Identity Building through Narratives on a Tulu Call-in TV Show

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IN INDIA, the speakers of Tulu, a Dravidian language with 1.7 million speakers concentrated in the South Kannara region of the state of Karnataka, have largely been linguistically subsumed by the greater number of Kannada speakers (38 million nationwide) around them. In February 2005, Namma TV (“Our TV”), a new television channel, started broadcasting local programs, largely in Tulu, for the first time in the region. Based on recorded episodes from a Tulu call-in TV show, Pattanga, on the channel, this chapter looks at how the moderators of and callers to the show use narratives on the show to construct and negotiate a linguistic and cultural identity.

I begin by providing some background on the Tulu language, on the sociolinguistic situation in the South Kannara region, and on the Tulu call-in show Pattanga. Next, I look at research on language and identity that informs this study. Finally, I present selected interactions and narratives from recorded episodes of the show that I believe are representative of the process of identity construction that I am discussing in this study and look at how the format of the call-in show is used by viewers and the moderators not only to tell stories but also to construct a Tulu identity and to reconstitute social roles and statuses within the community. The social world is created through talk, along with other forms of action (Johnstone 1990). Thus, narratives do not merely mirror social reality; they create it and perpetuate it.

The Tulu Language
Though Tulu is spoken widely in the South Kannara region, the language does not have a script in current usage. The lack of formal instruction in Tulu and the economic and social predominance of Kannada in the region have, over the centuries, led to the loss of the Tulu script (Kekunnaya 2000). The government of India currently recognizes twenty-two “official languages” in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, and Tulu is not one of them. Speakers of the “nonofficial” languages of India constantly vie to be part of the group of the country’s recognized languages, because the central government provides funds for the educational and cultural development of these languages. Also, the government-run radio and television stations
(All-India Radio and Doordarshan, respectively) encourage programs in these recognized languages (Krishnamurti 1995). Claiming a Tulu identity is thus an act with, potentially, important political and social ramifications. Claims to a “Tulu identity” could be appropriated by groups whose goal is the projection of the community as a viable group, which could lead to the recognition of Tulu as an official language by the Indian government.

The Sociolinguistic Situation
The South Kannara region is often referred to as Tulunadu (“the place where Tulu is spoken”). Tulu speakers in South Kannara are generally bilingual in Tulu and Kannada, and Tulu is usually the first language they are exposed to in the region. Kannada is often learned later, formally, in school. There are no Tulu schools, nor is Tulu taught as a subject in schools. Kannada, Hindi, Urdu, and English are some of the other languages taught in schools in the region. Tulu speakers there are constantly exposed to Kannada, Hindi, and English on television, in films, and over the radio.

Tulu speakers come from distinct caste-based communities such as the Brahmins (the priestly class—the highest caste), the Billavas (a group that used to be largely engaged in martial arts [garadi] and toddy tapping), the Bunts (the farmers and the landowning community), and the Adivasis (the so-called indigenous communities like the Koragas, who live largely outside the mainstream). Though caste lines in urban India have become relatively diffused, in rural India, the hierarchy between the various castes is still very salient. Intermarriage between the various Tulu-speaking communities is rare (Shetty 2003). The lack of social interaction between the castes has led to each caste developing its own social dialect, such as the Brahmin dialect, the Adivasi dialects, and the common dialect (a group of community-based dialects spoken by the Bunts and Billavas, as well as the Mogaveeras, the fishing community) (Kekunnaya 1994, 5). Besides caste dialects, Tulu speakers also speak various regional dialects. Within the social dialects, there are variations depending on which part of the region a Tulu speaker is from. Speakers also come from different class backgrounds, ranging from landowners to day-wage agricultural workers.

