Sylheti Repertoires and Sociolinguistic Place-making in Tower Hamlets

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Declaration for SOAS PhD thesis

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ABSTRACT

Conducted in collaboration with the Tower Hamlets based community organisation Osmani Trust, this sociolinguistic ethnography responds to local concerns that Sylheti is undergoing language shift to English. Existing studies have tended to focus on Sylheti as a discrete language, linked to individual identities and attitudes, or on intergenerational language transmission. Drawing on the concept of spatial and communicative repertoires, this study instead explores the relationship between Sylheti and place. The research sites: streets, shops, markets and cafes, were selected by the participants, all adults with links to Sylheti and Tower Hamlets. The use of ethnographic walking methods and ethnographic linguistic landscaping strengthens the theoretical focus by pushing the analysis away from individual speakers' competencies and identities towards a more socially situated understanding of sociolinguistic place-making.

Findings show Sylheti as a part of a constantly changing web of communication resources and ideologies, rather than a discrete language in decline. Dispensing with dominant discourses which tie minority languages in the UK to a faraway country of origin, I consider Sylheti as a 'local practice' (Pennycook, 2010). Further findings suggest that language and place interact through social practice and are mutually constitutive. Legacies of anti-racist struggle in Tower Hamlets reproduce a space of resistance where Sylheti can be used freely and this freedom in turn reinforces Tower Hamlets, or parts of it, as a space of sociolinguistic resistance. The data reveal a linguistic energy and dynamism seldom acknowledged nor referred to in policy documents or in dominant models of language education, which tend to focus on lack and deficit. By suggesting that Sylheti is a crucial element of Tower Hamlets

life, the study problematises two powerful discourses: the frequently articulated

concern among Sylheti speakers in the UK that irreversible language shift towards

English is underway; and the intensifying political discourse that English is the only

language to index social cohesion and belonging.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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TRANSCRIPTION KEY

<italics>	translation to English
(.)	brief pause
(…)	longer pause
(( ))	transcriber's comment
n<u>o:</u>	elongation for emphasis (speaker)
bold	analyst's emphasis
[	overlapping speech

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The struggle for language

On 21st February 2023, International Mother Language Day and the day the language martyrs are commemorated in Bangladesh, Apsana Begum, one of the two female British-Bangladeshi MPs in Tower Hamlets, and ardent campaigner for language provision in Tower Hamlets, spoke Sylheti in the British Parliament. As she did so, she commented that it was perhaps the first time Sylheti had been spoken in a House of Commons debate. She made a statement that spoke directly to language marginalisation in 2020s UK, linking the larger historical struggle for Bangladeshi independence and language rights to the smaller but current struggle for linguistic diversity in the UK. She said: 'Ekta basha kuno dino jotheshto oy na', translating it herself directly afterwards into the English: one language is never enough (HC deb, 01 March 2022).

There is not scope in this thesis to discuss the Bengali Language movement in detail or the 1971 war of independence marking the birth of the new nation of Bangladesh, but it is a central part of the contextual backdrop to this thesis. Bangladesh is the only nation state to have emerged from an independence war based on language rights. The 'language martyrs' were students murdered in 1952 as they protested for Bangla language rights to be part of what was then east Pakistan. Although the independence war leading to the birth of the new Bangladesh would not be fought for another 20 years, the events of 21 February, 'Ekushey February' have been symbolically considered at the heart of the struggle for independence (see *inter alia* Gard'ner, 2004; Hamid, 2011; Glynn, 2014; Hoque, 2015).

Of course there are endless complexities, not least that in the region that became Bangladesh there are many languages that have been marginalised, even crushed, by the processes of colonialism, post-colonialism and nation-building. Sylheti is one example of this (Simard et al, 2020) and like many other languages in Bangladesh became victim of the 'one nation one language' rallying cry of the new Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the idea that Bangladesh was born out of a collective struggle for language remains incredibly powerful among Bangladeshis and British Bangladeshis in the UK, including Sylheti speakers.

Apsana Begum's address to parliament on Ekushey February spoke also directly to a very different struggle for language, linked not to a unitary language but to an idea of language pluralism and the struggle for linguistic diversity in the 2020s UK. This includes the struggle against the ideological and effective domination of English in public life, the struggle for recognition of Sylheti as a language in its own right, and the struggle for language maintenance that relates to all minority languages in Tower Hamlets, not just Sylheti.

This thesis investigates the extent to which Sylheti remains an important linguistic and cultural resource in people's daily interactions in public places in Tower Hamlets, despite, and sometimes because of, the tensions and complexities outlined above.

1.1.2 Monolingual discourses and the invisibilisation of linguistic complexity

While the UK is becoming increasingly multilingual there is an exacerbation of monolingual ideologies that position English as the only language necessary for employment, education and national belonging. 'One nation, one language-ideologies (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1992; Blackledge, 2004), in which nations are considered better governed if there is a unitary language, are hegemonic in England. Furthermore, there is a proliferation of monolingualist discourses which

focus on the absolute importance of English as a common language for a well-functioning society, while simultaneously invisibilising and marginalising other languages, especially racialised minority languages (Blackledge and Creese, 2008: 549; Lamb and Vodicka, 2018: 7).

This was made clear in the 2021 census. Respondents were asked to specify their main language and could only mention another language if they had *not* put English as their main language. This meant that the census failed to get accurate information about multilingualism in the UK. Indeed, the census data did not reflect the language profiles of any of the participants in this thesis, including myself - all of whom have English as their main language but who speak and use a range of other languages in their day-to-day lives including Sylheti, Bangla, Arabic, Italian and Hindi.

For census respondents who specified that English was *not* their main language, further questions were then asked about proficiency in English, but nothing about the other languages they spoke. This follow-up question made two erroneous assumptions. The first is that the only reason people in the UK do not speak English as their 'main' language is because they have low proficiency. And secondly that English should be the only language of any interest and concern in social policy (see Sebba and Ayres-Bennett, 2021).

The census language question both exemplifies the dominant monolingual ideology and sends a clear message to UK citizens and residents who also speak other languages that their languages are not useful and do not serve any purpose in UK life.

In 2005 Blackledge made the following points:

> This dominant ideology, securely seated on the Government benches in
>
> Parliament, and even in the Cabinet, is dismissive of languages other than

English, firmly believing that the only route to success for immigrant groups is to leave behind their established linguistic resources, and to replace the language of the home with the language of the host country (Blackledge, 2005: 41).

Blackledge's comments show that this a deep-seated, long-standing ideology and it shows no sign of abating, despite the critical work done by sociolinguists in the last 20 years.

Ideas related to speaking the 'right' language in the 'right place' lead to harmful processes of othering, as well as feeding anti-migration discourses and policies (Badwan, 2021b). The following comments from Suella Braverman, former Home Secretary, in October 2023 are just one of the seemingly endless pronouncements of this ilk.

'They are coming from abroad, they are not learning the language. They're not embracing British values, and they're not taking part in British life' (cited in Hughes, 2023).

Finally, because the ideology seeps through to everyday life, it affects people's conscious and unconscious decisions about how they approach their own multilingual repertoires. Lamb and Vodicka make the point that the dominance of monolingual ideologies, 'nurtures an assimilation to the (mono) linguistic norm' (2018:12).

1.1.3 Monolingual discourses in Tower Hamlets

Although it cannot quite be said that Tower Hamlets mirrors the national picture, there is much less institutional and political support for language diversity than might be hoped for, or indeed expected in such a multilingual part of the UK. Local policy documents rarely make mention of the borough's linguistic resources. Sylheti is

seldom highlighted as a resource for local Tower Hamlets life even though it is the second most widely spoken language in the area. Any reference to language policy appears to relate to the deficit discourse regarding lack of proficiency in English. For example, the State of the Borough briefing in 2023 (LBTHd) covers areas including population, age lifestyle, education, economy, youth and health - but makes no mention of Sylheti or Bengali.

There has been a recent welcome change in this regard with the Tower Hamlets Mayor pledging to reinstate funding to community language provision in 2023, provision which had been subject to managed decline by the local Tower Hamlets administration. But it remains to be seen whether this marks a change to attitudes to language diversity more generally at a policy level.

1.1.4 Some complexities researching, analysing and writing about Sylheti

As I show throughout the thesis, the invisibilisation of language diversity in political discourse, and the overwhelming dominance of the monolingual ideology contrasts sharply with evidence of linguistic diversity in ground-level social activity and as an ethnographic study this thesis first and foremost investigates ground-level practices and ideologies rather than top-down discourses.

Moreover, this thesis is not just focused on promoting Sylheti in opposition to its marginalisation as a racialised minority language in the UK. Sylheti is caught between various language hierarchies, language ideologies and multiple elements of social complexity which I attempt to draw out in the chapters of this thesis. These complexities surrounding Sylheti have been part of the fascinating aspect of this study, but, at the same time, part the difficulty finding clear paths and threads and definitive answers.

As a result of these complexities, I have had difficulties finding clear terms and labels for the languages explored in this thesis. In this introduction, for purposes of clarity I explain the labels *I* use for the various languages in this thesis. I use the following labels merely to make necessary distinctions for analysis purposes and for the purposes of readability and minimising confusion, not to make any claims on normative terminology. The necessary complexity of the table below tells its own interesting story about the ideological construction of named languages, something I explore in detail throughout the thesis.

Sylheti	I use this to talk about linguistic resources associated with all varieties of Sylheti, although I recognise that this is a label not commonly used by Sylheti speakers themselves.
Bangla	I use this to talk about the state language of Bangladesh, used in education, media, law etc. I also use it to label regional varieties commonly spoken in central Bangladesh including Dhaka.
Bengali	I use this as a generic term to refer to any language of Bangladesh. I have found this umbrella term necessary because very often it just isn't possible to separate out codes. This is also the name used most commonly in English to refer to Bangla, for example in GCSE and A level curricula and examinations.
Suddho	Following common usage, on occasions, I use this to refer to Bangla and varieties of central Bangladesh.
English	I use this to refer generically to all varieties of English, unless specifically highlighting a particular variety e.g. Cockney.
Arabic	This refers to all varieties of Arabic.
Italian	This refers to all varieties of Italian.

As well as my own terms, a multitude of various terms and labels are used by participants and appear in the illustrative extracts throughout the thesis.

The following table explains terms used in the empirical examples.

I have also tried to make these clear in the discussion of each extract, sometimes in a footnote if necessary.

Bengali	Most frequently used term to talk about both Sylheti and Bangla.
Sylheti	Less commonly used among Sylheti speakers but it is nevertheless in usage. People often use it to when they need to distinguish from Bangla. It appears more in this thesis than would normally be the case as participants are responding to my question.
Sylheti Bengali/Bangla	Sometimes used for Sylheti.
Bangla	Refers to Bangla but sometimes used by Sylheti speakers to mean Sylheti.
Suddho Suddho basha	Most commonly used term to talk about Bangla. The meaning 'pure' reveals the dominance of ideological hierarchies of language.
Dhakaiya	Refers to the accent/dialect of the Dhaka region, very similar to Bangla.
"Our language"	Used for both Sylheti and Bangla

1.1.5 Tower Hamlets Sociolinguistic Profile

As already highlighted, Sylheti is the second most widely spoken language in Tower Hamlets, although there are no current accurate statistics regarding this. The 2021 census reports 11% of the population of Tower Hamlets as speaking Bengali, including Sylheti and Chatgaiya, as a main language (ONS Census, 2021). However, as I have pointed out, the census did not record any information regarding multiple languages spoken. We also know that many Bengali speakers have English as their main language and so they are not included within that 11%. The other relevant statistic included in the census is ethnic origin which shows 34.6 % of the population are of Bangladeshi origin. Although this is not synonymous with language it is likely to be a more accurate reflection than the 11% suggested in the language statistics. At the very least is can be assumed that most of the 34.6% will have had exposure to and have some knowledge of one of the Bengali languages, and many will be highly proficient in one or more.

The other difficulty regarding getting statistics around language is the tendency to group all Bangladeshi languages under the name 'Bengali', meaning there are never any accurate statistics concerning Sylheti. In the past, it could have been assumed

that most people of Bangladeshi origin would have had some level of proficiency in Sylheti as this was traditionally where most people migrated to London from. Anecdotally over 90% of all Bangladeshis and British Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets had links to Sylhet.

However, over the past 10 years there have been considerable changes in this regard, with many Italian citizens of Bangladeshi origin moving to the area. Again, there are no official statistics but the 2021 Census figures show that since 2011 there has been a 247% increase in Italian citizens to Tower Hamlets and it is thought that at least half of these came originally from Bangladesh (LBTHb: slide 27). Differently from Bangladeshi migration to the UK however, the majority of Bangladeshi migrants to Italy are not Sylheti speakers. This new migration to Tower Hamlets since 2010 constitutes significant sociolinguistic change that I capture in this thesis.

The paragraph above points to how difficult it is to use official statistics to understand the linguistic make up of an area, and statistics need to be combined with a great deal of ethnographic work based on knowledge of the area to get any kind of overall picture. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Bangladeshi languages, Sylheti in particular, are a significant aspect of life in Tower Hamlets.

1.2 Thesis beginnings

1.2.1 Sylheti project- SOAS in Camden

This study was designed as a collaborative project between the Osmani Trust and two universities, SOAS and Goldsmiths and was funded by CHASE Doctoral Training Partnership (AHRC). It initially grew out of a long-standing collaboration between the SOAS Department of Linguistics and the Surma Community Centre in

Camden (Sylheti project -SOAS in Camden). Their collective language activist work was to raise the profile of Sylheti as a minority language in the UK, as well as challenging negative attitudes to Sylheti among Bangladeshis and British Bangladeshis. Diglossia and concomitant dominant language hierarches in Bangladesh often position Sylheti as an uneducated version of Bangla. These hierarchies are also often reproduced in the UK and the Sylheti Project- SOAS in Camden has done important work to empower Sylheti speakers by reclaiming Sylheti as a language in its own right, with a proud literary history. This has included the promotion of Sylheti Nagri, the traditional Sylheti script which fell out of use and later was actively discouraged in processes of language standardisation relating to the building of the new Bangladeshi nation (see Simard et al, 2020). Other work done by the Camden Sylheti Project has consisted of Sylheti classes, the production of children's books, and linguistic description and linguistic documentation of Sylheti features in order to highlight the linguistic distinctions between Sylheti and Bangla. Simard et al also describe the work as closely linked to concerns, articulated by members of the Surma centre, about Sylheti speakers undergoing 'a shift from multilingual to English monolingual' (ibid, 2020:12). This concern prompted calls for more research.

1.2.2 The Osmani Trust

This PhD project was set up as something separate from the language documentation and activist work being carried out by SOAS in Camden and was initiated to generate sociolinguistic research into attitudes and identities regarding Sylheti, although the exact nature of this was not pre-imposed. The Osmani Trust, a well-established Tower Hamlets-based grassroots community organisation that works on issues of marginalisation, social deprivation and anti-poverty projects in the

local area, joined the project alongside SOAS and Goldsmiths as supporting non-academic institution and I was appointed to carry out the research. The inclusion of the Osmani Trust brought Tower Hamlets to the centre of the project and ensured that field work would take place in the Bangladeshi heartland of the UK (*inter alia* Alexander, 2011).

1.2.3 My own connections to the project

It was to an existing project therefore that I brought my own research background and interests, my own ontological and epistemological stances and my own life experiences. In terms of origins, my involvement in a research project such as this could not have been predicted: I was born and grew up in Liverpool, both my parents were English with no connections to Bangladesh and I do not speak Sylheti. However, there are other elements in life that bring people to different experiences. When I first arrived in Tower Hamlets in 1998 to take up an hourly paid position as an ESOL[1] teacher in what was then called Tower Hamlets College[2], I could not know that that would be the beginning of a deep, long-lasting connection with east London, nor the beginning of an interest in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh. Since then I have taught and got to know literally hundreds of students from Sylhet. One thing ESOL classes do is give space for people to talk about their lives, past and present, about childhoods, about migrating to the UK, and about adjusting to life here and these conversations have become part of my own experience and understanding of Tower Hamlets life. When I visited Sylhet in 2022, I recognised so many of the place names and the beauty spots, not from my research, but from hearing students' anecdotes and reading their writing. I also had many Sylheti, Bangladeshi and British-Sylheti

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[1] English to Speakers of Other Languages- language education for migrants
[2] Now New City College

ESOL colleagues with whom I have had countless conversations about life and experiences, as colleagues do. Because our collective students were mainly from Sylhet, we perhaps talked more than colleagues in other sectors or even other departments of the College, about Sylheti language and culture.

My work as an ESOL teacher has always been oriented to linguistic diversity and I have long centred the importance of all linguistic resources and the need to nurture and develop all languages in students' repertoires and I have fought against dominant notions of an 'English only' curriculum and pedagogy. In the latter part of my ESOL career at Tower Hamlets College I became involved in participatory classroom research with the Centre for Language, Discourse and Communication at Kings College London (see Cooke et al 2015, 2019). Finally, in 2015 I did more research in Tower Hamlets College as part of my MA in Sociocultural Linguistics at Goldsmiths. This time the focus was on 'Bangladeshi Italians' and sociolinguistic reasons for migration to Tower Hamlets (Winstanley, 2015). I consider myself not only as a language teacher and a researcher but as a language activist in the broadest sense and it was a combination of these that motivated me to do this PhD.

1.2.4 Aims of the project

As I have outlined in the sections above, some of the overall aims of the project pre-dated my involvement but the research itself was loosely defined and I could bring my own perspectives and ideas to the project. I brought an academic interest in communicative repertoire and language ideologies to the focus on heritage language maintenance inherent in the existing project.

I was very aware of local perceptions that language shift was underway. I had heard the concerns expressed many times by adult ESOL students, and my own friends and colleagues with regards to their children. Similar concerns were expressed by

the Osmani Trust. Hoque's (2015) work highlighted the issue among his young third generation participants, who did not prioritise speaking Sylheti, although some did speak it as part of a broader repertoire. Similar worries also periodically emerge in the local press. In April 2024 a four-part article series was published by the local online paper Whitechapel LDN which began with an article entitled 'With third-generation British Bangladeshis losing their mother tongue, the community faces a tipping point' (Naylor Marlow, 2024a).

Concerns regarding language change should not be surprising. As Canagarajah (2008:151) points out an expected span for language shift in diaspora contexts can be three generations: 'Parents migrating as monolingual in L1, children becoming bilingual, and grandchildren shifting to monolingual in L2' (see also Pauwels, 2004 2016). Sylheti speakers are already on the fourth generation, at least, and migration from Sylhet has been stagnating, not through lack of interest, but due to increasingly draconian immigration laws as part of the hostile environment.

On the other hand, I also knew from my own experience of life in Tower Hamlets that there was a huge contrast between monolingual ideologies and the linguistic diversity I saw in public life in public places in Tower Hamlets where Sylheti was anything but invisible.

There are three main strands to this thesis which I bring together in dialogue as the chapters unfold. The first strand is situated sociolinguistic description based on ethnographic explorations with participants. This strand talks to the importance of understanding what is happening linguistically in 2020s Tower Hamlets: what people are doing with language in Tower Hamlets, why, and what their thoughts about this are. The second strand is how this description connects to participants' concerns

regarding language loss including and what people think can be done to address the concerns. The third strand takes us back to Apsana Begum's address to the House of Commons in the first pages of this thesis and relates to how Sylheti can be harnessed as part of the struggle to bring a more accurate understanding of the UK as a multilingual nation where 'ekta basha kuno dino jotheshto oy na' – *one language is never enough.*

1.2.5 The importance of this study

The importance of this study lies in the connection of the strands outlined above: the exploration of the affordances of place and place identity for Sylheti and linguistic diversity in the UK. It is a hopeful study which, while recognising the inevitability of the dominance of English in multilingual repertoires of Sylheti speakers of all ages, and the tensions between Sylheti and other Bangladeshi languages, it points to the enduring nature of Sylheti in the public and semi-public place, the affordances of changing linguistic diversity in Tower Hamlets and evidence of a revival hint at a renewal of Sylheti in Tower Hamlets in the future.

After reviewing some of the relevant literature which I discuss in chapter 2 and carrying out some preliminary research, I decided to investigate connections between language and place. The existing literature mainly referred to individual identities and choices (Hoque, 2015; Chowdhury, 2016) and family practices (Ruby, 2017). Although Hamid's (2011) work did address practices outside the home in Leeds, there has been very little recent investigation focussed on Sylheti language practices outside the home, and none in Tower Hamlets. Studies in other linguistic contexts have focused on situated language practices outside the home but many of these studies centre on the affordances of place for interlinguistic and intercultural communication (see for example Blackledge, Creese and Hu, 2015; Bradley and

Simpson, 2020), rather than on language maintenance and development of any particular language.

The perception that Sylheti is only spoken in the family or in closed contexts rather than as part of public life, can invisibilise it or and give weight to erroneous ideas that it is English that is used in the social world outside the family. I felt that exploring affordances of Tower Hamlets and communication in public places, rather than a focus on individuals or families, might give a fresh perspective on experiences of and attitudes to Sylheti in Tower Hamlets, shedding light on the circulating discourses that gave rise to this project. With this underpinning rationale, I developed the following research questions to guide me.

The main research question for this study aimed to explore the importance of place, how Sylheti speakers use language to construct the public space and how the public space is linked to choices and selections from repertoires.

> RQ 1. How do participants' experiences of place affect how they draw on their multilingual resources in everyday encounters?

The second question addresses the notion that, particularly in the public space, Sylheti is used as part of a range of communication resources and strategies.

> RQ2. What is the relationship between Sylheti and other linguistic, semiotic and embodied communicative resources used in the local area?

The final question relates to participants' own ideas and perceptions.

> RQ3. How do participants construct ideas about and attitudes to Sylheti and Sylheti maintenance?

1.3 Chapter outlines

There are 6 chapters following this introduction.

In chapter 2, I situate the research and outline how I approach the work theoretically and explain my own research plan in relation to the existing field.

In chapter 3, I introduce the participants in the study, and I discuss and justify how I approached the study methodologically.

In chapter 4, I present an empirical case study of Watney Market, a small market street close to the Bangladeshi heartland of Banglatown and Spitalfields. This chapter is based on linguistic landscape work done in and around Watney Market, and I also weave in analysis of interview data from the broader dataset. In this chapter I describe how Sylheti is deeply embedded in the social fabric of Tower Hamlets.

In chapter 5, I continue to explore the linguistic landscape of Watney Market but I explore how changes to migration have changed the sociolinguistic profile of the area and I explore the sociolinguistic coming together of Tower Hamlets Sylheti speakers and European 'Dhakaiya', or Bangla speakers.

In chapter 6, I move away from situated language use and I explore how participants talk about and reflect on their own language use and language attitudes. Drawing mainly on interview data I explore meta-understandings of language use. Finally in this chapter I also point forward to the future, bringing in the role of language education and language activism.

Finally in chapter 7 I draw conclusions and suggest some implications of this study as well as point to ideas for further research.

2 Literature and theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the scholarship which informs and supports my study. I outline some of the main theoretical developments that influence the research and I explain how I approach my research conceptually. Like many sociolinguistic ethnographies, my study developed in different directions and consequently there is no single sub-field of sociolinguistics to which this work clearly belongs. It sits within the field of sociolinguistics of multilingualism and adds to work that seeks to understand how and why speakers use their multilingual repertoires in the way they do. But by doing this it creates a dialogue with work on heritage language maintenance: the work people do to strive to maintain and develop their multilingual repertoires, often against odds. The focus therefore is on what everyday practices in public places in Tower Hamlets involving Sylheti repertoires can tell us about Sylheti language maintenance.

The thesis is theoretically underpinned by the concept of repertoire (*inter alia* Gumperz, 1964; Busch, 2012; Rymes, 2014; Blommaert and Backus, 2011; Blommaert and Rampton 2011) and in section 2.2 I outline and discuss the current theoretical debates that relate to my study.

I also draw on theoretical notions of place and place-making and in section 2.3 of this review I discuss how studies that explore the nexus of language and place from a sociolinguistic perspective have underpinned the project.

Finally, in section 2.4 I discuss the field of heritage language maintenance. I put particular emphasis on studies related to Sylheti where possible, but I also pay attention to work developed in contexts of racially marginalised languages or languages with links to colonialism, as those most relevant to my study.

2.2 Linguistic and communicative repertoire

In this study I draw on the theoretical concepts of communicative and linguistic repertoire to help me analyse how participants draw on Sylheti in public places in Tower Hamlets. My decision to use repertoire as a theoretical framework is based on my own ontological understandings of how people use language. I understand language use as situated and impacted by local situations and as such constantly redefined in practice, including metalinguistic practice (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Pennycook, 2010; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011).

It is also based on the recognition and awareness that all the participants in this project use Sylheti as part of, and not isolated from, the other languages, communicative resources and communication strategies they draw upon in day-to day activities. These practices are often impossible to separate.

The concept of repertoire has been drawn upon in myriad different ways by scholars of sociolinguistics, and beyond. At its most basic level it can be understood as a personal communication toolkit or set of communication resources that all speakers develop over the course of their lives as they accumulate sociolinguistic experiences (Blommaert and Backus, 2011). According to Bagga-Gupta and Carniero (2021:8) 'if semiotic repertoires are merely a set of resources that describe contingent interactions, it is a useful concept, akin to the common-sense meaning of the word repertoire as an inventory'. But they go on to suggest that to merely consider repertoire as an inventory, however useful, 'does not contribute to advancing the field forward' (ibid). For example, how people gather their repertoires how they are

deployed, how they are perceived and interpreted, contested, adapted and expanded, are all issues of debate within the field and relevant to my study. The following discussion moves beyond the idea of repertoire as a toolkit to how scholarship has advanced the field.

2.2.1 Languages as ideological constructions

It could be said that the scholarship on repertoire developed out of a strong challenge to the dominant, structuralist notion of 'languages' as separate linguistic codes, or fixed objects. It is now widely accepted in sociolinguistics that languages as named and relatively fixed entities are socially and historically constructed, often as part of macro political processes such as nation building, policy making and institutional categorisation of people as means of control of societies especially colonial control (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Heller, 2008b; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011).

Gumperz' seminal work on linguistic repertoire (1964) began to unravel the dominant ideological construction of named and separate languages. He put forward that what structuralist linguists thought of as different languages and language varieties instead 'form a behavioural whole, regardless of grammatical distinctness, and must be considered constituent varieties of the same repertoire' (1964: 140).

As well as problematising the ontology of languages as fixed entities, scholars have also contested that languages are not adequate, or accurate enough to describe our complex communication processes. These ideas relate to critiques of structuralist models of languages as 'objects', somehow separate from the speakers and listeners in situated contexts. Stroud (2018: 24) describes this as a 'bloodless understanding of language as a disembodied structure.' Rampton (2019: 7) points

out, 'If we only think in terms of named languages like 'English', 'Punjabi', 'Spanish' or 'Yoruba', we will miss the complex shifts and mixings that people use, need and engage with in contemporary life'. Even terms such as bi and multilingualism are not adequate as they simply confirm the separate status of languages living alongside each other, something Heller (2007) termed 'parallel monolingualisms'.

The concept 'translanguaging' (*inter alia* Garcia and Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al, 2015) has become one of the most diffuse terms in the literature to describe the process in which speakers draw on relevant aspects of their repertoire in situated practice and especially in education contexts. Scholars often draw on Otheguy et al's 2015 description of translanguaging as:

> The deployment of a speaker's full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages (2015: 3).

This foregrounding of the fluid processes of linguistic elements in communication, often dispenses with ideas of named languages altogether (*inter alia* Garcia, 2007; Blackledge and Creese, 2014; Otheguy et al, 2015).

2.2.2 Named languages as part of communicative repertoire

There is perhaps an underlying sense in current sociolinguistic thinking that named languages are somehow false and 'invented' and should be replaced by something else, a more accurate version of linguistic 'truth' which might be fluid practices, idiolect, or whole repertoire (*inter alia* Makoni and Pennycook 2007). But orientations to fluid practices are also aspects of language ideology. People's orientations to fluidly or fixity can be seen as ideological, subject to social and historical forces and both are present in communicative practice.

Alongside the challenge to ideas of languages as whole named entities, there has to be understanding that communication practice also contains 'watchful adherence' (Otheguy et al, 2015) to the *idea* of separate languages.

Silverstein's total linguistic fact, (Silverstein 1979) illuminated by Rampton's work (Rampton 2011, 2013, 2019, 2020) is very relevant here. Silverstein argues that within *every* instance of language use there are three interlinked components: the first is the structural aspects of language, grammar, vocabulary, sounds etc; the second is the communicative activity, or practical impact of what we say and the third is the overt or covert expression of people's attitudes and beliefs in relation to the language they use. All three components link together in a dynamic process, each affecting the other (Rampton 2019). This means that the attitudes and ideas about the nature of language that people carry with them when they interact with others in particular spaces also form part of their repertoire. The discourses we carry with us about languages, whether consciously or not, whether expressed directly or enacted in practice are as integral to our communication practices as the linguistic, multimodal, spatial and visual resources we draw upon (ibid). Creese and Blackledge (2011: 1197) also make a similar point when they say, 'Language is a fundamentally social phenomenon, and linguistic practices are not separate from the beliefs and attitudes relating to languages in societies'.

Similarly Agha's work on enregisterment (2007) helps to explain the idea of named languages within a repertoire approach. Canagarajah draws on Agha's work when he argues that languages are 'historically sedimented processes of enregisterment' (2022: 4). He suggests that when habitual linguistic practice, or metalinguistic practice, is accepted by groups of people it becomes the unmarked norm. Through

habitual metalinguistic practice therefore certain linguistic forms become known as 'languages'. There are parallels with Bucholz and Hall's (2005) theorisation of processes of identity formation and Butler's ideas of gender (1990) as ideologically sedimented. More recently scholars of language and race (Alim et al, 2020) have described orientations to race as similarly outcomes of practice.

I draw on these concepts throughout the thesis to incorporate the many orientations to Sylheti language that emerge in the ethnographic data. They include: meta orientations to Sylheti as a separate named language; meta orientations to linguistic elements of Sylheti as the same as other Bangladeshi languages especially Bangla; evidence of language separation in usage and evidence of Sylheti meshed with other linguistic and semiotic resources in practice. I argue that a repertoire frame, alongside theories of enregisterment (Agha, 2007) and the total linguistic fact (Silverstein, 1979, 1985; Rampton, 2011) allows for all of these (see also Madson, 2023) and I draw on the concept of repertoire as consisting of linguistic elements, semiotic elements, and ideological elements.

2.2.3 Fluid practices as enregistered

If we think of named languages as enregistered ideological processes (Agha, 2007; Canagarajah, 2022) which are thought of and used *as if they were* fixed stable entities, it is then also possible to think of language use in various stages of the enregisterment process. Pennycook (2018: 86) points to certain terms or ways of speaking, conventionally thought of as belonging to one language, that are used so habitually in another that they also become part of or 'enregistered' in the new language. He gives the example of 'assalamualaikum' from his data and suggests it would be problematic to refer to this simply as 'Arabic', as it is incorporated into so many different languages. The common use of the word 'loanword' to describe this

process is revealing of the ideologies in traditional structuralist linguistics as it suggests that terms inherently 'belong' to particular languages and can merely be borrowed by others.

The concepts of enregisterment (Agha, 2007) and translanguaging (*inter alia* Garcia and Li, 2014; Otheguy et al, 2015) shed a different light on the idea of 'borrowing' or language mixing albeit from slightly different angles. The idea of enregisterment of mixed language practices is explained well by Canagarajah when he suggests that 'it is possible for a speaker to appropriate semiotic resources from elsewhere and treat them as part of their language through their repeated use and shared indexicality' (2019: 12). In this way fluidity becomes more stable or enregistered. Pennycook's example of Arabic highlighted above is particularly revealing in this regard as we can see how the use of particular terms, perhaps once used with an element of fluidity, has gradually become more stable across a range of languages. My data contains multiple examples of this particularly in relation to Arabic and English being incorporated into Sylheti, as if these terms were Sylheti.

Translanguaging is also used to explain mixing practices, but it implies more spontaneous fluidity, conveying the idea of practices emerging from the contingent moment rather than emerging from or connected to habitual practice. Proponents of translanguaging tend to dispense with the idea of named languages altogether whereas an enregisterment lens sees named languages as being the result of language ideologies, normally with associations of power, and habitual practices that over time become accepted by and 'named' by speakers and institutions (Agha, 2007).

Using the concept of enregisterment it is possible to think of more stable mixing practices as sedimented translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2020). The same

ideological processes that create ideas of stable named languages also sediment these mixing practices and allow them to become enregistered, or more stable, and as such less fluid and more fixed.

Most studies of Sylheti. including mine, point to the prevalence of flexible mixing or translanguaging between Sylheti and English. This is shown to be common in observations of practices but is also 'ideologically sedimented' (Canagarajah, 2020) into new names and categories, although these names are not institutionally embedded. Hoque in his study of 3rd generation Bangladeshis found that his young participants freely combined Sylheti, Bangla and English in everyday speech during interviews. He uses the term 'Banglish' (2015: 60) and calls this 'free alternating between English and Bengali' (2015: 61)[3]. Similarly, during Rasinger's (2007: 253) study on the second language acquisition of first-generation Bangladeshis, his interviewees reported that London born adolescents frequently used a 'Sylheti-Cockney': a speech variety consisting of both east London adolescent vernacular and Sylheti elements. Hamid (2011) also refers to the frequent use of mixed Sylheti and English among Sylheti speakers in Leeds, both adults and young people. The terms that refer to this kind of enregistered mixing are also used by non-academics and are mentioned frequently by my participants during the project.

Canagarajah (2019) also highlights this process with regard to Sri Lankan Tamil in the UK and he argues that such mixing can be seen as a new form of heritage language, perhaps even one to aspire to, over and above the aspiration of pure or standard forms. He explains:

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[3] Hoque 2015 explains that he uses the term Bengali interchangeably with Sylheti in line with the practices of his participants. The term Banglish therefore assumes mixing with Sylheti and English and possibly Bangla.

> Many families mentioned that their conversational interactions always
> involved both English and Tamil, such that the mixed usage had become the
> unmarked code for family interactions. In such contexts, it is difficult to tease
> apart the HR from the other languages. In fact good argument can be made
> that it is such mixed languages that might be considered the HL[4] (ibid: 28).

Such possibilities already have huge consequences for heritage language studies,
including those relating to Sylheti. Canagarajah (2008) exploring Sri Lankan Tamil
maintenance in the UK in the Sri Lankan diaspora in English speaking countries
suggests that attitudes to language maintenance can be dominated by unrealistic
expectations. He posits that languages in diaspora contexts will never be the same
as in their countries of origin, due to high levels of language contact and shifting and
competing language ideologies linked with migration. Although there is a sense of
wanting to keep ties with the homeland, it is also common to prioritise mastery of the
local languages over maintenance of home languages in order to achieve
educational and economic success in the new country (ibid). This is perhaps
especially the case in English speaking countries in which the ideology of English as
a global language also plays its part.

There is however perhaps a tension between ideas of enregisterment of new
'languages' as suggested above and fluid approaches such as translanguaging.
When Creese and Blackledge et al (2011) investigated ideological notions of
separate named languages in complementary schools in the UK, they also came
across mixing practices but cautioned against applying fixity to language mixing.
They argue:

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[4] heritage language

> In keeping with our understanding of flexible bilingualism as heteroglossia, we do not view this as a phenomenon which is unitary, or fixed. Rather, it represents considerable diversity in the use of linguistic resources. Examples in our corpus are diverse, from the use of two 'languages' in a single word (e.g. 'junglema'), to movement between 'languages' in moving from formal to informal (or public to private) talk, to the appropriation of voices from the worlds of multimedia and digital communication (ibid, 1206).

I agree that although the enregisterment of language mixing is of great interest, it is only part of the multitude of possibilities that a repertoire approach can incorporate as the above quote explains.

Any tension between fixity and fluidity can be resolved by continuing to focus on the processual nature of repertoire, and indeed it is this which allows for the ideological construction of named languages in the first place and which allows for the possibility of enregisterment of new named languages. Repertoires understood thus can contain, free flowing linguistic and non-linguistic items, ideological items such as named languages and linguistic combinations that appear to be in more stable stages of enregisterment in particular contexts, for example Benglish. This is hugely important in the context of this study where fluid practices are commonplace and orientations to named languages remain an important element.

2.2.4 Repertoire and migration

Repertoire approaches have come to be particularly relevant in sociolinguistic studies relating to migration and diaspora (*inter alia* Lytra & Jørgensen, 2008; Valentine et al, 2009; Blommaert, 2010) with some arguing that it is migration itself that has complexified repertoires. Blommaert (2010: 5) points out 'complex mobility, associated with superdiversity, causes people's patterns of language use to become

less predictable and significantly more complex'. Blommaert and Backus locate this historically in the 'changed nature and structure of migrations after the end of the Cold War' (2011: 4) and in the rise of digital communication possibilities (ibid). The more migration, therefore, the more complex the repertoire as people collect communicative resources by interacting in different contexts.

However, there have been various critiques of this position put forward by scholars with an orientation to studies in in the global South (Canagarajah, 2022; Lüpke, 2012; Bagga-Gupta and Carniero, 2021). They point out that fluid multilingualism, and indeed an understanding of the centrality of semiotic and embodied practices is nothing new in the Global South. Mar-Molinero (2020:14) does well to remind us that research into urban multilingualism has 'been largely driven by research embedded in Western concepts of 'national' languages and indeed 'bounded' languages, without drawing on the sociolinguistic knowledge of scholars from Global South (see also Canagarajah, 2022). Canagarajah (2022) suggests that the idea that migration has led to increasingly complex repertoires is a misrecognition, based on western understandings of language. He describes the communication practices he grew up with in Sri Lanka: 'shuttling in and out of [..] languages, or using Sri Lankan English as a lingua franca, or fashioning new pidgins out of our vernaculars when not everyone spoke English' (ibid 6).

Rather than reject the link between migration and complexifying repertoires, another argument is that migration has disrupted, and continues to disrupt, the deep-seated monolingualism in the Global North which has at its core processes of colonialism and domination. Migration has done this not simply by bringing other languages into the mix but, again drawing on Silverstein's 'total linguistic fact' (Rampton, 2019), by

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bringing language ideologies and epistemologies from the Global South. Heller, discussing the disruption of the ideological hegemony of monolingual norms in the Global North, suggests 'it is increasingly difficult for [nation states] to impose fictive linguistic cultural homogeneity within their boundaries (ibid, 2008b: 513). Fluid orientations are better thought of politically therefore as anti-colonial rather than as linguistic processes linked with migration. In this way 'colonial templates' based on Global North epistemologies can be challenged (Severo and Makoni, 2021:20).

Amir's (2024a) personal blog post tracking her family's language history across migration makes the interesting point that even when individual named languages are lost through the migration process, the multilingual ideologies remain.

> I find myself incapable of being able to speak all the bolis of my grandparents. I have lost two of my heritage bolis. Similarly, my children cannot speak all the bolis of their grandparents. Triple migrations and moving from one place to another have left us leaving one language for another; however, we still carry some of the mannerisms of our bolis in other languages – our Kashmiri-Pakistaniness manifests in English, Urdu, Swedish, and a mixture of all the above! We perform our identities through new vehicles, in new mediums, new bolis.

She explains 'In the case of South Asia and Pakistan, the notion of one language or one ethnic group is rendered a myth' and she goes on to say 'Euro-centric epistemologies and theorisation fall short of accurately labelling and describing both individual and societal multilingualism' (ibid).

Muxul Saxena's 1994 study of literacy practices among Panjabis in Southall illustrates well that migration and mobility bring not only new 'languages' to the Global North but also fluid practices and ideologies from the Global South. He points out, 'Historically and ideologically Britain has largely remained a monolingual,

monocultural and monoliterate state: However, linguistic minorities exist as multilingual, multicultural and multiliterate subsystems both in terms of their ideologies and practices' (Saxena, 1994:213). These ideas shed some light on the complexities surrounding orientations to Sylheti alluded to in chapter 1 and the difficulties in categorising as either a separate named language or variety of Bangla.

2.2.5 Selections from the linguistic repertoire

In my study all the participants have a broad linguistic and semiotic repertoire allowing for many possibilities, conscious and unconscious decisions about which elements to draw on in interactions. In the empirical chapters 4, 5 and 6 I explore the basis of some of the selections people make. Although I use the word selections, I do this in full recognition that the use of this term falsely implies a freedom of the speaker to decide. There are of course a whole range of complexities within these 'choices', mostly to do with concepts of power.

Work on language ideologies has helped to trace and understand the historical meanings behind discourses relating to language valuation and hierarchies and helps us understand how certain beliefs about language and particular named languages have developed (Badwan 2021b). There are always concrete and historical reasons as to why certain named languages are considered powerful, although these reasons are often far too complex and multifaceted to be traced in their entirety.

Dominant or hegemonic language ideologies have often emerged historically to protect the interests of powerful social groups and they become so embedded in collective use through habitual use over long periods that they are often considered 'truth' or 'fact', are embedded in complicated relations of power and continue to

perpetuate inequality in society. Cavanaugh (2019: para 14) points out, 'a language ideology perspective, or one that works from its basic premises, can shed light on the tight but often invisible connections between speaking and wielding—or being excluded from—power'.

