/.

## 2.3. Auditory and acoustic analysis

After an initial impressionistic analysis, it was decided to concentrate on four consonantal features: the realization of /l/, /b/, and /t/, and given the tendency for stylized Asian accents to use unaspirated voiceless plosives in place of voiceless aspirated plosives, the realization of word-initial /p/. Other features, such as the realization of /r/ and vowel quality would also merit analysis in a future study.

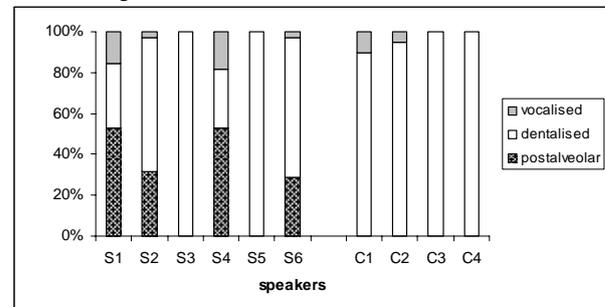
### 2.3.1. Postalveolar/retroflex /l/

Punjabi shows a separate series of retroflex consonants, including /l/ in certain dialects [11]. Retroflexion, and/or postalveolar, articulation of plosives is also a common feature of stylized Asian accents. Here, 38 instances of /l/, in a range of phonetic environments (word-initial, preconsonantal, syllable-final, postconsonantal) were auditorily transcribed for all 10 speakers.

The auditory analysis identified three main groups of variants: dentalized laterals typical of Glaswegian; auditorily retracted laterals, either postalveolar, or in some cases, close to retroflex; and auditorily vocalized variants, in syllable-final position only. Figure 1 shows that while monolinguals mainly use dentalized variants (white), four of the Glasgow Asian speakers use postalveolar variants (dark); vocalized variants (light grey) occur sporadically across the two groups ( $\chi^2(2, N = 380) = 55.54, p = 000$ ).

This finding is consistent with Heselwood and McChrystal's [5] study of Punjabi/English bilingual children in Bradford, where retroflexion was the most common feature found in their informants.

**Figure 1:** Realization of /l/ as percentage of variant types, for 6 Glasgow Asian (S...) and 4 monolingual Glaswegian informants (C...). N = 380.



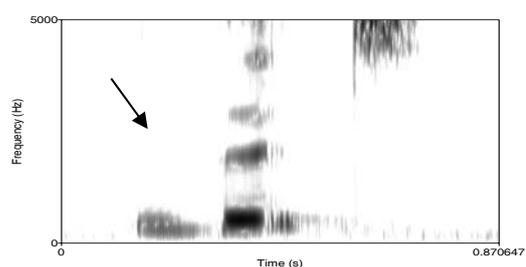
### 2.3.2. Prenasalization of /b/

Heselwood and McChrystal [5] also reported instances of prenasalisation before /b/ in both Punjabi and in some English words. The wordlist contained 7 words with word-initial /b/: *beat*, *but*, *bite*, *boot*, *boat*, *bought*, *baby*.

**Table 1:** Prenasalization (ms) of /b/ for Glasgow Asian speakers according to word.

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
<i>beat</i>	0	0	0	0	0	128
<i>but</i>	90	0	0	85	64	70
<i>bite</i>	63	36	0	58	0	129
<i>boot</i>	0	0	0	0	0	127
<i>boat</i>	119	90	118	96	74	90
<i>bought</i>	125	0	128	102	78	0
<i>baby</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Figure 2:** Spectrogram of *boot* from S6 with prenasalization (marked with arrow).



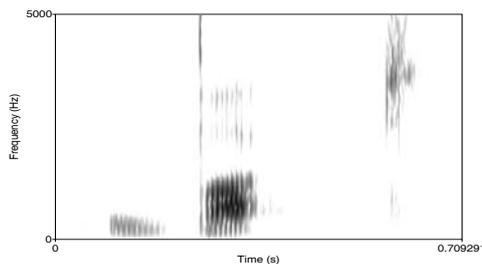
As expected, no monolingual Glaswegians showed prenasalization, but all Asian speakers showed at least one case of prenasalization, and the female speaker (S6), showed 5 instances. Table 1 shows the duration of prenasalization for each speaker for each word, which is illustrated by the

spectrogram of *boot* as spoken by the female Glasgow Asian speaker.

### 2.3.3. Realization of final /t/

Initial impressions of word-final /t/ in the speech of the Glasgow Asians were that the stops were being released with greater force than those of the Glaswegian control group. In fact, these sounds seem to resemble voiceless ejectives. See, for example, final /t/ in *but* in speaker S4, shown in Figure 3 (cf [10]).

**Figure 3:** Spectrogram of *but* from speaker S4 with final ejective.



The distribution of realised, glottal, and possible ejective, plosives in the wordlist is shown in Table 2. The ‘ejective’ category is restricted to Glasgow Asian speakers, who also avoid glottal stops; the Glaswegian controls use glottal and released stops ( $\chi^2(2, N = 140) = 84.34, p = 000$ ).