The Tulu Call-in Show Pattanga
The Tulu call-in show Pattanga airs once a week live on cable television and is moderated by two male moderators, Dr. Ganesh Amin Sankamar (GS) and Kadri Naveen Shetty (NS). The moderators decide on the topic of each episode of the show and field calls from viewers. The common dialect is the variety used by the moderators on the call-in show Pattanga. The callers to the show also, largely, speak in the common dialect, with certain regional and social variations. The social, caste, and geographical backgrounds of the various callers to the talk show can be identified from the lexical, phonological, and syntactic variations in the Tulu language they speak. Callers come from different caste and class backgrounds. In a social situation where there is little, if no, intermingling between the various castes, the TV show enables people from different backgrounds to have a dialogue with each other. Tulu women—who do not, as a general practice, speak up before older male members, to male members whom they do not know, or in public forums—call in frequently. An important
aspect of the show is that female viewers feel emboldened and empowered enough to call in through a non-face-to-face medium and share their views, knowledge, and experiences. Such interactional data provide an ideal corpus for examining how identity is constructed in discourse and how social constructs like gender, caste, and social class can be constituted as well as reconstituted through language.

Narratives on the Call-in Show

Apart from personal narratives, the narratives on the call-in show are largely based on the paddanas, or ritual narratives, that are performed during the rituals for the spirit deities who are worshipped by Tulu speakers in the region. These narratives are legends about the origin of the spirit, its supernatural powers, and its heroic deeds. Tulu speakers consider these spirits their guardian angels and conscience keepers. Claus (1989, 56) refers to the paddana as an example of a “multistory” tradition that contains the stories of perhaps dozens of heroes who are often linked with one another by participation in one another’s stories. These paddanas are orally transmitted from generation to generation and exist in different versions in the various parts of the region. They are performed in the context of a village ritual known as the bhuta kola, where men from specific castes narrate the stories of the bhutas or spirit deities. They are also told in the rice fields by teams of women transplanting rice. The three main stories that are discussed in the following interactions from the talk show Pattanga are those relating to the spirit deities Babbuswami, Jumadi, and Guliga.

The Narrative Construction of Tulu Identity

In this chapter I take the view that identity emerges during interactions, and therefore I look at its situational and contextual emergence during interactional exchanges and through the telling of narratives. I follow a social constructionist approach (Davies and Harré 1990) to language and identity that conceptualizes identity as an interactional accomplishment, produced and negotiated in discourse. Identities, in this approach, are thus not stable and independent of language but are constantly negotiated in the course of interactions. This approach differs from traditional sociolinguistic approaches that link already established social categories with language variables and gives more agency to the individual who is seen as choosing from a variety of acts in a given social situation. For example, in a study of African American drag queens, Barrett (1999, 318) uses the term “polyphonous identity” to convey the idea that linguistic displays of identity are often multivoiced and that speakers may index a multilayered identity by using linguistic variables with indexical associations to more than one social category.4

Sacks (1992) showed that identities are interactional achievements rather than a priori categories that exist apart from particular interactions. Identities, according to De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg (2006, 3), are seen not as merely represented in discourse but also as performed, enacted, and embodied through a variety of linguistic and nonlinguistic means. In the context of the call-in show, for example, speakers attempt to establish group identity through the performance of certain linguistic acts, such as the act of praising and the act of evoking common cultural practices. For instance, in the following excerpt from an episode of the show, the moderator GS
constructs a common identity for the “people of Tulunadu” by referring to their faith in Babbuswami (also known as Kori Babbu) and encourages viewers to call in and write to the show about the stories surrounding this spirit deity:

“The People of Tulunadu”:\(^5\)

1. GS: → Kori Babbu ee namma Tulunadudu wah rithidu nambwere
   Kori Babbu.of this our Tulunadu.in what way.of faith
   *in what way do people in Tulunadu have faith in Kori Babbu?*
2. wah rithidu awene mechondu baidere
   what way.of of.that show come
   *in what way do they demonstrate that belief?*
3. panpinene aah wole baredu kadaple
   saying that letter writing send
   *that way, write and send us letters.*\(^6\)

The fact that Babbuswami is the deity of a small portion of Hindu Tulu speakers who usually belong to lower-caste communities (Upadhyaya and Upadhyaya 2002, 115), though his worshippers come from various Hindu castes, is neither acknowledged nor mentioned. The umbrella term “the people of Tulunadu” (line 1) is used to label an otherwise disparate group of people. They are projected as a cohesive group, and differences between group members are ignored. Group identity is built through referencing commonalities, and differences that may be prejudicial to identity building are consciously overlooked.