Exerting power through language was an aspect of colonial domination (*inter alia* Makoni and Pennycook, 2007; Canagarajah, 2022). Severo and Makoni explain 'the colonial linguistics that helped shape languages had material effects on language policies adopted by colonial powers, as in the role of education in the institutionalization and systematization of languages, mainly by inserting literacy as a powerful representation of what counts as language' (Severo and Makoni 2020:155) It is also feature of neo-colonialism whereby languages like English continue to gain power in previously colonised countries such as what is now called Bangladesh, through ideological associations of specific languages with prestige, status education and wealth.

In Bangladesh, the country born from a struggle for a national language, English is sought after more now than ever before in the form of English medium education and this is ubiquitous across the Indian subcontinent decades after the end of British colonial rule. Severo and Makoni (2021: 19) rightly point out that:

> Coloniality and post-coloniality cannot be reduced to geographical or temporal aspects, but rather, must consider evolving power relations that submit some to the systematic control of others. This means that history cannot be reduced to a linear and chronological perspective that has been used to shape the ideas of 'pre' and 'post'.

As well as contending with the dominance of English, Sylheti is also positioned as inferior to the standard language Bangla as a result of standardisation processes in the building of the new Bangladeshi nation (See Hoque, 2015 and Simard et al,

2020). Sylheti speakers in the UK therefore can find that their Sylheti resources are diminished in competition with *two* powerful languages.

Karatsareas (2020) makes similar observations in his study of Greek Cypriots in the UK:

> When varieties that stand in diglossic relation with each other are transplanted to new geographical and social settings as a result of migration, they are placed in a new context where they both lose part of their symbolic capital and are jointly put under pressure from the majority language of the host country. In this new state of affairs, non-standard varieties are further minoristised and disadvantaged as diasporas often see it as their mission to instil into younger generations the socially dominant and prestigious aspects of the national and cultural identity of the homeland (ibid, 2020:107).

This kind of language stratification can lead to further devaluing of stigmatized languages. Badwan (2021b: 32) explains, 'it directs individuals to invest in certain languages, it degrades the value of other languages and their speakers, and it creates new types of social divisions which are configured based on access to the language that dominates the market'. Moreover, these hierarchies, although ideological, have concrete material consequences and Badwan (ibid: 29) explains that 'there is' a strong connection between the social position of individuals and the perceived values of the languages they speak'.

Such ideological evaluations play a part on how people 'select' aspects of their own linguistic repertoire in certain situations. As Kroskrity (2007: 518) points out, 'language ideologies are not merely those ideas which stem from the ''official culture'' of the ruling class but rather a more ubiquitous set of diverse beliefs, however implicit or explicit they may be, used by speakers of all types as models for constructing linguistic evaluations and engaging in communicative activity'. Jaffe (2009: 391) also explains such ideological positionings are to be found everywhere

in communicative practice: 'We find empirical traces of language ideologies in multiple types and levels of data. Language ideologies are reflected in explicit statements about language in metalinguistic discourse; they are refracted in practices that orient towards or draw upon ideologies as resources and are also embedded as presuppositions of discourse'. Language ideologies can be explicit, in laws and policies governing language use in countries or intuitions, or in overtly expressed opinions and attitudes towards language use, how things should or shouldn't be expressed for example, or which languages should be used in different contexts. Some language ideologies are taken for granted or common-sense notions or because they are deeply ingrained in our own personal experiences and worldviews. According to Sallabank (2013: 64) it is precisely these unconscious beliefs that are 'all the more powerful as drivers of practice'.

I draw out these concepts in the context of my thesis. The data reveals that these ideologies are both reproduced and resisted in ways in which people draw on their Sylheti repertories in complex ways. In chapter 5, I bring evidence from a new contact zone in Watney Market where Sylheti speakers are suddenly having to contend with Bangla speakers. It was tempting to draw the straightforward conclusion that that the Bangladeshi Europeans are wielding the ideological power of Bangla, disregarding Sylheti as less worthy. While this may sometimes be the case, I also show in the empirical chapters there is more complexity alongside simple reproduction of dominant discourses.

So far in this discussion I have mainly referred to how linguistic elements combine in repertoire. However, the linguistic is only one aspect of the elements in our repertoire and in the next section I discuss non-linguistic aspects of repertoire

2.2.6 The linguistic hierarchy in repertoire

Scholars of repertoire have begun to contest the communication hierarchy in sociolinguistic study that places what we consider 'language', words and sounds, named languages and so on, as most important, and other aspects of communication as secondary. Bradley and Simpson refer to this as the 'logocentric' focus of multilingualism research (2020: 29) and Block (2014) as lingualism. In response to this, scholars working within a repertoire frame have begun to focus on expanding the notion beyond the 'linguistic' and develop an understanding that linguistic elements are just aspects of what can now be called a 'semiotic repertoire' (Kusters et al, 2017; Blackledge et al, 2014) or 'communicative repertoire' (Rymes, 2014). Rymes' formulation is broad and all encompassing: 'one's repertoire can include multiple languages, dialects, and registers, in the institutionally defined sense, but also gesture, dress, posture, and even knowledge of communicative routines, familiarity with types of food or drink, and mass media references'. Lüpke and Storch's (2013: 347) is similarly comprehensive. They say 'what we will need in order to understand what language actually is to speakers and hearers, is a description and explanation of those devices that people use in order to communicate and express themselves – ranging from various "named" languages and their registers, to signs, symbols, objects, clothes, gestures, and so on'. Kusters et al's (2017) 'semiotic repertoires' describe the combination of linguistic, multimodal and embodied resources, including gesture and signing, that people use in communicative practice. I have found Blackledge, Creese and Hu's (2015) formulation the most useful for my own work as, unlike the others, it does not just list constituent elements but, includes a description of process: how these elements are taken up or not taken up in situated communication.

They argue:

> Semiotic repertoires include but are by no means limited to the linguistic. Rather, they include aspects of communication not always thought of as 'language', including gesture, posture, and so on; they are a record of mobility and experience; they include gaps and silences as well as potentialities; and they are responsive to the places in which, and the people with whom, semiotic resources may be deployed (Blackledge, Creese, & Hu 2015: 100).

The TLANG project, which ran from 2014-2018, has arguably pushed forward empirical work on communicative and semiotic repertoire. The project involved multiple co-researchers in 4 research teams across 4 UK cities. It aimed to gain an understanding of multilingual practices in the UK from the theoretical perspectives of repertoire, social practice approaches and translanguaging. The project's stated aims were to document situated everyday meaning making across different modes, spoken, gesture, written and visual (TLANG website). Most of the project was carried out in areas of substantial linguistic diversity with people drawing on multiple named languages, often without an obvious lingua franca or shared linguistic resources, alongside multimodal communication resources.

An important element of the TLANG project lies in the extensive documentation of communication practices across different sites, via linguistic ethnographic methods such as video recordings of interactions and extensive field notes, which aim to show actual communication practice, rather than self-reported practices. In their case study of the Chinese butcher in the Bull Ring Market in Birmingham, Blackledge and Creese show that when people with diverse linguistic backgrounds interact 'through the deployment of semiotic repertoires of gestures, eye gaze, nods and headshakes, shrugs and smiles, commercial activity goes on in a convivial way that is not

seriously troubled by apparent differences between linguistic, cultural, or national backgrounds' (2017: 19).

I draw on this work in my study. For example, in my analysis of the café in chapter 4 I showed how Shohid the café owner drew on the whole range of his repertoire to make meaning and sell produce using linguistic items from Sylheti, English, Italian and Bangla. But he also used semiotic resources including the materiality of the shop layout such as the canopy with the Italian colours and positioning of the betel leaf stall just outside and displays of produce which index both Bangladeshiness and Italianness. In fact, it is very easy to imagine how his business would have been less successful without these semiotic factors.

2.2.7 Repertoire as individual or collective

Although the shift from thinking about communication as 'languages', to ideas of 'repertoire' constituted a paradigm shift, as discussed in the last section, there is nevertheless still a tendency to think of repertoires as part of individual competencies and scholars make links between repertoire and individual biographies. Rymes (2023:17) captures this stating: 'an individual's repertoire can be seen as like an accumulation of archaeological layers. As one moves through life, one accumulates an abundance of experiences and images' (see also Blommaert and Backus, 2011; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011). However, Pennycook (2018: 79) states 'rather than being individual, biographical or something people possess, repertoires are best considered as an emergent property, deriving from the interactions between people, artefacts and space' (see also Rymes, 2023).

Busch (2012) also notes that Gumperz' original work on repertoire tied repertoire to interactional sociolinguistics and conceived it not just as the possible linguistic

resources the individual had at their disposal but also *how this would be received in specific interactional contexts* (my emphasis). She argues that according to Gumperz the importance of 'how linguistic choices are tied to social constraints and categories' are paramount (2012: 504).

There were a number of factors in my study that ensured a focus on collective rather than individual repertoires: connection of language and place which drew analysis away from the individual and towards socially situated repertories; walking methods which focused participants on social activities (see chapter 3); working with participants across a range of ages, migration trajectories, class, gender and so on meant more attention was given to communication across difference.

As I explained in chapter 1, my main theoretical approach in this thesis was to investigate how Sylheti is incorporated within social practices and how it is just one aspect of communicative repertoires. I have mainly drawn on the rich scholarship discussed in this section to analyse and consider my data and develop understandings of Sylhet in 2020's UK. In-depth study of current and ongoing debates has enabled me to assess the complex nature of the repertoire lens that I have applied to my own research. 'Sylheti in the UK' is itself a complex area, and I was drawn to the repertoire lens as one well placed to provide a theoretical framework for on-the-ground practices and metalinguistic commentary which consisted of both fluid mixing of communication resources and (ideological) separation of resources.

In the next section of this review (2.3), I bring in a focus on place and place-based communication to the concepts of repertoire and I extend the notion of repertoire as collective and linked to situated practice. As I explain in the next section of this

review, I combine ideas of repertoire with an expanded notion of linguistic landscape (see section 2.2.3 this chapter and chapter 3 section 3.6.3 for a discussion of linguistic landscaping). This has meant a bringing together of the semiotic and visual affordances of linguistic landscape framing with the linguistic elements of repertoire. Using both these frames together allowed me to see practices which include Sylheti from a broad but more detailed standpoint.

2.3   Language and place

In this section I explore the literature relating to another central aspect of my thesis- the link between language and place. I outline the methods I used: walking interviews and ethnographic linguistic landscapes in more detail in chapter 3, but here I explore the link between language and place from a theoretical perspective. As I explained in the previous section, this also allowed me to focus on repertoire as situated practice and interacting with the places in which we live our lives. Cornips and de Rooij (2016: 192) argue that 'the local should not be thought of as being 'just there', as the natural outcome of a direct connection between a certain place and the people that live there, but needs, in the words of Appadurai, 'to be produced' (1996)' often by linguistic means'. Wang and Lamb (2024:12) point out that 'there has been an emerging trend in applied linguistics that has begun to treat 'space' rather than 'labelled language' as a starting point when analysing social and communication practices'.

As I outlined in the introduction, in my own study, the starting point has been both, and I draw interconnections between 'space' or 'place' - Tower Hamlets, and 'language' – Sylheti or 'Sylheti repertoires'. In addition to my own ontological understanding of language, outlined in the previous section, this lens brings another

reason to focus on repertoires, rather than Sylheti as a discrete language:

Researching language used in public places, whether that be speaking, hearing, seeing, or other, makes it more likely that languages will be observed in combination with one another and with other communicative resources.

Rather than just being the context in which 'language' occurs, or a backdrop to the study, place is *central* to my theoretical approach, methodology and the ethnographic activities I engaged participants in (see chapter 3). In my study 'place' refers to Tower Hamlets as a geographical location and as an identity marker but I also focus on the specific 'places' that participants directed me to a part of the study such as shops and cafes (see chapter 3).

2.3.1 Hegemonic notions of place

Notions of languages as having fixed origins in particular places were once at the core of sociolinguistics, in studies of dialectology and urban dialect geography, and were central to early variationist studies (Baynham 2012:115). However, ideas of a one-to-one relationship between language and place are increasingly contested in the literature, especially in work that explores actual language practices.

Smakman and Heinrich (2017: 5) point out that 'non-mobile speakers, staying their entire lives in their urban home society, are becoming increasingly atypical cases in an ever-growing number of cities. So are speakers who use a fixed and settled language repertoire throughout their lives'.

Nevertheless, dominant categorisations linked to these 'atypical' cases prevail in common-sense discourses. People still think of Bengali as somehow belonging to Bangladesh, Italian to Italy and so on, despite knowledge of more complex histories regarding how languages are attached to nation states and indeed their own lived

experience. Such critiques of fixed geographical links to language (Badwan, 2021b), or fixed links between language and nationhood (Heller, 2008b), underpin my study.

Pennycook (2010) challenges the idea of fixed links with language and geography by foregrounding the local nature of language practices and how people make use of linguistic resources in their local lives and activities, regardless of whether the languages they use are associated with other places. He makes an incredibly important point for my study when he problematises the commonsense idea of specific languages *spreading* from the places where they are perceived to have originated, to new places. In the introduction to his book *Language as a Local Practice*, he says 'the idea of language spread will be questioned from a position of multiple origins: language may not have spread and taken on local characteristics so much as already being local' (2010: 3).

I take up his argument and apply it to Sylheti, a language which has been *widely* spoken in London and other parts of the UK for at least 7 decades. According to Pennycook (ibid: 130-131) languages 'do not have one point of origin but rather multiple, co-present, global origins'. Although Pennycook is here referring to global Englishes, I apply this point to Sylheti as co-present in London, Leeds, New York and Sylhet and so on.

2.3.1.1 One to one links between language and place are exclusionary

Lamb and Vodicka's (2018:15) argument that any fixed link between a particular language and place could be exclusionary by rendering 'a place unwelcoming towards other meanings' is highly relevant to my study (see also Blommaert et al, 2005). As I outlined in chapter 1, in 2020s UK unwelcoming and exclusionary

language ideologies and associated language policies are played out in mainstream media and political discourse in the UK on a daily basis.

Amir (2024b) sums this up in a blog post about the presence of Pakistani on the linguistic landscape of the London district of Tooting. She poses the following question which is also very pertinent to my study:

> 'How much of local Pakistani languaging practices are considered part of the local ecology by the policy makers of modern-day "Global Britain"? And how much can we as educators and researchers make use of all languaging practices in our environment without labelling them under the binaries of minority/majority, local/foreign, indigenous/migrant?'

Such perspectives are not just, or even necessarily at all, about migration but predominantly about race and class. Rosa and Flores's (2017) work on raciolinguistics has focussed attention on longstanding 'deficit views of linguistic and cultural practices associated with racialized and socioeconomically marginalized populations' (ibid 621). They go on to reinforce this by arguing that 'despite decades of sociolinguistic research debunking deficit perspectives and challenging racializing discourses, they remain as pervasive as ever' (ibid). Although their perspective is embedded in the US, their arguments also resonate strongly in the UK context. For example, Cushing and Snell's (2023) work offers similar critiques of the racist deficit models that prevail in schools and school inspection regimes in the UK. Lamb and Vodicka highlight this in relation to the monolingual ideology prevalent in UK schools. They say:

> The situation is, sadly, particularly evident for children who bring a language spoken by more recent migrant populations from parts of South Asia or Africa (such as Punjabi or Somali), rather than one of perceived high status such as French or German (2018:7).

Badwan (2021a) interviewed young people in Manchester about their perceptions of using their own multilingual repertoires in public places. Although some took linguistic diversity for granted as a normal part of UK life, others spoke about 'shame, fear, and frustration that make them hide their non-English repertoires in public places' (ibid: 168). Cooke at al's (2019) work also uncovers experience of othering based on language. Their participants, adult ESOL students in South London reported, 'practically everyone in the group had a story to tell and some people said they experienced some level of discrimination related to their use of language "every day"' (2019: 147).

The experiences highlighted by these scholars and their participants reflect the uneven value of languages and repertoires in particular places. They also illustrate the existence of 'linguicism' in the UK: discrimination based on language, often used as a smokescreen for overt racism (see also Cooke and Simpson, 2012). For example, when Nigel Farage, right wing populist politician, stated in 2014 that he felt 'awkward' on a train journey in London because he couldn't hear any English amongst all the other languages, we know he is not really talking about language but about the people speaking and most likely about the ethnic background and religion of the people speaking (Farage felt awkward on train 2014) (see also Cooke and Simpon, 2012).

Cameron drawing on Wetherell's notion of 'interpretive repertoires': 'culturally familiar and habitual line(s) of argument comprised of recognisable themes, commonplaces and tropes' (Wetherall, 1998: 400 cited in Cameron, 2005: 331), suggests that speakers' knowledge of how gender, race or ethnicity are routinely or habitually approached in interaction affects how they then engage in communication with others, including which elements of the repertoire to employ.

Redclift et al's (2022) study illuminates this. They show how British Bangladeshi Muslims navigate communication in social situations in the public arena. Their study, based on extensive interviews, focuses on how 'broader discourses of anti-Muslim racism… are both internalised and resisted in everyday encounters' (ibid:1162) and their findings also have implications for our understanding of how people draw on their multilingual repertoires in much more complex and nuanced ways than knowledge of particular named or unnamed languages, proficiency, or even identity. Many of their examples show how interviewees use English to strategically avoid potential situations of racism. They highlight how interviewees 'took for granted the need to appear unremarkable in public space: to smile on the bus, to 'blend in' with those around them, and to speak English loudly to show they belonged' (ibid: 14). One of their interviewees describes her own experience (ibid: 8)

> I have to make an extra effort to tell people that even though I'm wearing a
> hijab, I can speak English, I can do stuff.

An awareness of racist positionings therefore affects how participants draw on their repertoire, irrespective of whether they are responding to actual examples of racism. The fact that my study contained few examples of this type is related to the particularity of the Tower Hamlets context which I discuss in the next section of this review, but there were instances, nevertheless. For example, Abdul Hussain, in chapter 6 talks about using an 'English' sounding name on job applications.

My study teases out some of the complexities within these concepts, situated in the dissonance between aggressive political discourse which draws on hegemonic discourse of language as tied to perceived origins, and the often very different reality of most people's experiences of living in London, and specifically Tower Hamlets.

Hegemonic ideas regarding language and place, although part of the daily digest from right wing politicians and mainstream and social media, contrast starkly with on-the-ground realities of my participants' day to day lives in Tower Hamlets and their multilingual and multimodal language practices. In chapters 4 and 5 I draw attention to these practices through ethnographic description of an animated linguistic landscape (see section 2.3.3). I show that Sylheti is both 'already local' (Pennycook 2010:3) *and* nurtured by new migration in ways that bring layers of complexity to the way people draw on their repertoires and belie fixed notions of language and place.

As I was about to finish this thesis, a wave of racist and Islamophobic violence engulfed small towns across the UK, much of it fuelled by the kind of comments made by Farage and Braverman used as examples here and in chapter 1. Such comments have been repeated for decades by politicians and right-wing journalists and commentators on mainstream news, in parliament and across social media. Comments and ideas about language use, and what languages people should use and where are just as much a part of this violence as comments about race, religion and other cultural practices.

2.3.2 Place-making

Place-making is a useful lens to investigate how people construct the places they inhabit by carrying out activity, including linguistic. Sociolinguistic place-making refers to how discursive activity constructs place and vice versa (Cornips and de Rooij, 2018; Thissen, 2018). Thissen (2018:25) outlines the concept of sociolinguistic placemaking. She explains that 'place-making is [..] about the ways that people

appropriate particular locations while endowing these with social meaning in the form of linguistic and cultural and/or material objects'.

An important aspect of my study consists of an empirical investigation of how participants relate their language use to place. This includes how participants refer to place, either in their metalinguistic comments or how they relate to the space around them, how they draw on elements of their repertoires in different spaces, and how they define their language use in particular places. Pennycook (2010: 2) argues: 'what we do with language in a particular place is a result of our interpretation of that place; and the language practices we engage in reinforce that reading of place'. I argue that there are specific actions and ways of talking and communicating or drawing on the repertoire that link specifically with Tower Hamlets, and specific spaces in Tower Hamlets.

2.3.3 Linguistic landscaping

Linguistic Landscape studies (*inter alia* Blommaert, 2013a; Shohamy and Gorter, 2009) have afforded an important, and fruitful way for sociolinguists to link language, multilingualism and place-making. Visible and audible manifestations of communication on the landscape can be understood as evidence of sociolinguistic place-making as it shows how people leave elements of materiality related to their communication practices and ideologies on the landscape. Linguistic landscape work can be viewed as part of an investigation of sociolinguistic place-making activities and to investigate how people make linguistic claims on the public place (see Paffey, 2020; Stroud and Jegels, 2014). The link afforded by linguistic landscape studies to connections with people and places brought me to consider it as a theoretical and methodological starting point or 'way in' for the work I was doing.

Barbara Johnstone's explanation of how theoretical critiques of language and place outlined in section 2.3.1 can link with understanding of linguistic landscapes, articulates well my perspective in this study. She says:

> Linguistic difference, the topic of sociolinguistics, is not just a result of physical distance or topography, as we once imagined. Rather, language is linked with place, or not, through ideas about what language, language varieties, and places mean, and these ideas are produced and circulated in talk and taken up in individuals' experiences of the linguistic landscapes they encounter (2011: 217).

Early linguistic landscape studies predominantly focussed on quantitative investigation of visible, multilingual signage. Such studies provided useful but perhaps at times two-dimensional accounts of multilingual communities and drew simple conclusions about demographic or ethnic make-up of an area or ethnolinguistic vitality, with such conclusions often based on precisely those perceptions of fixed links of language and origin that I critiqued in section 2.3.1. William (2016:133) comments, 'the quantitative arm of the field is too reliant on generalist categories, which only scratch the surface of the diverse complexities that construct the LL[5]'. Stroud's critique of structuralist approaches to language as 'beyond a bloodless understanding of language as a disembodied structure' (2017: 24) could also be applied here, as in early linguistic landscape studies, language items were often disassociated from those who made, used or interacted with them.

However, like the repertoire approaches highlighted in section 2.2, the field of linguistic landscapes has developed since its inception, also in response to debate

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[5] Linguistic landscape

and critique within the field. Scholars have extended the focus and work has become more qualitative and ethnographic in recognition that the relationships between people and the linguistic landscape need to be better understood. Some scholars have redefined this shift as 'ethnographic linguistic landscaping' (Blommaert and Maly, 2014). This new direction has led to a more critical and analytic approach to linguistic landscape work, focused on the complexities of how people relate to places rather than a focus on place in the absence of people. Blommaert's (2013a) and Papen's (2012) studies of neighbourhoods in Antwerp and Berlin, respectively, are examples of this more ethnographic focus. Both studies show 'linguistic landscapes as indexical of but also shaped by wider processes of social change and urban development' (Papen, 2012:58).

Blommaert's study investigated traces on the landscape of stratified social activity, and he used this analysis to trace social class transformations in the neighbourhood-His formulation: 'signs lead us to places, places lead us to people' (2013a: 82), captured the idea that visible signs are a manifestation of people's lived experiences in a specific locality, or, as I suggested earlier, evidence of sociolinguistic place-making.

Papen's study of Berlin shows how processes of gentrification are visible on the landscape, but she also shows how the landscape includes the history of the area, highlighting that it is not just a snapshot of a current moment in time. She remarks 'There is a tradition of neighbourhood activism in Prenzlauer Berg, going back to GDR times; activists have and still place signs in the public sphere' (ibid: 77). This shows the importance of the linguistic landscape to reveal social histories and by visibilising these histories, shape social change.

As the field of ethnographic linguistic landscape studies has developed, scholars have increasingly highlighted the importance of people in their studies. Papen's study in particular brought people actively into the investigation by conducting ethnographic interviews, something which she regards as crucial for her findings. She says:

> The contextualised and diachronic approach to examining linguistic landscape developed in this paper has allowed me to show how the LL both reflects as well as shapes social change and urban development in Berlin prior to and since reunification. Central to this approach was the use of interviews, with sign producers enabling me to identify and analyse some of the different voices present in the linguistic landscape (2012: 77).

Rather than just making inferences based on the visible landscape therefore, she used ethnographic approaches to enrich these inferences. These approaches have become more widespread (see Shohamy and Gorter, 2009; Stroud and Mpendukana, 2009). Juffermans (2014: 212) argues, 'if we are studying the linguistic landscape for what it can teach us about society [….] we cannot study the linguistic landscape in the absence of people'. Studies have brought attention to people's own accounts of the linguistic landscapes in areas they inhabit or frequent (Stroud and Mpendukana, 2009) or they seek to understand authors and audiences of the physical manifestations of language on the landscape (see Papen, 2012; Eley, 2019).

My own approach to linguistic landscape studies dispenses completely with any quantitative analysis or of the idea that that linguistic landscape means a focus on public signage alone. Such an approach would provide limited, and unreliable data for my research questions as it is very difficult to locate Sylheti in script form.

Shohamy and Waksman (2009:314) describe linguistic landscapes studies as 'text presented and displayed in a changing public space which is being refined and reshaped'. This definition begins to offer more to a study like mine, especially if, as the authors go on to explain, the understanding of text is of a 'broad and infinite repertoire of text types' (ibid), and 'systems which consist of mixes, hybrids varieties, fusions, "meshes" and multi-coded languages (ibid: 319). The linguistic landscape can incorporate, again according to Shohamy and Waksman, 'all [..] displayed and interwoven "discourses"- what is seen, what is heard, what is spoken, what is thought' (ibid: 313).

Then it can be conceived that a broad linguistic landscape lens is perfectly suited to the communicative repertoire lens I am applying to my study. In chapter 4 (section 4.2.2) I point to a shop sign outside a Bangladeshi sari shop. It is in \roman script and contains a combination of words linked to English, Sylheti and Arabic, evoking discourses of both empire and anti-empire. This is just one of the many examples of elements of the linguistic landscape where there are, 'no-fixed "linguistic" boundaries but rather a variety of crossings of the traditional homogenous linguistic borders resident language laws and standardisation in creative and innovative ways' (ibid: 319).

2.3.4 Spatial repertoires

The concept of spatial repertoire (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015) provides another way to link the concept of repertoire discussed in section 2.2 to concepts of place and place-making discussed in this section and is perhaps very similar to the broad version of linguistic landscapes described in section 2.2.3 above. Pennycook and Otsuji (2015:161) describe spatial repertoires as, 'linguistic resources of people

available in a particular place' and Canagarajah suggests it is to do with, 'how people put words to use in situated activity in specific locations' (2019: 35). A spatial repertoire lens suggests that spaces are part of the dynamic that shapes how people communicate and are in turn shaped by habits, histories, the physical environment and objects in the physical environment.

The spatial aspect of repertoire draws new attention to existing understandings of language practices as embodied and multimodal by including materiality as well as communication resources attached to humans in particular spaces. The materiality within spaces, including the built environment, combines with language and multimodal communication to shape activity. Repertoire is therefore not just how an individual makes choices on the basis of the linguistic and multimodal elements they have available in their own repertoires, but the available repertoires in particular spaces with particular people.

I show this in the analysis of the interactions on the fruit and vegetable stall I describe in chapter 4 (4.3.3) and in the interactions in the café in chapter 5 where the stall holders are making decisions based on the perceived repertoire of their customers and the surrounding materiality of the shops and markets space. Canagarajah makes this clear when he says, 'bits of words and grammatical structures from diverse languages work together….because these communicative resources find coherence in terms of the spatial ecology' (2019: 36). This is not just about the individual repertoires of the fruit seller in chapter 4 or the barista in chapter 5 therefore but about communication 'assembled *in situ'* (ibid: 36).

Pennycook and Otsuji argue that spatial repertoires, 'rather than focusing on either language-to-language relations (bilingualism, code-switching, multilingualism,

translanguaging) or language-to-person relations (competence, individual repertoires) aim to explore local language practices in relation to space and activity' (2015:162).

I approached the data with a focus on all the elements of repertoire, including spatial, and I asked what this agentive space meant for the speakers' multilingual practices in my study, how particular spatial configurations enabled or constrained multilingual practices and identities in my data, as well as how the participants sought out spaces as an outlet be that a breathing space or even a place for resistance.

2.3.5 Places of resistance

In this study I argue that sociolinguistic place-making has acted and can act as resistance to monolingual normative practices. Although Lamb and Vodicka warn that when languages are invisibilised, along with the identities of those who speak them, this 'nurtures an assimilation to the (mono)linguistic norm' (2018:12), I show that there are places in Tower Hamlets where Sylheti repertoires are visible in a way that defies this. I explore how these practices have been part of Tower Hamlets in different ways for decades and I peel back the layers to understand how they are inscribed on the linguistic landscape. Such practices, as well as contributing to the visibility of Sylheti and Sylheti speakers, also contribute to resisting the UK monolingual habitus (Gogolin, 1994 :2002, cited in Lamb and Vodicka 2018:12)

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Both Raychaudhuri (2018) and Wang and Lamb (2024) have drawn on Foucault's notion of heterotopias (1986:24): spaces that can disrupt norms and create change, to understand place-making practices as resistance. Wang and Lamb extend Foucault's notion to 'language spaces as Heterotopias' (2024: 18). They explain that these:

Conjure up a space of difference and a space of negotiation, in which diverse discourses, experiences and pursuits are brought together to be represented, contested and reversed, creating an opportunity of becoming. By doing this, it undermines the hegemonic language of ethnicity, race, citizenship imposed from above and destroys the 'syntax' with which the authorised discourses hold things together (ibid: 19).

Raychaudhuri's (2018) work explores the reclaiming of 'nostalgia' as resistant practice among South Asians living in neo colonial societies. He suggests that South Asians living in white normative societies harness nostalgia to create spaces where they can feel a sense of belonging despite the racism and othering they experience. These spaces can be defined 'heterotopias': places where small but significant small acts of resistance take place. They allow for a 'kind of everyday, domestic, quotidian, nostalgia as also possessing important progressive political potential' (2018: 17). Like Wang and Lamb, he argues that cultural acts can disrupt normative discourses, citing examples from 'literature, cinema, visual art, music, computer games, mainstream media, physical and virtual spaces and many other cultural objects (2017: 4). He also argues that the embedding of South Asian cultural practices in countries like the UK, 'complicates the here-there dynamic that is still far too often seen as structuring the world' (ibid: 12). Such arguments highlight the important role that everyday language and communication practices have in resistance. Although these every-day acts of language resistance to the sociolinguistic norm are small manifestations rather than huge political mobilisations, this does not have to detract from their importance.

2.3.5.1 Tower Hamlets as a heterotopia

In my analysis I bring the idea of 'heterotopias' and apply it directly to Tower Hamlets. I investigate how far the specific experiences and histories of Tower

Hamlets link with ideas of spatial repertoire and language heterotopias (Wang and Lamb, 2024). I consider how far people feel enabled by the Tower Hamlets heterotopia to draw on parts of their repertoire in ways that might feel uncomfortable or 'out of place' in other parts of the UK. This concept pushes the language and place frame to incorporate more than the agentive materiality of place implied in the idea of spatial repertoire, to incorporate histories of place, and particularly histories of struggle, within ideas of spatial repertoires.

The idea of Tower Hamlets enabling or facilitating multilingual practices where other places restricted them has been investigated by other scholars. Earlier in this section I highlighted Redclift et al's (2022) study, which pointed to people selecting English from their repertoire in public interactions 'so as to appear unremarkable' (ibid 1171). However, they also point out that their respondents who lived in Tower Hamlets felt some protection from this.

Similarly Rajina (2023), in her article about Muslim men's dress choices, points to the specificity of Tower Hamlets in creating more freedom of expression. She argues, 'specific locations in East London allow the Muslim man to bring forth a Muslimness merged with their ethnic expressions not afforded in other public spaces. In particular, the prominence of Tower Hamlets for the British Bangladeshi imagination is crucial to capture, as it is the heartland of the Bangladeshi community' (ibid: 3). She goes on to reinforce this point, stating 'Tower Hamlets, operating as a Muslim-majority borough, aids ease for Bangladeshi Muslim men to negotiate their sartorial choices' (ibid: 16).

Similarly, the Tower Hamlets ESOL students who participated in Cooke et al's (2019) study mentioned in section 2.3.1 reported different very different experiences to their south London ESOL colleagues and said they felt very comfortable using their full

repertoires when out an about. However, they also stated that this comfort disappeared when outside of Tower Hamlets or in areas they described as 'white'. I suggest that this sense of safety is not only a question of safety in numbers, although this is part of the equation, (cf. Ahmed, 2005; Redclift et al, 2022). But it is also a result of the legacy of struggle in Tower Hamlets, where battles against racism have been fought, and importantly won, in order to, 'create spaces where people could belong as British Asians' (Raychaudhuri, 2018: 17).

In my analysis I consider if Watney Market, and other parts of Tower Hamlets, can be viewed as a language heterotopia. This was brought into sharp relief by the eruption of racist and Islamophobic violence in small towns and cities across the UK in August 2024. This violence was a wake-up call against complacency, but also a sign of resistance work to be done, of the kind that has made Tower Hamlets much less likely to be attacked.

2.3.6 Convivial places

An orientation to language and place and a focus on the peopled linguistic landscape requires an understanding of how people use their repertoires to communicate with each other in the public place. Gilroy's work on conviviality gives a useful framework for understanding this. It explores how people create 'cultures of conviviality' (2006). in the shadows of colonialism and resulting inequalities. He points to a 'large measure of overlapping' (2006: 40) of people's everyday experiences and suggests that the outcome of overlapping activities can lead to a 'getting on' of sorts. Gilroy's work is not simply a celebration of multiculturalism or a glossing over of the experience of othering. Rather it centres the tensions between racism and multiculturalism and explores how people can appear to 'get on' even though

underlying racist attitudes remain unresolved. Back and Sinha add further caution suggesting, 'contact between people from diverse backgrounds offers an opportunity for convivial life but in no way guarantees it' (2018: 135), which suggests that there are political choices involved.

Despite the obvious tensions and the cautious approach to his work that he himself espouses when he says, 'recognising conviviality should not signify the absence of racism' (2006: 14), there is nevertheless an inherent optimism in Gilroy's work and hope in how people focus on their collective everyday activities, rather than overfocus on difference. As Back and Sinha (2018: 134) suggest, Gilroy's work offers 'an alternative understanding of cultures based on what people do every day rather than always reducing them to their cultural origins' (see also Harris and Rampton, 2009; Blommaert, 2013b).

Redclift at al's (2022) work offers a critique of the inherent optimism in the conviviality literature. They argue that although the literature rightly points to 'work' involved in convivial interactions, previous studies have failed to recognise that the distribution of this work in uneven. They suggest that the burden of this 'getting on' is shouldered disproportionally by racialised minorities while white people either remain unaware or not are prepared to take on the burden and take on the difficult work involved. Their study, involving analysis of extensive interview data, points out, 'The "burden of conviviality" is the burden placed on the shoulders of those racialised vis-a-vis white normativity (as South Asian and Muslim), to educate, understand and put at ease those not racialised as "different"' (2022: 14). They conclude, 'until diversity itself is seen as unremarkable, this burden is sometimes accepted, sometimes resisted, but always unevenly distributed' (ibid).

A conviviality lens can be useful in understanding how Sylheti speakers draw or do not draw on their repertoires and how they engage in sociolinguistic place-making in a white majority society. However, I also use it in chapter 5 to explore contact, shared space and activities between the host community mainly comprising Sylheti speakers and newcomers to the area, Bangladeshi 'onward migrants' from Italy. This part of my study regards cultures of conviviality where negotiation of difference relates to migration trajectories, cultural, linguistic and class differences rather than racial, ethnic or religious differences. This data points nevertheless to 'tense interactions and negotiated difference' (Williams and Stroud, 2013: 3), although further research would be needed to understand whether there was any element of 'burden of conviviality' in contexts where racial inequality is absent.

Williams and Stroud also highlight situations such as the Watney Market contact zone (see chapter 5) as fruitful for studies of conviviality (ibid). They suggest 'contexts of rapid change, and upheaval, diversity and mobility, afford particularly rich insights into how complex affiliations and attachments are negotiated, mediated and contested' (ibid, 2013: 291). Like Williams and Stroud's work I focus specifically on how language is harnessed to negotiate across difference.

As well as a useful lens for exploring the data, conviviality aligns with ontological and epistemological stances in this work, the ethnographic approach to research, the importance of dialogue and grassroots approaches to language and language education that I explore in the next section. These notions cohere around a stance of the transformatory potential of bottom-up or ground level language and culture that I am highlighting this thesis.

In this section I have drawn out the scholarship on language and place that has supported my analysis, but I have also drawn connections between the repertoire frame in section one and the language and place frame in this section. I suggest that the theoretical dialogue I have set up between these two frames and explorations of the cross overs provided a fruitful and innovative way to approach my data analysis.

2.4 Heritage Language Maintenance

In this third, and final, section of this chapter I discuss the body of literature which can be described as or has engaged with Sylheti as a 'heritage'[6] language in the UK. This literature links with the rationale for my study outlined in the introduction - local concerns about language shift to English and this section sets up the conversation between the theoretical frames discussed in sections 2.2 and 2.3. In this section I discuss scholarship related to identities and categorisation of communities, language hierarchies, intergenerational transmission in families and language education. In the final sub-section I include a discussion of activist approaches to heritage language maintenance.

2.4.1 Diaspora identities

The link between language use and identity is complex and multifaceted and the studies reviewed here reflect this complexity. Many of the studies discussed here take an anti-essentialist view of identity and investigate identities as being 'performed' or 'constructed' via social relationships and consequently as multiple, changing and contingent on lived contexts (Bucholz and Hall 2005). There is an understanding that identities do not always map neatly onto known categories and

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[6] Scare quotes refer to my problematising of the term heritage and the argument put forward in section 2.3.1 that Sylheti is both local and global.

that language intersects with other gender, religious, class and a whole host of more situated identities (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004; Harris and Rampton, 2009). In section 2.3.1, I aligned my study with critiques of the one-to-one relationship between language and origins. Canagarajah (2011: 77) explains, 'with the deterritorialization of both language and ethnicity, we are seeing new forms of identification practices in society'. There are myriad identity options regarding language and language maintenance and they can and do all co-coexist, sometimes within the same individual and like all identities are always changing.

Brubaker's influential 2005 article is drawn on by many scholars. In it he argues that diaspora should be treated 'as a category of practice, project, claim and stance, rather than as a bounded group (2005: 13)'. He suggests that diaspora identity is not something that people *are* just because they or their families have migrated but it is something that they *do*, or don't *do*. Brubaker also reminds us that while practices are linked to allegiances and identities, they are also strategic. He argues that, as a category of practice, 'diaspora' is used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations, to mobilize energies, to appeal to loyalties' (Ibid: 12). Discussing Brubaker's ideas, Androutsopolus and Lexander (2021:721) usefully point out that there will be 'communicative practices of diasporic engagement, which may grow or diminish over space and time'. This does not just relate to assumptions of diminishing diasporic engagement throughout generations. For example, it may be that Sylheti speakers who live in Tower Hamlets enact diasporic practices more frequently than, say for example, Sylheti speakers in other parts of the UK, as multiple examples in my study testify. It also means that people may 'do' diaspora at the market but not at home, for example, as my study also points to. Diaspora

practices are not just variable within populations but also within individuals, with people opting in and out of diaspora stances as and when it appears relevant or, as Redclift at al's 2022 discussed above illustrates, when they are pressured to by societal forces.

From this perspective multiple orientations to diaspora can be seen as complex situated practices rather than contradictory. Diaspora identities are tightly interconnected to other social identities that people orient to and perform linguistically, and diaspora practices may coexist with practices that point away from diaspora identities (Androutsopolus and Lexander, 2021).

In this sense, 'diaspora' can be considered to be part of communicative repertoire, to be drawn upon, or not, as and when it appears appropriate, strategically required or advantageous in some way. However, in order for practices to be drawn upon by individuals, they also need to be available and visible in the form of circulating discourses or, for example, as discussed in section 2.3.5 as part of places of resistance or 'heterotopias' (Raychaudhuri, 2018, Wang and Lamb, 2024).

In the context of Tower Hamlets, where Sylheti speakers have lived for many generations, it is important to problematise the terms such as 'heritage', and other related terms such as 'diaspora' and 'migrant'. Many scholars have pointed out that these terms are often used on the basis of ethnicity, regardless of how a person sees themselves or of whether an individual has themselves migrated, or how long ago they migrated. Is a person who migrated 10 or 20 years previously to be considered a migrant if they themselves do not identity as such? It has also been pointed out that it is particularly racialised minorities who find it more difficult to make their own choices about whether to orient to migrant, diasporic or heritage identities,

and are often ascribed these identities rather than for example described as 'citizens' or 'residents' (Wemyss, 2009).

Such essentialising discourses often lead to damaging processes of othering. In contexts such as Tower Hamlets linguistic and cultural orientations are extremely complex and it should not be assumed on the basis of Bangladeshi ethnicity that people will orient to a diaspora identity. How language indexes a diasporic stance or how 'doing' diaspora or heritage links with language use and how a diasporic stance can support language maintenance, are questions to be investigated rather than taken for granted using broad based categorisations.