**Table 2:** Realization of word-final /t/ in the wordlist for all speakers.  $N = 140$ .

	t	ʔ	t'
S1	3	0	11
S2	2	0	12
S3	1	0	13
S4	5	0	9
S5	12	0	2
S6	8	0	6
C1	8	6	0
C2	9	5	0
C3	14	0	0
C4	14	0	0

### 2.3.4. Realization of word-initial /p/

Voice Onset Time was measured from release burst until the first cycle of vowel onset for the 10 words with word-initial /p/ from the wordlist. Whilst unaspirated word-initial plosives are typically used in stylized Asian accents, reflecting the actual existence of two voiceless series in many Indic languages [7], a t-test revealed no statistical difference in VOT between Glasgow Asian

speakers (average 54ms) and the control Glaswegians (average 52ms),

## 3. STUDY TWO

In contrast to Study One, Study Two [1] was a piece of ethnographic research carried out by a female bilingual Punjabi/Urdu/Scottish English speaking member of the Glasgow Asian community, based on social data and the auditory analysis of a specific Punjabi/Urdu language feature from spontaneous casual speech from older girls at school. The aim was to investigate the extent to which accent variation might contribute to identity construction in Asian girls.

### 3.1. Method

The framework for Study Two was that of quantitative sociolinguistics informed by ethnography (e.g. [3]), whereby linguistic variation is observed in the context of social practices through long periods of participant observation. In this case, the ethnographic fieldwork was conducted for 3 months with a group of Asian girls at a High School with a large proportion of Asian students in the south side of Glasgow. Digital recordings, using a clip-on condenser microphone into a Sony DAT TCD-D100, were made of informal interviews/conversations held by the researcher with pairs of girls in a quiet room in the school.

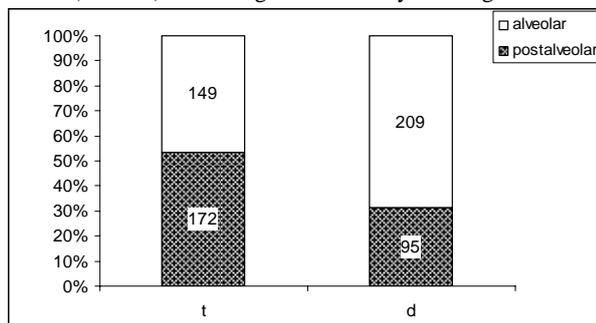
Speech from 7 girls, all 18 years old was selected from DAT, copied onto CD, and then orthographically transcribed and analysed using Praat. First impressions suggested a range of possible features to analysis, including variation in the Scottish English monophthongs /e/ and /o/, and a tendency towards more syllable-timed rhythm. A single feature, retraction of place of articulation of the plosives /t/ and /d/ in word-initial position, was selected for analysis. Retroflex plosives exist as a separate series in Punjabi/Urdu [2], and it was hypothesized that there might be relationships between specific social practices and topics of conversation and the use of more or less retracted variants.

### 3.2. Auditory results

Figure 4 confirms the substantial presence of a retracted, postalveolar, articulation for /t/ and /d/ (dark shading) in the speech of these Asian girls, alongside expected alveolar plosives (white). This is similar to the findings of Study One, where

Glasgow Asian laterals could be postalveolar or dentalized.

**Figure 4:** Realization of word-initial /t/ (n = 321) and /d/ (n = 304) in 7 Glasgow Asian 18-year old girls.



Subsequent analysis revealed that variation was linked with particular topics, for example, talking about school favoured use of alveolar variants for both /t/ and /d/. Variation was also related to social practices, such that the trendier girls who incorporated more westernised practices (such as dating and flirting) into existing Asian practices (speaking Punjabi and sometimes wearing traditional clothes), used the postalveolar variants the least.

#### 4. SUMMARY

Taken together, the two studies confirm both the perceptual reality of the notion of a 'Glasgow Asian' accent within Glasgow, and the existence of certain phonetic features present in Glasgow Asian speech which are not found in monolinguals (postalveolar articulation, prenasalization, apparent ejectives) and which may serve particular social-indexical functions.

Postalveolar articulation may continue the Punjabi/Urdu feature of retroflexion, but this is less possible for prenasalization, which possibly derives from the existence of a fully voiced series of stops in Punjabi/Urdu; ejectives are not usually reported. It seems that certain features originally derived from language interference are now being actively deployed as English accent features by second and later generation speakers, though with rather different realizations and distributions from those expected in the original language.

But note that our Glasgow Asians were also recognized as Glaswegian, and this is also confirmed by their using Glaswegian features too. Furthermore, talk from the informants in Study One about Glasgow Asian referred to subvarieties existing in different parts of the city, with a particular accent for the 'south side' of the river,

where the main Asian community resides. Interestingly, informants S3 and S5 neither lived nor socialized south of the river – they also showed no instances of postalveolar laterals.

We may now begin to answer the questions posed at the outset, based on read and spontaneous speech, quasi-empirical and ethnographic methods, insider and outsider fieldworkers, accent judgment, auditory and acoustic analysis. The results confirm the notion of Glasgow Asian for Scottish speaker-hearers, and in terms of the presence of specific accent features, noted here as postalveolar realization, prenasalization, and final ejectives. The features appear to occur in different kinds of speech, though we do not know to what extent speech activity may constrain or promote them. Certainly postalveolar articulations are found in read speech and frequently in spontaneous casual speech, and may vary systematically.

We suggest that Glasgow Asian consists of an array of features indexical of both Glaswegian and Asian identity, but much more research is needed to substantiate this point, and indeed the features of the accent(s) themselves.

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