Identity is often seen as emerging from the twin concepts of similarity and difference (Woodward 1997). However, in the context of the call-in show, where the moderators make a conscious attempt to portray Tulu speakers as belonging to common social and cultural worlds, the more accurate term to use would be “adequation,” as proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 599). The term “adequation” emphasizes the fact that in order for groups or individuals to be positioned as alike, they need not, and in any case cannot, be identical but must merely be understood as sufficiently similar for current interactional purposes. Differences irrelevant or damaging to ongoing efforts to adequate two people or groups will be downplayed, and similarities viewed as salient to and supportive of the immediate project of identity work will be foregrounded. Thus, on the talk show *Pattanga*, no references are made to the different castes or social classes from which people come or to the different dialects that they speak (I did, however, see one episode featuring a guest who spoke the high-caste Shivalli Brahmin dialect of the language.) The moderators and the callers to the show speak, largely, in the common dialect, and the common dialect is presented as the unmarked language variety. The commonalities between the various communities that make up the group of Tulu speakers are emphasized and the differences between them are either glossed over or ignored.

Irvine and Gal (2000, 38) describe the process of selectively ignoring variation as relying on a semiotic process called “erasure,” whereby differences, which are regarded by the dominant ideology of a group to be inconsequential, are either dis-
counted or ignored. The dominant ideology renders some persons or activities invisible; for example, a social group or a language may be imagined as homogeneous, disregarding its internal variation. Thus, on the talk-show *Pattanga*, audience members are portrayed as a cohesive casteless, classless group whose members all largely speak the same dialect. As Bucholtz and Hall (2004, 371) write, social grouping is a process not merely of discovering or acknowledging a similarity that precedes and establishes identity but, more fundamentally, of inventing similarity by downplaying difference.

On the basis of the assumption that narratives are useful units for the study of the emergence of identity in discourse, I now look at how they are used on the TV show, to politically and culturally define a Tulu identity. Baquedano-Lopez (2001) describes how the telling of the narrative of Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe) in *doctrina* classes composed of Mexican immigrants at a Catholic parish in Los Angeles serves as a locus of Mexican identity construction. Comparing these *doctrina* narratives with the narratives told in catechism classes at the same parish that illustrate a different ideology about Our Lady of Guadalupe and about ethnicity, Baquedano-Lopez points out how narratives can be used to collaboratively redefine the setting of a story in relation to the present participants. Like the narrative of Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe, the narratives on the television show *Pattanga* are collaboratively told and socially managed. The following interaction, for example, is from an episode where the moderator, GS, while talking about the historical reasons behind the name of a local pond, tells a story associated with Agolimanjanna, a legendary local strongman who was reputed to eat a lot:

**Using Dominant Narratives**

1. GS: Agolimanjanne appene
   Agolimanjanna mother.of
   *Agolimanjanna of his mother*
2. nenepadu banaga
   while.thinking while.coming
   *when he is coming along thinking*
3. Karlada bakeru
   Karla.of big.field
   *the big field of Karla*
4. kangana athodu
   courtyard should.have.become
   *should have become the courtyard*
5. Kodinjada kalludu
   Kodinja.of stone.with
   *with the stone of Kodinja*
6. udigere athodu
   curry should.have.been.made
   *the curry should have been made*
In the above excerpt, the moderator GS says that the pond could be one where Agolimanjanna used to take a bath, so it had to be a big one (lines 12–14). In lines 3–8, GS recites the popular verse about Agolimanjanna, and NS and GS both say the last line of the verse together with a small variation in tense (line 9), thereby demonstrating a shared knowledge of the narrative. By referencing the story of Agolimanjanna, GS uses the shared knowledge by Tulu speakers of a certain narrative to create connections between a current local place name and a legendary tale of which most viewers of the show have knowledge.
Ochs and Capps (1996) write that adherence to a dominant narrative is community building, in that it presumes that each member relates to a common story and that narrative constitutes a crucial resource for socializing identities and constituting membership in a community. The shared knowledge of a certain narrative is thus used to draw common ground between disparate groups of people. By evoking the well-known story of Agolimanjanna, GS, the moderator, seeks to connect with the viewers of the show, who also share knowledge of the story by virtue of living in the region. As Johnstone (1990) writes, shared knowledge of a community’s stories is part of what creates a sense of community in a group. In this particular instance, the stories serve to highlight what people in the community have in common and to take attention away from their differences, in terms of social class and caste.