2.4.2 Competing identities: religious and linguistic

Studies have shown that orientations to particular identities can provide motivation for language maintenance. In this thesis I argue that there are multiple motivations for Sylheti maintenance. I argue that orientation to a local Tower Hamlets identity is one but there are other identity options that can concentrate or dilute orientations to language maintenance practices. In this sub-section I discuss the idea, prevalent in the literature, of competing identities with regard to language and religion.

Both Hoque (2015) and Hamid (2011) investigate intersections between language or diaspora identities and religious identities and the relationship to language maintenance. Hoque's ethnography (2015) pointed toward a distinct shift away from heritage identities and desire to maintain Sylheti or 'Bengali' among his third-generation participants, concluding that they prioritised religious identities. He contrasts the confidence and strength afforded by a British-Islamic identity, compared with struggle and difficulties associated with heritage identities linked to a Bangladeshi national identity or a Sylheti regional identity.

He explains:

> The religion of Islam, in its spiritual, visible and political context, provides a
> sense of belonging and acceptance to …. third-generation Bangladeshis as
> they struggle against years of systemic and institutional racism and poverty.
> Islam also provides a safety net against a Bangladeshi culture and way of life
> that is becoming increasingly alien and irrelevant to the everyday lives of this
> community (2015: 158).

Hamid (2011) suggests that this is related to the rise of, and more importantly struggle against, Islamophobia in the UK. She also says, 'perceptions of Bangladeshi Muslims have changed from secular to Islamic [..] evidence suggests that religion rather than language has now become the focus of their identity' (ibid: 182). Some of these ideas were taken up in recently in interviews with activists and academics as part of a 4-part series of newspaper articles about Sylheti and Bengali language maintenance in Tower Hamlets (Naylor Marlow 2024 a, b, c, d). One of the articles (Naylor Marlow 2024b) reported on the decline of supplementary schools in Tower Hamlets and contains an interview with Julie Begum, chair of Bangladeshi cultural organisation Swadhinata Trust. In the interview Begum links the decline of interest in Bengali maintenance to the rise Islamophobia in 2000s saying 'there was a shift from language to more religious studies' as parents wanted their children to feel confident in their religious identity' (Julie Begum cited in Naylor Marlow 2024b).

Hamid's work, however, concluded that despite these shifts there continues to be positive identification with Sylheti and she pointed to continued high vitality, especially in home and local community domains. It should be pointed out that Hamid's study investigated habitual language practices among Sylheti speakers in Leeds across three generations, whereas Hoque's ethnographic study was focussed

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on young third generation Bangladeshi's who appeared to be more distant from their Bangladeshi heritage (see also Pauwels, 2004). Part of the shift to an Islamic identity is the growing interest in the Arabic language and there is a perceived competition between Arabic and Bengali languages. However, relatively few young people are studying modern spoken Arabic as an alternative to spoken Bengali but rather they are studying Qur'anic Arabic for religious purposes. Hoque points to this when he suggests that 'While English provided a gateway to commerce and 'a good future' […] for some, others were committed to learning Arabic in pursuit of ideological meaning and belonging' (2015: 75).

Comparisons can be made with Eid and Sallabank's (2021) study of Lebanese Arabic in the UK in which they draw on Heller's (2012) pride and profit paradigm. In this paradigm, pride generally links to strong heritage identities and orientation to diaspora practices, while profit links to economic valuations of dominant languages, for education and employment for example. In Eid and Sallabank's study, the pride paradigm unites religious and heritage identities because Lebanese Arabic is associated with the Arabic of Islam, despite linguistic differences. Eid and Sallabank report that positive family evaluations of Lebanese Arabic combine with feelings of pride towards religious identities related to Modern Standard Arabic. Both these factors lead to overall positive outcomes for language maintenance in their study.

This is very different with Sylheti however, and the opposite can be seen, with religious identities and Arabic often, or increasingly, fulfilling the pride paradigm and English fulfilling the profit, leaving no space for Sylheti and Bengali. Hoque concludes (ibid: 75): 'The language of Bengali will become a victim of symbolic

violence as it becomes devalued and redundant in the modern British-Islamic world where English twinned with Arabic will wield the symbolic and linguistic power'.

Although there may be some agreement that religious identities have been prioritised, that does not necessarily point to a decline in interest in Bengali or Sylheti heritage language maintenance. For example, as already mentioned, Hamid (2011) does not conclude that for reasons of religious identity, Sylheti or Bengali, are no longer relevant in the UK. Instead, she concludes that despite multiple and often contradictory identities, there is evidence that family ties, in-migration and ethnic employment practices are enough to maintain what she calls 'Sylheti-English bilingualism' (2011:189), although it is important to note the time passed since Hamid's work and that she did not specifically focus on the younger generations. Even Hoque, despite concluding that the Sylheti language was at risk of becoming irrelevant to young British Bangladeshis, points to competing identities and states 'some of my participants were embroiled in the tension between language, culture and identity' (2015: 63).

Naylor Marlow (2024b) reports Fatima Rajina as suggesting that families *do* want to maintain the Bengali language, it's just that they want Arabic classes more. She says 'it's not about displacing (Bengali), it is more about prioritising what they feel is a necessity. Many parents now feel Arabic is a necessity whereas Bengali is not' (Naylor Marlow, 2024b).

In my data similar orientations were manifest and they corresponded to choices with regard to education and my study highlights a sharp decline in interest in Bangla supplementary schools for children which I discuss in chapter 6. It was notable that none of the younger participants in my project had accessed Bangla language

education as children, whereas all went regularly to Qur'anic Arabic classes. As the above studies suggest, however, my data also pointed to continued, and perhaps even growing, interest in the Sylheti language.

2.4.3 Language hierarchies

The section above discusses the literature related to identity, but identities and identity practices are also intertwined with ideologies of language and how people relate to circulating discourses about language. Much of the literature relating to language maintenance explores issues relating to ideological hierarchies of languages (see section 2.2.7) and outlines how it is a struggle to maintain languages in particular contexts, despite pride orientations (Heller 2012). Sylheti is caught between two powerful languages, English and Bangla and as shown above, is competing with Arabic for the pride orientations.

Both Hoque and Canagarajah take up the idea that their languages of interest, Sylheti and Sri Lankan Tamil respectively, are subject to the powerful ideology of English as language of economic success. Hoque (2015) explores this from the perspective of young third generation British Bangladeshi Sylheti speakers. He suggests that some of them do not consider Bengali (Sylheti) to offer any educational or career benefit and for some this is a reason not to prioritise any form of maintenance. Similarly, Canagarajah (2008) argues that there is a mountain to climb if languages are seen as competing with English stating, 'in the context of material inequality and ideological domination, families face a superhuman struggle for language maintenance' (ibid: 172).

Also relevant for Sylheti is the power of Bangla. Longstanding dominant language ideologies in Bangladesh and in the UK position Sylheti as inferior to Bangla, or as a

vernacular variety of Bangla. They are linked to standard language ideologies and the perceived superiority of codified and written languages, another legacy of colonialism (*inter alia* Severo and Makoni 2020). The commonly used name for Bangla *suddho* meaning 'clean' or 'pure' is all-revealing.

Hoque (2015) traces historical events in Bangladesh which contributed to Sylheti being devalued and considered low status with regards to the national language of Bangla. He says:

> Historically situated within a backdrop of strong linguistic consciousness (which led to the Bengali Language Movement in 1952) and bound up with the politics of Bangladeshi nationalism, the 'unofficial' Sylheti language underwent a process of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1991) as the political elite sought to unite the nation against West Pakistan under a single, powerful, 'official' language (Bengali) in 1971 (ibid: 58).

Blackledge and Creese also highlight these ideological positionings in their work in Bengali complementary schools in Birmingham. They cite one of the teachers as taking about the Sylheti students: 'they are the poor, the deprived farmers. Their parents were not interested in education nor are the children interested' (2008: 543). Such attitudes prevail despite massively increased educational opportunities in Sylhet over the last 20 years and they emerged in my data on a number of occasions, oriented to by Sylheti and Bangla speakers alike. Abdul Hussain, one of the participants on this project, spoke about Sylheti as a 'farmer's language' for example.

On one occasion, while attending an event organised by the London Bangla Press Club[7], I was struck by an anecdote that illuminated some of these hierarchies. The

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[7] https://londonbanglapressclub.org/ a charity that connects UK based journalists with media in Bangladesh

speaker was a Sylheti journalist who for many years wrote the Bangla language insert for the Tower Hamlets Council run newspaper 'East End Life'. He told of how he had been accused of being 'illiterate', by fellow journalists in Dhaka for performing the art of 'Sylhetifying' the Bangla translations of English articles. Far from being illiterate, his was an example of a highly creative skilled writer who over the years had learned how to bring together aspects of a repertoire conventionally kept separate, to suit the purposes of his Sylheti speaking audience. Were his texts in Sylheti or Bangla? There is no answer to this question because the categories are revealed as inadequate by his very example.

These hierarchical positions, although still dominant are also contested both in practice and metacommentaries revealed by my own and other studies (Blackledge and Creese, 2008; Hamid, 2011). Heller's pride and profit paradigm discussed above in section 2.4.2 is also very relevant. For example, in a podcast interview with British Sylheti rapper and comedian IKSY, he was asked whether he preferred 'Sylheti or Suddho' to which, without drawing breath, he replied 'Sylheti', revealing that for some, resistance to the dominant hierarchy is an important identity position.

However not everyone orients to the pride and profit paradigm and there are other ideological orientations, more prevalent in my own data, that there is little difference between Sylheti and Bangla, and that both index Bangladeshi heritage, or that both are important in indexing identity. This is also revealed by widespread naming practices which tend to not demarcate Sylheti and Banga. Hamid (2011) suggests that speakers are often unaware of any difference. Talking about the majority of the adults in her study she says (2011: 152): 'they perceived no differences between the

two language varieties often reinforcing 'eta to Banglai' (this *is* Bangla) when referring to Sylheti. She suggests that this attitude relates to the all-encompassing identification with the Language Movement (see introduction) as the basis for independence, that of course also included Sylhetis. From this perspective people see the Language Movement (see chapter 1) as not specific to the standard variety of Bengali but against the imposition of Urdu. Blackledge and Creese's study of Bengali complementary schools in Birmingham indicated that some Sylheti speakers emphasised the similarities between the two languages as a way to claim some of the prestige linked to Bangla and to de-emphasise the fact that Sylheti is considered less valuable (2010: 544).

2.4.4 Language hierarchies and onward and complex migration

In my study these distinctions, linguistic and ideological between Sylheti and Bangla take on new relevance as for the first time there is now a sizeable community of Bangla speakers in Tower Hamlets (see section 1.1.3).

Studies have shown that processes of repeated migrations mean an accumulation of linguistic and cultural resources adding layers of complexity to the already existing practices, ideologies and identities *vis a vis* Sylheti and Bangla. Recent studies have begun to investigate 'onward migration' and there is a body of work, mainly in sociology, that investigates Bangladeshi onward migration to the UK (*inter alia* della Puppa and King, 2019; Morad, della Puppa and Sachetto, 2021).

The relationship between migration and complexifying language practices and ideologies, has also become a topic of significant interest among sociolinguists interested in repertoire. For example, Sankaran's (2021) study of Sri Lankan Tamils in London included those who had onward migrated from various European countries but mainly France and Germany. She investigated the impact of this on

Tamil practices in London. She suggests that 'SLT [8] from Europe [ ] have gradually changed the sociolinguistic profile of the SLT diaspora. Their arrival naturally complicates prior accounts of language practices of SLTs in the UK' (Sankaran 2021: 137). Her findings also suggest that 'there seems to be a move toward Tamil language maintenance in the UK as a result of onward migration from Europe' (ibid: 144). She argues that onward migrants from other EU countries had been more likely to keep fluency in Tamil than their UK counterparts because colonial links with English meant Sri Lankan Tamils in the UK were more likely to use English alongside Tamil (see also Canagarajah, 2008). Her suggestion that onward migrants brought fresh Tamil to a mainly English-speaking population, stimulating a process of revival, is of significance for my study.

Goglia's 2021 study focuses specifically on onward migration of families from Italy to the UK and investigates the role of English in the repertoires of young Italian born members of these families. These young people have Italian as their main language and language of education, but also speak the Bengali, Yoruba, Twi or Panjabi from their parents' countries of origin. He found rapid shift to English from this generation once they had moved to the UK as they strove to fit into their new environment. Their parents on the other hand, maintained Italian alongside Bengali/Yoruba/Twi/Panjabi or mixed codes. Unlike Sankaran's or my own study, however, Goglia does not investigate the impact of onward migration on communities already living in the UK.

Investigations into onward migration is a growing area of interest in the field of multilingualism and it links to an increasing understanding of the hitherto inadequate categorisations of languages linked to hegemonic ethnic and national categories.

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[8] Sri Lankan Tamils

This was raised in a 2021 special issue of the International Journal of the Sociology of Language which explored 'internal diversities' of groups which are often seen as more or less homogenous from a sociolinguistics perspective. The editors' rationale laid out in the introduction was that 'a single ethnic categorisation is no longer adequate to understand minority communities when it comes to their challenges, needs, affiliations, linguistic configurations' (Curdt-Christiansen et al, 2021: 4). The collection included, but was not limited to, studies of onward migration. It also included studies of how different waves of migration among same language groups (Pepe, 2021; Karatsareas, 2021) and intergenerational differences (Eid and Sallabank, 2021 and Abdullahi and Wei, 2021) correspond to very different communicative repertoires and related language ideologies. This work further problematises not only named languages but dominant categorisations of the speakers of those named languages.

My work extends these studies by investigating a new contact zone in Watney Market where Sylheti speakers and Bangla speakers are in daily contact. Like Sankaran's study, I explore the sociolinguistic relationships between the onward migrants and the UK-based Sylheti speakers. My own study brings a further dimension because the onward Bangladeshi migrants not only bring new cultural and linguistic resources from their European countries of migration but also in the main do not speak Sylheti but rather other Bangladeshi languages, mainly Bangla or Dhaka varieties which are very similar to Bangla. I show that although language hierarchies are present, they are not straightforward and are mitigated by processes of conviviality discussed in section 2.3.6 and changing language ideologies. I

highlight changes in repertoires of both Sylheti and Bangla speakers and point to a new phase of Sylheti in Tower Hamlets.

2.4.5 Language education

Work relating to language education is of course very relevant to heritage language maintenance. Although there is not scope in this chapter to discuss the vast body of literature related to complementary and supplementary schools, I discuss some work with relevance to Sylheti. Until recently complementary schools were hugely important for Sylheti speakers in Tower Hamlets and a significant site of heritage language maintenance. The need for such schools of course also reflects the marginalisation of multilingualism in the UK. Ruby (2017) highlights this in her study of intergenerational language learning in the home. She paints a picture of third generation children whose school lives are English dominated and she highlights the failure of mainstream schools to do anything but pay lip-service to children's multilingualism. She points out, 'third generation children speak English fluently and are doing well at school. Consequently, their bilingual skills are often overlooked' (2017: 1). She also highlights the lack of any coherent multilingual pedagogy in British schools: 'Often, bilingual teachers are themselves unsure about where they can utilise their linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge to enrich the learner identities of the bilingual children in their classrooms' (2017: 1).

As well as countering the dominant forces of English and the deficiencies of the education system in the UK, Bangla complementary schools have also been sites for competing identities and language ideologies outlined in sections 2.4.2 and 2.4.3. Most, if not all, schools in Tower Hamlets use a curriculum based on Bangla aiming to develop literacy skills in the Bangladesh national language of education. As an

unintended consequence, these schools also support the development of spoken Sylheti due to linguistic similarities between Bangla and Sylheti.

Many studies have contested the standard language approaches of traditional complementary schools, especially in contexts where there is a great deal of language diversity among the student cohorts. Complementary schools often adopt the standard form of the heritage language as a lingua franca, especially in contexts of linguistic diversity, but this approach tends to both homogenise the students and fails to draw on the 'funds of knowledge' individuals bring to the group (see Li, 2014).

Such an approach is also based on the misrecognition that less complexity and flexibility is somehow easier to manage. In Lytra's (2011) investigation of Turkish complementary schools in London, she highlighted the complexity of the young students' Turkish repertoires which including a range of varieties as well as the standard. She reports that these were not taken into account in the curriculum design, with school leaders preferring to emphasise proficiency in the standard and teachers and leaders correcting non-standard or mixing practices. Although the students generally bought into the standard language ideology presented by the school and showed desire to learn the 'prestige' form, Lytra also points to moments of contestation and challenge from students who wanted to remain loyal to their own ways of speaking and 'articulate their own constructions of community culture' (ibid: 34).

These debates are very important in the context of my study in which the Bangla taught in complementary schools is not even comprehensible for some British born Sylheti speaking children who have little or no exposure to Bangla. Moreover, they

have to learn a completely new script in order to take part in activities as they have grown up speaking Sylheti as an oral language and learnt the Roman script as part of their English based education in the UK. For them this is very far from the 'funds of knowledge approach' proposed by Li (2014).

However, as already mentioned, the participants on my project who attended complementary schools as children reported being able to speak better Sylheti and the role of Bangla complementary schools as a significant site of Sylheti language socialisation should not be overlooked. In their study of complementary schools, which included Bangla schools in Birmingham, Blackledge and Creese (2008) found that teachers and children used their multilingual resources, including Sylheti, flexibly, both in the classroom and outside, for example in break times. This flexibility occurred despite the school leaders, the teachers and sometimes the student themselves, appearing to orient to language ideologies that conflict with these fluid practices. This suggests that while formally the 'funds of knowledge' approach was not generally embraced, children were able to draw on their whole repertoire in many instances.

More recently complementary schools have emerged that appear more open to non-standard approaches to curriculum that reflect students' communicative repertoires, rather than focus solely on an abstract standard. Silvestri (2023) discusses a new approach to complementary education adopted by an Italian heritage language school in London in which both the students' local identities as Londoners and their translanguaging practices outside the school are nurtured and *made central* in the curriculum. These local funds of knowledge are prioritised over focus on Italian history and culture and of language separation approaches which have previously

dominated Italian heritage language education in the UK and the school leaders have adopted a 'flexible bilingualism' approach (Blackledge and Creese 2010). Critical perspectives on traditional language schools and openings for new approaches in language education is an area of interest in my study with regard to young Sylheti speakers in the UK, whose own repertoires often do not fit traditional models. In chapter 6 I explore some recent examples of grassroots projects with a non-traditional orientation and I suggest that they could provide interesting future directions.

2.4.5.1 Family based learning and other projects

There are other interesting and creative language maintenance models explored in the literature. For example, Ruby et al (2010) and Ruby (2017) have conducted recent research into how transmission of heritage language and literacy occurs within families across different generations, via both parents and grandparents. She describes the situation within many Sylheti and Bangla speaking households whereby second-generation parents tend to talk to their children in English, leaving the heritage language transmission to the grandparents.

Her study illustrates that the children have clear multilingual skills and these often manifest in the family during communication with grandparents, who, according to Ruby, have more time on their hands to allow the children that extra bit of space to communicate, or who are more invested in passing on the heritage culture via the language, or who quite simply need their grandchildren to speak Sylheti or Bangla in order to be able to communicate due to their own difficulties with English. She describes how the children use their repertoires to make meaning when talking to their grandparents and points to the notion of 'flexibility' as something that supports

and nurtures a wider repertoire. 'Even though the children had restricted powers of expression in Bengali, they managed to keep up the conversations with their grandmothers' (2017: 107).

Ruby's study highlights children's flexible repertoires. Although the children might not have what is considered full competency in Bangla, from a repertoire perspective they are drawing on appropriate linguistic resources in relevant contexts.

A similar project, 'Stories from Home', (Burns 2021) was developed in conjunction with Mile End Community Project in collaboration with Queen Mary University. The project made a series of short films based on stories grandparents told to their grandchildren in various languages, including Sylheti and Bangla. These videos played creatively with standard and non-standard varieties, with translations and with multimodality, drawing on the children' knowledge of English and the heritage language.

My study tries to ascertain how an understanding of repertoire, of on-the-ground situated practices with Sylheti, including mixed practices, begins to underpin language maintenance initiatives, including complementary schools. This would not necessarily mean sweeping aside traditional models that are based on standard language ideologies of language as fixed, stable objects. Lytra acknowledges there is often tension between fluid and fixed approaches to language maintenance initiatives. She explains:

> On the one hand, the recognition of diversities [….] and the adoption of flexible and adaptive language and cultural practices, and on the other hand, the desire to protect, maintain and pass onto the next generation reified and stable representations of community languages cultures and identities (2022: 86).

In my study I investigated whether language programmes which challenge the traditional approach to Bangla language education by experimenting with approaches that foreground spoken Sylheti over standard literacy, might be more appealing to young people

2.4.6 Activist stances

In the final part of this section, I discuss work which links to activist stances on heritage language maintenance, including specific work relating to Sylheti maintenance in the UK. I discuss two activist stances, linguistic human rights (LHR) stances (May, 2012) and linguistic citizenship (LC) (Stroud, 2001, 2017) both with different ontological perspectives in relation to language and consequently different theoretical perspectives on language maintenance.

2.4.6.1 Linguistic Human Rights approaches

Simard et al (2020) discuss the work of the SOAS Sylheti project (hereafter SSP) in collaboration with the Surma community centre in Camden (also briefly discussed in chapter 1). They describe the work of the SSP as closely linked to concerns about Sylheti speakers undergoing 'a shift from multilingual to English monolingual' (ibid: 12). Their work has focussed on ways of promoting and preserving Sylheti in the UK (see section 1.1.2 for an account of their work). Their approach has taken a linguistic human rights perspective (May 2012) in that it aims to fight for increased recognition of Sylheti as a *distinct* language, which should be preserved and revindicated as different from other Bangladeshi languages with distinct traditions, history and written script, rather than as a dialect or variety of Bangla as it is often positioned. Simard et al (2020: 8) point out that 'some of the striking structural differences between Sylheti and standard Bengali, in phonetics and phonology, lexical and

grammatical structure, challenge the view that Sylheti is merely a dialectical variation of Bengali'. The work they do emphasises this linguistic separateness from Bangla as a means to challenge dominant language ideologies that position Sylheti as inferior or less educated. For example, they point out that when producing the parallel texts in the Sylheti storybooks, they decided not to include a Bangla translation, 'in order to underline the idea that Sylheti is distinct from Bengali' (2020: 17).

The collaboration with artist Saif Osmani and Shanti Boi on the 2017 art exhibition 'Bangla is Not My Mother Tongue' (Osmani, 2017) drew attention to Nagri as a symbol of Sylheti as a language in its own right. The powerful exhibition which consisted of panels written in Sylheti Nagri was intended to raise awareness of the history of the 'forgotten language' (ibid) of Sylhet and can be read as a challenge to the dominant ideology that the mother tongue of all Bangladeshis is 'Bangla' of which Sylheti is a dialect or variety. Osmani's website states that 'Sylheti Nagri, the written script native to the Sylhet region (northeast Bangladesh) began to decline around a century ago partly due to ruptures caused by colonialism, partition and the construction of Bangladesh, when a standardised form of Bengali took hold in the region' (ibid).

Critiques of linguistic human rights perspectives (Stroud, 2001, 2017) suggest that they engage in reification and artificial separation of minority language in acts of strategic essentialism. They suggest that focus on language separation can risk reproducing rather than breaking down notions of language hierarchies by promoting new ideologies of purity that conflict with the fluid practices people use to communicate in multilingual societies (see Stroud and Heugh, 2004, Rampton et al,

2022). Williams and Stroud argue that 'LHR based policies, presuppose a mosaic view of linguistic and social order, and are therefore unable to deal with the quotidian mix and mesh of everyday politics in rapidly emerging, transnational and cosmopolitan encounters in speech communities that are increasingly complex, stratified and hybrid' (2015: 291).

2.4.6.2 Linguistic Citizenship

Stroud's 'linguistic citizenship' (2001, 2017) offers an alternative perspective that aligns more closely with repertoire approaches and distances language activism from structuralism and essentialist perspectives. According to Stroud:

> The concept of linguistic citizenship permits multiple (democratic, participatory) approaches to citizenship issues based on an idea of language as a political and economic 'site of struggle', on respect for language diversity and difference and on the deconstruction of essentialist understandings of language and identity (2001: 353).

A research orientation to the linguistic citizenship paradigm (Stroud, 2001; Stroud and Heugh, 2004; Rampton et al, 2018) allows for an explicit focus on actual language practices rather than named languages always viewed as separate. This perspective is more aligned with my research design, my ontological perspective on language and my theoretical framework of repertoire in this thesis. Stroud suggests that linguistic citizenship, 'embodies commonality of action and commonality in action, rather than politics based in group characteristics of a more essential nature' (Stroud, 2001:353).

It is important to point out however that although, from an ontological perspective,

the linguistic human rights and linguistic citizenship paradigms are

fundamentally different, from an action perspective the differences may appear more subtle, with both engaged in on-the-ground activism to promote and safeguard linguistic diversity. Perhaps to some degree all heritage language maintenance activism inevitably engages in strategic essentialism. How else can attention be drawn to unequal language hierarchies that have real life consequences for speakers. Stroud (2001: 348), however, explains that linguistic citizenship 'draws on the power of linguistic identity to mobilise minority languages but *in ways that transcend essentialist ascriptions of identity to language by viewing the language-identity link as contingent and constructed in discourse'*.

Recent attempts to re-focus attention on Cockney in east London (Strelluf et al, 2023), have highlighted a number of sociolinguist themes relevant to my study. Like the SOAS Sylheti project (SSP), they draw on variationist approaches to highlight Cockney's distinctive linguistic features, but unlike the SSP, which tries to distance Sylheti from any links with Bangla, the Cockney project emphasises hybridity. They state 'we have found that Cockney is not a reductive, monolithic identity, but rather a multifaceted one. We have interviewed Londoners who identify as Bengali Cockney, Black Cockney, East End Cockney, Essex Cockney, Jewish Cockney and Sylheti Cockney, among others' (ibid). These identifications are interesting because they challenge perceptions of Cockney as a fixed white category, perceptions that sometimes link the label Cockney with white racism (Wemyss 2009).
Wemyss argued that Cockney as a fixed territorial category was often used as a proxy for 'white'. She demonstrated clearly that 'in the dominant discourses associated with the police, national and local media, the meanings of the categories

'Cockneys' and 'East Enders' were [ ] used to refer to an unchanging homogenous white working-class community' (Wemyss, 2009:107), although she goes on to point out that these discourses were sometimes contested in on-the-ground practice (ibid, 74).

The Cockney Cultures project aims to emphasise plural and hybrid understandings of Cockney and actively problematise associations with racism. They put forward:

> This agenda must challenge discrimination based on negative stereotypes, ideologies, and misconceptions, and advocate positive investment in language, heritage, and education to celebrate a proud Cockney past with a confident future among other language varieties and cultural identities.

The project, which has been active since 2021, has also had institutional success when it led and won a campaign to be officially recognised in Tower Hamlets as a community language. This success means raising the profile of Cockney among the general public, challenging negative stereotypes and drawing attention to how working-class varieties are consistently stigmatised without critique or challenge.

The project leaders argue that the recognition of Cockney as a community language in Tower Hamlets 'acknowledges the linguistic validity of all varieties of English spoken in the borough. It celebrates the role that non-standard dialects play in shaping individual and community identities and the ways in which identities such as "Cockney" continue to evolve' (Strelluf et al, 2023).

Another activist project which took place partly in Tower Hamlets was the 'Our Languages' project (Cooke at al, 2018 & 2019, see also Rampton et al, 2018). In this project, part of a broader ethnographic investigation into Sri Lankan Tamil in London, carried out by Lavanya Sankaran at King's College London, I was one of the teacher-researchers. The Our Languages project used some of the Sri Lankan data

to engage adult ESOL learners in conversations about their own situated multilingual practices and identities. We worked with students to explore their whole language lives, not just those aspects relating to English learning. This was a departure from mainstream ESOL pedagogy which normally reproduces the deficit discourses dominant in UK language education policy which focus on ESOL students' lack of English. During the classroom activities the students, many of whom were from Sylhet, explored their situated language practices in a variety of contexts. We devised participatory activities which stimulated students to think and talk more broadly about non-standard registers and varieties, and to problematise contested categories such as 'native', 'mother tongue' and 'heritage', avoiding any orientations that create 'artificial boundaries between ways of speaking that are actually continuous (Rampton et al, 2021:2) and creating a 'safe space for students to develop a more positive sense of themselves as multilingual, sociolinguistically aware students' (Cooke at al, 2019: 151).

I argue that these projects show that there are current projects either explicitly adopting linguistic citizenship approaches or pursuing approaches that are aligned with the ideas. I explore this further in chapter 6 when I identify some current Sylheti projects that also align with these approaches.

By engaging fully with mixing and hybridity with Sylheti and making sure not to create artificial boundaries between elements of people's repertoire that include Sylheti, I align my study with linguistic citizenship orientations. This is based on the insights put forward by Stroud that 'individuals now find themselves participating in a variety of sites in competition for resources distributed along multiple levels of scale, such as the nation, the supranation, the local and the regional' (2010: 200).

2.5   Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has outlined, discussed and evaluated the theoretical perspectives on my study, whilst also incorporating previous studies relevant to my topic and research questions. In the three sections explored in this chapter I have created a theoretical dialogue between three strands of my thesis: repertoire approaches to communication, orientation to place, linguistic citizenship approaches to heritage language maintenance.

I have used this chapter to situate my work and carve out a path for the study which takes into account the fact that Sylheti in Tower Hamlets is enmeshed in a broader complex of languages, communication strategies identities and histories. Rather than separating it from all of these to investigate it as a disembodied language, I have preferred to keep it embodied and situated in local life, especially that of Tower Hamlets of which it is a major part.

I have worked with participants ethnographically and engaged with concepts of space in embodied ways to get an insight into language life in Tower Hamlets: what that looks and sounds like, drawing on participants' experiences, ideologies and orientations. I link this sociolinguistic work with language education and activist work directed to Sylheti maintenance. In doing so I extend the literature on Sylheti language maintenance by bringing place-identities and place-based, situated language practices to ideas of individual repertoire and ideologies, guided by my research questions.

3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I focus on the process of the research itself. I discuss my methodological approach and how this developed over the course of the study. I describe and evaluate the decisions I made the problem solving I undertook as part of the project. I begin this chapter by talking about the collaborative structure of my PhD, project mentioned briefly in chapter 1, as this was very influential in decisions I took regarding my methodological approaches. Secondly, I introduce the main participants, many of whom have worked with me in different ways for the whole project. I discuss my own relationship to the participants and to the study and I include how I managed the ethics of researching with people.

In section 3.2 I discuss the ethnographic epistemology that guided me throughout, the participatory ethnographic research methods I employed, and, in 3.3, the ethnographic data collection tools I used. In section 3.4 I detail the process of managing, organising and then analysing the dataset. In section 3.5 I reflect on the ways in which I approached the research from an ethical perspective. Finally, I discuss some of the difficulties encountered and limitations of the project.

3.1.1 Collaborative Doctoral Award

As I outlined in the introduction, this PhD project pre-dated my own involvement and was created as a collaborative research project with The Osmani Trust alongside the two universities. Collaboration was formally built into the research framework. Implicit in this framework, although not a formal requirement, was that alongside the production of an academic thesis, and the contribution to the academic research

community and my own discipline of sociolinguistics, the work would also be of interest to, and important for, the communities represented by the Osmani Trust. I was very mindful of the project's genesis and the original proposal throughout the 4 years of study, despite the inevitable mutations brought about by the research journey.

Ways of working with the academic supervisors at SOAS and Goldsmiths very much followed the traditional PhD process and I had to fulfil the university requirements in the same way as other PhD students. The collaboration with the Osmani Trust was much more loosely defined and we were able to carve out our own path. Five months after the start of the project, however, the country went into full Covid lockdown and the Osmani Trust closed its doors to the public for more than 12 months.

Despite these not insignificant difficulties, reflecting back, it is apparent to me how much the collaborative *structure* of the project influenced both my own ways of working and the research itself. First, it helped me maintain a balance between the requirements of the academic institutions and the local and community-based orientation of the project. Regular meetings with the Osmani Trust, COVID-19 notwithstanding, allowed dialogue about the substance of the project to develop without academic constraints. Conversations with my research advisor at the Osmani Trust took on various forms over the years: initial chats, planning, carrying out pilot studies, collaborative analysis of parts of the dataset, and feedback on the final thesis and even planning dissemination and future projects. I consider this to have greatly enriched my work both academically and in terms of potential local significance.

There were two other crucial aspects linked to the collaborative model, both of which influenced the course of my research in ways that I had not envisaged at the beginning. The first was the additional language training element of the Collaborative Doctoral Award which allowed me time and resources for learning Sylheti. As well as being invaluable for working with a multilingual dataset, the Sylheti course I followed brought me into the classroom alongside second and third-generation Sylheti speakers. This gave me an abundance of additional ethnographic insights and even the recruitment of participants as two students and one of the teachers joined the project from this school.

The second consisted of me volunteering once a week for two terms in 2022 in the functional skills classes run by the Osmani Trust. The teacher was Sylheti speaking and the students were a mixture of Bangla and Sylheti speaking. Although this was not a formal part of my data collection it meant that I could spend regular time in the Osmani Centre, getting to know more people which again greatly added to the ethnographic experience. Volunteering in the class also gave me the opportunity to observe a multilingual model of education where the teacher and students shared language resources and Sylheti and Bangla flowed freely as part of the learning process. The experience gave me further inspiration to make links between the more descriptive sociolinguistic aspects of the thesis in chapters 4 and 5, and alternative models of language education outlined in chapter 6. This was an aspect of the research that I had not necessarily anticipated in the beginning.

There are so many experiences over and above the formally designed research design that feed into an ethnographic process and it is hard to pinpoint exactly which

ones made the difference. However, my final reflections do suggest that these broader affordances of the Collaborative Doctoral Award shaped the methodology.[9]

3.1.2 The project participants

Before discussing the sociolinguistic ethnographic approach of this project in detail, I introduce the participants who peopled this project and brought to it their voices, ideas, knowledge, experience and interest in the topic.

I first introduce the core participants, the people who signed up initially to take part in the research. I then mention secondary participants who joined the project at a later stage as part of the Watney Market case study (see section 3.3.3. The secondary participants allowed me to observe and record their activities in Watney Market and agreed to take part in in situ interviews conducted by me and the core participants, but, unlike the core participants, they did not take on any active co-researcher roles. Finally, I talk about, '*ad hoc*' participants. These are people who got involved mainly through the other participants or who I approached directly during the data collection period. They were either friends brought into the research by the core participants, people I knew myself or simply people we chanced upon during the research activities.

Many of the core and secondary participants stayed for the duration of the project, including during the writing process and this allowed me to contact them to raise queries and get feedback right up until the end. This was invaluable in terms of fine-tuning analysis and interpretation, but it was also crucial for my own stamina and confidence in the research process.

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[9] Elements of sections 3.2.1, 3.2.2 and 3.3.2 in this chapter have been taken from or adapted from Winstanley 2022.

3.1.2.1 Selection of core participants

The selection of the initial group of core participants happened in several ways. Initially, I approached people I already knew who had heard about the project and had expressed interest. These were ESOL students or former students and their family members or friends of friends or ESOL colleagues. Some participants joined from the Osmani Trust after the project was introduced to staff. Finally, as I have already mentioned, some participants joined from the Sylheti course at the language school.

The main characteristic of the group of participants is that of diversity- in terms of language backgrounds, country of birth, migration trajectories, age, social class, gender, profession, education, knowledge of Sylheti. The only criteria I set for participation was links with Sylheti and Tower Hamlets. This meant it was inevitable that participants would have a wide range of other backgrounds and experiences, although all participants were Muslim and all had South Asian or mixed South Asian heritage. Some participants oriented to a 'diasporic identities' and were engaged in 'diasporic practices' (Brubaker, 2005), others were not. None of the participants were engaged in any kind of formal language activism.

In the next section, I introduce the participants. For the purpose of the thesis, I group the participants into the areas of Tower Hamlets where active research was carried out. I do this because I feel that it best reflects how I gathered and analysed the data in this project. This study is not just focussed on individual experiences and identities but on experiences of place and I have tried to foreground this element here, as well as in the thesis overall.

As part of the participatory research methodology which I explain in more detail in sections 3.2.1, 3.2.2, and 3.3.3, one of the first things I did was to ask the core participants to select the research sites. I asked them choose places which they felt were important for their multilingual lives (see Appendix A). We then walking together around these places, chatting about all aspects of sociolinguistic experience as we walked. I had initially envisioned that this activity would focus the research on specific situated interactive sites, such as shops for example, but as most participants chose places near to where they lived and worked the notion of 'neighbourhood' became prominent in the study. I describe this in more detail in section 3.3.2 but here I would like to highlight that 4 main neighbourhoods emerged from this process: Whitechapel (including Watney Market and Brick Lane), Roman Road in Bow, Bethnal Green and Canary Wharf (see Figure 1).
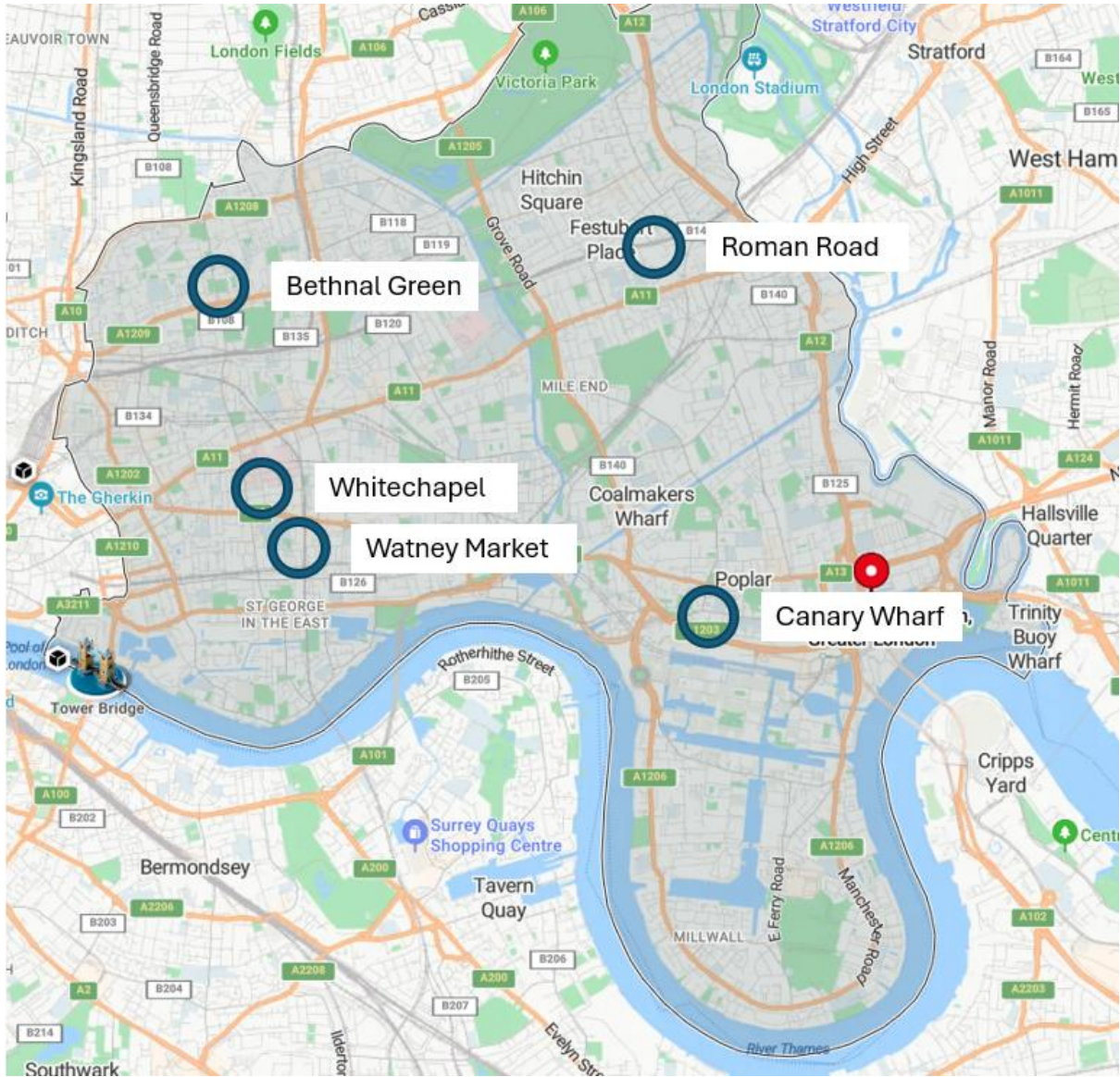
Figure 1 Tower Hamlets: plus neighbourhoods (© 2024 OpenStreetMap)

In this introduction to the participants, I have combined biographical snippets of information about the participants with snippets of information about the neighbourhoods each participant was connected to. Of course, like all groupings and categorisations this is only one of many options I had. It would be ludicrous to suggest that the participants were limited to just one small section of Tower Hamlets. Participants talked about multiple parts of the borough, at least half the group referred to experiences in the neighbouring borough of Newham. Some spoke about other UK cities and everyone referred to experiences in Bangladesh.