Narratives are not only used to mobilize a disparate set of people into a loosely cohesive group. They are also used to highlight community achievements, as can be seen in the following excerpt from the show. The following conversation is taken from an episode in which NS, the moderator, is joined on the show by a guest, PK. C1 is a caller to the show who has been asking PK about the significance of using certain oils for lighting lamps placed before deities. In the following excerpt, NS, the moderator, interjects with a seemingly unrelated story of how a man tried to climb a lamp pole the wrong way:

Highlighting Community Achievements

1. NS: tirthudu mith
   from bottom to top
2. wori pothavondu poyye
   one man lighting went
3. NS: aa?
4. C1: hmm
5. NS: awe baari aa yethorada deepastamba awe
   that very aa high of lamp pole that
   that is a very high lamp pole
6. PK: ithinetu
   among (lamp poles)
7. NS: ithinetu saadarna namma jilledu
   among in estimate our region in
   among (the other lamp poles) I
   estimate in our region
8. PK: andh, andh
   yes yes
9. NS: baari yethora da
   very high of
a very high
10. onji kanchi da deepastamba awe
one bronze of lamp pole that
lamp pole made of bronze that is
11. C1: saari
correct
12. NS: tirthudu mithu ponaga
bottom from top while going
while going from bottom to top
13. bokka tirthu japyere aayeji
then bottom climb could not
then (he) could not climb down
14. athu urri ithindu
that much heat was there
there was that much heat
15. daada malpuni indh
what to do like this
what to do
16. gothu aayeji
knowledge did not happen
(he) didn’t know
17. deveregu kai mugiye
god to hand folded
he prayed to god
18. apaga devere kuntu pathyere
then god cloth held out
god held out a cloth
19. ee laagi pandidh
you jump said
(god) said you jump
20. koontu pathyere panpina onji kathe
cloth held out saying one story
the story goes that god held out a cloth
21. aanda aayegu laagyere
but he to jump
but to jump
22. daira bathiji
courage did not come
he did not have the courage
23. C1: hmm
In the above excerpt, NS, while narrating the story, talks about how the lamp pole the man is climbing and lighting is the tallest one in the region (lines 5, 7, 9, 10, 27, 29). PK, the guest on the show, agrees with him (lines 6, 8). The caller C1 tries to ask his question (line 28), but NS continues with his narrative. NS’s eagerness to tell the story despite the caller’s interest in asking a specific question, demonstrates his awareness that the interaction and his narrative are not just being heard by the caller he is addressing but also by other Tulu speakers who are watching the show. The talk that surrounds the main core of the narrative stresses those parts of the narrative that talk about how the lamp pole is the highest one, thereby indexing salient accomplishments and achievements by the community in general. In the above excerpt, NS’s main purpose in telling his narrative seems to be to draw attention to the height of the lamp pole and to point out how high it is as compared to other lamp poles. The narrative form is used as a framework by NS to emphasize certain discourse elements, in this case, the unusual height of the lamp pole and, thereby, showcase the achievements of the community. A shared sense of place and the achievements of those who live in that place are thus used to create and build cultural identity.