3.1.2.2 Whitechapel (including Watney Market and Brick Lane)

The neighbourhoods of Watney Market and Whitechapel comprise the bulk of the thesis. In chapters 4 and 5, the case study of Watney Market is the central thread around which I weave the analysis related to the other areas and participants (see section 3.3.3.2). It is also the biggest geographical area, in some senses artificially because I have linked two neighbourhoods together. Nevertheless, there is only a 10-minute walk from Watney market to Whitechapel, or one stop on the overground. Both these areas form part of what Alexander (2011) describes as the 'Bangladesh heartland'. These were the main neighbourhoods where the majority of Bangladeshis and British Bangladeshis lived probably until the 1990s. Areas to the east (Bow, Poplar, Isle of Dogs) the north Bethnal Green, and the South (Wapping) were considered unsafe for Bangladeshis due to mobilisations of organised far right groups and overt violent racism in these predominantly white areas. These conditions have been widely documented and written about (*inter alia* Wemyss, 2009; Hoque, 2015; Begum, 2022; Stepney Community Trust, 2022).

Begum in her 2022 study of the Bangladeshi squatting movement brilliantly details how squatting in Whitechapel and Shadwell (Watney Market) was a way for families to secure housing in a neighbourhood with lower instances of racial violence and more solidarity and support from fellow Bangladeshis. She says: 'for Bengali migrants in the racially hostile East London of the 1970s, squatting was a claim to social housing and to the right to feel safe in the city' (ibid: 16). This is still an incredibly popular area for Bangladeshis and British Bangladeshi residents although gentrification in the Brick Lane area and skyrocketing rents have made it difficult, especially for young people.

Three core participants, Abdul Hussain, Khalid and Shaj did active research in this area. The Osmani Trust is also within this area and Khalid and Abdul Hussain were workers there.

Khalid

Khalid took me on a walk along the busy Whitechapel High Street, comprising the new Town Hall, then still being refurbished and the East London Mosque. He works in this area so is here every day, although he now lives in the neighbouring borough of Newham. He arrived in the UK with his parents as a child and grew up in Tower Hamlets. He has always worked in the voluntary sector and he is also involved in wider community activities such as football coaching for children. He speaks Sylheti, English and 'gets by' in Bangla, which he learned at complementary schools as a child, and Hindi and Urdu which he picked up from films. Talking about his relationship to language he told me *'You're part of this. You know the country and I guess you're more proud. You just feel, I'm here my kids speak English, they can't speak Bengali so you know. This is me now, if you know what I mean.'*

Abdul Hussain

Abdul Hussain also worked at the Osmani Trust. Abdul Hussain was in his early 20s when the project started. He was born and brought up in Brick Lane and describes himself as third generation. He has strong family ties to Sylhet and visits frequently. He grew up speaking Sylheti at home but says he mainly speaks '*English with bits of Sylheti mixed in'*. Since sixth form, he has worked in various jobs, NHS, retail, and community and youth work. He plays football, learns Arabic, writes, paints and is an all-round creative. We walked around what he called 'the jurisdiction of Brick Lane' which included surrounding streets, parts of Whitechapel Road and part of

Bishopsgate. It included conversations with multiple people and visits to a grocery store and barbers.

Shaj

The final core participant connected to this area is Shaj who came to London from Italy in 2018 with her husband and three children. Shaj took me to the Shadwell area, to the local primary school where she works, along Watney Street and to the café she frequents. We also went along the canal to Wapping to the south. She was originally born in Dhaka but when she got married she joined her husband in Italy. She explained that for her the more difficult transition was from Dhaka to northern Italy: '*When I came to London I was not shocked like I was to Italy, so it is my second home now'.* I initially included her son as part of the project but soon after he moved out of London to go to university so he couldn't continue. Shaj speaks English, Bangla, Italian and says she understands Sylheti from watching Sylheti TV dramas. She went to university in Bangladesh, did various jobs in Italy and now works in a primary school as a special needs teaching assistant.

Secondary participants

As well as the core participants there are four important secondary participants linked to this neighbourhood. Rezaul, Shohid, Mr Kahn and Mizana joined the project much later in 2021 as part of the Watney Market case study. They were formally introduced to the project aims and gave written consent to be participants in the project. Rezaul, Shohid and Mr Kahn are Watney Market stall holders, café owners and shopkeepers respectively and Mizana is a local resident. All were born in Bangladesh and have been living and working in Watney Market for a number of years. Rezaul and Mr Kahn are from Sylhet and Mizana and Shohid from Dhaka. Shohid is part of the new Bangladeshi Italian migration (see chapter 5).

3.1.2.3 Roman Road, Bow

The Roman Road neighbourhood in the northeasternmost part of Tower Hamlets is connected to the primary school where my children went to school and where I continue to teach ESOL. It comprises a mix of very long-standing East-End family-run businesses, including Bangladeshi grocers and greengrocers as well as new coffee shops and designer gift stores suggesting the beginnings of gentrification. It has one of London's oldest pie and mash shops, G Kelly which opened in 1939 and is now run by the fourth generation of the Kelly family (O'Brien, 2020). Gulabi, Amena and Omar carried out research in this area.

Gulabi

Gulabi was the youngest member of the project team at only 21 at the end of the project. At the time of writing, she had recently graduated and was about to embark on a professional law career. She grew up speaking Sylheti at home and out and about in the local area. She speaks regularly to her grandparents in Sylheti and told me:

> *My grandfather he was a freedom fighter who fought against Pakistan so that's why I kind of looked up to him because he sacrificed a lot for us and our family.*

She was very committed and involved in the project all the way through and included family members including her mum and 2 younger siblings. On her walk she took me along the Regent's Canal, the whole length of Roman Road, her local café, the Ideas Store library and her old primary school.

Amena and Omar

Amena and Omar are parents at the local primary school where they have 3 children

Amena was the only one of two core participants who was born and brought up in Sylhet. She came to the UK 12 years prior to the start of the project. She commented, '*First time I don't like this country and then slowly slowly I stay, now I'm feel completely used to it this country'.* She volunteers in the primary school and is improving her English so she can get a teaching assistant qualification and get paid work. When we started the research, I asked her if she would like to do interviews in Sylheti with an interpreter but she wanted to work in English, motivated by the chance to improve her English by using it in a different context. In our walks we went to Roman Road Market where we chatted to shop and stall holders and then to the primary school for school pick up.

Amena's husband, Omar, also took part but due to time constraints was less involved. Omar was born in Sylhet but moved to the UK when he was 10 and went to school and college in Tower Hamlets. He works in the finance and banking sector.

3.1.2.4 Bethnal Green

Bethnal Green in the north of Tower Hamlets is a working-class neighbourhood that was known in the 1970s and 1980s as a predominantly white and hostile area for Bangladeshis. 'Brick Lane the Turning point 1978' (Four Corners, 2022: 21) describes the railway bridge that crossed Brick Lane as forming a frontier 'between the Bengali area to the South, and the mainly white, often NF -sympathising territory to the north – a no-go area for Bengalis'. Things are thankfully very different now and there are many Bangladeshi shops and businesses along Bethnal Green Road and market. Bethnal Green became part of the project because it is home to the Sylheti language classes I attended and where I met and recruited two fellow students Farhad and Sarah and one of the Sylheti teachers, Moni.

Farhad

Farhad was born in Manchester where he grew up with his parents, grandfather and brother. His parents were from Chattogram and they moved to the UK as adults. His grandfather came to the UK in the 1950s. He was a worker on ships and absconded from the ship when it was docked in Liverpool. Although his parents spoke Chatgaiya at home, he and his brother always spoke in English, something he now regrets. He complained '*I've always been really bad at speaking Bangla, since I was a kid'*.

He left Manchester to go to university and now he works as a social researcher. He visits Bangladesh about once every 5 years. He enrolled in the Sylheti language class to be able to speak more with his Sylheti speaking in-laws and because Sylheti is more widely spoken in east London. Although we met in Bethnal Green, we travelled over the borough border to neighbouring Newham for our walking tour and he took me around Green Street, an important centre for all South Asians.

Sara

Sara was the only core-participant, except me, who did not have a Bangladeshi background. Her mum was from India, her dad is English and she was born and brought up in Oxford before settling in east London. She was at the language school learning Sylheti because she wanted to be able to speak to her in-laws, and generally be able to take part in her husband's large family gatherings which were a big part of their lives. Much of the data she brought related to home life and language use, so I couldn't use it directly for this project, which was mainly focussed on public places outside the home. The rich conversations we had nevertheless fed into the broadening of my own ethnographic knowledge and understanding.

There were two teachers at the school and one of them, Moni, joined the project.

Moni

Moni was born in Bangladesh and came to the UK as an 18-year-old with her family. She started off in ESOL classes, and then gained some qualifications in administration and did lots of different jobs before settling to work as a receptionist in a community centre. She has also been teaching Sylheti and Bengali in the voluntary sector since 2014. She is married and had her first child in the middle of the research. We took a long walk from the west part of Bethnal Green Road where she lives, along the street market to the community centre where she works and then further east to Victoria Park**.**

3.1.2.5 Canary Wharf

The final neighbourhood to introduce is Canary Wharf, the business district of Tower Hamlets and alongside the City of London, one of London's financial centres, renamed 'Docklands' as part of a rebranding of the Isle of Dogs. The social and political ramifications of the Docklands development is beyond the scope and focus of this thesis, especially because the area formed such a small part of my own project. In her book *The Invisible Empire,* Wemyss (2009) details how the new development actively sought to erase the negative histories of slavery and colonialism connected to the docks and the colonial links of the area. The rebranding of the area also emphasised the local population as predominantly white, leaving the 'apparently unconnected 'ethnic minority' population struggling for the right to belong' (Wemyss 2009: 49). Arguably this rebranding has continued to today with Canary Wharf very disconnected from working class populations in the local areas to the east of Tower Hamlets.

Joy

Canary Wharf was chosen by Joy as it is his place of work. Its inclusion offers both the expected contrasts with the rest of the dataset and unexpected insights into this

district as a longstanding place of work for local British Bangladeshis. Joy for example began working in retail there after graduating in 2001. He explains that when Waitrose opened there in 2002, 700 people got jobs, 550 of them came from the local area, including many with a Sylheti background: '*thousands have come and gone, around a hundred of us of us have stayed from day one*'.

Joy was born in a small town in the Sylhet division and moved to London aged eight with his family and grew up in Newham. His dad had already lived in the UK in the 1960s but had gone back to Bangladesh to set up a business before later returning to the UK with his family. His first UK memory was the strange smell of hops coming from the Truman Brewery in Brick Lane, just next to where his family spent their first few weeks of UK life. He grew up speaking Sylheti at home, although as one of the only Bangladeshi children in his school he had to adapt very quickly to English. He has taught himself Bangla using YouTube. He told me, '*as I get older and become intellectually solid understanding the world around me, I'm becoming more and more emotionally attached to Bangla and Bengali culture'.*

Joy also interviewed some of his colleagues for the project and as a result I include, Ashraf as a secondary participant, who has also worked in Canary Wharf Waitrose since 2004.

This is the group of people with whom I carried out the main bulk of the research. Many of their words, experiences and knowledge appear in chapters 4, 5 and 6 but aside from that, their involvement seeped into all my work, even if not necessarily documented in quotation marks in the thesis. I would sometimes find I had phrases or accounts of experiences in my head as I analysed the data or wrote the chapters. Additionally, it was the human relationships, the interest in the topic and the sense of

support I felt from the participants that supported the intellectual process in ways it is hard to quantify or document.

3.1.2.6 Ad hoc participants

The final group of participants from across all neighbourhoods are the 'ad-hoc' participants. These participants became temporarily involved in the research because they happened to be carrying out their own activities at the same time and place as the research was taking place. They can be sub-divided into three groups. The first group consists of people connected to the core-participants: friends or acquaintances they brought in to chat while we were out and about doing the research, mostly during the walking interviews (see section 3.3.2). For example, on one walk with Abdul Hussain, we went into two shops and chatted to the shopkeepers and workers there, we then sat for a while and chatted with his friend's wife near a children's playground. Aysha, joined with us on the walk for about 20 minutes and the conversation became three-way.

The second group were strangers I approached directly to ask for a chat, mainly market stall holders and shop keepers when I was doing linguistic landscape research in Watney Market. Everyone I spoke to was willing to talk to me after a brief description of the project and people were incredibly generous with their time, anecdotes and opinions, as well as accepting of the voice recorder.

In addition to the conversations described above there were people who simply 'popped up', mainly customers on the market who approached me with curiosity to ask what I was doing, or who simply overheard conversations I was having and joined along, offering their own insights.

The voices of these ad-hoc participants added a further ethnographic layer to the study. Talking about language appeared to be of great interest to people and part of personal and cultural background and experiences and this aspect of the methodology allowed me to tap into this local knowledge. Additionally, the inclusion of these ad hoc voices as part of the analysis meant that the experiences of the core-participants were presented as part of, rather than dislocated from, local surroundings.

3.1.3 Researcher reflexivity

In chapter 1, I pointed out that although my language background, my ethnicity and my regional background are far removed from the topic of my research, there are important elements of my life experience that connect me to the topic. In an application of 'insider' and 'outsider' positions I would of course be an 'outsider' with regards to the Sylheti aspects of the research. However, in terms of Tower Hamlets I consider myself local and connected to local life. I did not have to 'go to the field' to carry out my research. It was carried out in places that were already part of my day-to-day life. Canagarajah and Stanley (2015: 33) warn that in attempts to fit in, researchers run the risk of becoming 'condescending, deceptive or even coercive'. However, my life was already part of the local community with my own spaces, my own roles, and existing relationships which gave a good foundation upon which to build new relationships and new experiences as part of the research.

In addition, scholars have recognised that that the insider outsider distinction can be too simplistic and reliant on essentialist categorisations of people as belonging to fixed communities (Gregory and Ruby, 2011). According to Martin-Jones et al (2017), it is important to 'unpack the 'identity' categories of 'outsider' and 'insider' and move away

from representing the identities of researcher and research participants (and the relationship between them) in fixed and binary terms' (2017: 190). Experiences and identities are not only based on broad social categories outlined above but are multifaceted and situated and it is important not to impose identities on participants or ethnographers.

Nevertheless, I was very aware throughout of my own limitations as a non-Sylheti non-Bangladeshi researcher. There were of course linguistic limitations. I was working with a large dataset which, although was mainly in English, of course contained a lot of Sylheti and Bangla, that I did not understand well enough. Partly this dataset was generated by my own theoretical and methodological priorities which I explain later in this chapter. Had I chosen a more standard interview-based approach, I would not have come across the same difficulties. I knew this when I designed the project but, despite foreseeing the difficulties, a dataset about Sylheti in English only would have been highly problematic. It was important for me that the dataset was as multilingual and multimodal as possible, despite my own linguistic limitations. Holmes, Reynolds and Ganassin (2022: 345) talk about drawing attention to 'researching multilingually as social and political action'. This includes challenging the privileging of certain languages over others in the research process (ibid). My research questions also guided me to a multilingual and multimodal data and in order to investigate these questions I needed to be able to able to capture the language diversity in public places and 'moments of social action' (Scollon and Scollon, 2004). The theoretical focus on place (see chapter 2.3) meant that the data I captured was situated and reflected language use in those places, rather than in a language selected for

interviewing and was therefore multilingual. English still dominated but this also reflects the sociolinguistic reality of my participants.

Despite my linguistic limitations, I was able to work closely with collaborative partners, at the Osmani Trust and the participants to understand the data. I found this process to be very positive for the collaborative research model and for the research itself, as there is always further dialogue and discussion that accompany translations. Kalocsányiová and Shatnawi (2022: 225) also highlight this: 'collaborative transcribing also encourages reflexivity, enables a critical engagement with data and contributes to a more transparent reporting'. I learned enough Sylheti to allow me to use the multilingual data once transcribed and translated/explained, but as Kalocsányiová and Shatnawi point out, 'it is [..] important to be realistic and acknowledge that most of us will remain less-than fluent in a new language learned for fieldwork purposes' (ibid: 211). I would not have been able to use the Sylheti or Bangla in the data analysis without dialogue with expert Sylheti speakers but this dialogue also further contributed to the ethnographic process. Therefore, although my own language background was a limitation, making the decision to keep the dataset as multilingual as possible sometimes provided unexpected affordances.

Many times, however, as an outsider researcher I keenly felt the limitations of lack of knowledge and experience, and also of a lack of legitimacy or warrant to be involved in 'somebody else's' cultural and linguistic background, despite my own connections to the local area outlined above. This made the research process difficult at times. In the UK race, ethnicity, religion and racialised languages are constantly highlighted and questioned in both public and everyday discourse and are key axes of inequality (Alim, Reyes and Kroskrity, 2020:3). Not only did I not share these experiences with

my participants, but my own race, ethnicity and language is completely unmarked in UK society, and thus almost never questioned and highlighted. In many ways this was more complicated than the language barrier, which could be tackled head on with practical solutions.

Canagarajah and Stanley, talking about the research and writing process, warn, 'since the subjects exist in the report only through the voice of the researcher, there is a tendency for their complexity to be suppressed and their identity to be generalized (or essentialized) to fit the dominant assumptions and theoretical constructs of the researcher and the disciplinary community (2015:41). They point out: 'the subjectivity of the researcher with his/her complex values, ideologies and experiences- shapes the research activity and findings' (ibid). I was aware that this was a real danger in my research and I did not want to erase any important aspect of knowledge through my own lack of experience or understanding.

I knew that in order to do justice to people's experiences and mitigate the risks outlined above by Stanley and Canagarajah, I would need to rely on my relationships with participants and the collaboration with the Osmani Trust. I also needed to know where to look and where to see racism, linguicism and other forms of othering when it was not overtly stated, without taking a naïve interest or without making it a 'researcher category' (Rampton, 2011, see also Spotti, 2014) where it was not relevant.

One way of responding to these difficulties academically is to foreground the data, in order to mitigate the danger of over focus on the researcher's perspectives. Although this is integral to ethnography, in recent decades there has been recognition that the

idea of the objective researcher channelling the voice of the participants can be misleading. Lytra et al explain: 'although ethnographic inquiry takes an emic perspective to data collection, interpretation and analysis, privileging the participants' perspectives, it is now widely acknowledged that researchers bring to the field their own biographies and identities' (2017: 215).

Certain sociolinguistic approaches such as conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics (see Cameron, 2005; Rampton and Harris, 2009) provide more rigorous approaches for staying close to the data. Scholars in these fields urge researchers to use only what participants orient to in analysis, rather than imposing top-down social structures such as race and gender to interpret the data.

Although I found the general premise of staying close to the data important, this is by no means a panacea and there are other considerations. For example, Cameron (2005) draws our attention to the more subtle aspects of interaction which may not be revealed in even close interactional linguistics (IS) or conversation analysis (CA). For example, she argues that data may not easily reveal silences or hidden discourses. Similarly, Redclift et al's (2022) study shows that racialised minorities will play down the existence of racism or Islamophobia in the presence of white people, either because they know they wouldn't understand, or because they have taken on the burden of easing how uncomfortable white people find such discussions. These elements are subtle and nuanced and not necessarily easy to see in close linguistic data analysis, especially when the researcher lacks the knowledge that comes with lived experience. I tried to mitigate these risks in ways that aligned with my open and fluid research style and although I was not always successful, I remained alert and on

guard to the fact that the participants' experiences would ultimately be represented through my voice (Canagarajah and Stanley, 2015: 33).

Awareness of these academic debates helped me navigate the inevitable difficulties inherent in my project. Overall, although I tried to stay as close to the data as possible I do not pretend to offer representation or suggest that my own perspectives are not central to the study. I was always very aware that another researcher in similar context would have produced very different research to my own and that I played a key part in the collection, selection, deselection and interpretations of the data (Ramanathan, 2011:268).

This perspective is not, however, merely about the inevitability of researcher subjectivity. It is more agentive than that and I embraced the perspective put forward by Blackledge and Creese (2023: 23) that it is important to resist the urge to explain the lives of others and to 'accept that the meanings of other lives may remain opaque to the researcher' (ibid). Blommaert (2018: 63) explains how ethnography is a dynamic in which the role of the ethnographer is not as 'knower' but as interlocutor and this very much aligned with my own position. For some, a central aspect of ethnography means making sure the voices of participants are well represented, and while I would most certainly not want to misrepresent anyone, I also felt that this position of the ethnographer as *giving voice* did not necessarily represent my approach and required problematising. Back and Sinha (2018) talk about accountability to relationships and I think this captures the process much more accurately for me. They say 'methods are about a sense of accountability both to the people portrayed and the relationships out of which these words and insights have been assembled' (2018: 171).

3.2 Ethnography

I drew on ethnography and ethnographic traditions throughout the study as a methodological, theoretical and epistemological framework. As well as a general orientation to ethnography and interpretive research paradigms, I also draw on critical sociolinguistic ethnography which includes an understanding of the role of language in issues of power, inequalities and social change (Heller, 2008a; Rampton et al, 2018) and linguistic ethnography, which links the broader epistemological focus of ethnography to more empirical interactional sociolinguistics (Rampton et al, 2018; Copland, Creese and Rock, 2015).

Ethnography is not just a chosen method of data collection, field work practices and analysis among many, but it is a way of viewing the world and society. McCarty (2015:81) talks about ethnography as a 'way of being' and 'way of looking' and Blommaert (2018:13) describes ethnography as 'a theoretical perspective on human behaviour'. Although ethnography is a cross-disciplinary methodology used in arts, humanities and social sciences predominantly, it has a long tradition of research in sociolinguistics and there have been very many ethnographic, sociolinguistic studies in multilingualism in the UK that link with my own study.

There are a number of accompanying ideas, and indeed a specific epistemological perspective, which are integral to ethnography and which have accompanied me on the research process. Like other ethnographers I consider the production of new knowledge as discovery, contingent on real situations. Part of this epistemology is to be open to the unexpected and to see themes as emerging from the data itself rather than collecting data to fit with pre-established themes (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

The findings of my project relate to the group of participants taking part in the research, and this is in keeping with the ethnographic research tradition which does not claim to be generalisable or representative but seeks to spotlight specific experiences which can help us to understand the complexities of the social world (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Heller, 2008a). This deep investigation of a small number of cases should not be seen as a limitation, but rather a different research focus. As Sallabank points out (2013: 72) 'qualitative research attempts to give respondents a say in how research develops, which reduces comparability or generalisability of data but increases detail'.

Critical ethnographers argue that it is precisely by focussing on ground-level perspectives that ethnography can potentially counterbalance institutional discourses which tend to serve the powerful. Findings of smaller ethnographies, such as this one, can be viewed alongside other similar ethnographies in order to build a larger picture of how the social world is actually constructed in real terms, and how injustices can be challenged (Heller, 2008a). This means a commitment to ensure data collection is detailed and as a result ethnographic data is often collected in multiple ways and triangulated. For example, data from participant observation, follow-up interview data and recorded interactive data can relate to the same situation or episode with each aspect of data collection giving a different but complementary focus on the same instance.

However, ethnography is not simply documentation of participants' ideas, views and experiences but also an interpretation. Blommaert (2018:3) points out. 'At its core, an ethnographic analysis is a cultural analysis – a peeling back of tissues of meaning to

answer the question, "what is going on here?" It is also for this reason that researcher reflexivity discussed in 3.1.3. is so important in ethnography.

Within critical sociolinguistic ethnography there is an understanding that linguistic resources are both a source and a reflection of inequality in society. Language is not neutral but carries with it the workings of power and critical sociolinguistic ethnography aims to expose and even, in some cases, tackle linguistic inequalities. McCarty (2015: 81) talks about ethnography as 'social enquiry that is humanising, democratising and anti-hegemonic'. This is particularly relevant for a language focused research such as my own, with speakers of minority languages in the UK, who so often find their language resources not valued or even denigrated as I outlined in the introduction and chapter 2.

3.2.1 Participatory ethnography and participatory pedagogy

Back and Sinha remind us that 'methods matter because the way we hear and look is profoundly political' (Back and Sinha, 2018: 171). As well as fitting my epistemological stance, I felt that ethnography and ethnographic approaches could best represent how I approached my research *politically*. For me this meant approaching the research project dialogically: entering into dialogue with the world around me, with participants and with the data and seeing knowledge production as negotiation. During the research process I perceived my participants as interlocutors (Blommaert, 2018), people I was engaged in dialogue with to develop collective knowledge, insights and deeper understanding. My stance aligned with other dialogic ethnographic stances, for example, Blackledge and Creese's 'creative ethnography' (2023) and Back and Sinha's 'sociable ethnographic' methods based on dialogue and relationships (2018).

My own interest in participatory research emerged and grew from my pedagogic practice in ESOL. This practice (see Cooke et al, 2015, 2019) draws on the ideas of Paolo Freire (1970) and Augusto Boal (1995, 2002). I have found it useful and productive to draw parallels between ethnographic research and Freirean inspired critical pedagogy, even though this connection is rarely made by ethnographers. The understanding of dialogue as a method of inquiry and knowledge production is central to the understanding and application of participatory pedagogy in my research. In Freire-inspired participatory education models, dialogue as a method replaces the dominant transactional model in which 'knowledge' is a passed from the 'expert' teacher to the 'non-expert' learner. According to Freire education should begin, 'with the conviction that it cannot present its own programme, but must search for this programme, dialogically with the people' (Freire 1970:124). Learning takes place through engaging in critical dialogue with students and creating learning environments in which learning contexts are related to students' and teachers' real lives and experiences can be discussed, understood and problematised (Freire, 1970).

There are clear parallels between this and the epistemology of unfolding knowledge in ethnography. Collaborative ethnographers Bell and Pahl (2018: 106) echo these ideas when they point to the importance of recognising that 'research does not access a pre-existing reality but is active in the creation of that reality'. Baynham, (1988: 418) also draws this comparison: 'Dialogical problem-posing education is a kind of co-operative discovery of the way that social meanings are constructed, a kind of research investigation'.

3.2.2 Participatory research - practical considerations

The description of Back and Sinha's, *Migrant City* as 'not a sole author book but rather the result of *many people writing together*, albeit contributing different things to the end result' (2018: 173) is something to aspire to. This is however difficult in a PhD project, even one employing a participatory methodology like mine. Ultimately, only one person will be responsible for the research and indeed be personally examined and generally rewarded for the work produced.

Additionally, no one else involved in this project had chosen to spend years of their lives researching. Moreover, everyone else had their own jobs, studying commitments, activities, time consuming foci - and no one else had financial support in the form of a scholarship. I was very aware of all these factors. Nevertheless, I still strove to employ as many collaborative ways of working as I could during the project, in line with my participatory stance.

Scholars writing about collaborative and participatory research models have warned against the potential risks involved in collaborative research. Firstly, they warn against 'false equality' (Bell and Pahl, 2018:14) – research that fails to make clear the concrete details of exactly how and where the collaboration is going to take place, or that fails to recognise where collaboration is not possible, for reasons of knowledge or time, for example (ibid). Campbell and Lassiter (2015: 5) advise 'making sure to accurately outline the collaborative and non-collaborative aspects of a project and making visible hierarchies which are potentially hidden', by highlighting exactly *how* participants are engaged in tasks and activities such as questions, key decisions, interviewing, analysing, interpreting and writing up findings.

In my project, a participatory research design guided participants to take on active co-researcher roles, exploring and reflecting on their own sociolinguistic experiences via a series of participatory activities. I have already mentioned that participants chose the research sites and I talk about this in more detail in section 3.3.2 below. The design also included participants doing some of the research tasks such as participant observation and interviewing.

On the one hand I was very aware that I was asking for a lot of commitment from the participants and I was aware of the dangers of exploitation. According to Lanza (2008: 86) issues of exploitation often rest on the notion of who benefits from the research, the 'researched' or the 'researcher'. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 217) also warn 'people supply the information which is used by the researcher and yet get little or nothing in return.'

On the other hand, I also knew that the process would be more engaging and a shared endeavor would be more likely to maintain interest and offer benefits to the participants. For example, as well as offering knowledge and experience to the project, they also got an insight into the process and substance of sociolinguistic research. Some participants included their work on the project on their C.V.s for example. I was also cognizant that participants had all chosen to be involved because they were interested in the project and they were aware they could choose to leave at any point.

Scholars also point to the importance of distinguishing a collaborative research design from more general aspects of collaboration. As most ethnographers would agree, there is no ethnography without collaboration of some sort (*inter alia* Lassiter, 2005; Back and Sinha, 2018; Budach, 2020) but this does not necessarily mean all

ethnography engages with issues of power. For example, Marcus (2001) critiques the idea of instrumental relationship-building in the form of 'rapport' in order to extract information. Lassiter (2005:16 cited in Thomas Crockett, 2010) distinguishes collaborative research from the reciprocation model sometimes employed in ethnography. This model involves the ethnographer offering something in exchange for any information gathered during the ethnographic process. Some examples of this are voluntary work in the community, advocacy work or campaigning, He argues that it is important not to misrecognise reciprocation as participatory and collaborative knowledge production.

I do not want to present an idealised account of participatory research. I am aware there were many limitations, especially at the beginning of the project when I was finding my own feet. I realised that collaborative research is best carried out by a confident, experienced researcher. However, the fact that I could develop the fruits of my experience as participatory educator supported the process.

3.3 Data collection methods

My data collection methods took a number of twists and turns over the course of the research. This was partly due to the nature of the ethnographic process in which, as things begin to emerge, it becomes clear that more data is needed in to illuminate particular themes (*inter alia* Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). And, as I have already mentioned the whole research design and process was completely turned upside down by the Covid pandemic which hit six months into my programme before I had even begun work with participants. I carried out data collection work in different phases over a period of two years from October 2020 to November 2022. The period of data collection was quite long for a doctoral study. This is partly because Covid

had made research so difficult for everyone and a lot of the data collection took place during periods of lockdown.

However, another reason was that my own daily life was in the same place as the research, so I had almost continual opportunities to meet with people, exchange WhatsApp messages, take observational notes and gain insights 'on the go'. When, during the period of analysis it became clear that I needed more data to understand something I had observed, I could easily do that.

The structured phases of fieldwork can be divided into three parts.

1. **Biographical interviews[10]**: This involved getting to know each other through semi-structured conversations in which we chatted about participants' lives and backgrounds and their relationship with multilingualism.

2. **Participant-led explorations of place, participant-led participant observation[11].** This was designed to understand participants' language connections to places in their everyday lives and to experience these places in an embodied way. Each participant chose 5 places in their lives where they thought language was important. In the next stage the participants took me to these and we talked while we walked to each place. The walks were audio recorded and followed up with field notes. Following the walks, I asked participants to go back to one of the places, observe interactions taking place and make their own notes. We then went back to the place together to discuss their observations. These discussions were audio recorded.

3. **Linguistic Landscape work and participant observation in Watney Market.** The final stage consisted of an in-depth investigation of one of the

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[10] Core participants only
[11] Core participants only

places from phase one which became a case study. Here I carried out broad

linguistic landscape work which included observations, participant led

observations and recordings of sounds and in-situ interactions.

In sections 3.3.1, 3.3.2, and 3.3.3 I provide further detail about these methods.

3.3.1 Part one-biographical interviews

My main aim carrying out these interviews was to get to know the participants,

gather some biographical details (Codó, 2008:161) and spend some time together in

order to feel more comfortable. It was also a chance to talk more about the kind of

participatory research I wanted to do and give participants the possibility of asking

further questions and consider whether they wanted to continue. All participants

carried on to the next phase. Although I had a set of questions (see Appendix B), I

tried to make it a 'conversational interview' to reduce the formal aspects and help in

the getting to know you process. This was particularly important for those

participants I had only just met, like Joy, Khalid, Farhad, Abdul Hussain, and Moni.

Although my aim in carrying out these interviews was initially preparatory and, in a

sense, to test the ground on which we would later tread, the conversations we had

were incredibly rich. Participants spoke at length about their lives, their families, their

relationship to Bangladesh and their relationship to their own multilingual repertoires

and experiences of being a multilingual citizen in the UK. Certain themes emerged

here that did not emerge in the walking interviews and so although this was mainly

intended as a 'getting to know' you phase, these interviews formed a part of my data

analysis.

There is no shortage of critiques of interviewing in ethnographic research (see for

example Hammersley 2003). Harris and Rampton's (2010) robust critique of reliance

on interview data to analyse discourses of race and ethnicity highlight that interviews

risk giving the researcher what they want to hear and offer 'quotably literal encapsulations' rather than contestation (2010: 116). They argue that:

> In trying to identify a context for what interview informants say, researchers draw on (and position their informants intertextually within) only the most obvious discourses at large. Unfortunately, these tend to be essentialist and crisis oriented (ibid).

Even Hammersley (2003), who generally argues in favour of interview data in ethnographic research, warns about relying exclusively on it.

However, Cameron (2005) suggests that there are also limits to naturally occurring data as it may contains silences and erasures imposed by circulating discourses in particular environments (see section 3.1.3). There are questions therefore around whether naturally occurring, spontaneous data can be seen to be a better representation of reality or not. Harris and Rampton also refer to this when they acknowledge 'sometimes it is certainly necessary to go straight to the big concepts, in acts of strategic essentialism' (2010: 116).

These debates became apparent as I analysed my data. For example, the biographical interviews contained more references to the 'big concepts' (ibid), such as class, race, ethnicity, religion and gender and participants more readily oriented to societal tensions. Data collected out and about in-situ tended to follow more convivial experiences (Gilroy, 2004). This suggested firstly that the biographical interviews were influenced by the researcher bringing the big concepts but also that participants felt a certain amount of privacy and did not feel the same need to perform to expectations of conviviality that they would when chatting on the street. Data gathered in situ on the street, on the other hand, followed the tacit rules of interactions on the street and more generally reflected the more convivial dynamics, regardless of underlying tensions. It struck me when reading Francesco della

Puppa's (2021) work for example in which he investigated the new relationships between longstanding Sylheti or British-Sylheti residents and Italian Bangladeshis, that his data contained very explicit reference to tensions and difficulties between the two groups whereas mine did not. My own data, collected mainly out and about in the street contained undertones of tensions but nowhere near as clear cut as his suggested. It is possible of course that as researchers we were bringing different concepts to the process, or it could be that his data was collected in more private circumstances where interviewees did not have to be aware of the immediate social space and talked more freely.

I became aware therefore that all data collection activities I used were subject to both affordances and limitations. I tried to mitigate this, first of all by being aware of these in my analysis and secondly by combining the different types of data in the analysis work. I felt that the variation in the data I had collected was a strength that I could use in my analysis.

3.3.2 Part two-participant led explorations of place: walking methods

When I asked the core participants to choose sites relevant for them in their language lives a fascinating array of social spaces emerged that included homes, shops, parks, workplaces, cafes, school gates, classrooms, mosques, iconic streets, backstreets and even particular rooms in houses. These places became the principal research sites and the very act of choosing became an integral part of the participatory ethnography model, with the participants involved in decision making processes that fed into the wider project. The next stage was to go together to each of these places to observe, describe and discuss communication practices there, and thus began the walking phase of the research.

There was huge variation in these walks: some were a quick round the block, some covered a couple of miles and others one road or even just a part of a road. Most were thought about and planned in advance by each participant but one or two were completely spontaneous or changed route at the last minute. All were devised and led without interventions on my part. Most participants devised integrated walks around particular neighbourhoods as I have already mentioned earlier in this chapter. This meant that notions of belonging, identity and emotional attachments were foregrounded.

Back and Sinha (2010: 174) citing Kvale and Brinkman's work (2009: 48) highlight the curious Latin root of the word 'conversation' as meaning 'wandering together with'. This led me to thinking about my own walking methods in which those involved in research are literally walking together, as well as metaphorically 'wandering together' in conversation. This wandering together in conversation became arguably the most important data collection method in my project. It opened up the field of research and meant that conversation about language was embodied and took place in real surroundings that included sights, sounds, architecture and, of course, people.

Some of the walks reflected Anderson's (2004) description of 'bimbling' and consisted of me and the participant whiling away the time chatting whilst walking. Others were more dynamic and involved and engaged other ad-hoc participants (see section 3.3) we met along the way. We chatted about why the participants had chosen a particular place, communication practices in the various sites, changes they had noticed, possible reasons for these changes and much more.

Much of the of ethnographic research carried out using walking interviews has taken place in other disciplines, notably anthropology, sociology and cultural geography (*see inter alia* Anderson, 2004; Carpiano, 2009; Trell and Van Hoven, 2010). In sociolinguistics it is less frequently drawn upon as a method, although some, like me, have combined walking with linguistic landscaping (see for example Szabó and Troyer, 2017).

Many of these scholars have pointed to the opportunities afforded by walking to carry out more inclusive or collaborative research and this aligned well with participatory research model. Szabó and Troyer suggest that the very nature of walking can disrupt hierarchies in the research process. They point out 'several walking-based methods have emphasized that walking as an action and as a sensory experience transforms interaction and re-positions both the researcher and the research participants in the fieldwork setting' (2010: 309). Similarly, Wells in her research tracing Italian heritage in Valparaiso describes the dynamics between her and one of her research participants:

> Walking through an environment unknown to me allowed him instead to take a more active guiding role in ways which allowed him to bring to my attention and explain subjects which it would not have occurred to me to ask about (2020: 144).

Back and Sinah (2018) talk about walking interviews providing safety from the triggering effect of more formal interviews. For example where participants may have had interviews with the home office or other stress inducing interviews

Another affordance of walking is that is takes into account notions of 'spatiality' (Canagarajah, 2018: 33). A focus on spatiality allows us to go beyond linguistic

orientations and include how space interacts with communication activity. The physical space is an integral part of that communication, so being 'in-situ', in an embodied and sensory way, can allow for a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of place, and this was crucial for my research questions.

Finally, scholars point out that walking can generate *different* knowledge compared to more static interviewing methods. Anderson (2004: 260) points out that the knowledge produced is less reliant on intellect and rationale. 'Talking whilst walking does not perhaps function cognitively and rationally [..] Nonetheless, it can successfully tap into the non-mechanistic framework of the mind and its interconnections with place to recall episodes and meanings buried in the archaeology of knowledge'. He goes on to say 'the knowledge produced is importantly different: atmospheres, emotions, reflections and beliefs can be accessed, as well as intellects, rationales and ideas' (ibid).

These insights recall walking with Gulabi. After our first walk together in which we literally and metaphorically (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009) conversed along her chosen route of canal toe paths, parks, the whole length of the long and ancient Roman Road, ending up at her old primary school, she summed up the experience beautifully:

> It feels like it's long-lasting walk and it doesn't end. There is no end and when you're walking with someone and you're having a conversation with them, the conversation kind of just flows with the environment that you live in, the environment that you're walking in and I guess when you're walking within this area, you get things that kind of pop up in your head, certain things and I guess it just kind of sparks the conversation (Gulabi during a walking interview).

The poetic and powerful way she describes the walk foregrounds the embodied and emotive elements in the knowledge production process is and shows how certain methods can unlock different kinds of ideas (Anderson, 2004).

The walks were characterised by dialogue rather than interview and I found that walking helped to provide an interactional environment where I did not feel I was always leading the conversation with my questions. Topic initiation and openings were much more likely to come from the participants, even when they were aware that I had a set of possible questions to refer to (see Appendix C). The physical environment in the walking interview worked as mediational tool which allowed a dialogic space to open up between the me and the participants, extending the conversation to allow both myself and the participants to move away from the limits of a single set of thoughts. Szabó and Troyer (2017: 322) make a similar observation:

> Inclusive ethnography can challenge the dichotomy of observer vs. observed and highlights the mediating role that embodiment, devices, and verbal interaction play in shaping the generation of multimodal data and research narratives.

Using walking methods allowed both me and participants to step back from each other and the intensity of a face-to-face interview to observe and experience something together in a more collaborative way. Embodied methods helped to bring the research participants far closer to the research process and increase their control over the information exchange from participant to researcher and contribute to the co-production of knowledge. I felt strongly that these methods reduced the danger of positioning participants as 'informants' who pass over information to the research

without being active in the research process, knowledge creation and ideas generation. As Szabó and Troyer (2017: 309) suggest 'walking as an action and as a sensory experience transforms interaction and re-positions both the researcher and the research participants in the fieldwork setting'.

A final observation is that walking was a mutually enriching experience. I feel that as a method it strengthened my relationship with participants because it felt like we were involved in a shared endeavour, rather than them just giving an interview or carrying out assigned tasks. I believe it was particularly the walking that solidified participants' involvement in the project as a whole and gave them a longer-term interest in how the project developed.

3.3.3 Linguistic landscapes

Rather curiously, I came late to linguistic landscape work on this project. Curious because notions of place and connections between people and place had always been my point of departure on this project, both methodologically and theoretically and this is reflected in my research questions.

Szabó and Troyer's point that 'The study of inhabitant's perspectives on the language(s) of their surroundings was integral to the coining of the term linguistic landscapes' (2017:306), finds immediate resonance. However, traditional linguistic landscape research has generally focused on visual imprints on the environment, such as signage. The relevance of this was not immediately apparent for my study focused on an 'oral' language, with complex representation in print.