Creating New Social Roles through Narrative

Narratives reflect social hierarchies, but they also create them. They can be used to perpetuate the social status quo, but they can also be used to bring about social change. The TV show provides a forum for people in the community to call in and narrate their version of a certain folktale or song or myth. The talk show format also gives people from the community the opportunity to call in and contest versions of a shared narrative, narratives that would not be normally contested in ritual settings. Women also feel emboldened enough to challenge versions of the narratives, as can
be seen in the following interaction from an episode where the stories related to the spirit deity Babbuswami are being discussed. NS and GS, the moderators, are joined on the show by a guest, MK, who is an “expert” on the spirit deity Babbuswami and has written a book on the deity. MK has just finished narrating his version of the story describing the meeting between the two spirit deities Babbuswami and Jumadi, during which Babbuswami gives a tender coconut to Jumadi to quench his thirst. However, a caller, a woman, C4, who calls in, disagrees with what MK has been saying. She says that the main character in the story with Babbuswami is a different spirit deity, Guliga, and not Jumadi:

“Jumadi or Guliga?”

1. C4: anda yechina kade tu uppuni Jumadi bokka
   but most stories in exist Jumadi
   then
   
   but in most stories, Jumadi then
   
   inde Kori Babbu Gulige
   this Kori Babbu Gulige
   Kori Babbu and Guliga

2. NS: aah

3. C4: wotigu banaga Gulige
   together while coming Guliga
   when they were coming together, Guliga

4. GS: aah

5. C4: bajolodu aaye gu
   thirsty with him to
   he was so thirsty

6. yelu samudra da neer parondula
   seven seas of water even if he drank
   that even if he drank the waters of seven seas

7. aaye gu bajol tadeji ge
   him to thirst did not get over it is said
   it is said that his thirst was not quenched

8. aah portu gu Gulige ge
   that time in Guliga it is said
   at that time, to Guliga, it is said

9. dada malpwe umbe soojidu wote maltude
   what did he needle with hole made
   what does he (Babbuswami) do? He made
   a hole in the coconut with a needle

10. Babbu bonda korpe ge
    Babbu tender coconut gave it is said
and Babbu gave the tender coconut (to Guliga), it is said

12. NS: aah aah
13. C4: aah bondude
   that tender.coconut.with
   with that tender coconut
14. aayena badao bajol telidini
   his hunger thirst quenched
   his thirst was quenched
15. panpina matha ithe mulpa matha
   they.say everyone now here everyone
   now everyone says here
16. kelao mastu kadetu ondu mulpa
   many a.lot.of places in is.there here
   in a lot of places the (story) is there
17. NS/GS: andh andh
   yes, yes
18. C4: Juma . . . Babbu na kola
   Juma . . . Babbu of ritual
   Juma . . . Babbu ritual
19. yelanji la nette oondu
   day.after.tomorrow even here is.there
   is going to be held even day after tomorrow
20. yenkul yepala tupa
   we always watch
   we always watch (the rituals)

In the above excerpt, the woman caller, C4, points out that in most of the stories she has heard, the characters in the story are Guliga and Babbuswami (also known as Kori Babbu) (lines 1, 2, 5). She says that it was not Jumadi but Guliga to whom Babbuswami offers the tender coconut (lines 9, 10, 11). She disagrees with the expert MK and points out that it is Guliga and not Jumadi who drinks the tender coconut in the actual rituals, which she claims to see very often (line 20). The caller here seems to want to communicate that the knowledge that she has, either by watching the rituals or by sharing stories with other people in the community, has more authenticity than that of a so-called expert who has written a book (lines 15, 16). In other words, the caller seems to claim her knowledge as being more rooted in the sociocultural traditions of the region. As Bauman writes (1992, 131), here the narrator contextualizes the narrative itself, weaving a complex web of verbal anchorings for her discourse that link it to a range of other situations and other discourses, endowing it with traditional authority in the process. The narratives produced on the TV show thus give an opportunity to persons, like the women from the community, whose
cultural knowledge has hitherto not been acknowledged or appreciated, to put forward their views and engage in conversations with individuals with whom having a conversation would otherwise be socially unacceptable. The narratives that are produced on the show thus seem to be paving the way for changing attitudes towards how certain types of knowledge are valued or devalued. The people who call in to the show do not, generally speaking, have formal knowledge of the topics they are discussing. The show provides a platform where these kinds of traditional knowledge can be given an outlet and could, potentially, change the way different kinds of knowledge are valorized in the community. Because one’s caste and gender has traditionally being linked to the amount of education one could have received (the higher-caste Brahmins are the most educated, and female Tulu speakers, largely, do not have the benefit of a formal education, for example), the show, through the narratives produced on it, is also challenging the traditional views of who can or who cannot possess knowledge. The narratives on the show are also used to potentially change the way the language is perceived by its speakers. This conscious attempt to change the way Tulu is perceived can be seen in the way the caller who has been narrating a story is praised for her Tulu in the following interaction. NS and GS are the two moderators of the show; C4 refers to the caller, a woman:

Valorizing Tulu

1. NS: aah Gulabiakka
   
aah Gulabi (name) elder sister
2. C4: aah
3. NS: baari porludu
   very beautifully.in
   very beautifully
4. Tanimanige na kathenu pandaru
   Tanimanige of story you said
   you narrated the story of Tanimaniga?
5. C4: aah
6. NS: Sasural da tamane wonasu
   Sasural of felicitation meal
   the meal at Sasural restaurant
7. malpyere eera eerna illadakul
   to.do you your home.members
   to have, you and your family members
8. pura barodu
   all should.come
   all should come
9. C4: aawe (laughs)
   okay (laughs)
10. NS: aah
11. NS: \( \rightarrow \) baari porlu da Tulu
very beautiful of Tulu

your Tulu is very beautiful

In line 11, NS, the moderator, tells the caller that her “Tulu is beautiful,” and that she has narrated the story very beautifully (lines 3, 4). In actual fact, there was nothing remarkable about the way in which the caller had used language in her narrative, so NS’s remark about the beauty of her Tulu indicates a conscious attempt to promote the idea of Tulu as a language that is capable of being beautiful. There seems to be, thus, through the use of narratives and through the comments on the narratives produced on the show, a conscious effort to stress the beauty of the language and also what seems to be a move to change the way Tulu is viewed by its speakers.

Conclusions
The analysis of narratives in this study reveals how narratives can be used as significant tools in the construction and negotiation of identity and to build the cultural identity of a disparate group of people. The study demonstrates that narratives cannot only be used to index a traditional past as a way to bring together a group of people who are, currently, only loosely united by the fact of living in a certain place. Narratives can also be used to authenticate, valorize, and glorify the present. They are thus important interactional resources in the creation and building of group identity. They can be used to highlight community achievements, to create new social roles, and to change the ways in which certain types of knowledge and experience are acknowledged and valued. Narratives can also be employed to change how a language is viewed by its speakers and nonspeakers. Finally, this study demonstrates how, through the medium of a call-in TV show, narratives can become instrumental in overcoming social and gender barriers and are, therefore, potential tools for social change.

NOTES
1. The South Kannara region was divided into the Dakshina Kannada district and the Udupi district in 1997. For the purposes of this study, I refer to the region as the South Kannara region.
2. Episodes were recorded over a two-year period from 2005 to 2007 during fieldwork in the South Kannara region. Ten episodes of the hour-long weekly show were recorded.
3. A popular alcoholic beverage produced by fermenting the sap of the palm tree.
4. Indexicality, according to Ochs (1992), is the property of speech through which social identities and social activities are constituted by certain stances and acts. Besides indexing attitudes and dispositions, indexicality can also communicate certain statuses and gender identities.
5. Transcription conventions (adapted from Keating 1998): The first line shows the Tulu words; the second line, an interlinear gloss, shows a literal translation of the Tulu utterance; the third line, in italics, provides a free translation in English. Also:

\[ \] overlapped speech (two or more speakers speaking at the same time).
NS, GS etc. capitalized initials indicate the names of the participants.
( ) author’s comments.
\( \rightarrow \) highlights a portion of the transcript for the reader.
she.said the period between the English words in the interlinear gloss indicates that the Tulu word is made up of a number of concepts that in English would have to be rendered separately.
6. Tulu speakers use Kannada to write.

7. Tanimaniga was a lower-caste woman, regarded to be the spirit deity Babbuswami’s sister.

REFERENCES