My own focus on space was initially far more metalinguistic and related to how people articulated their experiences of language and place, something I was exploring in the walking methods described above. I was also interested in situated interactions, and I was initially more oriented to geo-semiotics (Scollon and Scollon,

2003) as an approach to capture how people used language in particular places for strategic purposes in moments of 'social action' (ibid). However, I found the data that would allow me to work with a geo-semiotic analysis frame difficult to capture.

Although I originally intended to follow up the walking interviews with participant-led observations and recordings of social (inter)action in places of their choosing along the walk, the data I was able to get was too disparate and fragmented to be able to do adequate geo-semiotic analysis.

I remained interested in geosemiotics and Scollon and Scollon's nexus analysis approach, but I did not use it systematically, using it instead as an analytic heuristic which I outline in section 3.4.1.2.

3.3.3.1 Developing a dynamic ethnographic communicative landscape study

This difficulty capturing interactive data during the walks was one of my motivations for deciding to follow up the walking interviews with what I am describing as a dynamic ethnographic approach to linguistic landscapes. I wanted to capture more of the dynamic interactions that were taking place in and around the places we walked in and so I decided to develop my methods and carry out linguistic landscape work in one of the places that participants had taken me to.

Additionally, as the project progressed, my interest in spatial repertoires and the multi-sensory and embodied aspects of the methodology developed through my own experience of walking with participants.

The link afforded by linguistic landscape studies to connections with people and place continued to recur in my reading and thinking about the data. In section 2.3.3, I described how linguistic landscape studies had evolved from a more descriptive, quantitative field to a more ethnographic focus which investigated how people and

their lives are interconnected with language in the landscape. This foregrounding of people's experiences in specific places aligned well with my study.

In addition, the linguistic landscape lens also gave me a way to add layers of communication that had not been the specific focus of the walking methods. These layers consisted of visual elements such as commercial and civic signage as per traditional linguistic landscape studies, and visual semiotic elements such as street murals, shop window arrangements and other material objects that can index aspects of linguistic diversity, and interactions between people. All of these elements were evidence of past and present sociolinguistic place-making.

I also drew on my own field observations and interviews with secondary and ad hoc participants to explore what people say and think. In a departure from most studies, I brought in an investigation of the linguistic soundscape (El Ayadi, 2021), which captures the sounds of an area, including the sounds of linguistic diversity.

I first became interested in the sounds of place when transcribing recordings made while walking with participants in various parts of the borough. As these recordings were often made walking through streets there was always a lot of background noise and conversations taking place as we walked past people. I had not noticed any of this at the time as I was just focussed on the main conversation but as I transcribed, I realised that the sounds of place were an essential element. Later, during my field investigations of the linguistic landscape of Watney Market, I felt more aware of the sounds of voices around me, the timbre of people's voices and the low hum of human communication. Although some of this was captured in my field observations, I eventually decided to do a more systematic investigation by audio recording the sounds of the street. This time, rather than walking with participants whilst chatting

as in the first part of the research, I walked alone. I listened, recorded and carried

out, 'linguistic soundwalks' (El Ayadi, 2021) (see chapter 4).

Another way I developed the linguistic landscape lens in this study was by including

moments of interaction captured on audio recordings and field notes as elements in

the linguistic landscape. I began to explore the idea that the chance conversations I

had with 'ad hoc' participants could also be considered as elements of the linguistic

landscape.

I refer here to two types of ad hoc conversations. There are the unplanned

interactions with people who, on overhearing a conversation, join in of their own

volition, adding a comment or opinion. Alternatively, there are the secondary

conversations picked up in the background as I record other research activities.

Methodologically these snippets or mini conversations can be considered as

interactive data collected during participant observation. As I got more used to

researching in this way however, I began to consider the sounds and snippets of

conversations picked up inadvertently on the voice recorder as sonic and voice

elements in the linguistic landscape. In the same way the camera captures the visual

elements of the linguistic landscape, the voice recorder captures the sounds and the

voices.

Stroud and Mpendukana allude to this when they describe the linguistic landscape

as, 'language used in [ ] speakers' public displays, performances and interaction'

(2009: 364) and it is implicit in Shohamy and Waksman's formulation of the linguistic

landscape as including not only visible manifestations of language but also 'what is

spoken, what is thought' (ibid: 313). Indeed, it seems odd that the linguistic

landscape has traditionally been thought of as a silent, often unpeopled, landscape.

I could not of course do an in-depth linguistic landscape study of all the walking sites. I decided to choose one site as a case study into which I could weave aspects of the broader dataset, and for this I chose Watney Market, a place where Shaj had taken me on her walking tour.

3.3.3.2 Watney Market

My decision to use Watney Market as a linguistic landscape case study was not entirely straightforward. I had to select between the different neighbourhoods covered as part of the walking interviews (see section 3.1.2). All of these neighbourhoods were interesting and all would of course be part of my analysis through the walking interviews and participants' contributions, but an investigation of all five areas was way beyond the scope of this study.

I chose Watney Market because it was a small, compact, pedestrian street containing markets, shops and cafes in one location. It was also very close to areas of historical Sylheti influence, Brick Lane and Whitechapel and this meant I could easily broaden it, particularly to Whitechapel which is very close. Another factor which drew me to Watney Market (and Whitechapel) was the significant number of Bangladeshi Italians who had moved to the area. I knew from the walking interviews that this was a salient theme and a more in-depth focus on Watney Market would allow me to develop this theme further to include an investigation of the linguistic changes this new migration had brought about. A final reason was that I knew the area very well and already knew some local residents and market traders and other participants in this area knew others and together I knew we could collect more data.

3.3.4 Reflective notes

My own reflections, gathered as part of the ethnographic process, took on many iterations throughout the course of the project. I initially began to write notes as part of an ethnographic journal and did this after each walking interview to accompany the audio recording and capture my own perceptions of the event. As walking interviews were somewhere in between an interview and participant observation, it never really felt like I was taking traditional ethnographic field notes but rather noting my own follow-up reflections on what had happened, and any additional information not captured in the audio recordings. I also took notes in other situations, for example when volunteering in Osmani Trust classes or if I had attended a local event, for example the London Bangla Press Club event mentioned in 2.4.3 or spoken to someone about my project.

Later in the second stage of research when conducting linguistic landscape research, the notes I took could be described as more traditional ethnographic field notes, akin to what Papen describes as a 'form of "representation" (Emerson et al, 2011) of participant observation: an account of observed events, persons and places, written down by the ethnographer during or after participant observation' (Papen, 2020: 141). In this phase of the project, I wrote more crafted notes after each visit (see Appendix D for an example). I had already done some of the analysis work from the walking interviews and so my notes became more focussed and analytical. They also served as bridge between the data collection, transcription and analysis processes and the writing of the thesis. It was at this stage that I realised that writing and thinking often occurred together and these notes sometimes morphed into the writing of the thesis, which I think is evident in the analysis chapters (for example section 4.2.3).

Copland and Creese rightly point out that the taking of notes is a very subjective act. They argue: 'Field notes cannot avoid being evaluative: a language of description does not allow us to be neutral. Whatever we write down positions us in relation to what we observe in one way or other (ibid 2015: 43). Notes are therefore already part of the interpretation and knowledge production process, and this includes the selections of where to focus attention and what to omit. As Papen (2020: 146) highlights, field notes are an 'epistemic process', something I felt increasingly as the project progressed.

3.4 Working with the dataset

3.4.1 Analysis methods

In the next section I describe how I managed and worked with the dataset. I have already highlighted that an ethnographic epistemology was central to the study. This meant approaching my data in an exploratory way without preconceived ideas regarding what the data might mean. Atkinson and Hammersley (2007:21) observe that 'most ethnographic research […] has been concerned with producing descriptions and explanations of particular phenomena, or with developing theories rather than with testing existing hypotheses'. This approach means not searching for particular answers in the data but rather engaging with the data to understand emerging themes. Atkinson and Hammersley suggest approaching the data as 'materials to think with' (2007: 158) and this phrase almost became my guiding principle throughout the period of analysis.

This thinking process meant being open to a variety of understandings and interpretations and I embraced the idea of thinking about the data, bringing questions

to it and not being in a hurry to find the answer. The idea of thinking with the data also served as a support during the many moments of dificultly.

Not for the first time in the research process I drew on my experience as a participatory educator (see section 3.2.2) to help me navigate the complexities that arose. When employing participatory teaching methodologies in my ESOL classes, I also found that learning sometimes took long and winding paths, rather than easily digestible bite sized chunks or organised structured curricula. However, so often the results of the participatory learning appeared to have a depth that superseded any pre-planned and easily delivered learning programme.

As I had worked dialogically with participants, I also tried to find ways of working *dialogically* with the data, something which took some time. One way of doing this was by developing dialogic ways of working with my research advisor at the Osmani Trust in which we could discuss extracts and listen to and discuss recordings.

In addition, I engaged in dialogue with my own thoughts through the writing process itself, using words on the paper as a thinking tool. These methods were non-linear and much time was spent with a feeling of 'not knowing', which at times felt deeply uncomfortable. The following challenges laid out by Hammersley (2022) were all part of my own process and the concerns he outlined capture my own difficulties well. He suggested that producing overly descriptive accounts, neglecting the wider social context, focusing on familiar problems meaning that nothing new was found, were risks inherent in this type of ethnographic research.

In order to manage the concerns above I accepted that, like participatory dialogic teaching, there would always be a certain amount of messiness in the participatory process. Blackledge and Creese (2023: 4) also refer to this saying: 'ethnography approaches social life as fluid, heterogeneous and under-patterned. It accepts

fragmentation, contingency, indeterminacy and ambivalence'. They go on to affirm, 'In our effort to make sense of the actual and possible lives we observe, we work towards incomplete and unresolved ethnographies' (ibid).

Nevertheless, as Blackledge and Creese (ibid) also highlight, fragmentation and incompleteness does not mean lack of rigour or superficiality and I while I did not work to put my data in neat boxes, I did strive to make my thinking with the data as in-depth as I could.

3.4.1.1 Transcription and thematic coding

One of the most fruitful things I did as part of the analysis was to transcribe everything I had audio recorded by hand: the initial biographical interview recordings, the walking interviews and the in-situ recordings of the Watney Market linguistic landscape work. This consisted of approximately 46 hours of recording (see Appendix E for record of data collected). This was time consuming work but transcribing it myself meant that I was able to familiarise myself thoroughly with the data. Such close attention to the recordings paid off and I found I often knew exactly where certain themes emerged. I also got used to listening to the backgrounds in the walking interview recordings. The process of transcribing meant listening again and again for accuracy and this also gave multiple opportunities for annotation. I initially used the ideas of 'enabling' or 'limiting', either Sylheti specifically or multilingual repertoires, as sensitising concepts. I applied these to all aspects of the data, including individual actions, decisions, aspects of the linguistic landscape, evidence of circulating ideologies in metacommentary and so on.

I did not rely on this alone however but coded the data on NVivo. I had done my transcribing directly into NVivo so I already had everything in one place. This meant

the data was easily accessible and the software allowed me to organise and describe my thinking. It also gave me a structure to capture my analytical ideas as they emerged, as these were all documented on NVivo along with the data and transcription. I used NVivo to develop the initial sensitising concepts into themes. This made it easier to understand the relevance of ideas, patterns and confirm or test out ideas (see Appendix F for examples of coding and Appendix G for working record of emerging themes).

I organised the visual data collected as part of the Watney Market linguistic landscape into a separate table (see Appendix H). As this work was qualitative, I used the table to keep track and make my own selections. The selections were based on my own observations on what appeared to be rich points and on connections and cross overs with the rest of the dataset. I also took note of where participants had commented in interviews and used my wider ethnographic knowledge to guide me. For example, I knew from conversations with people, from social media and press coverage that the certain aspects of the linguistic landscape, for example the Whitechapel Tube sign (section 4.3.1) and the Mateer Tan mural section (4.3.3) had grabbed local attention and were being discussed.

3.4.1.2 Nexus Analysis as a thinking tool

I have already mentioned an orientation to nexus analysis (Scollon and Scollon, 2003, 2004; Hult, 2015) as an analytic frame to support and help guide my analysis and interpretation of some parts of the dataset. Nexus analysis offers a systematic method for analysing situated language use across different temporal and geographical scales and as such is well suited to research that investigates place-

making. As I explain later in this section, I did not do a full nexus analysis but I found it extremely helpful it as a thinking framework.

Scollon and Scollon suggest locating what they call a 'moment of social action' as the starting point for analysis in ethnographic research. According to Lane (2014: 15): 'The main activity of a nexus analysis is to map the cycles of people, places, discourses, objects and concepts circulating through the moment when a social action takes place'. The first stage of this is to locate a moment of social action from the dataset. These encounters, or moments of situated language use, are categorised within nexus analysis as 'social actions' or 'semiotic actions' (Lane, 2014) which produce and reproduce social and historical processes.

Then the next step involves investigating this moment through three separate but interconnecting and mutually shaping discourse dimensions: discourses in place, historical body and interaction order (Scollon and Scollon, 2003). Scollon and Scollon, 2004:148) explain this as an organisation of 'a theory of complex social actions among multiple motives, multiple participants across various timescales'. The 'discourses in place' dimension refers to the analysis of wider discourses and ideologies circulating at a particular moment in time and in a particular geographical space. This may refer to political and media discourses, or discourses circulating in a particular workplace or community setting.

Investigation of the 'historical body' looks at the individual beliefs a speaker has about language and tracks specific life events which have shaped an individual's understanding of the world including education, migration patterns, social status (Hult, 2017:224 Fig 19.1).

Investigation of the 'interaction order' involves how ideologies are played out in interaction. This may be examining why a particular language code or register is

used in particular space or choice of phrases of vocabulary, or it might be looking at the power dynamics between speakers, including turn taking and expectations regarding social roles (ibid). It also encompasses analysis of power relations within the interaction and how this affects language and register choice.

As Scollon & Scollon (2004: 9 – cited in Hult. 2015: 218) point out, 'by conducting a study in this way, a researcher can 'make sure that the study does not become obsessively narrowed to single moments, speech acts or events or participants without seeing how these connect to other moments, acts, event and participants'. Crucially however they also explain that the act of separating out these three elements is only for the purpose of analysis and understanding because all these elements are always part of the same social action (ibid, 2004:162) (Cf. Silverstein's total linguistic fact)

Blommaert, commenting on the potential of deep and complex analysis that nexus analysis brings states:

> Whenever we investigate a synchronic social act, we have to see it as a repository of a process of genesis, development, transformation. If we see it like this, we will see it in its sociocultural fullness, because we can then begin to understand the shared, conventional aspects of it, and see it as a moment of social and cultural transmission (Blommaert, 2018:75).

Despite my own interest in the framework I found I could not adopt it fully and systematically as an analysis frame because my dataset consisted of predominantly interview data (see also 3.3.3). Nevertheless, I found the structure of thinking it stimulated for me incredibly useful. When I was considering an aspect of the data, for example the *Thank you Tower Hamlets* mural in section 4.3.3, I used the nexus analysis framework to help me consider the data in more depth. I used nexus

analysis as an 'analytic disposition' which for me meant using the 3-part framework to help me consider aspects of the data I had selected for analysis, asking myself questions such as:

1. What are the current and historically relevant discourses that affect this data?

2. What aspects of the interaction emerge as significant? Here I was particularly interested in which aspects of the repertoire people chose to deploy but also any salient aspects of the dialogue. I didn't do any systematic conversational analysis work, but the nexus framework allowed me to dip in and out of fine-grained analysis if it seemed fruitful.

3. Who are the individuals engaged here? What are their backgrounds and current roles?

This triadic thinking allowed me to gain deeper insights. For example, it was this thinking that allowed me to bring the histories of struggle in Tower Hamlets to moments of social interaction on Watney Market.

3.5 Ethical considerations

There are a number of ethical considerations with regards to this research. Alongside a responsibility to the research community as a whole, the Osmani Trust and communities they represent, the universities supporting my research and my funders, I also had direct responsibility to my participants. This meant making sure that they were actively supported and protected throughout the process. This concerns certain aspects relevant to all ethnographies. For example, making sure that all participants understand the purpose of the research and are able to give informed consent and have identities protected (Lanza, 2008: 84) (see Appendix A and also section 3.2.2). As a lot of the data collection was carried out during Covid, I

had to make sure that the activities did not compromise safety by putting extra measures such as face masks and, antibacterial wipes for recording equipment. Some of the research was carried out in public and semi-public places and I was often picking up people's voices in the background of the recordings. In other cases, while chatting to participants, 'eavesdroppers' would get involved in the conversation. I used a lot of this ad hoc data in the analysis, and I found it greatly added to the ethnographic texture of my study, so I needed to make sure I had done everything possible to inform people about the project and get consent. I was always careful to interrupt these unplanned conversations to let people know what I was doing, and that I was recording. On occasions the core participants also performed this role and we all became well versed in the set phase: 'We're just doing some research about languages in this area and we're recording, is that ok?'

When recording inside the cafes and shops, I knew some background conversations were likely to be picked up by the voice recorder. With the consent of the owners, I propped up a sign on the counter next to the till containing basic information about the research alongside contact numbers (see Appendix I). Where I conceived these snippets as elements in the linguistic landscape (see section 3.3.3.1), I was more relaxed about the ethics of using this data in my analysis.

3.6 Difficulties to overcome - Covid

From March 2020 for approximately 2 years of the research process, the world was gripped by a completely unexpected, at least from the public's point of view, global pandemic. There is no scope here to discuss the personal emotional strain the pandemic had on members of project team, but I outline the way in which the expected parameters of my research had to change, some of which have turned out

to have brought unexpected affordances to the research project. Of course, the PhD process is a long one spanning a period of years and even without a global pandemic there are unexpected events that change the course of things. Perhaps this is especially so in an ethnography where relationships and people's lives are at the core of things. For the participants on the project, including myself, we experienced the ups and downs of life: births, marriages, bereavements, changing jobs, children growing up and moving on, graduations, and within these perhaps more significant life milestones, these were many smaller life events that intertwined their way through the process, all events which changed perspectives and therein also aspects of the research.

The Covid pandemic of course changed the course of history in ways we are still understanding but more mundanely it impacted on the practical elements of my own research, meaning adaptations had to be made and certain things were no longer possible for me to do. The Osmani Centre closed for an extended period meaning that I was not able to conduct any active research there. But most places closed their doors and the world moved online. Certain aspects of my research also moved online, my Sylheti classes for example and my own teaching.

I did do some research interviews online, but it soon became clear that I would not be able to access the multilingual, multimodal data I was looking for online. As a result, I changed my data collection focus to adapt to the new circumstances. I had always planned to focus on the link between people, places and language use but suddenly many of these places were no longer accessible, not just for me as a researcher. The participants were also unable to access the places they would normally be frequenting on a regular basis. So, when it became possible, I adapted my methods to incorporate the one thing we were free to do, walk in the open air.

My main ethnographic tool, the walking interview, was therefore a result of Covid. The discovery proved pivotal as it was a method that fitted in so perfectly with my research focus and participatory approach. It was the constraints of Covid and the discovery of walking methods that shifted the focus of my research to the public domain, mainly the street, but also to shop doorways, street markets, parks, canals, wasteland and children's play areas. With walking came an incredible sense of freedom to express described in section 3.3.2 and with walking came the variety of interactions that comes with bumping into various people enroute as well as being able to collect recordings in which meta commentary combined with more spontaneous interactions which supported my theoretical ideas. Arguably this constituted the originality of my research and allowed me to further develop my interest in situated language use and the link between language and place.

3.7 Chapter conclusions

In this chapter I have given a reflexive account of the research process. I have described the structure of the research and the different stages involved in the design, collection and analysis. I was guided by a number of fundamental principles: dialogic methods, the importance of relationships and the epistemological stance of knowledge as a process of collective discovery. With these tenets as solid foundations I was able to creatively use multiple data collection methods and analysis frames. This selection of methods is not unusual in ethnographic research and triangulation of data can support the knowledge production process. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 184) warn against what the call a 'naively optimistic view that the aggregation of data from different sources will unproblematically add up to produce a more accurate or complete picture'. While I did not assume that, I did find that thinking about the data from different perspectives

and angles helped to produce a more in-depth study, even if this depth was an increase of complexity rather than clearer answers.

In the analysis chapters that follow, I draw out and illuminate the findings of the processes described here.

4 Sylheti in the communicative landscape of Watney Market

4.1 Introduction and chapter aims

Sylhet and Tower Hamlets: long connecting threads

On first entry from either north or south into the Watney Market area, you are immediately welcomed by sights and sounds that point to a long history of cultures and languages mixing and influencing each other. This is a different type of 'superdiversity' (Vertovec, 2007) than seen in Blackledge et al's (2015) study of the Bull Ring Market in Birmingham, for example. They describe the large Birmingham indoor market in their study as 'super-diverse, with people of myriad national, educational and socio-economic backgrounds, with different legal statuses and biographical trajectories coming together in zones of encounter' (ibid: 4). The 'superdiversity' of Watney Market is instead one in which *one* particular set of linguistic resources, Sylheti, has intertwined and evolved alongside English and its London variety, Cockney, over many decades. This is similar to what Raychaudhuri in his study of South Asian belonging, calls '"here" for a long time' (2018: 4). That is not to say that people of many other backgrounds, languages and nationalities do not live in and move to Watney Market, or that fewer languages in circulation means there is less diversity, but it is varieties of English and Sylheti which are linguistically and culturally the most dominant here.

In this chapter I argue that the ways in which Sylheti is embedded in the sociolinguistic landscape and soundscape of Watney Market and, many other Tower Hamlets neighbourhoods, is a defining feature of social life in Tower Hamlets and

one that problematises dominant language ideologies that position Sylheti solely as a 'diaspora' language.

The aim of this chapter is to use the 'linguistic landscape' (*inter alia* Blommaert, 2013a; Shohamy and Gorter, 2009) of Watney Market as an entry point for understanding how people use Sylheti to make place, claim belonging or mark presence. I explore and detail how the historical links between Tower Hamlets and Sylhet are visible and audible in the linguistic landscape, as well as how Sylheti is made visible, oriented to, commented on, ignored or erased in interactions and metacommentaries.

The linguistic landscaper's first task is to provide a detailed and accurate description of language activity in a locality, which can then be utilised to gain deeper understandings (Blommaert, 2013a). Through my reading of the landscape, I highlight how the long connections between Sylhet and Tower Hamlets have become inscribed in the local landscape to reveal how people have engaged in acts of sociolinguistic place-making over many decades. The traces of commercial, religious, civic, political and cultural activity can also be understood as constituting acts of sociolinguistic resistance set against, as Raychaudhuri convincingly sets out, 'the normalising tendencies of a neo-colonial state that continually demands assimilation' (2018: Xiii).

I observe and analyse the linguistic landscape in the light of how sociolinguistic activity has been used commercially, culturally politically and socially, how these acts have cumulatively developed Watney Market into what can be seen as a site of sociolinguistic resistance (see Alexander, 2013:206).

Following the broader or expanded conception of linguistic landscape which I use in this study (*inter alia* Shohamy and Gorter, 2009), the descriptions of Watney market

that form the backbone of this chapter draw on the visual, semiotic, sonic and interactive linguistic landscape. The 'texts' or 'signs' I chose to focus on can constitute 'moments of social action' (Scollon and Scollon, 2004:159). I draw on Shohamy and Waksman's formulation when I investigate 'what is seen, what is heard, what is spoken and what is thought' (2009: 313) as part of a dynamic and interactive linguistic landscape. I refer to photographs and field observations (what is seen); sound and audio recordings (what is heard); recordings of interactions (what is spoken); and interviews with markets goers, market traders and shopkeepers (what is thought). I weave the other parts of the broader dataset throughout. I also include aspects of online data, where it pertains to Watney Market, such as google reviews (Blommaert and Maly, 2019).

Linguistic landscapes time-lag

Certain aspects of the linguistic landscape, such as conversations, soundscapes, temporary posters advertising upcoming events, price tags or even graffiti, can appear to be examples of the here-and-now of communicative activity. Meanwhile others, especially those elements containing more officially produced script, or more expensive commercially produced signs, tend to lag considerably behind the other parts of the communicative linguistic landscape.

This does not diminish their importance in any way. On the contrary, they add to the sense of 'here for a long time' (Raychaudhuri, 2018:4), that I am foregrounding in this chapter. A focus on these elements can offer a useful glimpse into the past. Peck et al (2018) talk about 'historicities of semiotic landscapes'. They argue that to some degree:

> Linguistic landscape research always invokes history, either explicitly or tacitly: the materiality of signs and the physical landscape are embodiments in

and of themselves of things that have been said before, made all the more legible in the 'historical layers' of the material world'. (ibid: 225)

Peck et al's perspective helps me to pull back the layers to uncover past meanings, but also see things changing in the here and now and observe how the passage of time changes the relationship of people to signs. The following sub-sections therefore focus on the here and now of communication activity *and* the visible traces of history that live alongside, and interact with, the here and now.

4.1.1 Chapter orientation

This chapter is divided into 4 sections. Following this introduction, in sections 4.2 and 4.3 I paint a picture of the Watney Market landscape through descriptions and analysis of linguistic, semiotic and embodied resources. In section 4.2 I explore how local actors: stall holders, local residents and customers have engaged in sociolinguistic placemaking from a 'bottom-up' perspective. Section 4.3 looks at how official bodies: for example, Tower Hamlets Council, funding organisations and other institutions have marked space from a 'top-down' perspective. I use the notions of 'bottom up' and 'top down' as an organising heuristic rather than analytical division. I argue that each of these processes feed into the other and together contribute to the creation of a space of sociolinguistic freedom in and around Watney Market. Finally in section 4.4 I provide a discussion.

4.2 Bottom-up or everyday sociolinguistic place-making

4.2.1 The Watney soundscape

I begin the description of the Watney Market linguistic landscape in a rather unusual way with a focus on sonic elements found on the landscape. As I explained in chapter 3 section 3.3.3, I carried out a number of 'linguistic soundwalks' in the different neighbourhoods to understand how the sound of voices contributed to sociolinguistic place-making.

My first impression in Watney Market was how human voices dominated the soundscape. This is a pedestrian area, so traffic is much less audible, despite the proximity of the thundering HGV route, the East India Dock Road to the north. Of course, this depends on the time of day and had I taken a recording at 4.30 a.m. I would have heard few voices and much clattering as stalls are erected. But during the day voices dominate - voices shouting out, chatting in groups or talking into a phone handset. Occasionally the recorder picked up the sound of a child crying or a low flying plane but these were just isolated moments.

My second observation was the dominance of Sylheti voices. English and Bangla were also audible but I could pick up no other language during the majority of sound walks in this area. I recorded six soundscapes in total on Watney Market at various times of the day and followed these with written reflections. This first impression was confirmed during the other soundwalks.

The Watney Market soundwalks, however, contrasted with other soundscape recordings I did in other parts of Tower Hamlets. For example, in one 30-minute recording from Altab Ali park to Brick Lane, only a 15-minute walk away from Watney Market, I found barely a trace of Sylheti on the soundscape. Instead, I heard the

sounds of many different languages, varieties and accents, French, Arabic, Spanish, English, Italian, Somali… but neither Sylheti, nor Bangla was audible on this recording. It was a Saturday morning and visiting non-locals and tourists may have impacted the soundscape. Nevertheless, it also relates to the well-documented gentrification and transformation of Brick Lane where 'Bangladeshi presence is still highly visible but under threat' (Alexander at al, 2020). Canary Wharf, perhaps more predictably given this has never been a 'Bangladeshi' area, also had no trace of Bangla or Sylheti and it was a predominantly English speaking space. The Roman Road soundscape featured far more Bangla and Sylheti but this was mixed with English and Cockney and sounds of a more superdiverse area in inner London, with multiple languages. The standout soundscape was Watney Market, as illustrated below in a transcript of the first soundwalk.

Extract 1

0.19: Traffic noise

0.28: (Becky whistling)

0.33: Man talking-

0.42-50: Men talking- **Sylheti**

0.54: Children's voices unclear crying

1.09: Multiple voices- **Sylheti** and **English**

1.17: Man talking- **Sylheti**

1.22-129: Multiple voices- man and woman speaking **Sylheti** are the most audible

1.29: Woman talking, - **English**

1.40- 145: Stallholder and female customer- **English** (Zara shop)

1.58: Women: **Sylheti** plus laughing children.

2.14: Man and woman- **Sylheti**

2.30- 2.35: Multiple voices: **Sylheti-** plus child crying loudly

2.40-2.52: Child screaming, woman speaking- **Caribbean English**

2.57: Woman speaking to male stall holder- both **English**

3.18: Whistling

3.41: Voices picked up in distance- unclear

3.52: Women- **English**

3.55: Multiple voices

4.15: Man speaking -**Sylheti** (on phone)

4:39: Women- **English**

4.50: plane flying over

4.57: Man speaking- **Bangla**

The transcript above, that points to a dominance of Sylheti sounds, is of course a representation. The lack of detail that comes from a soundscape compared to, for example, the recording of a whole interaction, is palpable here. The soundscape recordings are different from recordings of specific interactions in that fleeting moments are recorded that consist of fragments of conversations as people walk by. They suggest an *overall mood* rather than allow for an understanding of language practices or translanguaging practices for example. But they convey the sense that that varieties of Sylheti are the dominant sounds on the sound scape. The varieties of English heard point to working class and global varieties of English.

In spite of these limitations, there is something compelling about these voice recordings, a rarity in linguistic landscape studies. Cultural geographer El Ayadi, (2021) also notes this and draws attention to the affordances of soundscapes. She suggests that we:

> Gain a sensory experience of place based on our own perceptions', be they visually (the linguistic landscape) or orally (the linguistic soundscape) of the place. To only account for the first and not for the latter gives only a part of the linguistic dimensions of place' (ibid:7).

This idea of emphasising voices as an element of space is echoed by Kanngieser (cited in Wilson, 2015:168) who argues that voices are a crucial element of knowing a space. She argues that they are 'more than a conduit for the transfer of

communication. They *make* space' (ibid). El Ayadi comments specifically on multilingual voices and argues that sounds of other languages are an important aspect of people's experience of linguistic diversity. Indeed, if multilingual signs and script on the landscape, give us important insights, then the same must hold for multilingual sounds on the landscape. This is particularly important in a study where Sylheti is at the centre and where investigation of signage and script alone would not make it clear if Sylheti, Bangla or indeed other Bangladeshi languages were being captured.

4.2.2 The business landscape

The most prominent manifestation of sociolinguistic place-making on Watney Market is via the businesses on the market street. The market itself runs down the centre of a shop lined street. The descriptions in the following sub-sections highlight the wide range of multilingual and multimodal resources deployed by the market traders and customers. The market, which is the central focus of the street, operates Monday to Sunday from 8 am to 5 pm. Run by Tower Hamlets Council, it comprises fruit, vegetable, clothes, jewellery and homeware stalls.

According to an oral history project, 'Women at Watney: Stories from an East End Market' carried out by East End Women's Museum, the market has been in operation since 1881. Of this early history they suggest:

> In the Victorian period, Watney Street Market is one of the busiest in London, serving local Jewish and Irish communities. Being so close to the river, the market attracts dockers, warehouse workers, sailors, and their families (East End Women's Museum, 2021).

The same exhibition (ibid) dates the first Bangladeshi traders to 1950 and 70 years later when this study took place, the majority of market traders are from Sylhet.

During chats with stall holders and customers on the market, I asked about the languages spoken and heard on the street and most of the stall holders reported Sylheti as being the most dominant language by far. I use the following extract to illustrate how this perception of Sylheti dominance is often articulated. The use of percentages (typically people cite 90% or, like this example, 95%) to do this is common across the dataset.

Extract 2

1.	**Becky:**	what languages are you speaking on your stall?
2.	**Stall holder:**	Bangla Bangla
3.	**Becky:**	(repeats) so Bangla normally
4.		and most of your customers that come here?
5.	**Stall holder:**	most of the customers Bangla
6.		so 10 % maybe other languages but most of them Bengali
7.	**Becky:**	and what do you speak?
8.	**Stall holder:**	Bengali and English both but I can speak Hindi as well
9.	**Becky:**	and do you get Hindi speakers coming here?
10.	**Stall holder:**	yeah yeah every day some people is Hindi
11.	**Becky:**	when you say Bengali, you said Bangla ...
12.	**Stall holder:**	*[normally we speak Bangla*
13.		*but in Sylheti language*
14.	**Becky:**	yeah that's what I was going to ask
15.		do you find most people are speaking Sylheti?
16.	**Stall holder:**	*[Sylheti .. yeah most of them*
17.		*Sylheti because everyone like, its 95% from Sylhet*

In extract 2 the jewellery stall holder claims 95% of Watney Market are Sylheti (lines 16 and 17). Although he mentions other languages, English, Bangla and Hindi there is little doubt that he perceives this as a Sylheti speaking space.

Steve, one of the few non-Bengali stall holders makes more general comments about languages spoken and his perception is of more linguistic diversity. He remarks 'you hear every language going, yeah full range, every nationality, Cockneys as well'.

Watney Market is known locally as an East End market and a Bangladeshi market. There are no farmers-market type fruit and veg stalls, no bakery or street food stall, no vintage stall. This is by all accounts an old-school, authentic, East End market. Below is the description on the Tower Hamlets website:

Found in between Whitechapel and Shadwell, this market gives you a glimpse of the borough's diverse range of residents. It's very community-focussed and offers a heady mix of gadgetry, fruit, veg, fashion, cultural wear and household goods. Prices are very reasonable and it draws eagle-eyed bargain hunters from all over Tower Hamlets (LBTHa).

A quick browse of Google reviews of Watney Market are more revealing. One reviewer gives it three stars and wrote:

'Nothing special but Bangladeshi people went there to visit a bangla culture, every single product including vegetable are high priced….loving place to meet people of own country and get some experience about Bangladeshi culture' (Google 2022).

Key terms highlighted among the more than 1000 google reviews, are 'Asian', 'cultural', 'halal' and 'fruit and veg'. The following reviews (Figure 2 and Figure 3) are a couple of examples chosen somewhat randomly from the Watney Market Google page. The first specifically uses the labels 'Asian' and 'Bengali' and the second highlights Bangladesh-linked produce, 'giant mangoes and white guavas'.
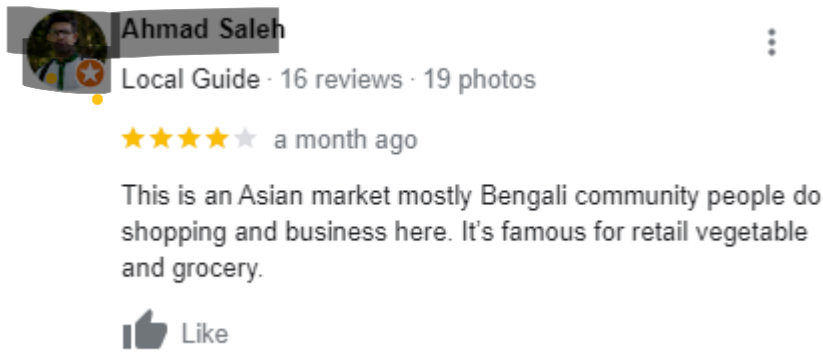
Figure 2 Review of Watney Market (Google, accessed 27.07.23)
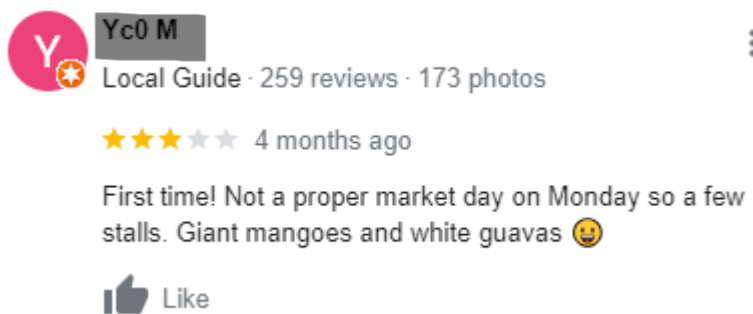
Figure 3 Review of Watney Market (Google, accessed 27.07.23)

4.2.3 The fruit and veg stall

One of my many visits to the market takes me to the corner of the market street and Commercial Road where Rezaul and his brother manage one of the fruit and veg stalls that are perhaps the defining emblem of the market. Their family have been in London for generations. Rezaul tells me his grandad came from Sylhet in 1952 and his sister has now become a grandmother, 'that makes 5 generations,' he points out. He arrived in the early 90s, age 17. His dad had wanted him to be a doctor in Bangladesh but when that didn't work out, he was told to move to the UK to work and has been on the market stall ever since. The following extract from my field notes conveys the hustle and bustle, sights and sounds and social communication around Rezaul's stall.

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Extract 3

The atmosphere at the stall is like one would expect from a busy East End fruit and vegetable stall. Transactions here are many, fast-moving and loud. There is the constant refrain in Sylheti shouted out from one of the workers, 'lo aiya, lo aiya, lo aiya' (come and get it, come and get it, come and get it) and people mill around along the stall perimeter eyeing the fresh produce. Most of the stall holders speak Sylheti to each other and the customers, mixed with bits of English, Bangla and Arabic. In front of the market stall, a food and drinks outlet, housed in a small green van keeps the workers in lemon tea, coffee and other refreshments throughout the long day. The workers begin at 4 am 6 days a week, and there is no break except for taking it in turns to rush to the mosque at prayer time.

There's no lull here and I can only grab snippets here and there with Rezaul and his brother, between one customer and another, and that is despite there being at least seven workers at a time. The interactions we have are non-linear and some are started but do not finish. I am an extra here at the market stall and conversations about language do not fit into to the expected patterns of market talk. But I do manage to chat to the brothers, other workers on the stall and friends of theirs who pass by and who get co-opted by Rezaul to chat to me. The lack of linear conversation is more than supplemented with observations of the sights, sounds and multimodal communication practices in the stall and beyond. Indeed, despite the difficulties conducting anything like an interview, it was an opportunity to observe the market stall landscape in a more authentic way.

Personal relationships between customer and stall holders appear to be the key to good business. This is a place of loyalties and allegiances, and the stall holders clearly work hard at this aspect of the business. At one point, as he chats at length to a customer in Sylheti, Rezaul's brother turns to me and says 'She's like my sister... [She's a] customer, but like my sister, everyone not the same.' I'm not sure whether this comment is intended for me or her, but he points out that just as customers have their favourite stall, the stall holders have their favourite customers. They chat some more and after a couple of minutes he brings me into the conversation again asking me, 'do you

understand what we're saying?' He proceeds to repeat it more slowly for me and then translate, 'One pound asey, ami extra dilay, (it's one pound I'm giving you a bit extra),' and by doing so he is inviting me in to how the relationships between stall holder and customer are built and maintained. He clearly wants to highlight that building personal relationships with customers is an important part of day-to-day business activity.

Rezaul also talks about this in an earlier conversation when he describes how he tries to tap into the reasons why a customer would be choosing their stall rather than any of the other stalls on the market. 'Why choose my stall?' he asks me, 'here any stall is good'. This is about human relationships just as much as products.

Most customers are Bangladeshis or British-Bangladeshis and the few white customers appear to be older locals. During the visit an older white lady with a small dog in a tartan coat gets her weekly shop. When she asks for bananas, Rezaul shouts to one of his workers, 'nice bananas for the lady please'. To which she replies. 'oooh they were lovely the other day and I'll have some of your lemons and you know those apache potatoes' (field notes 30 November 2022).

The extract indicates the many layers of communicative resources involved in interaction. Of course, there are the different named languages and styles but also a sensitivity towards the customers' needs. Rezaul tells me 'I've been here 15 years but I learned a bit communicating with people'. Knowing which language to use is a crucial part of the stall holder's skill set. In the interaction with the white customer, it is perhaps a given that he would speak to her in English. But he also follows up by shouting over to his colleague in English when she asks for bananas, 'nice bananas for the lady please'. Even though he wasn't talking to her directly, he was including her in the interaction by his use of English and selection of appropriate vocabulary 'lady', and she responds accordingly by continuing the conversation. This reveals strategic selection from his repertoire, and shows clearly how language choice,

relationship building and the inclusion of references to the produce are interwoven in his talk. Despite the perceived awareness of his selections from his repertoire, there is no sense in this interaction that Rezaul is feeling the 'burden of conviviality' (Redclift et al, 2022 and see chapter 2 sections 2.2.6 and 2.3.5). On the contrary, the seamless switching between languages and styles give the idea of sociolinguistic freedom in the midst of a language heterotopia (Wang and Lamb, 2024), at least in this instance.

Rezaul is very aware of his own and others' repertoires and states clearly that he thinks it is important to expand one's repertoire. He tells me he speaks English, Sylheti and 'proper Bangla', by which he means standard Bangla. He expresses criticism of some of his colleagues, telling me, 'they're not interested in learning'. He goes on to say:

> They need to improve but they're not even bothered to speak proper Bangla (…) you are a Bengali, like you (.) you're living in this country so many years (..) we have Bengali (…) this is not Bangladesh (..) we have a big community here (.) you can survive (…) but still you need to change, you need to learn (.) a little bit.

On the one hand these comments reveal dominant language ideologies regarding the importance of English, and the prestige of Bangla. But later conversations, and spending time on the market observing his communication strategies, point to more complexity. In one of our conversations, he comments that people arriving recently Sylhet are now educated, speak good English and 'proper' Bangla but nevertheless still have a lot to learn. He says:

> 'yeah one (..) two of my cousins (…) they came they previously went college (…) one doing master's one's doing a degree (..) they did masters but they cannot speak like me.'

He considers good communication not just to be about speaking the standard forms, therefore.

The sounds, languages and gestures captured in the field notes in extract 3 above are integral to the sociolinguistic making of place on the market. Fioretti and Briata (2019) make the distinction between place *making* and place *marketing*. They suggest that there is a difference between institutional endeavours to construct place and what they call 'encounters' - grassroots acts of placemaking. Both may contribute to the sociolinguistic identity of a particular area but I suggest that in Watney Market it is precisely this kind of grassroots place-making, which is so intertwined with relationship building, that is the most evident. I am reminded here of Alexander and Knowles' understanding of space.

> Space is not a 'thing' but the outcome of past and present activities and social relationships: the social contexts of earlier networks coexist with new ones so that space always contains multiple temporalities, just as it sustains multiple and contradictory uses, meanings, associations with different kinds of people. Space both reveals social priorities . . . and provides for alternate voices, uses and versions of what matters (Alexander and Knowles, 2005: 4–5).

4.2.4 There is very little written communication around the market

As I explained in chapter 2 section 2.3.3 and chapter 3 section 3.3.3, a focus on script and signage only constitutes a small part of my study, even though this is considered the main aspect of most linguistic landscape studies. There are, in fact relatively few written signs on the stalls, either printed or handwritten. Instead, the stall holders communicate their business semiotically: through the arrangements of fruit and vegetables; with the voice through shouting the names of products on sale and through building relationships with regular customers.

But Rezaul's stall is also very much about the product offer. There is a constant refrain of requests in Sylheti: 'Bhaisab, bhaisaib, faan ase ni?' (Brother, do you have betel nut leaf?). 'Khasa orange ugu ase ni?' (Do you have the ripe oranges?'), 'lal shag se ni ar' (do you still have the red spinach'). Here the produce seems to be always preceded by an adjective, *ripe* oranges, *red* spinach, *apache* potatoes and customers require specific information about the products before buying. I was intrigued when one customer asked Rezaul in Sylheti, 'coriander kita?' (what type of coriander is this?) and he replied that it was fresh from the garden, 'fresh garden-or' (fresh from the garden).

Prices are communicated in the dialogue between customer and stall holder and are at some discretion of the stall holder and depend to a degree on the relationship between customer and stall holder. The following dialogue between stall holder, Bilal, and customer on another fruit and vegetable stall just opposite Rezaul's further highlights this. While chatting to me about language the stall holder negotiates the prices with a customer.

Extract 4

1.	**Customer:**	hellooo (trying to get attention)
2.	**Becky:**	(to customer waiting) sorry I've taken your time
3.	**Bilal:**	that's 4 for £1…you want this?
4.	**Customer:**	yeah..how much is this?
5.	**Bilal**	I said £4
6.	**Customer:**	noooo:
7.	**Bilal:**	3.50 to you
8.	**Customer:**	(gives money)
9.	**Bilal**	(counting the money) £2..£1…
10.	**Bilal:**	(to me) so are you most interested in Bengali language or
11.	**Becky:**	I'm mostly interested in Bengali language or language in this

12.		area actually my research is kind [of
13.	**Customer:**	[you have to give me change
14.	**Bilal:**	nah you give me £3..you need to give me 50p
15.	**Customer:**	I haven't
16.	**Bilal:**	you have.. 50p.. there you go..thank y
17.	**Customer:**	(inaudible)
18.	**Bilal:**	yeah cause you don't wanna give it to me ok

This transcript shows two simultaneous interactions: a research interview and a commercial transaction. Here I will focus on the commercial transaction. Although officially this is a 'fixed price' market, extract 4 reveals that there is much negotiating to be done. The transaction is direct, almost void of niceties, as both customer and stall holder try to gain advantage, but there is also an underlying element of banter and knowledge of the rituals that are typical of bartering cultures where both sides know the rules. These conversations, which take the place of written signs, leave the final price open to dialogue and relationship building, offering scope to lure new customers and reward loyalty. Here the conversation takes place in English between two Bangladeshis who have either lived in the UK for many years in the case of Bilal, or perhaps born here, in the case of the customer. Bilal arrived in the UK from Dhaka in the mind 1990s when he was 18 to work on the market. At that time, he explained, he was the only 'Dhakaiya'[12] speaker so he had to learn Sylheti pretty quickly. Now he tells me no one can tell he isn't Sylheti, but he explains that, in any case, people speak a lot of English.

Back on Rezaul's stall another Sylheti interaction further illustrates the importance of relationship building in stall holder-customer transactions.

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[12] The variety spoken in Dhaka is sometimes referred to as Dhakaiya and is very similar to Bangla

Extract 5

1. **Customer:**   ((pointing to a vegetable)) bhai egur dam khoto *<how much is this?>*
2. **Rezaul:**   10 per kilo (..) ikta oise faas pound *<that'll be £5>*
3. **Customer:**   nowkha *<here you are>*
4. **Rezaul:**   ((indicates some betel leaf)) ugu loya jaw ka gi *<take this with you>*
5. **Customer:**   okhon na bhaisab (..) fore nimu *<not now brother, I'll take it later>*

This fairly standard vegetable transaction includes Rezaul giving away free goods to his customer, who although refuses, maintains the relationship and avoids giving offence by saying 'fore nimu', (I'll take it later).

Blackledge et al's (2015) study of the Bull Ring Indoor Market in Birmingham also investigates encounters in a marketplace. Drawing on Cook's study of markets, they explore the need to address the 'inescapable presence of economic valuation' (Blackledge et al, 2015:8). Unlike stores and supermarkets, with prices clearly on display, in the market prices are communicated through interaction. This element was present in most of the business transactions I observed on the market. Their citation from Cook's 2008 study captures this: 'the active, mutual valuation of goods wherein people perform, propose, and test relationships – relationships which may be fleeting, recurring, or the most permanent imaginable' (ibid 8). Although there appears to be an absence of signs on the market landscape, it is rather that they appear in a different mode than expected - as words and gesture rather than writing on paper.

There are elements of the linguistic landscape that are clearly visible: signs, script, product arrangements; and others which can appear more intangible or fleeting, such as gestures, spoken words or posture. These are often hard to quantify and categorise but are nevertheless crucial elements. Even more intangible and difficult to incorporate into the analysis are those elements without any physical manifestations. For example, orientation to particular discourses, stances and ways of relationship building. In the examples above, how relationships are built and how people express the complex issue of money, that supermarkets so conveniently dispense with, are as important as language choice or gesture in the communicative repertoires I observe on Watney Market. Some of the literature on repertoire discussed in chapter 2 hints at knowledge of discourses comprising an element within individual and spatial repertoires, but it is under researched compared to linguistic and semiotic elements. The inclusion of elements of discourse within participants repertoire in this study begins to extend the scholarship on repertoire to include discourses and I suggest that this would be a fruitful area for further research.

Although I have suggested that written signs are secondary to spoken interaction in Watney Market, they are nevertheless part of sociolinguistic place-making. Most written signs pertain to the business of buying and selling and are part of what Fioretti and Briata (2019) describe as 'everyday', rather than institutional interventions on the landscape. For example, further down the market from Rezaul's stall is a carpet stall with the stall-holders details written in marker pen on a cut out square cardboard, bordered with Sellotape to preserve longevity, (see Figure 4). Underneath the personal details, reads a key point of information, 'no refunds'

indicating both that the stall holder has no wish to engage in conversations regarding refunds- and that it is something regularly asked of him. This is another way to address the issue of managing the inescapable presence of economic transactions discussed above. This kind of sign is worlds away from the neo-liberal digitised shop signs just down the road in Canary Wharf but this model still works, has currency and the stall holder has no apparent reason to upgrade.

Figure 4 Cardboard sign on Watney Market

Behind the stalls on the shop fronts that line the street there are more written signs of various kinds, printed, photocopied and handwritten. Many of the signs on the shops lining the market appear in both English and Bangla script. Although the beautiful sign painting tradition of Bangladesh is generally missing, colourful arrangements of produce in and outside the shops, and colourful pictures of the

produce (see Figures 5 and 6) add to the sociolinguistic placemaking. This does

recall shops in Bangladesh and adds considerably to the sense that this is a

'Bangladeshi' area curated to attract business from the local Bangladeshi and

British-Bangladeshi population (see Blackledge et al, 2015).

Figure 5 Colourful product arrangements on Chapman Street, Shadwell

Figure 6 Fish produce poster, Brick Lane

Informal signs - many handwritten or photocopied, are in Bangla script only and not translated into English, indicating products not deemed to be of any interest to non-Bangladeshis, for example money transfer services or paan (betel leaf) sales (see Figure 7). These tend to be less alluring than the colourful shop fronts and digital panels, perhaps conveying a product with a lower business return as well as a sense of temporariness (see Blommaert 2013a) but I would argue are still an important element of sociolinguistic place-making as they convey a sense of resistance to the ubiquitous neo-liberal branding of uniform shop signs.

Apart from the main shop fronts which are all factory produced, the signs are mostly hand-produced and this gives the sense of physical proximity between the signs and the sign makers. Handwritten signs in Bengali (script) and English, stuck on windows and pillars, add to the sense of Watney Market as a Bangladeshi, Cockney, East End and, working class neighbourhood.

Figure 7 'Paan pawa zai' (Betel leaf sold here) sign on pillar

Further down the market, towards the Shadwell end another sign stands out (see

Figure 8). The sign, 'Keep Calm and Say Mashallah', hanging outside Mr Ali's sari

shop, is a bit of a feature around the market. The content of the sign is not conveying

any information, nor advertising any product, but appears designed to attract

attention, which indeed it does.

Mr Ali told me he had inherited this sign when he took over the shop and he had not

thought to enquire about the original meaning or purpose of the sign. He also

confessed he had not taken much interest himself in the upkeep of the sign which

had once been illuminated; the bulb has long since needed replacement. He did

however confirm that many customers ask him about the sign and take selfies underneath it and he recognised it as something of local interest, according to him because of inclusion of the widely used Arabic word 'mashallah'.[13] It is a word that circulates in spoken discourse but is perhaps not seen frequently in English on shop signs. According to Mr Ali this is the factor that makes the sign eye-catching.

It is difficult to separate the linguistic elements of the sign. There are multiple ways of reading the languages and scripts involved. 'Mashallah' can be considered an Arabic word transliterated in Roman script. But it is also a word so frequently used in Sylheti and Bangla - or indeed in English - that it can be considered a lexical element within all of these languages. The reading most closely aligned with the arguments in this thesis is that this sign uses a mixture of local communication resources, English, Roman script and the widely circulating term 'mashallah' which cannot easily be separated or attributed to one single named language (see also Pennycook, 2018). It is so widespread a term in east London that it is certainly in most Muslim people's repertoires, regardless of any knowledge of Arabic, and arguably in many non-Muslim's repertoires, at least receptively.

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[13] Mashallah = something good has happened that God needs to be thanked for

Figure 8 Keep Calm and Say Mashallah

The 'Keep Calm' sign also caught the interest of Raychaudhuri (2018:4) who

discusses it in his 2018 book, *Homemaking: Radical Nostalgia and the Construction*

of a South Asian Diaspora'. Drawing on Hatherley's study of the ubiquitous 'Keep

Calm and Carry on' meme, he explores the theme of nostalgia. Raychaudhuri points

out that according to Hatherley, the original meme indexes reactionary nostalgia as

exemplified by anti-immigration rhetoric and later Brexit.[14] Raychaudhuri recalls. 'I

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[14] The sign 'Keep Calm and Say Mashallah', is one of the seemingly infinite number of 'Keep Calm' memes. The meme, inspired by the 1939 wartime 'Keep Calm and Carry on' poster urging resilience from the population, was repurposed in 2001. It reached delirium popularity in the period post 2008 financial crisis and has saturated tourist outlets all over the UK. This 'Keep Calm' phase seems to show no sign of abating. Hatherley, (2016)

encountered a version of the poster in Watney Street Market, Tower Hamlets'. He goes on to suggest that the juxtaposition of the idea of Empire, indexed by the standard 'Keep Calm' meme, with the Muslim declaration of gratitude to Allah 'mashallah' constitutes a counter-colonial act of resistance.

Mr Ali, as became clear during our chats about the sign, was not aware of these possible interpretations, nor did he seem particularly interested in the original 'Keep Calm and Carry On' meme. His focus remained on the importance of the word, 'mashallah'. While in this case it would be revealing to talk to the sign maker, one limitation of linguistic landscape work is that very often the sign maker has long since moved on.

Raychaudhuri's anti-colonial analysis suggests that the existence of visible signs like this in places such as London 'amounts to a recognition of a presence and valuing the other that has been 'here' for a long time, and whose presence necessarily complicates the here-there dynamic that is still far too often seen as structuring the world' (2018: 4). Signs such as this catch the eye, even if not everyone will read it directly as a sign of sociolinguistic resistance. There are multiple layers of subversion contained within it. First of all, it has the semiotic appearance of a shop sign but it does not advertise any shop or any product. Secondly it juxtaposes languages and scripts in unexpected ways, or perhaps suggests that 'mashallah' is an English word. Whatever the interpretation, it communicates a sense of irreverence to consumerism, Empire and monolingualist ideologies.

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investigates the re-emergence of the wartime poster 'Keep Calm and Carry On' around 2010. He suggests that the visual slogan and accompanying graphics (it has only ever circulated in visual form) quickly became the new symbol of the 'British' national character, symbolising notions such as understatement and stoicism. He argues that the sign, indexing nostalgia for times of adversity, emerged again as a link between wartime rationing and current austerity measures.

Along with the handwritten signs and the relationship building between customer and stall holder, there is a wealth of everyday sociolinguistic placemaking in and around the market. The assertion from Blackledge et al (2015: 7) resonates strongly: 'As the marketplace has historically been the centre of all that is unofficial, it remains with the people'.

4.2.5 The importance of multimodality in communication on the market

It is clear from the description of the market landscape above, that to get an understanding of sociolinguistic place-making with focus on linguistic elements alone would be insufficient, even if these in themselves are of great interest. As we saw above in section 4.2.3, the interactions in this section are mediated by the sights and sounds of the marketplace.

Lytra suggests that:

> Adopting a multimodal perspective implies a theoretical and analytical shift for studies on multilingualism from focusing exclusively on language as the primary site for meaning making, to recognizing the role that other modes (e.g. visual, aural, oral, kinaesthetic, artefact-related) and media play in the communicational landscape (2012: 533).

In the 'marketscape' these other 'modes' play an integral part in how people are communicating. Artefacts, particularly the products for sale, have a central role as I suggested in the vignette of Rezaul's stall earlier in this chapter (section 4.2.3). Indeed, as I analysed my data a clear sense emerged that was impossible to separate language from products. Additionally, it became clear that both products and language instilled a sense of belonging for many. In a chat with a British-Sylheti MA student at the beginning of my PhD studies, I was struck by something he told me which kept returning to my mind throughout my research. The student grew up

speaking Sylheti in his family but has never lived in a 'Sylheti area'. He told me that

would often take the tube to Whitechapel for the afternoon where he would have the

chance to hear and speak a bit of Sylheti as he did his shopping, something not

available to him where he lived. For him the language was the central factor. This

anecdote also shows the pull of language and of Tower Hamlets to young Sylheti

speakers born in the UK. On the other hand, for core-participant Farhad, a young

British Chattogram-Bangladeshi, learning Sylheti, the important aspect is the

product.

In the following extract we are chatting about his neighbourhood, Green Street, an

important area in nearby Newham for all South Asians, not only Bangladeshis. In the

first part of the conversation, he describes why he likes the area, describing it as

'always busy'.

Extract 6

1.	**Farhad:**	always busy quite happy
2.		people are generally coming here to do something like …
3.		mildly fun .. like shopping or seeing their friends
4.		I came here on Chaand Raat which is the night before Eid
5.		err maybe a few months ago as well
6.		that was so cool.. here there was loads of like street stalls
7.		people selling stuff on the streets and doing erm henna
8.		and stuff like that
9.		pretty cool… so it's like quite lively
10.	**Becky:**	I was asking that question about Brick Lane as well
11.		**how much is the language important?**
12.		obviously Brick Lane is also iconic ..
13.		but how much is that related to language
14.		and how much is related to the curry houses and the shops?
15.		**do you think you can disentangle these things?**

16. **Farhad:** erm I think it's more about what you….
17.   **so people come here to buy stuff...**
18.   **I think people come here for the stuff that they sell**
19   like you know you're spoilt for choice isn't it
20.   **so I think it's more about that maybe than language or culture**

In extract 6, Farhad uses adjectives like 'cool' (lines 6 and 6), 'lively' (line 9) 'always busy' (line 1) to describe Green Street and he describes the people as 'happy' (line1) and active, 'generally coming here to do something (line 2). I then ask him about the relative importance of language and products and whether the two can be separated (lines 11 and 15) and his perception is that language is secondary to the pull of products to the sense of cultural belonging. He says: 'I think people come here for the stuff they sell'- (line 18).

Seen though the broad communicative repertoire lens I have adopted in my analysis, I suggest that both Farhad and the MA student are highlighting specific elements of communication practices which do not need to be separated. The approach outlined by Lytra above, and indeed a communicative repertoire approach (Rymes, 2014) posits that language and products indexing links to Bangladesh, and perhaps more importantly to Bangladeshi diaspora life in London are co-existing parts of the 'communicative landscape' in many Tower Hamlets neighbourhoods.

4.2.6 The discourse repertoire

Orientation to particular discourses and displays of cultural knowledge and identification, are also part of the communicative landscape and place-making activity (see Rymes, 2014; Bradley and Simpson, 2020). I have already discussed how discourses of money were part of commercial transactions of the market in

section 4.2.4. Knowledge of these discourses is part of situated and spatial repertoire as we saw in the market examples. Talk about religion was also salient and appeared frequently in the metacommentary as part of conversations about language and migration. Among new residents, it was the first reason most people cited for moving to London. For example, Rezaul's friend told me he had moved to the Watney Market area from Birmingham for religious reasons. He told me:

> 'Don't take me wrong[15]. You know the community we're 75%.. sorry 90% Muslims.. where is Muslim community, there is an opportunity to learn Islam, that's why we moved to here.'

Mr Kahn in the sari shop also pointed to the East London Mosque as a significant pull factor for people moving to the area. In fact, he joked that private rents in the area were directly proportional to proximity to the East London Mosque, (interview with Mr Kahn March 2023).

I was therefore quite surprised at the lack of Arabic on the Watney Market linguistic landscape. Field notes from November 2022 indicated that that I was only able to find one instance of visible Arabic language and my notes also show that the signage in the Shadwell Jame Masjid Mosque was in English and Bangla. I wrote:

> The local mosque has its signage in English and Bangla only, with no indication that Muslims of other nationalities are visiting in numbers significant enough to warrant any additional language on the sign (see Figure 9)' (field notes October 2022).

However, a return to the Mosque in 2023 showed a marked change. In a refurbishment of the façade the old English and Bangla sign has been removed and

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[15] This appears to be an example of the 'burden of conviviality' (Redclift at al, 2022). Rezaul, used a discourse filler to introduce his point about people moving to Watney Market for religious purposes, as if to smooth his point, as if a conversation with me about Islam needed some kind of softener.

replaced by a decorative wrought iron façade. The temporary sign is now in English and Arabic only and reads 'Eid Mubarak' (see Figure 10). Bangla, it seems, is no longer required linguistically, with the other languages providing the adequate communicative functions. It is Arabic, rather than Bangla which will now carry the indexical of religion. The comparison between the older sign that used English and Bengali and the new 2023 sign that uses English and Arabic, illustrate how religious discourses and indexical use of linguistic resources have changed. In the past sermons would have been in Bangla but they are now most often conducted in English. This is in recognition that young British-Bangladeshis struggle with the Bangla but also that there are Muslims of all nationalities attending mosques.

The other interesting aspect regarding this façade is that the money for the refurbishment came from a local fundraising initiative that many people I spoke to had taken part in. It is a good example of how the linguistic landscape can document acts of claiming space (Alexander, 2011) or belonging.

As I mentioned in 4.2, the written linguistic landscape often lags behind practices and can therefore be a useful way to view historical layers of social activity as the mosque façade example shows. The replacement of the old Bangla and English notice with a new façade in Arabic, captures the diminishing importance of Bangla as a language of religion and the increase of Arabic to index Islam (see Hoque, 2015).

Figure 9 Shadwell Jame Masjid November 2022
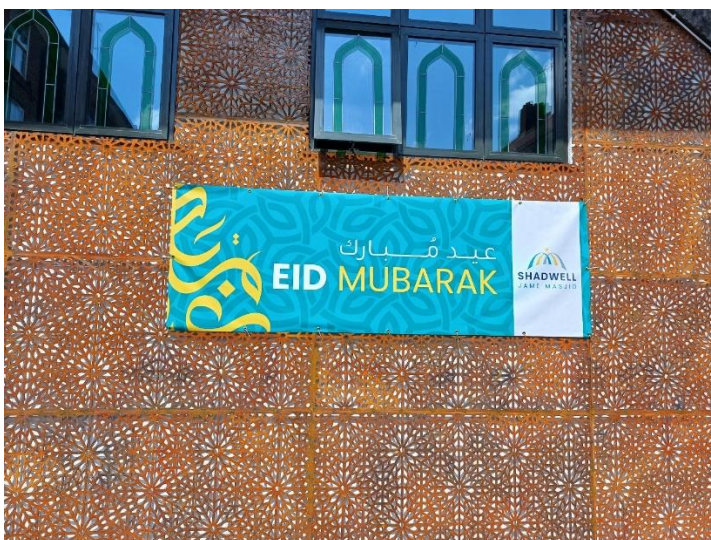
Figure 10 Shadwell Jame Masjid new facade May 2023

4.2.7 Canary Wharf

So far in this chapter I have mainly explored 'everyday' sociolinguistic placemaking: how stall holders and shop keepers manage their communicative repertoire, including semiotic arrangements of produce, and relationship building construct their commercial activity and how customers respond to this. Spoken Sylheti flows freely in and out of other linguistic and embodied practices and there appears to be little evidence of everyday policing of repertoires. I contrast this with another part of the dataset collected a bit further down the road in a corporate shopping centre in Canary Wharf. Joy, core participant, had worked in the shopping centre for more than 20 years. The workforce is multilingual and a substantial amount of the workforce are Sylheti speaking. This gives ample opportunities to speak Sylheti at work but despite this Joy says that he would 'very rarely' do so.

The following extract captures a conversation between Joy and one of his long-standing work colleagues, Ashraf, also a Sylheti speaker. Both started working in the shopping centre at the same time and both share the belief that speaking Sylheti at work is unprofessional. The extract shows the men talking about how they will only speak Sylheti at the beginning of the day when there is no-one around.

Extract 7

1.	**Joy:**	on Sunday morning when I come in at 9.30
2.		and you come in at 9.45
3.		yeah yeah we talk
4.	**Joy:**	it's just me and you on the shop floor isn't it?
5.		so we have a bit of (..) we use a bit of Bangla[16] don't
6.	**Ashraf:**	yeah yeah

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[16] Joy uses the label to refer to both Sylheti and Bangla, preferring not to make a distinction.

7.	**Joy:**	as soon as Sarah or them come in at 10
8.	**Ashraf:**	**we stop because you know disrespectful**
9.		they don't understand what we're talking about you know
10.		I don't
11.	**Becky:**	you two are quite in tune with that
12.	**Joy:**	so
13.	**Ashraf:**	educated enough not to do that stuff
14.	**Joy:**	and throughout the day here and there
15.		we'll bust up with some random
16.	**Ashraf:**	a little bit here and there, nothing like ..

Extract 7 gives a brief insight into how different the atmosphere in the shopping centre is compared to Watney Market. The sense of linguistic freedom seen around Watney Market appears to be absent here. It is an 'English' space with a few spaces in the cracks for people to draw on multilingual repertoires, or as Ashraf says in extract 7 'a little bit here and there' (line 16). The men are referring here to conversations between themselves, but they nevertheless consider speaking Sylheti in the presence of non-Sylhetis to be 'disrespectful' (line 8) and uneducated (line 13) and something they would not do (line 13).

The spatial arrangements of the shop where Joy and Ashraf work also contrast with Watney Market. The décor is plain and angular consisting of white panels, drawing attention to the neatly arranged products and signs around the shop. Product information is all in standard written English. It can be argued the 'burden of conviviality' (Redclift at al, 2022) and the 'white listening subject' (Rosa and Flores, 2015) is more present here than in Watney Market and that this, alongside powerful language ideologies relating to English as the language of professionalism, curtail the freedom of the two men with regard to their repertoires. I found little evidence of the burden of conviviality in the other parts of the dataset, particularly the Watney

Market data. One notable exception was the example in section 4.2.6, in which

Rezaul' s friend prefaced a comment about Islam with 'don't take me wrong' (see

footnote 7). Of course, it may be that I missed other less obvious examples.

However, another explanation is that there were fewer examples in Watney Market

precisely as a result of the place-making that has created a space of (sociolinguistic)

resistance or language heterotopia (Wang and Lamb, 2024).

Redclift et al (2022) suggest that in Tower Hamlets the burden of conviviality is less

pronounced, arguing 'Space and location regulate and define what is perceived to be

acceptable to 'show', and even experience, in public'. They go on to suggest, 'the

size of the British Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets appeared to provide

some protection from 'the burden of conviviality' (ibid: 13). While I think this is true, I

don't think this is just a question of 'safety in numbers' but also of the legacies of

struggle that have taken place in Tower Hamlets 'to create spaces where people

could belong as British Asians' (Raychaudhuri, 2018:17).

4.3 Top-down or institutional place-making

In this final section of analysis of the Watney Market linguistic landscape, I explore

how Sylheti has been used in more institutional place-making processes. I highlight

sociolinguistic traces of local politics and civic engagement, including cultural and

arts projects that, although may appear more grassroots, increasingly include

political contribution through funding. This section illustrates how the landscape can

tell its own story of the importance of Sylheti in the social and political fabric of the

area, both historically and currently.

4.3.1 Dual language signage is ubiquitous

Dual language signage in English and Bangla is commonplace all over Tower Hamlets, especially on council-owned public buildings and services, such as hospitals, schools, nursing homes, one-stop shops and estate buildings. Watney Market is no exception. These signs, most dating back to the 1990s, add to the historical record of Watney Market and form a backdrop to the everyday activities taking place. The elevation of the lampposts over the market conveys a sense institutional importance (see Figures 12 and 13). Nobody mentions the lamppost signs in conversation but they are there, looming above the market as if overseeing the activities, and it is hard to imagine the area without them. For anyone visiting the area or viewing on Wikipedia or carrying out a quick google-images search, the signage is indeed prominent and immediately noticeable (see Figure 12) and communicates clearly that Watney market is *officially* a 'Bangladeshi' area. Signage on lampposts and estate buildings, appear in both Bangla (script) and English. There are six lamppost signs on the pedestrian street. They display the writing 'Watney Market' in English, white on a red background and the Bangla transliteration on a blue background directly underneath. A Bangla transliteration of the name 'Watney Market' can also be found on the central information panel as you enter Watney Market from Commercial Road. The building names on the former council blocks are also transliterated into Bangla. There is also one dual language information sign (no ball games) (see Figure 11), which is translated into Bangla. This kind of sign is very different from the handwritten signs on shops or the 'Keep Calm' sign discussed in section 2, which reflect the more fluid linguistic and semiotic mixing practices I observed on the stalls. Instead, the lampposts reflect 'parallel monolingualism' (Heller 1999) or 'separate bilingualism' (Blackledge and Creese,

2010) where languages are neatly divided and bounded, with standard forms in both languages maintained. Dominant language hierarchies are also reproduced with English always appearing above the Bangla.

It may appear that Sylheti is erased or rendered invisible by the signs in Bangla script, especially in comparison with the sights and sounds of the market stall described in the previous section. However, I argue this that this interpretation is not adequate for the sociolinguistic complexities at play here. It exposes the limitations of structuralist perspectives, which take code rather than practices as a starting point and uncritically present a one-to-one relationship between script and language. It is impossible, as well as unnecessary, to ascertain whether a street sign which uses the Bangla script to render a transliteration of the words 'Watney Market' is Sylheti or Bangla. A purely linguistic interpretation would suggest that the Bangla script represents Bangla. However, an ethnographic perspective on the linguistic landscape tells us that when the signs were produced more than 30 years prior to this study, the Bangladeshi population of the area was more than 95% Sylheti, leading to further questions about language and script correlations.

Figure 11 'No ball games' dual language sign on Watney Market

Watney Market (from Commercial Road)	
Location	Shadwell
Address	Watney Street, Shadwell, London E1 2PR
Opening date	1881
Management	Tower Hamlets Market Services[1]
Owner	Tower Hamlets London Borough Council
Goods sold	General goods
Days normally open	Monday to Saturday (8.30am to 6pm)

Figure 12 Watney Market (Wikipedia, 1)

Figure 13 Dual language lamppost signs Watney Market

The Watney Market signage played a part in the creation of the area's Bangladeshi branding the centre of which was Brick Lane (see Alexander, 2011; Fioretti and Briata, 2019). According to Glynn these 'specially designed Bengali lampposts and Bengali street signs' (2014:167) are part of rebranding and 'place marketing' (ibid) of the Bangladeshi areas of Tower Hamlets which came about as a direct result of the Bangladeshi presence in the council (see Glynn 2014 for an in-depth discussion) or as a response to campaigning (see Begum, 2022). Glynn goes on to point out that this rebranding 'clearly stakes Bengali claims to this part of London'. Although these signs are historical and perhaps faded into the background, they are nevertheless an example of how language and script have been harnessed by local administrations to index identity and foster belonging or present an outward facing multi-cultural identity. When these signs were installed, there may have also been the sense that

many residents needed Bangla signs functionally rather than symbolically. Now the symbolic element is perhaps paramount. According to Blommaert (2013a: 53) signs such as these have a 'landmark function' in that they index 'history, traditions and customs'. According to Mr Kahn, sari shopkeeper, they signpost to newcomers that this is a Bengali speaking area, where it is fine to speak Bengali if you want or need something. He says, 'you see this is a place where you can speak Bengali'.

Whitechapel Tube dual language signs

A recent high-profile example of where the Bangla language and script has been harnessed by local politicians to present a local Bangladeshi-rich identity, or Bangladeshi branding (cf. Alexander, 2011; Glynn, 2014) would be the 2022 refurbishment of Whitechapel underground station which included new Bangla signage on the arched entrances and exits to the station (see Figure 14). On the entrance to the station one of the two arches has the writing 'Whitechapel Station' in English and the other one translated into Bangla. On the other side of the arch, for those exiting the station onto Whitechapel Road, the signs read 'Welcome to Whitechapel' in both languages and both scripts. The use of Bangla here is mainly symbolic sending the clear message that this is a Bangladeshi heritage area. The actual reading of the script is, one could argue, secondary in this case. There are no further Bangla signs in the station offering information or directions for example. All informational signage is in English.

Figure 14 Dual language sign Whitechapel Station

The addition of the Bangla to the original English was requested in 2021 by the then

mayor of Tower Hamlets, John Biggs, to coincide with the Bangldedesh50

celebrations[17]. It was funded by Tower Hamlets Council and installed by Transport

for London as part of the high-profile Crossrail Elizabeth Line extension at

Whitechapel Tube. The unveiling was attended by political and diplomatic

representatives from Bangladesh and Bengali speaking India and was covered

extensively in the local, national and international press. The London Standard

reports the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan as saying:

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[17] Bangladesh50 was the name given to celebratory events across the UK to mark the 50th anniversary of the birth of the Bangladeshi state
https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/leisure_and_culture/Bangladesh-at-50/Welcome-to-Bangladesh50.aspx

> The revamped signs at Whitechapel station recognise and celebrate the vital
> contribution Bangladeshi Londoners have made in shaping the community in
> Tower Hamlets and throughout our city (Keane, 2022).

The Whitechapel signage is a continuation of the long Tower Hamlets tradition of utilising Bangla script and language to reflect the Bangladeshi heritage of the area and to generate a sense of belonging for Bangladeshis and people with a Bangladeshi background, as well as non-Bangladeshi locals who identify with the Bangladeshiness of their local area. This was particularly powerful with such a high-profile project connected to the Elizabeth line, in turn linked to Queen Elizabeth's Jubilee, also celebrated in 2022, which gives it something of a neo-colonial feel. Severo and Makoni's (2020:154) assertion that that colonial powers used literacy to underscore what they felt counted as language, disregarding others, brings an unfortunate parallel to the celebratory dual language sign.

The installation of the signs and refurbishment of the station was a point of local conversation generally and it was something that arose quite naturally and often in chats with participants both in face-to-face and in WhatsApp. I also asked some participants directly for their views and reactions. The signs were met with varying degrees of enthusiasm. I was interested in how people felt that the Bangla signs represented them and if anyone highlighted or contested the Bangla script being used to symbolically represent the majority Sylheti population.

I asked Joy, core participant, his opinion of the signage and the following extract from our WhatsApp correspondence gives an interesting insight into the range of views on the issue. The transcript below reveals he is very cynical about the use of Bangla script in the two examples I ask him about, the historical street signs, and the

Whitechapel tube writing. He considers both of these, although 40 years apart, to be a vote-catching stunt on behalf of local politicians[18].

Extract 8

13/10/2022, 12:41 - Becky: Joy… Do you think it's important to have Street signs in Bangla even if a lot of people born here can't read it. I'm writing about street signs at the moment 😊
13/10/2022, 12:42 - Becky: <Media omitted> (photo of the Watney Market lampposts)
13/10/2022, 12:42 - Becky: This kind of thing
13/10/2022, 12:55 - Joy: 😂😂🧏.... Great example of local politicians securing they vote banks.
13/10/2022, 12:55 - Joy: their*
13/10/2022, 12:59 - Becky: Do you feel the same about new Whitechapel tube sign?
13/10/2022, 13:00 -Joy: Unfortunately, yes

Joy's response to the signage reflected the fairly widespread feeling of cynicism displayed at the time on social media towards the perceived hypocrisy of the local administration. Local reactions to sign were mixed and sometimes very divided, particularly on social media platforms where many complained that the signs showed up the hypocrisy of the political establishment. On the one hand it would make public displays of recognition of Bangladeshi contribution to Tower Hamlets, while on the other hand sanction and oversee gentrification projects that are perceived by many as damaging to Bangladeshi businesses and residents. For example, many fear that the Truman Brewery development in Brick Lane (see Spitalfields Trust) which will see the building of a new multi-story shopping centre and the plans to renovate

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[18] This extract also hints at the complex landscape of local Tower Hamlets politics which is beyond the scope of this thesis

Whitechapel market, will pave the way for dismantling Bangladeshi-run stalls and replacement with a gentrified version of the market that would not suit the longstanding Bangladeshi traders.

Critiques such as Joy's are explored in Fioretti and Briata's (2019) comparison of the emergence of Rome and London's 'Banglatowns'. They argue (ibid: 392) that this type of civic signage can be construed as 'a commodification of ethnicities' on the part of elements in the political establishment. Fioretti and Briata also argue that the original Banglatown signage from the 1990s, and resulting commodification of Bangladeshiness, has led to the gentrification that is now pushing the very Bangladeshi businesses that gave rise to the notion of Banglatown-namely the curry houses- out of the area, to make place for a new middle-class elite.

Begum (2023) outlines the events leading to the creation of the Tower Hamlets 'Banglatown' and subsequent installation of civic signage in the area. She points out that the proposals for creating Banglatown in order to recognise the significant Bangladeshi contribution to the area and attract visitors and increase footfall was by no means universally considered a positive step among Bangladeshis. Although it was welcomed as a 'coming of age for a Bengali community who was asserting its identity and interests in a place where it had once faced attack' (2023:192), for some the creation of Banglatown represented, 'nothing more that the commodification of Bangladeshi 'culture' for marketing purposes' (ibid). There are genuine fears that the upcoming regeneration of Whitechapel Road will destroy the market as we know it driving out longstanding Bangladeshi market stall holders in a process that mirrors

the recent history of Brick Lane. Ilbury (2022) also takes up this point in his research about the experience of gentrification in east London. He explores the notion that:

> Whilst the ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity of the working-class neighbourhood is initially advertised to prospective residents positively, offering middle-class residents an 'experiential lifestyle of exciting Otherness' (Erbacher 2011:2016), gentrification often leads to the loss of diversity as areas become more ethnically and culturally homogeneous' (ibid:523).

Scholars of gentrification point out that one of the drivers of people leaving gentrified areas is the process of 'un-homing' (Begum, 2023:184) whereby local shops and services no longer feel familiar or 'homely' and as a result people feel dislocated from their local area and look to move away. Similarly, Papen (2012: 60) draws on Marcuse's work on the gentrification of New York, explaining the processes by which 'families seeing their neighbourhood change in such a way that they feel no longer at home and are ready to leave'. Changes include type of shops and the aesthetics of shops (ibid). In this context it is little wonder that a great deal of cynicism surrounds the widely publicised Bangla naming of Whitechapel tube which appears to go hand-in-hand with the council-sanctioned stimulation of gentrification of the local area.

Not all participants expressed this view, however. Abdul Hussain described the Whitechapel sign as a 'nice gesture considering that Bengalis have been working hard in and around the area' (WhatsApp correspondence May 2022), a view that invokes the discourse of respect for the achievements of Sylhetis in creating a neighbourhood of shops and services despite considerable difficulties (see chapter 6 for a more in-depth discussion).

Even more positive was the reaction of another core-participant Amena, not a local Whitechapel resident but frequent visitor to the market. Extract 9 comes from a conversation in which I initiate a discussion about the sign.

Extract 9

1. **Becky:**   recently in Whitechapel tube… on the underground
2.   I wonder… I think maybe I've got a picture
3. **Amena:**   (enthusiastically) yes yes… Bengali.. Whitechapel station
4.   I saw the news on my phone
5.   it's good became Bengali area is there
6. **Becky:**   do you think things like that are important?
7. **Amena:**   good because my language in Whitechapel station
8.   good..I'm so happy when I saw the
9. **Becky:**   so you think it's a positive thing?
10. **Amena**:   yeah yeah yeah

In this exchange Amena, expresses great enthusiasm for the new sign. Her comments are personal and contain emotion distinguishing them from the more detached commentary of the previous examples. She makes direct reference to 'my language', the use of the pronoun further reinforcing the idea of an unproblematic relationship between Bangla script and Sylheti, or perhaps uncritical reproduction of dominant language ideologies. It should be noted that, unlike Joy and Abdul Hussain, her primary literacy is in Bangla. This perhaps contributed to closer identification with Bangla script. She came to the UK as an adult so having the Bangla script visible on the linguistic landscape is more likely to evoke feelings of familiarity and belonging.

Whatever the differing reactions to the creation of the sign, none of the participants questioned the relationship between the Bangla script and the Sylheti language and despite the deep-seated issues of power and status between Bangla and Sylheti,

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especially with regard to script, there is for many the sense that the Bangla script carries symbolic and political meaning for Sylheti speakers in the context of an often-hostile UK environment.

This section highlights how script is deployed, mainly by local policy makers, in sociolinguistic place-making from above to invoke a Bangladeshi identity and a sense of belonging. As I argued earlier in this chapter, a focus on literacy practices rather than codes renders a simple correlation between the Bangla script and the Bangla language or the Sylheti language simply inadequate. The Bangla script as displayed in the new Whitechapel tube signs and in the Bangla installation is clearly part of the literacy repertoire of Sylheti speakers, as well as Bangla speakers (and of course other varieties of Bengali). It could also be argued that it is part of the repertoire of all residents of Whitechapel, whatever their background, who recognise it as a Bangladeshi area and recognise the Bangla font. The ability to read the script in this case is not even required but the knowledge of the context and the ability to recognise the script as Bangla suffices to make meaning.

Another way to view this would be to say that the Bangla script forms part of the linguistic resources available in the locality, mainly drawn upon by Sylheti speakers who form the majority of the Bangladeshi population. This focus on the complex individual and spatial repertoire leads away from the question of how Sylheti as a named language is represented in the linguistic landscape and moves towards a consideration of how the linguistic experiences and literacy practices of Sylheti speakers are located in the landscape. As Blommaert (2013a: 82) points out 'signs lead us to practices and practices lead us to people.' This approach allows a problematising of the trope that Sylheti has no script.

4.3.2 Bangladesh50 on the linguistic landscape

The 2021 celebrations to commemorate 50 years since the end of the war with Pakistan and the resulting independence of Bangladesh (see introduction) inspired a widespread re-wakening of interest in Bangladeshi culture and history, especially for young people born in the UK who may not have had much contact with Bangladesh. Multiple celebrations marking this event were organised throughout the whole of 2021 by Newham Council and Tower Hamlets Council, local administrations that represent large numbers of Bangladeshi and British Bangladeshi residents and by the Mayor of London. There was also an abundance of also arts, cultural and discussion activities organised by independent community groups and artists too numerous to detail here. Although many of these events were held online due to Covid lockdowns, it may be that this made them more popular as people were looking for intellectual and cultural outlets and distractions.

Tower Hamlets Council commissioned the installation of two large public art installations. The first, also located on Whitechapel Road about 500 metres from the station, at the site of the Whitechapel Idea Store[19] is a large installation of the word 'Bangla' in Bangla script, designed by Dhaka based artist Ruhul Abdin. This artwork uses the Bangla script very explicitly to represent the birth of Bangladesh, the history of the language movement and birth of the nation encapsulated within the name of the language itself (see Figure 15). The piece is a large fabric–covered, 3D hanging installation of the word Bangla. Although this piece was commissioned by Tower Hamlets Council, the design was influenced by a of team of 15 citizen researchers (Swadhinata Trust). The piece gives further evidence of the positive identification of the Bangla script in a majority Sylheti area.

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[19] Tower Hamlets flagship public libraries/community centres

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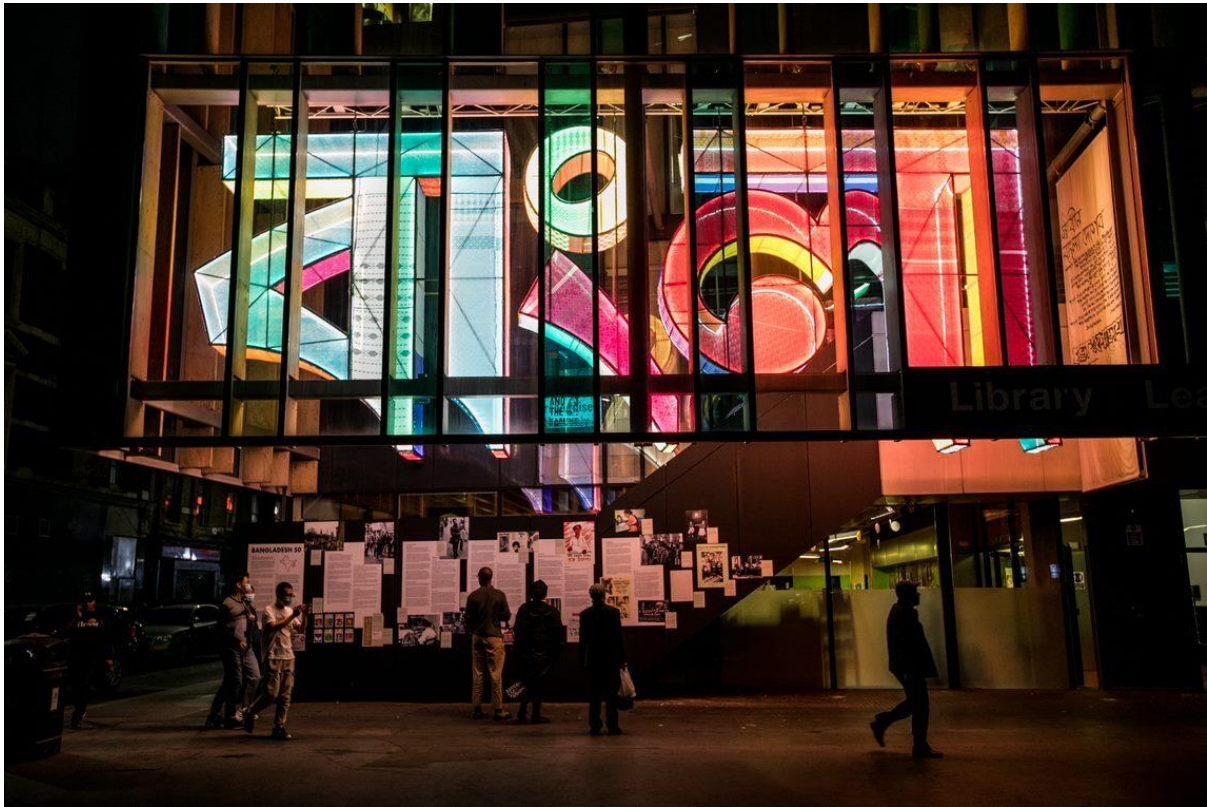
Figure 15 Bangla installation Whitechapel (Ruhul Abdin, 2021)

4.3.3 Murals

Although script on the landscape affords a wealth of analytic possibilities, it is
multimodal representations that could give a fuller picture of local repertoires, not
least in that they reduce the ambiguities and potential contradictions with regard to
the aforementioned relationship of Sylheti to script. One of the newest street art
murals in Tower Hamlets 'Thank You Tower Hamlets' was painted in 2021 by
community arts and graffiti collective 'Trapped in Zone One' and funded by Tower
Hamlets Council and some local businesses (Trapped in Zone One). Figure 16
shows this latest addition to the distinguished history of murals in this area and it is
just a short walk away from renowned Cable Street mural depicting the antifascist
march against Moseley in 1936 (Rosenberg, 2015: 256).

Such is the informative power of social media, the first I heard that a new street mural had gone up in Shadwell was though my Instagram feed. This is despite the mural being only a stone's throw from Watney Market, where I had been doing regular research for nearly two years. Needless to say, I went straight there to take a look. As I turned the corner onto Shadwell Gardens, the mural loomed large above the otherwise mundane midweek morning scene. The mural feels joyful. The vibrancy of the colours, especially the iconic green and red of Bangladesh, are in stark contrast to the dark architecture of the east London council estate. The central image shows a woman holding a tray of sweets with the word ধন্যবাদ (thank you) written in Bangla as if stretching out to those who pass.

Trapped in Zone One's social media posts explained that the mural has been commissioned to commemorate both the 50th anniversary of Bangladeshi independence and the fighting spirit of the people of Tower Hamlets who had come together during the covid 19 pandemic. The layers of complexity inherent in the mural give a powerful example of how meaning is transmitted both linguistically and semiotically. To think about communication in terms of language only is belied by this mural and I am again drawn to Rymes (2014: 200) notion of communicative repertoire. She argues 'one's repertoire can include multiple languages, dialects, and registers, in the institutionally defined sense, but also gesture, dress, posture, and even knowledge of communicative routines, familiarity with types of food or drink, and mass media references.' Even Rymes' thorough list is not exhaustive, and further analysis of the mural brings more elements to the notion of repertoire. This includes awareness of discourses and knowledge of cultural and historical events and awareness of struggle. The dual English and Bangla text, which reads *Joy Tower Hamlets,* for example invokes a series of cultural references and historical

knowledge. The complexity of the message with so many layers of meaning contained in the mural requires a number of linguistic, semiotic and cultural resources for a comprehensive understanding. Sylheti speakers, whether born in the UK or in Bangladesh, can find their communicative and linguistic repertoires represented in the mural. The deep green and red of course invoke the iconic colours of Bangladesh. The flowing sari and mishti (sweets) invoke the culinary and textile traditions and the juxtaposition of two scripts point to local literacy practices. The word 'joy' can be translated as 'victory to' or 'strength to' and the placement of this Bangla word next to the English 'Tower Hamlets' refers to Tower Hamlets communities coming together to support each other during the Covid pandemic. This is also in reference to the suffering endured, particularly by Bangladeshis who were disproportionately affected by Covid due to factors that include deep-seated structural inequalities linked to racism and a high proportion of frontline health professionals leaving many exposed to the virus (Begum, 2022:221; Ray, 2024). There is also another strong meaning however, that takes us back to the Bangladesh liberation war of 1971, where the slogan 'Joy Bangla' was the victory cry. The link implied here between the two events is both temporal, the pandemic coincided with the 50th anniversary of the birth of the Bangladeshi nation, and symbolic of the people of Tower Hamlets' ability to take on the pandemic. This of course also includes non-Bangladeshis.

The referencing of the history of the independence war and liberation, in the actual and historical memory of Bangladeshis of all generations, including people born in the UK, resonates even more after the Bangladesh50 celebrations reawakened memory and consciousness and created a focal point around which families could recount stories to younger generations.

Figure 16 Street mural Shadwell Gardens

The second mural, again to commemorate 50 years of the Bangladeshi nation, is a
large street mural on Brick Lane. The mural 'Mateer Tan' or 'The Land is Calling'
(see Figure 17) was chosen by public consultation from one of three proposals, all
designed to connect with the experiences of the local Bangladeshi diaspora. On his
blog, the artist Mohammed Ali states:

> The artwork depicts and celebrates rural life in Bangladesh. Placing such
> imagery big and bold on an iconic street in London shouts loud and proud the
> Bangladeshi and immigrant identity that perhaps many can be insecure about.
> https://www.artofmohammedali.com/blog/brick-lane-mural-the-land-is-calling

Figure 17 'Mateer Tan' Brick Lane mural

I would like to go back to the previously discussed WhatsApp conversation with Joy
in section 4.3.1 (extract 8) in which we discussed The Whitechapel Tube sign.
Extract 10 shows how this conversation continued with a discussion of the Brick

Lane artwork. Interestingly, Joy felt differently about the mural about the mural than the Whitechapel sign, which he had dismissed as vote catching.

Extract 10

1. 13/10/2022, 13:01 - Becky: And the mural on brick lane?
2. 13/10/2022, 13:01 - Becky: New one?
3. 13/10/2022, 13:04 - Joy: Actually, the murul, is a reminder of
4.   our (rural Bangladesh) roots so, I personally, like it.... But
5.   the bangla signs are purely 'political' means to an end.
6. 13/10/2022, 13:04 - Becky: Thanks. Always good to get your take on things 👍
7. 13/10/2022, 13:07 - Joy: Ps, as more and more Bengalis are
8.   learning Arabic instead of bangla.. We could very well see
9.   Arabic signs appearing in Tower Hamlets.

In extract 10 Joy begins to answer my question with 'actually' in recognition of his own contradictory feelings towards the two public manifestations of Bangladeshi culture and identity (line 3). His explanation, 'the mural is a reminder of our (rural Bangladesh) roots so, I personally, like it… but the Bangla signs are purely 'political' means to an end.', The distinction perhaps points to the power of the visual semiotic over the linguistic. His use of punctuation is of interest here, the brackets highlight how he identifies his roots as rural. It is this aspect that appears to make the difference for him between the mural and the Bangla language sign. The use of the word 'rural' here also indexes Sylhet, in recognition that historically the vast majority of migrants were from rural areas.

The inclusion of the 'I personally' in line 4, shows Joy's recognition however of the wide variety of reactions to the mural (see also Begum, 2022: 212).

The examples highlighted in this section show the interconnections between the linguistic landscape and local politics but also that reactions to the linguistic landscape can constitute a dialogue with the local political representatives, and vice versa. Linguistic and semiotic inscriptions that index, 'Bangladeshi' or Bangladeshi identity, commissioned or directed by the local political representatives such as the council or the mayor are linked directly to either influence of Bangladeshi voters or Bangladeshi political representatives themselves exerting their ideas and influence.

4.4 Discussion

The chapter highlights the huge influence of the Sylheti experience on the linguistic landscape of Watney Market and its surrounding areas. People from or visiting the area can see, feel and hear the strong influence of Bangladesh and specifically Sylhet on the local landscape The focus on the linguistic landscape of Watney Market gives ample evidence of local Sylheti practices. Sylheti is linguistically and semiotically inscribed into the architectural landscape, on walls, on street signs, in fruit and vegetable and jewellery displays and shop fronts and in the sounds heard on the street. Moreover, Sylheti, 'un-moored' from Bangladesh' (Badwan, 2021), has become part of *local* Tower Hamlets communication practices that have at least as much, if not more, to do with life in London than anything happening in Sylhet or Bangladesh. These ideas destabilise dominant notions of English as the only language needed for life in England. A focus on social practice rather than ideas of origin, ancestry and birth brings different perspectives to dominant 'one nation one language' ideas.

This chapter shows that Sylheti is much more complex than language items alone and contains 'historical trajectories of people, places, discourse, ideas, and objects'

(Scollon & Scollon, 2004: 159). Linguistic landscape studies can capture Sylheti language practices, but only if a broader perspective is taken; one that includes metalinguistic commentary, semiotic landscapes and soundscapes as per Shohamy and Waksman's (2009: 313) formulation 'what is seen, what is heard, what is spoken, what is thought'.

I also show that an investigation of the linguistic landscape can reveal traces of social history (Blommaert 2103). Watney Market displays the faded street signs of the 1990s establishment of Banglatown alongside the representation of the Covid pandemic and the cultural celebrations of Bangladesh 50.

5 Bangladeshi Italians move to Watney Market

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4 I used an analysis of the linguistic landscape of Watney Market to argue that Sylheti is deeply embedded in the social life of Watney Market and can be considered as local. Chapter 4 also argues that the sociolinguistic profile of Sylheti can rarely be neatly separable from the other communicative and linguistic resources in the locality, but nevertheless its presence and importance cannot be disputed. Now, in chapter 5, I focus on recent trends in migration, and the effects of these on sociolinguistic change in the area.

During the last decade, changing patterns of migration have brought new Bangladeshi migrants to the area, including those who were previously settled in Italy and, to a much lesser extent, Spain, France and Germany. Before Brexit, freedom of movement between EU countries and the UK gave the choice to Bangladeshis with European passports to leave their first (or second) country of migration to relocate to the UK. I investigate how these newcomers or 'onward migrants' (Morad and della Puppa, 2021; della Puppa and King, 2019; Goglia 2021) have settled in, and how new patterns of language and communication have evolved out of convivial encounters (Gilroy, 2004) and mutual socialisation with the majority Sylheti-speaking residents.

In this chapter, I discuss the relationship between the long-standing majority Sylheti and British Sylheti residents of Tower Hamlets and the 'Europeans', 'Bangladeshi Europeans' or 'Bangladeshi Italians', terms which refer to those who have recently migrated to London from other European countries. Of course, neither group is homogenous, and each comprises a wide range of experiences and backgrounds- personal, social, cultural and linguistic. However, it can still be argued that the

European Bangladeshi migration is distinct from direct migration from Sylhet. First, although migration from Sylhet continues, it has been greatly reduced due to restrictive immigration laws. As a result, people are no longer moving from Sylhet in large numbers. Those with EU passports, on the other hand, have migrated from Europe in significant numbers. In addition, previous, often long, periods of migration in other countries mean they have accumulated a broad range of cultural and linguistic experiences. Thirdly, most Bangladeshi Italians are not originally from the Sylhet region and generally do not speak Sylheti. Finally, Bangladeshi migration to Italy is much more recent so most Bangladeshi Italians are first- or second-generation migrants. This means they generally have much closer ties to Bangladesh. These shared experiences mean they have formed social groups on arrival in the UK. The intensity of economic, social and linguistic activity of the newcomers makes it difficult for the local Sylheti residents to ignore and there is evidence of interest, involvement, acceptance and tension generated by this new activity. I present evidence that the newcomers are in an energetic moment of placemaking that is beginning to change everyday semiotic and linguistic practices of the area.

In chapters 2 and 4, I drew on Badwan's (2021:137) metaphor of 'unmooring' to highlight the fact that links between language and place are never fixed and are based on social practice rather than simply on ideas of origin, birth or ancestry. This chapter continues to use ethnographic description and analysis to explore these ideas of 'unmooring'. Following on from the linguistic landscape work in chapter 4, I also draw loosely on the linguistic landscape lens in this chapter. I focus on the linguistic, visual and semiotic manifestations of communication visible and audible on

the linguistic landscape and during moments of 'social action' (Scollon and Scollon, 2004) or social activity (Canagarajah, 2018).

5.1.1 Chapter orientation and data sources

Following this introduction, this chapter has a further four sections. In section 5.2 I introduce some of the European newcomers to the area and highlight how longstanding local residents are talking about this migration. I detail some examples of newcomers' linguistic and semiotic practices, how they have attracted local attention, and how they are perceived as 'different'. In section 5.3 I focus on the Caffe Italy (see chapter 3, section 3.1.2) as a case study to highlight some of the communication practices linked to the newcomers. In section 5.4 I argue that the sociolinguistic activity of the newcomers is leading to an expansion of local repertoires and I detail some examples of linguistic changes. I also explore how language ideologies have undergone changes. I present data that show how the Europeans' attitudes to Sylheti at times resist dominant language ideologies that position Sylheti as low status. This shows that, language ideologies, like practices, are also 'unmoored' (Badwan, 2021), they mutate and take on layers of complexity during the migration process.

Overall, I argue in this chapter that the cross-fertilisation of language practices, culture, lifestyles and habits on Watney Market has begun to change the sociolinguistic profile of the area. In the process this has changed ideas and attitudes, not just to Sylheti but also to ways of communicating across communicative and spatial repertoires. The data show that co-presence (Rymes, 2022) conviviality (Gilroy, 2006) and shared social practice, affect deep-seated ideas about languages. This analysis aligns with the 'total linguistic fact' which shows a

dynamic relationship of change between language form and ideology and interaction patterns (Silverstein, 1979; Rampton, 2019).

5.1.2 A note on languages

The data I draw on in this chapter reveal varieties of Sylheti, varieties of English, Bangla, Italian and Arabic. Of course there are many more languages spoken in the area but they were not captured in the data, or only very marginally. Participants often refer to Hindi, and there are a couple of references to Spanish but I do not explore these. A variety of Bangla is commonly spoken in the capital Dhaka and sometimes referred to as Dhakaiya. There are many other varieties spoken by Bangladeshis, but they did not emerge in the data.

5.2 The 'European' newcomers

It was core participant Shaj, herself a Bangladeshi European, who initially brought me to Watney Market during our first walking interview in 2020 (see chapter 3), and it was through her that I met Shohid, the owner of the Caffe Italy - a central focus in this chapter. I was already very familiar with Watney Street, the market and the surrounding areas as I had lived here in 1998 and had worked just around the corner for 20 years. Much of the data in this chapter comes from time spent chatting to Shohid, Shaj and customers in the café and observing the comings and goings. Although not part of the original cohort, Shohid, like Rezaul in chapter 4, became a key participant. I also chatted to other local residents and market regulars.

Shaj and her family were perhaps one of the first families to arrive in the Shadwell/Watney Market area from Italy in 2013, having previously lived in Brescia, in the north of Italy for 15 years. Shaj had moved to Brescia from Bangladesh in

2000 with her eldest son, to join her husband. Their other two children were born in Italy and the family had built a good life there, working as itinerant market stall holders. Things started to become more difficult with the economic downturn in Italy, however (see della Puppa and King, 2018; Morad et al, 2021) and like many Bangladeshi Italians they decided to relocate to the UK. Since then, her brother and his family and her mother have also relocated from Italy to the same area along with an estimated 30,000 others (King and della Puppa, 2021). Bangladeshis have also re-migrated to the UK from Spain, Portugal, Germany and France, albeit in much smaller numbers. Shaj explained to me that they had moved to the area specifically to be part of 'Bangladeshi' Tower Hamlets. This aligns with findings from King and Della Puppa's 2021 study. They explain that 'London, especially working-class east London, was perceived as a small version of Bangladesh, where it was possible to "feel at home" and to live in accordance with what participants defined as a "Bengali culture and lifestyle"' (ibid: 412, see also Goglia, 2021 for similar findings). Shaj's husband moved first to find accommodation for the family and Shaj recounted the chain of events:

> In Italy we saw in television the Whitechapel area and I saw Bengali people and I said to my husband, "go to Whitechapel and see what happens there". He's looking in Whitechapel area and this area and he found our flat. I asked him is it near to Whitechapel and he said yeah yeah (walking interview with Shaj, March 2021).

In Italy, theirs had been one of only a few Bangladeshi families in their town so she was familiar with the process of adjusting to a new culture and new linguistic environment. Although she reports that she and her family had been very happy in Italy, she explained that the existence of a ready-made Bangladeshi community with a shared religion and culture, mosques and shops in London had been a big pull

factor for Shaj and the other Bangladeshi Italians she knew. The following extract from my field notes describes Shaj showing me around the local area.

Extract 11

As we walked along Shaj had a bit of a laugh and a joke with one of the stall holders. We walked on to the railway arches and had a look at the bazaars there. They are beautiful shops, lots of hustle and bustle and an abundance of Bangladeshi products with adverts and shop signs in Bengali. Shaj was delighted to point out a small display of Bangladeshi brushes (see Figure 18 below) and it was evident how much this home-from-home atmosphere meant to her (field notes March 2021).

Figure 18 Bangladeshi brushes on sale in Watney Market

Shaj and her family, along with thousands of other Bangladeshi families living in Italy, chose to move to the UK, precisely for the space created and nurtured by mainly Sylheti migrants and their families over generations as described in chapter 4. But if on one level the plan was to move to a 'Bangladeshi' area, differences between the 'Italian Bangladeshis' and the settled Sylheti residents were many (King and Della, Puppa 2021). During the course of our conversations, Shaj and I discussed aspects of how these two different groups have adjusted to their new reality through mutual linguistic and cultural socialisation (Sankaran, 2021). Additionally, although Shaj was delighted to have reminders of Bangladesh as illustrated in the field note above, she also gravitated towards cultural and linguistic aspects of the Italy she had just left behind. Her feelings of 'home' were therefore more complex and multilayered.

5.2.1 Local perceptions of 'Bangladeshi Italians'

This new migration of Bangladeshis from Italy emerged as a salient theme across the data. It became evident that the sociolinguistic status quo outlined in chapter 4, which has 'moored' Sylheti to Tower Hamlets was beginning to change. Bangladeshis can no longer be assumed to be Sylheti or Sylheti speakers, as had been the case for many generations, albeit sometimes erroneously as there have always been a small number of non-Sylheti Bangladeshis in the area. In fact, interviewees Bilal and Mizana, who feature in this chapter as part of the longstanding resident population of Watney Market, are both originally from the Dhaka area. When they arrived in the 1990s, they were very much a minority and they both talk about how they had adapted to become part of the Sylheti community, adaptations which included learning Sylheti.

In chapter 4, I cited the jewellery stall holder talking about his perception of the amount of Sylheti speakers on the market: 'Yeah most of them Sylheti because everyone like, its 95% from Sylhet'. His comment did not reflect recent migration changes, however.

Chatting to people about the Italian Bangladeshi newcomers brings different perceptions and new percentages. During conversations with market residents, the use of descriptive adjectives such as 'majority' or estimates of percentages "70/30" forms part of a new circulating discourse surrounding these changes. According to Rezaul, the fruit and vegetable stall holder I introduced in chapter 4, the ratio is:

> '30% people speaking proper Bengali [20]and 70 % peoples are speaking Sylheti'.

Bilal, the other fruit and veg stall holder we met in chapter 4, suggests it is more like 50%:

> 'They're from different parts of Bangladesh so what they speak is all Bengali so now it's like you can say half half. Half like Sylheti half Bengali'.

And local resident, Mizana, herself a Bangla speaker originally from Dhaka, who has lived in the area for more than 15 years, thinks the majority of locals are now *not* Sylheti:

> 'When I go Watney Market people talk like non-Sylheti. Mostly people see non-Sylheti, I think majority.'

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[20] Bangla

There are differing accounts and interpretations as to how much change has taken place, but there is little doubt that the new migration of Bangladeshi people from other European countries, especially Italy, is noticed, and talked about locally as something new. This talk is also linked to the use of new, locally produced indexical categories. The fact that there are new commonly used and understood categories and labels coming into circulation, points to the significance of this new migration and to the local interest in the resulting cultural and linguistic changes.

5.2.2 Local categorisations

When talking to people I noticed that the label 'European' to talk about Bangladeshi onward migrants was frequently used. I found this category repeated across multiple conversations and it became clear that this was a shared local category. It is one that contrasted with the categorisations used in research literature (Goglia, 2021, della Puppa, 2021) and the media, (Clarke, 2015; Kington, 2018) which describe the newcomers as 'Bangladeshi', 'Bengali Italian' or 'Bangladeshi Italian', based on perceived national or ethnic origin.

Categorisations based on migration routes, for example, 'Italians' or 'Europeans' were however much more commonplace in everyday discourse and featured widely in the Watney Market data. These categorisations tell their own story and reveal a perceived importance of migration or passport status over ethnicity, regional identity or language variety. Categorisations based on language such as 'Bengali', 'Sylheti' 'non-Sylheti', 'Dhakaiya' and 'Cockney', were also present but much less frequent in the data.

The first time I noticed the label 'European' being used to describe Bangladeshi onward migrants was when chatting to local resident, Mizana. Extract 12 illustrates this,

Extract 12

1. **European** people
2. most of the people non-Sylheti
3. most of the people come to (..) non-Sylheti
4. now I mostly listen[21] to other people
5. not Sylheti much ((laughs)) so much (…)
6. when I go Watney Market (.) people talk like non-Sylheti
7. mostly people see non-Sylheti
8. I think majority now is the **European**
9. because I'm go market and then they talk non-Sylheti
10. we frequently notice the **non-Sylheti** we're hearing
11. on the street and the market

Mizana employs two categories: 'non-Sylheti' and 'European' to talk about the newcomers, categories that clearly index perceived differences between the two Bangladeshi migrations. The label 'non-Sylheti' indicates that 'Sylheti' is the dominant unmarked Bangladeshi category. The label 'European' conveys the idea 'migrated from Europe', rather than directly from Bangladesh or born in the UK. Rampton (2013: 3) tells us that 'indexical signs often evoke affective and epistemic stances rather than clearly recognisable social types and social categories', and Giampapa (2004: 193) also points out that 'the act of claiming identities and claiming spaces of identity is a political act'. Although in this case we are talking about ascribed identities, the same point holds.

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[21] Here Mizana is using the work listen here to mean 'hear'. She means that she mostly *hears* people speaking 'non-Sylheti' Bengali.

Bilal and Rezaul (see chapter 4) both draw on the category 'European' or 'people from Europe' to describe the onward migrants. But the data also shows the more dominant use of the term 'European' indexical of [mainly] white residents of the UK, or other white Europeans.

The following extract comes from a chat with Bilal. He uses the term 'European' in two different ways: to describe Bangladeshi onward migrants and to describe his white customers. In doing so it is interesting how he tries to clarify meanings, aware of the possible confusions the dual use can and does create.

Extract 13

1.	**Bilal:**	we ..
		myself speaking less English nowadays because we have like
2.		like lets say 0.001% customer **European or English or whatever**
3.		there are less people coming in as our customer
4.	**Becky:**	what do you mean less people coming in?
5.	**Bilal:**	no one is buying from us
6.	**Becky:**	what you're losing customers?
7.	**Bilaal:**	British people we are losing (…) we lost already
8.		it's only people who's here from before who have houses
9.		the old people (..)people who are here from before
10.		not many new people coming in
11.		no one is moving in people are moving out.
12.		**European people moved out**
13.		even people here are not coming to shop from us
14.	**Becky:**	sorry to hear that
15.	**Bilal:**	yeah, before it was different
16.		before it was **50% Asian and 50 % ..European**
17.		**or British or English**
18.		now its like 1000 customer (..) only **1% from Europe**
19.		even in the market they just walk past (..) before they used to buy

20.		but I don't know why they don't buy no more.
21.	**Becky:**	that's a worry for you isn't it?
22.	**Bilal:**	I mean yes (…) obviously when **European people moved in**
23.		I mean we've got more customers now but the trend has changed
24.		the market has changed we are **only selling mostly Asian.**
25.	**Becky:**	are people still coming from Sylhet?
26.	**Bilal:**	they do come (..) their portion is the same
27.		people have moved out from this area (…) honestly
28.		**European people (…) English people**

In extract 13 Bilal tells me that the make-up of his customer base has changed and it is now mostly 'Asian' (line 24) whereas before more were 'British or English' (line 17)'. I mistakenly understand that he is losing custom (line 14). In fact, it appears from line 23 that the opposite is the case, 'I mean we've got more customers'. He explains that the arrival of the 'Europeans' from Italy, has coincided with a reduction of white or 'non-Asian' or 'English' customers. One set of 'Europeans' [Bangladeshis] is increasing, and another set of Europeans [white British] is decreasing or 'moving out'. Rezaul on the other stall also refers to this, as Bilal terms it, 'change in trend', suggesting that local white residents are more likely to be passing the market after work when there is nothing left so will shop at supermarkets instead.

Bilal's comments, as well as providing interesting information about perceived changes in the market demographic, provide an insight into the use of locally produced labels such as 'European' to describe the new Bangladeshi migrants from Italy. Extract 13 illustrates the indexical nature of such categories, heavily dependent on shared understandings of context where situated meanings, including knowledge of migration histories and perhaps citizenship processes, give or restrict access to

local 'discourse repertoires' within which these categories become meaningful. Bilal uses the term European mostly to mean white British or other white Europeans. But he uses the same term to mean Bangladeshis coming from Europe when he says, 'European people moved in' (line 22).

In another example, Rezaul also draws on the more widely recognised racial category 'Asian' (in line 4) to make the distinction between the local white [European] population and the new Bangladeshi [European] population. The conversation begins with me asking about language practices at his stall.

Extract 14

1.	**Becky:**	tell me about Sylheti
2.		tell me about what people are speaking here in the market
3.		are people still speaking a lot of Sylheti?
4.	**Rezaul:**	yeah people are speaking Sylheti
5.		**now 30% 35% like came from the Europe like Asian peoples**
6.		they speak proper Bengali
7.		that's why now 30% people speaking proper Bengali
8.		and 70 % peoples are speaking Sylheti

Like Bilal, Rezaul uses a variety of labels to describe people but the label European, or 'from Europe' (line 5) for the Bangladeshi newcomers is a constant.
I suggest that use of the European label to refer to Bangladeshi migrants also reveals traces of tensions surrounding two contemporary issues of migration: the hostile environment and Brexit. There was no, or very little, direct reference to either of these in the data, but I suggest that the label 'European' contains indirect references to these interlinked and, at times, competing discourses. While

Bangladeshis with Italian passports were migrating to the UK using freedom of movement for EU citizens (circa 2013- 2020), repeated draconian immigration laws were making migration from Sylhet increasingly difficult. Many of the new arrivals tended to describe themselves as 'Italian' rather than 'Bangladeshi', perhaps they were so used to having to use their European passports to obtain rights, or possibly they felt that an Italian identity was more valuable in the UK than a Bangladeshi one[22]. As subsequent ferocious Brexit debates played out in the run up to the 2016 referendum and beyond, European passport holders became new targets of hostility in the UK and many Bangladeshi Italians began to foreground their Bangladeshi identities. Given this background, where the category 'European' is ascribed, it could be interpreted in negative terms. Tower Hamlets, like most areas of migration traditions in the UK, voted against Brexit. But the many tensions and the negative fall-out from the Brexit debate undoubtedly affected how the new Bangladeshi migrants from Europe settled in (see Morad and della Puppa, 2021 for a fuller discussion of this).

I have used the three extracts above (12,13,14) to show the use of locally produced indexical categories. The category 'European' to index new onward migrants is frequently used to invoke difference and indicate the distinction between the 'new' and 'old'. The extracts make it clear that labelling and grouping people is complicated and messy but it is nevertheless part of local practice.

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[22] When registering ESOL courses at the local college in 2014-1016, I noticed that onward migrants overwhelmingly described their nationality as Italian regardless of passport status, but this changed becoming less frequent during the Brexit debates.

5.2.3 New embodied practices: coffee drinking and gathering

In this section I present a variety of extracts from the data to illustrate some of the cultural and linguistic practices that have been noticed locally and noted by me during field observations. I discuss how these practices are talked about and argue that the 'Europeans' are bringing linguistic, semiotic and multimodal changes to the 'spatial repertoire' (Pennycook, 2014, Canagarajah, 2018) of Watney Market. New practices brought by the Europeans include: Italian language, products and iconography, new varieties of Bangla, coffee drinking practices and embodied practices such as gathering in groups outside the café.

The latter, the practice of gathering in groups, was mentioned a number of times by participants as an example of changes that had taken place since 2013. One of these is captured in field notes written after a walk with Shaj.

Extract 15

> We strolled along the street. It did strike me just how many cafes there were here, one next to the other. I told Shaj what Shihab[23] had told me, that Dhakaiya people always commented that Sylhetis were always in markets and Sylhetis always commented that Dhakaiya or 'Europeans' were always drinking coffee in cafes. She laughed and said, 'that's absolutely true'.
> It felt quiet today on the street and actually there were not so many people around compared to usual. We talked about the coffee society and she told me that she thought it had come from Italy, and the habit of gathering in Piazzas. She said that in her school she often overheard other members of staff, British born Bangladeshis complain about the people gathering outside the café and that they were taking up the whole pavement, forcing others to walk around **(**fieldnotes September 2022).

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[23] A Sylheti speaking ESOL colleague and friend

In extract 16 local resident Mizana also highlighted the tendency to gather in groups.

Extract 16

1. they make group
2. they together all the time
3. and everybody knows
4. if see a group of people Sylheti people say
5. "oy European"
6. they knows recognise easily by the group

Here Mizana's comments suggest two things. First of all that the Bangladeshi Italians are, as new migrants, finding each other and forming social bonds 'they together all the time' (line 2). Secondly, as I have already mentioned, their arrival in the local area is talked about, and their activity is perceived a something new, 'if see a group of people Sylheti people say, "oy European" (lines 4 and 5).

The other practice highlighted in comments is of course coffee drinking, the central focus of the Caffe Italy. In the extract below Bilal the fruit and veg stall holder, explains how he perceives the 'Europeans' or 'Italians' as bringing cultural and language practices from Italy.

Extract 17

1. **Bilal:** what they're doing is basically
they're just they're just moving on
2. they're just like following their own culture
3. there's quite a lot of people came in so they're not
4. really mixing up with other people
5. it's like they're living the way they used to live=
6. =like you know these cafes and bars

7.		like a café (..) but they call it bar
8.	**Becky:**	because in Italy they call it bar?
9.	**Bilal:**	they call it bar (…) yeah

Bilal suggests in lines 3 and 4 that the fact that people from Italy have migrated in significant numbers has made it much easier for them to bring their own cultural practices with them, rather than having to adapt to the local population[24], 'There's quite a lot of people came in so they're not really mixing up with other people.' He points out that one of these practices involves the café along with the use of the word 'bar' to describe it (lines 6, 7, 8 and 9).

As he indicates by his use of plurals in line 6, **'these** cafe**s** and bar**s**', there are a number of new bars run by the Europeans on Watney Market and the surrounding area. The Caffe Italy was a place frequented by Shaj and other 'Bangladeshi Italians' and it became clear that the practice of the 'café', as an essential place to stop at, pass through, buy Italian products and speak Italian, was an important part of the life they had brought from Italy to London.

However, this is neither a new, nor Italian phenomena. When discussing the 'new' café culture with Khalid, he recalled hearing stories of coffee shops on Brick Lane where the first generation of Sylheti migrants would gather to meet, chat and organise their lives. Alexander et al (2020) (see also Begum, 2023) describe the history of these coffee shops:

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[24] Perhaps here he is reflecting on his own experience when, as a migrant from Dhaka he was very much in the minority compared to Sylheti migrants. In one interview he said. '15 years before used to be mostly from Sylhet. I kind of actually learned it from them because there was no other option. You either had to speak their language or you don't speak. Now it's changed'. (Bilal- market stall holder).

By the late 1940s, there were several Sylheti-owned coffee shops selling hot drinks and snacks in Brick Lane, catering to these early migrants. However, the first important café of the modern era was the Star Café, which was established at 66 Brick Lane in 1958 by Lahore born Abdul Rezak, and which closed a decade later. A close relative of Rezak, one of our respondents, recalls that the Star Café opened at 9am and closed at 8pm every day of the week. The café's main customers were Bengalis and other South Asian men who lived in what was still a predominantly Jewish residential area (ibid:10).

The Caffe Italy, therefore, catering for the European newcomers as a place to meet and gather, has interesting historical parallels with the first-generation of Sylheti migrants to Tower Hamlets. Back then the new Sylheti migrants were meeting and drinking coffee in a long-established Jewish area, and now Bangladeshi newcomers from Europe are the new migrants, meeting and drinking coffee in a long-established Sylheti area.

5.3 Caffe Italy: a meeting place for Bangladeshi Italians

"My coffee is famous", says Shohid only half-jokingly as we chat together with one of his customers about his new shop, which is located on one of the southernmost corners of the pedestrian street of Watney Market. In fact, the large coffee machine behind the bar takes up proportionally more space than any other object in the room. Shohid has spared no expense, hiring one of the most expensive coffee machines available, making sure it is regularly maintained to ensure maximum quality. Shohid is the owner of the Caffe Italy, one of several small shops and cafes that line the market street. It is visibly distinct from the other shops and cafes on the road with its brightly coloured awning in the colours of the Italian flag and groups of, mainly, Bangladeshi men congregating outside chatting and whiling away the time. The café is one of the street's newest arrivals, opening just before the first Covid lockdown in

March 2020. Despite the tumultuous pandemic times, this tiny café has turned into a major success story and has established itself locally as a key spot for coffees and chai. Its location on the corner of the pedestrian area, and the convenient positioning of some low walls just outside the café[25], meant that even during the pandemic people could gather, chat and drink coffee just outside. Shohid moved to Tower Hamlets from Rome in 2019 and this relocation links him to the 'Bangladeshi Italian migration'. The Watney Market/ Shadwell area has become something of Bangladeshi Italian hub, with Shohid's café one of the popular gathering places.

The café itself is tiny. There's a long counter on one wall, a wall-to-ceiling shelf unit on the other with neatly arranged food products, and two small tables in between. One table has three chairs, and the other just two-fold away chairs. There are also a couple of small tables just outside on the pavement. This is clearly a café aimed at a takeaway clientele and the menu layout, with the list of coffees in prime position above the food menu, makes it clear that coffee is indeed the core business here. The Italian elements already mentioned indicate that Shohid has made the business decision to market 'Italianness'. But there is also a Bangladeshi feel. Freshly cooked homemade sinagla (samosa) have become a bit of a trademark among regular customers and the products available on the shelves are neatly alternated to showcase the best of Italy and the best of Bangladesh (see Figure 19).

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[25] These low walls were part of the Tarling Way redevelopment in 2009. They had been designed to encourage people to meet socially but had been strongly criticised locally (Robbins, 2013: 277 & 278). In the light of this is interesting that the location of the café appears to have achieved what urban planners could not. Also interesting from a linguistic landscape perspective is that the low walls are decorated with an array of different languages, presumably to promote multicultural harmony.

Figure 19 Italian, Bengali and Middle Eastern products arranged on the shelves

This product arrangement constitutes carefully orchestrated linguistic, cultural and semiotic diversity. Shohid talks about this himself during one of our chats:

> Italian and Bengali because my.. I origin Bengali, I love Bengali products as well but I am from Italy and I'm thinking here is a lot of Italian customer I have so this is for me a very good opportunity is sell er for Italian products.

Spatial repertoire of Caffe Italy

Observations and audio recordings made in the café reveal a very different multilingual soundscape compared to the market street (see chapter 4). Here there is much less Sylheti heard and unlike on the street, there is always someone speaking Italian. This is very much a Bangladeshi Italian hub, frequented by customers with similar migration trajectories.

The following extract presents an example of a conversation between Shohid and a customer. She enters into the shop to do a money transfer. Shaj and I are chatting at the small table just next to the bar and after finishing the transaction she turns to me and asks I if am learning Bangla: she must have overheard some of our conversation. We have a brief exchange and then she turns back to Shohid.

Extract 18

1.	**Shohid:**	afne kotha theke aschen
		<where are you from?>
2.	**Female customer:**	ami Milano e afney?
		<I'm from Milan, what about you?.
3,	**Shohid:**	ami Rome e chilam
		<I'm from Rome>

This part of the conversation takes place in Bangla, but they are foregrounding their mutual Italian identities. Although the café is generally a multilingual environment, Bangla and Italian appear to be the most frequently spoken. This is a place for the new Europeans to congregate.

On another visit to the café I struck up a conversation with a customer in Italian. The conversation took a similar trajectory to the one above between Shohid and his customer in that we begin by establishing our mutual Italian connections.

Extract 19

1.	**Customer:**	dove Italia?
		<where in Italy? >
2.	**Becky:**	Roma[26] (..) lei?
		<Rome (..)how about you?>
3.	**Customer:**	Ancona
4.	**Becky:**	ah Ancona al nord
		<oh I see Ancona in the North>
5.	**Customer:**	si si prima a Roma
		yes yes I was in Rome before
6.	**Becky:**	e dove in Bangladesh?
		<Where in Bangladesh?>
7.	**Customer:**	Sylhet
8.	**Becky:**	(surprised) ah Sylhet, ah.

As can be seen in line 8 I was quite surprised when the customer told me he was from Sylhet, as most Bangladeshi Italians are from the central regions of Bangladesh. However, as the examples reveal, those gravitating to the café appear to be doing so to seek out their Italian or European connection rather than any regional Bangladeshi affiliation. Indeed, the perception of two distinct groups is not actually based on regional affiliations to Dhaka or Sylheti, nor linguistic to Bangla or Sylheti, but rather on migration experience. For example, Bilal and Mizana, both from Dhaka but from an earlier migration not via Europe, do not associate themselves

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[26] I had lived in Rome for several years before moving to London.

with the café goers. Additionally, Shohid also tells me, although I do not observe this, that there are also many Spanish Bangladeshis who come to the shop. People are finding a place of belonging where shared experience of onward migration is crucial.

Shohid's influence on the spatial repertoire

After visiting the café a couple of times, it became quite apparent that this is a one-person project and Shohid, the proprietor, is at the centre of things. Consequently, Shohid's own experiences and ideologies shape a lot of what goes on in the small space. There is a clear relationship between Shohid's own attitude to language, the kinds of language practices available to customers in his shop and the 'spatial repertoire' of the shop (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015). Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) point to the link between individual and spatial repertoires, with individual life trajectories combining with visual and historical and social aspects of the space inhabited by individuals. Like many people with complex migration trajectories, Shohid has a wide multilingual repertoire (Blommaert and Backus, 2011; Blommaert and Rampton, 2011) and this is very much reflected in his own language practices.

The short extract below forms part of an audio recorded conversation between me, Shaj and Shohid. The recording takes place during Shohid's regular working day while he is behind the bar. Most conversations we have when he is working are brief, punctuated by him taking orders and making coffees. There are also some examples of longer more, in-depth discussions when there are no customers in the shop, or when customers themselves got involved in our chats.

However, this conversation is one of the more usual very brief chats. It includes Bangla, English and Italian, with little obvious attention paid to code separation and I

argue that this follows the general pattern of how Shohid is used to interacting with his customers. His metalinguistic descriptions of his own multilingual language practices appear to be fairly aligned with the practices I observed, and this perhaps shows the importance Shohid attaches to his own multilingual identity and his multilingual performances.

Extract 20

The extract begins with Shaj asking him about the languages he speaks in the café.

1.	**Shaj**	baija *<brother>* how many languages?
2.	**Shohid**:	ami *<I am>* basically Bengali.. Italian.. English, Hindi
3.		and a little bit Arabi (Arabic)
4.	**Shohid:**	a little bit Arabi uhum (..) 4 language
5.	**Becky:**	i clienti che lingua parlano?
		<what language do the customers speak?>
6.	**Shohid:**	i clienti most of the client is speaking is English.
7.	**Becky:**	ok
8.	**Shohid:**	and second Bengali, third is Italian
9.	**Becky:**	Bengali? is that all varieties or suddho basha
		<standard language>
10.		Sylheti basha
		<Sylheti language>
11.	**Shohid:**	mixed Sylheti and Bengali is the Bengali suddho
		<standard>
12.	**Becky:**	so mixed, so most people is suddho? *<standard>*
13.	**Shohid:**	most people is Sylheti
14.		so er speaking with me Sylheti language
15.	**Becky**	hmm and how…do you understand that? is that (…)
16.	**Shohid**	**is ok I (..) I proud is ehm everyone is ehm when is**
17.		**speaking with me is their language**
18.		is I understand and I answer with him with her

Extract 20 takes place in three languages. English is dominant, perhaps mainly because I am one of the interlocutors, but Bangla[27] and Italian words are scattered through the conversation. The translanguaging appears to be unselfconscious and although there may be a performative element it is hard to identify this. The extract gives an insight into Shohid's own perceptions of the languages spoken in his café as well as a sense of his own language practices, which switch between English, Bangla, Sylheti and Italian. In line 2 he describes his own multilingual repertoire stating. 'Ami (I am) basically Bengali, Italian, English, Hindi and a little bit Arab. He doesn't specifically mention Sylheti until I ask him, but as I explained in chapter 1 section 1.1.3, it is common practice is to use the umbrella term 'Bengali' to talk about all Bangladeshi languages and varieties of Bangla. Line 6 illustrates Shohid's perception that English is the dominant language of the café, 'most of the clients is speaking English'. However, the field notes and transcripts reveal that English, Bangla, Sylheti and Arabic are dominant during ordering and the boundaries between these are very flexible with multiple examples of translanguaging. However, the general chatting and socialising between the customers is dominated by Bangla with smatterings of Italian. Shohid tends to be less involved in these conversations and I suggest his comments in the extract 20 relate to the short ordering transactions that he himself is involved in.

The interview and observation data all indicate that the multilingual aspect of his work is very important to Shohid. In line 16 of extract 20 above he states. 'I I proud is err everyone is err when is speaking with me is err their language is I understand

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[27] I am ascribing the Bangla parts to be in Bangla because that his main language, even though in this case the Sylheti would be the same.

and I answer with him with her.' This statement indicates that his own multilingual practices are self-conscious and curated and the adjective 'proud', highlights that this is something that is important for him. His comments can also be viewed in the light of the shop display in Figure 19 where we see the shelves mixed with Italian and Bengali products. His multilingual stance is revealed in both his interactions and product arrangements. It appears that the curated multilingualism of the shop forms part of his business intentions, a desire to attract clients from all language backgrounds. This recalls Rezaul's ability to strategically draw on parts of his repertoire to suit his business purposes (see section 4.2.3).

5.4 New migration and expanded repertoires

In the previous section I outlined some of the local practices that the newcomers have brought to the local area, including orientations to 'Italianness' and new multilingual and semiotic practices. In this section I show how linguistic and communicative repertoires on the market are changing and expanding in response to these recent migration changes (cf. Goglia 2021). The spatial repertoire of Watney Market, in which the visual, semiotic and sonic landscape indexes 'Bangladeshiness' also supports this process.

5.4.1 Mutual comprehensibly between Sylheti and Bangla

As has already been explored in the literature (see chapter 2) the notion of mutual intelligibility between Sylheti and Bangla (and other Bengali languages and varieties) is very much contested. It cannot be assumed that the newcomers and the longstanding Sylheti speakers can communicate comfortably in their new shared environment. But it also cannot be assumed that they cannot.

Although from a purely linguistic perspective the standard form of Bangla is considered distinct from Sylheti (see Chalmers, 1996; Rasinger, 2007; Hamid, 2011; Hoque, 2015), my data appear to show that mutual comprehensibility is often achieved and even taken for granted, with both Sylheti and Bangla successfully used together in mixed interactions.

Some participants considered this mutual intelligibility to be knowledge of two distinct language codes while others felt it was because the languages are similar or perhaps even the same. This comment made by a Whitechapel shopkeeper from Dhaka was fairly typical: 'I understand Sylheti, and Sylheti people also understand suddho basha, *this is Bengali language anyway*[28], meaning that all varieties are part of the set 'Bengali languages' and therefore easily understood.

Some people felt that intelligibility was not quite two-way, with non-Sylhetis struggling more to understand Sylheti than vice versa. On the other hand, this perception was the reverse among Sylheti speakers born in the UK - who have had much less exposure to Bangla and other varieties of Bengali- than those born in Bangladesh. Those born in the UK who reported being able to navigate the two languages, at least in spoken form, have had some education experiences of Bangla, either informally at home or at complementary schools. Others without this experience were not able to navigate Bangla well. For example, Gulabi, who was perfectly comfortable speaking Sylheti, needed her mum to translate when carrying out interviews with Bangla speakers in her local café.

Aside from questions of exposure and knowledge of both languages, the data show that mutual comprehensibility is also achieved because speakers are drawing on a

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[28] He means, this is a Bengali language after all

broad communicative repertoire in which shared resources are not limited to linguistic codes but include shared knowledge of habitual activities, and references likely to emerge in interactions, for example prayer times, knowledge of food and drink and so forth (Rymes, 2012). Participants themselves reported numerous factors as contributing to this mutual intelligibility including migration, shared education systems, common TV shows, linguistic similarities, shared social spaces, shared vocabulary and use of English and Arabic vocabulary. Mutual comprehensibility is therefore complex and depends on many factors, including code similarity, exposure, shared discourses and language ideologies as well as multimodal communication practices such as gesture, and use of the surrounding materiality. Kusters et al also draw attention to this when they say:

> All human interactions, and linguistic repertoires, are (and have always been) multimodal. Language in use, whether spoken, signed or text, is always and inevitably constructed across multiple modes of communication and through 'contextual' phenomena such as the use of the surrounding physical spaces (2017: 220).

The following extract from the data illustrates some of these points. It comes from a walking interview with Abdul Hussain and takes place in the small grocery store in Whitechapel where we had stopped off to chat briefly to the grocer and his co-worker. The shop itself is compact and could comfortably have no more than five customers at one time. It has a single central aisle and to the right of the doorway is the shop counter, surrounded by sweets and confectionary. When we popped in, the grocer was sitting behind the till and his co-worker was audible but not visible as he was working on the far side of the central aisle. There was one other customer, a man in his twenties and as we entered the shop, he and Abdul Hussain acknowledged each other with a slight head nod and barely perceptible upward

movement of the eyes. Abdul Hussain explained that in a small community, people may not know each other but will have seen each other many times and acknowledgement of this kind is important. We stood at the end of the central aisle, leaving space in front of the counter for any potential customers and chatted to the shopkeeper for a few minutes. Every so often his co-worker would shout out or pop his head around the aisle to add something to our conversation. I imagined this to be their habitual communication mode: conversations shaped by the physical configuration of the shop and everyday work routines.

After a brief introduction to me and the project, the shopkeeper agreed to answer a few questions. His co-worker joined in of his own accord, responding to the topic which clearly interested him. The extract below shows both men talking about their communication at work.

Extract 21

1.	**Shopkeeper:**	Well they, one of my colleague he speak suddho(…)basha
		<standard Bengali>
2.		er but he understands (…) he has to understand
3.		because so many people from Sylhet here
4.	**Abdul H**:	there is no [choice
5.	**Shopkeeper:**	[he has no choice ((laughs))
6.	**Becky:**	((to the co-worker)) and is it easy to understand?
7.	**Co-worker:**	yeah it's easy
8.	**Becky:**	so what's your first language?
9.	**Co-worker:**	first of all I speak suddho basha (..) then Sylheti
10.		but I understand everything (…) all the Sylheti
11.	**Becky:**	and so when you speak to people
12.		do you speak in Sylheti?
14.	**Co-worker:**	Yeah (...) mixed(.) sometimes
15.	**Abdul H:**	<u>no</u> ((contradicts emphatically)) (..) he speaks in suddho

16.	**Co-worker**:	Sylheti people do understand suddho basha
17.	**Becky:**	so you don't need to speak in Sylheti?
18.	**Abdul H:**	[nah
19.	**Co-worker**:	[I understand Sylheti
20.		and Sylheti people also understand suddho basha
21.	**Shopkeeper:**	but some people from (..) you know (…) the suddho basha
22.		they don't understand Sylheti
23.		because it's a very like north language very much (..)
24.		so they don't understand
25.		but if <u>they</u> like talk or speak
26.		we understand (…)we Sylheti understand
27.	**Becky:**	do you have to get them to repeat
28.		or do you understand immediately?
29.	**Shopkeeper:**	**this is Bengali language anyway**
30.		**it shouldn't be very much troublesome**
31.		**understanding and speak (…)**
32.		**somehow you can communicate**
33.		**(..) you can manage (…) n[ot too (…)**
34.	**Co-worker**:	[not too much different
35.	**Becky:**	and what do you two speak to each other?
36.	**Shopkeeper:**	((in chorus)) [mixed
37.	**Co-worker**:	[mixed
38.	**Shopkeeper:**	and English

In extract 21 we get a good insight into how the shopkeeper, from Sylhet, and his co-worker, from Dhaka, perceive their communication. They both draw on a shared repertoire which allows them to cut flexibly across linguistic codes. They discuss fixed and flexible boundaries and it appears that for them the flexible use of shared receptive repertoires aids communication. They can each speak their respective expert, or most comfortable, language and the other will understand. Creese and Blackledge, observing similar cross-lingual practices in their data point out, 'both sets

of linguistic resources contribute to meaning-making, which becomes more than the sum of its parts, in ways that language separation would not allow' (2011: 1202). The shop assistant illustrates this well in lines 9 and 10: 'First of all I speak suddho basha and then Sylheti but I understand all of the Sylheti'.

Productive repertoires appear to be more fixed and not shared in the same way. When I ask, in line 12, if he responds in Sylheti he is uncertain. First, he replies 'yeah', but then adds 'mixed' followed by 'sometimes' and in the end it appears that he does not generally respond in Sylheti. The uncertainty is clarified by a very direct intervention from Abdul Hussain in line 15 who, addressing me, points out, 'no, he speaks in suddho'. The co-worker then clarifies that Sylheti speakers understand Bangla anyway so it is not necessary for him to respond in Sylheti. Although they quite clearly report they do not perceive problems of communication difficulty or breakdown, the use of 'somehow' in line 32 and the degree of hedging with 'you can manage…not to' (line 33) and 'it shouldn't be very much troublesome' (line 30) suggest that despite their generally perception of mutual comprehensibility, communication is not always without difficulty.

In the extract, the shopkeeper states that sharing codes should 'not be too troublesome' as they are 'Bengali language anyway' (lines 30 and 29). However, his perception of mutual comprehensibility is based on a number of different factors. First that he has knowledge of Sylheti because it is the main language he grew up speaking. Secondly, he has knowledge of Bangla because he was educated in Bangladesh where Bangla is the medium of instruction. Finally, his co-worker has knowledge of Sylheti because he has been living in Sylheti dominated Tower Hamlets for many years. To emphasise the point made earlier in this sub-section, these experiences obscure the difficulties faced by others such as Adbul

Hussain and Gulabi, who were brought up in the UK in Sylheti speaking families with little exposure to Bangla.

Another example from the data shows a very different linguistic situation in which Gulabi, a young Sylheti speaker born in Tower Hamlets is chatting to the new owners of her local café, both newcomers from Italy who speak Bangla. The extract below shows how they manage an interaction about school tuition. Gulabi was in the café doing an observation, recording and taking notes when the café owner called over to ask her about home tuition for his son. He likely thought Gulabi, a young student, would have some experience in this regard.

Extract 22

1.	Café owner:	((to Gulabi)) ekone kheyo basha home tuition korai ni?
		<do you know anyone who does home tuition?>
2.		hello? can you hear me? I'm talking to you
3.	Gulabi:	((a bit startled)) <u>oh</u> (..) yes
4.	Café owner:	do you know anyone do home tuition?
5.	Gulabi:	ehm which subject? Maths?
6.	Café owner:	for 11 plus pass (..) he's year 5 now
7.	Gulabi:	year 5 ehm (…) ami to mansho re zikay tam farmu
		<year 5 (..) ehm I'll ask around and let you know>
8.		but amar forisito ebo kaheo
		<but I don't know >
9.	Café owner:	[nai ni
		((finishes her sentence)) *<anyone>*
10.	Gulabi:	[nai but ami zikairam find out kortam farmu (..) ji-oy.
		<no but I'll ask and let you know(..)yes>
11.	Café owner:	aiccha
		<ok>

12.	Gulabi:	year 5 khorse maths?
		<is he doing year 5 maths?>
13.	Café owner:	year 5 maths level grammar school tuition
14.	Gulabi:	Oh 11 plus exam
15.	Café owner:	11 plus maths korbar lagi … agami bosor
		<he needs to do maths 11 plus… next year>
16.	Gulabi:	ah because 11 plus exam beshi furrtain te kore na, quite rare
		<because not many kids do the 11 plus exam…it's quite rare>
17.		because 11+ quite ita hard asi tuitiono important
		<because 11+ is quite hard so it's important to get tuition>
18.		but ami find out zantam farmu
		<but I'll find out and let you know>

This conversation is a very different context than the two co-workers in the Whitechapel Grocer's shop. Gulabi, a confident Sylheti speaker, is not confident with Bangla, either receptively or productively. In fact, when the conversation begins, she does not even realise the café owner is talking to her (line 2) because she is so unused to being addressed in Bangla. Like the co-workers in the grocery store they do however manage to have a conversation, but there is the sense that it is less fluent than the conversations between the two Bangladesh-born men from the grocery store. Gulabi and the café owner's conversation was successful in similar ways to the conversation between the grocer and his co-worker. The café owner understood her Sylheti. However, he also used English, perhaps because he was unsure if Gulabi was able to fully understand him.

Of course there are other factors; perhaps age and gender, (although Gulabi does not mention this when we talk about it together). Certainly, the two men in the grocers know each other far better than Gulabi and the café owner which is a contributing element to the awkwardness in the conversation. However, in a follow-

up conversation with Gulabi, her main reflection was with regards to the difficulty

speaking to a Bangla speaker. Although this was not the first time this had

happened, normally her mum, who speaks both languages, is around to help. In her

own observation notes (see also Winstanley, 2022:16) she talked about trying to

stylise her Sylheti and she explained she was trying to 'suddhify' her Sylheti, so as to

facilitate communication.

The mutual intelligibility described in this section relies on much more than linguistic

similarities between Sylheti and Bangla. The difficulties faced by Gulabi and the café

owner appear to correspond to the description put forward by the grocer and his co-

worker above in extract 21, lines 29-33, when they say:

> 'This is Bengali language anyway, it shouldn't be very much troublesome.
>
> Understanding and speak… **somehow** you can communicate …you can
>
> **manage**…**not too…. not too** much different'.

These two extracts reveal, however, the differences between communication

between people who are born in Bangladesh, used to operating in a diaglossic

context, and those born in the UK who are not.

5.4.2 Tense conviviality

Extracts 21 and 22, at the Whitechapel grocery store, and Gulabi's local café, are

examples of convivial communication without apparent tension. Speakers are using

their shared repertoires to get the business of communication done. However,

Williams and Stroud (see also Gilroy 2004) remind us that conviviality should not

always be considered harmonious but 'can be the outcome of tense interactions and

negotiated difference' (Williams and Stroud 2013:3).

In this sub-section I explore the communication practices between Sylheti and Bangla speakers further and I include some of the more tense interactions and negotiated differences in William's and Stroud's formulation.

In chapter 2, I discussed some of the language ideologies that position Sylheti and Bangla in unequal language hierarchies and that are deeply ingrained in the experiences and histories of Bangladesh. It should come as no surprise that the dominant ideologies of Bangla as the 'pure', 'correct' language of literature and education and Sylheti as a 'rural' 'uneducated' language continue to proliferate even in the UK. There were many instances in my data where both Bangla speakers and Sylheti speakers oriented to these hierarchies. Comments such as these from Abdul Hussain's were widespread: 'Theirs (Bangla), is more professional and we could say our language is a farmer's language'. Mizana, a Bangla speaker from Dhaka living in the UK for more than 20 years, said that when she first came to the UK and encountered Sylheti she had very strong negative feelings reflecting those widespread language ideologies. She said that hearing Sylheti felt like listening to swearing. She recalled 'I used to listen to Sylheti language, and my ear hurt like they are swearing like this.'

In my initial conversations with Shaj in 2020 she mentioned snobbery and prejudice on the part of some she knows towards Sylheti speakers. She talked about situations where she has observed Bangladeshi Italians speakers mock Sylheti speakers. She also talked about what she sees as reluctance of many Sylheti speakers to speak Bengali, preferring to speak in English. She said she had seen this in the primary school where she works as a midday meal supervisor and teaching assistant and

where her two younger children also attend. Sylheti speaking staff, she says, were reluctant to speak Bengali to the new migrant parents, even if the person they were speaking to was struggling. However, these experiences dated back to 2014 when she first arrived. Fast forward six or seven years and she describes translanguaging conversations at the school with her colleagues with people speaking both Sylheti and Bangla.

Blommaert (2013a: 3) reminds us, 'physical space is also social, cultural and political space: a space that offers, enables, triggers, invites, prescribes, proscribes, polices or enforces certain patterns of social behaviour: a place that is never no-man's-land, but always *somebody's* space'. This *somebody* has for generations been Sylheti speakers and the arrival of significant numbers of newcomers into the area with different Bangladeshi backgrounds and migration trajectories since circa 2013 has created change.

Della Puppa (2021) also explores some of these tensions in his interviews with 'Italian Bangladeshis'. His data showed a more significant rift between the two groups than my own data. He reports 'mistrust – sometimes a fully-fledged hostility between the 'newcomers' from Italy and the Bengali community established in London since generations' (ibid: 39). However, although the data presented in my project contains some evidence of these tensions, it is more of an undercurrent and less directly expressed.

Bilal, one of the stall holders mentioned tensions between the younger generation:

> The older generation who are actually used to speaking Sylheti and in
>
> English, obviously they're mixing up with them and they do speak like normal

Bangla language as well, but not the youngsters no, they don't like it, they don't like it, **they assume, people coming up taking over their places**.

However, this was one of the few moments where I heard tensions expressed directly. My data, however, are different from Della Puppa's in two significant respects. Firstly, my data were gathered in-situ on the street, in the space shared by the two groupings. I suggest that these in-situ interviews follow the tacit rules of interactions on the street and more generally reflect the more convivial atmosphere maintained there, regardless of underlying tensions (see Gilroy, 2004; Williams and Stroud, 2013).

5.4.2.1 Europeans' preference to speak Bengali

The data also revealed that the newcomers are bringing a preference for 'Bengali' in their interactions with other Bangladeshis, including Sylhetis, in public spaces. Bilal, the fruit and veg trader (see chapter 4) commented on this tendency to speak 'Bengali' as something new, a change in the habitual language practices he observes among his customers.

Extract 23

1.	**It changed a lot**
2.	before most of the people came in
3.	**as a Sylheti customer they used to speak in English**
4.	yeah
5.	but now as the customers have changed
6.	obviously they (..) the European people (..) the new people
7.	**just come straight away and they ask you questions in Bengali**
8.	**they're quite sure that you are Bengali ((laughs))**
9.	**so that's changed**
10	we ((self corrects)) myself (..) speaking less English nowadays

11.   because we have like like let's say 0.001% customer

12.   European or English or whatever

13.   there are less people coming in as our customer

Bilal's comments here point very clearly to an increase in 'Bengali' and a decrease in English. He suggests this decrease in English results from simultaneous changes in the population of the market. Firstly, he mentions a sharp reduction in, 'European or English' (line 12) customers, and here we can assume he is talking about non-Bangladeshis. Secondly, he points out that the Bangladeshi newcomers are likely to automatically speak Bengali based on perceived ethnicity of their interlocutors, related assumed proficiency in Bengali and an assumption of mutual comprehensibility. He contrasts this with Sylheti speakers who, he implies, will begin with English until they know the language preference of their interlocutors.

This preference for 'Bengali' is confirmed by Shaj in one of my first interviews with her illustrated below. She described the social pressure she felt to speak Bangla rather than English when out and about in Watney Market.

Extract 24

1.   Shaj: most of the time we talk Bengali

2.   Becky: at home?

3.   Shaj: Outside (..) some Bengali because there is lots of people in Bengali

4.   ((laughs)) **so you don't have option you know**

5.   you see if someone said in Bengali

6.   if I respose in English

7.   maybe they think I'm just showing something (..) no?

8.   most of the time outside with my friends and others

9.   **because there is a Bengali community (…)Bengali**

10.	Becky:	if someone talks in Bengali and you respond in English (..)tell me more
11.	Shaj:	it seems like you're showing something
12.		like you can talking English (..)
13.		maybe their English is not very good so they think another way
14.	Becky:	so they think maybe you're being superior or snobby or something?
15.	Shaj:	I (..) you know lots of the person not good at English
16.		so they feel like embarrassing or something
17.		so I don't want to embarrass someone else (..) you understand?
18.	Becky:	who are you talking about, which situations?
19.	Shaj:	like a man(..) I said there is a cafe bar so you know cafe bar
20.		there is lots of people around here
21.		so they talking (..) like **they're greeting in Bengali**
22.		**so I talk greeting in Bengali**
23.	Becky:	and you wouldn't speak in English there?
24.	Shaj:	((emphatic)) <u>no::</u>
25.	Becky:	any Italian?
26.	Shaj:	yeah they sometimes say ciao or come stai? *< hi-how are you?>*
27.		or something like that not very much (…)but sometimes
28.		((emphatic**)) they're talking in Bengali (..)**
29.		they prefer to talk in Bengali

In this extract Shaj, is quite emphatic about the preference for Bengali among the newcomers and in line 21/22, she describes it as a local shared practice, almost a tacit local code of conduct **'they're greeting in Bengali so I talk greeting in Bengali'.** In line 4 she recognises the power of this common code of practice. She says, **'you don't have option you know',** and her response, 'no:' in line 24 to whether English might be spoken is quite emphatic. Even though I probe a bit and ask her about English and Italian, she reiterates in line 23/24: **they're talking in Bengali, they prefer to talk in Bengali.**

In line 9 she says, they speak Bengali '**because there is a Bengali community'.** I am reminded that in Italy many Bangladeshis were fairly isolated from other Bangladeshis and, like Shaj and her family, did not live in multicultural and multilingual neighbourhoods. The existence of a large Bengali community was a big pull factor for many moving to London and that included being able to speak Bengali freely. King and della Puppa (2021) report similar findings. One of their respondents explained:

> We [Bangladeshis] came only recently to Italy ...so we are not a strong community there, whereas here in England, we are a big community, we are already at the third and fourth generations. This means that there are more advantages for us—our compatriots, our community, our food, our language, our culture, everything ... . Here, I feel more comfortable, more at home (ibid 412).

Therefore, in addition to difficulty speaking English, and the related feelings of embarrassment mentioned in line 16, there is also the feeling of freedom of going and about in a Bengali area. We saw this in the field note in section 5.2 which talks about Shaj feeling home-from-home. With this comes the choice to speak Bengali.

Additionally, something in Shaj's description of there is 'no option' in line 4 suggests an underlying power dynamic. Canagarajah (2022:7) points out that that speakers will make strategic selections from their repertoire in recognition of power differentials in situated contexts. Some of the selections here could suggest strategic awareness of the power dynamic between Sylheti and Bangla. when conversing with Sylheti speakers, Bangla speakers are selecting from a repertoire of two prestige languages, English and Bangla. By choosing Bangla they are requiring Sylheti speakers to speak Sylheti - a language perceived by the dominant culture as less

valuable and prestigious- or respond in Bangla, a language they may not speak or be less proficient in. Either of these situations allow the Bangla speaker to exert linguistic control in interactions. If English is used Sylheti speakers would often have the advantage over the newcomers, who may be struggling with proficiency in English and it may be perceived as face threatening. More data and analysis would be needed to understand this dynamic more fully but it is certainly one of the possible reasons behind the preferences highlighted in this section.[29]

5.4.3 Disruption of hierarchies

Alongside the 'tense conviviality' discussed in section 5.4.2, there was also some interesting evidence of a disruption of the hierarchies discussed above..

A chance conversation during one visit with a customer on the jewellery stall is revealing in this regard. I had been chatting with the stall holder, a Sylheti speaker from Sylhet, when she began browsing his stall. Overhearing our conversation, she joined in. The stall holder had been telling me that a lot of the Bangla speakers are now speaking Sylheti: 'basically everyone now used to speak Sylheti, most of them, even though Bangla, they learn also Sylheti, they every day hear the same language they can catch easily, so they know.' After mentioning similar points to others, for example the similarities between the language and the ease with which Sylheti can be incorporated, the customer made an additional interesting point.

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[29] Goglia's (2021) study points to different findings with regards to the younger generation of Bangladeshi Italians. He suggests that their preference is English with their Sylheti peers. However, it may be that in interactions in the market, the same young people are following local situated practice and speaking Bengali, although it seems more likely that my data apply mainly to older Bangladeshi Italians who were born in Bangladesh.

'It's because first generation that came to the UK was from Sylhet, and it took a long time for the others to arrive, by then we were well- established, with businesses and stuff that contribute a lot back home, **so it's like a respect as well**.'

Mr Khan, sari shop owner, made similar observations. He pointed out:

People from other districts have to respect. Sylheti has done a lot of work community wise, social base and they engage other community as well, and a lot of Sylheti doing charity work in Bangladesh.

This sense of respect for what Sylhetis have achieved in the UK is an important one that has brought complexity to dominant ideologies in which Sylheti speakers are positioned as inferior. As I outline in chapter 2, ideologies are an intrinsic element of repertoire and the dynamic between changing practices and interaction patterns discussed in this chapter also feed changing ideologies and vice versa. The UK context in which Sylheti has been the dominant variety of Bengali and where Sylheti speakers have been culturally embedded in UK life for generations is completely different from the Bangladesh context and the old language hierarchies, although still present, look very different. Sylheti and Bangla are enmeshed in sociolinguistic life in Bangladesh, but another set of circumstances in the UK creates a new set of connections, tensions, hierarchies, identities, social categories and language hierarchies. These are the circumstances to in which the newly arrived European migrants are part of changing practices and ideologies.

5.4.4 Bangla speakers trying out Sylheti; Sylheti speakers willing to adapt

The communication across Sylheti and Bangla and the proliferation of Bangla in the local area described in 5.4.2.1 is contributing to change in the sociolinguistic profile of the area. The arrival of Bangla speaking newcomers in significant numbers has

meant a perceived decrease in the amount of English spoken. Sylheti speakers find themselves speaking Sylheti or Bangla with their new Bangla-speaking neighbours, rather than English[30].

At first glance it may appear that this increase in Bangla may constitute a further threat to Sylheti in the area: a language caught between two more powerful high-status languages, Bangla and English. However, my data reveal more complexity and indicate that the arrival of Bangladeshi Italian newcomers may mean more rather than less Sylheti spoken, or an increase of Sylheti - Bangla translanguaging practices in what can be considered an expansion of local repertoires due to language contact.

A chat with the jewellery stall holder on Watney Market, reveals more about this expansion or broadening of repertoires. Originally from Sylhet, he has been in the UK since 2011 and he tells me he has mostly always spoken Sylheti on the market and that most of his customers are Sylheti speakers. Recently, he said, this was changing and that more Bangla speakers are picking up Sylheti.

Extract 25

1.	Trader:	basically everyone now used to speak Sylheti
2.		most of them (..) even though Bangla (..) they learn also Sylheti
3.		and they every day hear the same language
4.		they can catch easily(..) so they know
5.	Becky:	have you changed?
6.		or are you still speaking Sylheti in the same way?
7.	Trader:	I still speak Sylheti (..) I haven't changed
8.		but if like anyone speaks like in the Bengali language
9.		like the proper one(..) the book one (..) I can speak

---

[30] This observation does not relate to young Bangladeshi Italians who were born in Italy (see Goglia, 2021).

In our conversation he is very relaxed and says he can speak either Bangla (proper one..book one, line 9) or Sylheti (line 7). In line 1 he suggests it is Bangla speakers who are adapting when says 'basically everyone now is used to speak Sylheti, most of them, even though Bangla, they learn also Sylheti'. He gives the impression that he doesn't feel the need to adapt his own language choices too much.

This contrasts with Shohid's multilingual juggling in the café, which he presents as a source of pride.

> I proud is err everyone is err when is speaking with me is err their language is
>
> I understand and I answer with him with her.

Shohid's perspective is echoed by Mr Khan, a Sylheti speaker, at the sari shop just a bit further up the road from Caffe Italy. He talks about the changes he had noticed in how people speak in his shop and also alludes to his perception of responsibility as a shop keeper to accommodate customers by drawing on his full repertoire.

Extract 26

1. When someone coming to our shop (..) English people
2. we try to speak English
3. that's why some
4. we have to respect the customer
5. that's why other district people coming (.)
6. **we'll try to talking with the other district languages**
7. this is a little bit different
8. **before everyone Sylheti (…) talking Sylheti**
9. **now different**
10. **different different people coming**
11. **they are speaking different way**[31]

---

[31] In Sylheti and Bangla the verb to be is often understood from context rather than made explicit in the grammar as English. As a result many second language speakers do the same when speaking English, sometimes obscuring clarity in English. The above quote can be interpreted as 'Before everyone was Sylheti.. talking Sylheti. Now it's different. There are different people speaking in a different way'.

Like the other extracts Mr Khan points to a change in linguistic practices which are 'now different' (line 9). In fact he uses the work different no less than 5 times in this short extract. He also he expresses a sense of effort adapting to the newcomers 'we'll try to talking with the other district languages'. Overall the examples suggest effort and mutual adaptation and people trying to accommodate to a new situation.

5.4.5 Younger Sylheti speakers are learning 'suddho' for the first time

From the Sylheti perspective, Abdul Hussain and Gulabi, both born in the UK and confident Sylheti speakers, are only now learning 'suddho', or Bangla for the first time. Abdul Hussain, who works as an advice worker says he is now on a steep learning curve as his clients are often new migrants from Bangladesh, via Italy or other European countries, who do not speak English or Sylheti. He estimates his understanding of Bangla is now about 70% as opposed to 'barely any' when I first met him in 2020.

 Gulabi is also trying to learn some from her mum who speaks both languages and seeks more opportunities to speak to her mum's friend who is from Dhaka. She also talks about adapting her Sylheti to be able to speak with Bangla speakers. She talked about 'suddhifying' her Sylheti when talking to the Bangladeshi Italians who took over the management of her local café. According to Gulabi, this meant changing her Sylheti pronunciation to resemble the pronunciation of Bangla, and using certain lexical items. Neither Gulabi nor Abdul Hussain had been to Bangla complementary school as children, nor did they take GCSE at school as this has ceased to be a widespread practice in families. Their learning therefore is completely stimulated by contact with the new Europeans.

5.5 Discussion

The descriptions in this chapter, and particularly the observed and reported practices in the Caffe Italy, differ considerably from those outlined in chapter 4 at the other end of the market. Although both are multilingual and multimodal with smatterings of Arabic, one is dominated by Sylheti and English and the other by Bangla with smatterings of Italian and Arabic. Change has arrived on Watney Market and there is every indication that this is a long-term change with newcomers settled into new businesses, houses and habits.

During my conversations on Watney Market, certain aspects of social life and communication were foregrounded by the participants, the market traders and the passers-by. When I raised the topic of language, almost everyone I came into contact with referred directly to the newcomers, the Bangladeshi Italians and the mixing of the two communities and two languages. Of course, the opening for many of these conversations came from me and sometimes I was foregrounding this theme myself in the way I framed questions. Nevertheless, the question of internal diversity in the Bangladeshi diaspora was clearly of huge interest among the longstanding Watney Market residents I talked to.

The data revealed a tendency of the newcomers to draw on the degrees of 'mutual intelligibility' or familiarity between Sylheti and Bangla which allow them to opt for communication across perceived language boundaries. They were able to do this because the Sylheti speaking residents can adapt their own repertoires to accommodate this, both because there is often a degree of mutual intelligibility between all varieties of Bengali, and because many Sylheti speakers can also speak Bangla. The experiences of Bilal, the Dhaka fruit and vegetable stall holder along

with the Whitechapel grocer and his co-worker show that Sylheti and Bangla have always mixed to a certain extent. But the arrival of large numbers of Bangladeshi Italians points to a more intensified transformation of local repertoires.

6 'We've moved on'

6.1 Introduction

In chapters 4 and 5, I show that Sylheti is a crucial part of social life in Tower Hamlets, deeply embedded in the history but changing and adapting to new circumstances. The sociolinguistic vibrancy depicted in these chapters, however, contrasts sharply with common circulating discourses that point to serious concerns for the future vitality of Sylheti in Tower Hamlets and east London in general. Indeed, as I explained in chapter 1, this collaborative PhD was partly born out of this concern. All the participants oriented to it at some point during study and many kept returning to it.

Hoque (2015) discussed these concerns in relation to third generation Sylheti speaking young people and he concluded that maintaining knowledge of Sylheti or Bengali was very low down on the list of priorities for young people. This is in line with studies of generational language shift in diaspora contexts where third and fourth generations produce fewer speakers (Canagarajah, 2008:151; Sankaran, 2021: 125). There are also very specific conditions regarding the UK context where the dominant language English is also attached to global language ideologies as the language of educational and economic achievement. Canagarajah's (2008) study of language shift among Sri Lankan Tamil families in London, New York and Canada pointed to the relationship between Tamil and English as one of 'material inequality and ideological domination' (ibid: 172). In this context, he suggested: 'families face a superhuman struggle for language maintenance' (ibid). Hoque drew similar conclusions when he said that in the face of English, 'Bengali or Sylheti' just cannot compete (2015: 66).

However, the specific context of Sylheti in Tower Hamlets contains other crucial factors that support the continued existence of the vibrant Sylheti environment described in chapters 4 and 5. This includes a large population of Sylheti speaking residents in a specific geographic area and ongoing migration that continues to bring speakers of Sylheti, Bangla and other Bangladeshi languages to the UK. New migrants tend to want to settle in existing 'Bangladeshi' neighbourhoods, attracted by the pull of Bangladeshi oriented facilities, opportunities to speak Bangla and Sylheti, and feelings of belonging and safety to express their culture and religion. As I argued in chapter 5, even the influence of non-Sylheti Bangladeshi languages are important because they stimulate a multilingual environment.

In this chapter, I examine the complex concerns regarding language shift as they emerge in my data and consider the relationship between these worries and the future of Sylheti in Tower Hamlets.

6.1.1 Chapter orientation, data sources and texture

Chapters 4 and 5 addressed the research questions from the perspective of actual practices, both observed and reported, examining where and how Sylheti continues to be crucial on the local communicative landscape. Chapter 6 now focuses on participants' attitudes, either explicit or implicit, in the interview data. I draw predominantly on biographical interview and walking interview data with core participants and the people we chatted to during our walking interviews, rather than observation or recordings of actual practices. As a result, it strikes a more reflective note. I step back from the energy and vibrancy of everyday sociolinguistic life captured in other chapters, to reveal attitudes and ideologies. Drawing again on Shohamy and Waksman's orientation to linguistic landscape studies, 'what is seen,

what is heard, what is spoken, what is thought' (2009: 313), this chapter centres in on 'what is thought' (ibid).

The effect is to shift the analytical focus away from place towards people, although I acknowledge that in actual practice there is no such separation. As I begin this final empirical chapter, I am reminded of Blommaert's assertion (2013a: 82) that 'signs lead us to practices and practices lead us to people'.

Following this introduction, there are three main sections in this chapter, each divided into subsections. Section 6.2 highlights concerns that 'our language' is dying or will be lost for future generations and investigates how participants articulate these concerns. I examine how participants grapple with their worries and how language ideologies feed some of these concerns. In section 6.3 I consider changing attitudes to heritage language maintenance and the social and historical context in which these changes are occurring, including the relationship between language ideologies and everyday and structural racism. Section 6.4 examines changing attitudes to heritage language education and the relationship between this and young people's difficulties speaking Sylheti. In section 6.4 I also point forward to the future and address the question of what is next for Sylheti for the next generation, a question of pressing concern for many of the participants, both old and young.

6.2 Concerns about language loss

As I have already mentioned in the introduction, the worry about the new generation of children born in the UK losing access to Sylheti is salient in the data and oriented to by all the participants, as well as many people I met and chatted to during the period of fieldwork. The emphasis used by Abdul Hussain in the following quote is revealing: 'These kids cannot speak Bengali, to save their lives, no chance, they

cannot.' His use of three negatives and the idiomatic 'to save their lives' underscores the strength of his position.

When walking around Brick Lane we bumped into Abdul Hussain's friend Aysha, also in her early twenties. She talked about the younger generation in her own family:

> I got nieces and nephews and I feel like they won't speak any Bengali. So growing up I didn't speak the best Bengali but my nieces and nephews no, **I feel like they won't even speak Bengali.**

Here Aysha expresses the idea of language knowledge depleting with each generation. She judges harshly her own ability to speak Bengali, 'growing up I didn't speak the best Bengali' but she also uses this as measurement against which her nieces and nephews are performing comparatively worse. This reflects the idea of ever diminishing of language knowledge from second generation (Aysha) to the third generation (her nieces and nephews).

Earlier in the conversation she had also explained that as the youngest sibling in her family she spoke, 'the worst Bengali'. Aysha does not specify exactly what she means by the 'worst Bengali'. It is not clear if she is alluding to grammar, pronunciation, pragmatics, vocabulary or fluency. In fact, only one person alluded to one of these aspects specifically, giving an example of lack of knowledge of grammar and register. This was a relative of Abdul Hussain, who we bumped into and chatted to during our walking interview. She told us about her children aged 7, 13 and 16 and how they spoke Sylheti at home with their grandparents.

Extract 27

1. ok my older one (.)
2. when he speaks to my mother-in-law
3. he speaks in English he's 16 (..)
4. and I I <u>do</u> tell him off
5. I say talk to dadi *<gran>* in Bengali it's respectful (…)
6. and then he'll wind me up and speak to her in English
7. but when sh she does understand (..)English
8. but (.) erm when you see she's struggling (…) he does
9. but it's broken
10. So like he yeah heh *<he>* isn't a polite way
11. so .hh you wouldn't say to your dad heh *<he>*
12. ((laughing:)) would you?
13. so like my son like
14. he does cause he doesn't know
15. say if my mum called once
16. and she said where's your dad?
17. and he said heh bathroom-o (.)
18. he's in the bathroom
19. so they don't know that do they ((laughs))
20. like polite way unpolite way

Here Abdul Hussain's relative starts off by talking about her son's reluctance to speak Sylheti, something he will do only with his gran because he knows she struggles with English. The mum describes her son's Sylheti as 'broken' (line 9) and by this she means a lack of grammar knowledge and understanding of appropriate register. In the example she gives, although her son is making the effort to speak to his gran in Sylheti, he uses the very familiar pronoun form 'heh' which would not normally be appropriate for elders. She is talking about her son, but her use of 'they' in in line 20, indicates she is talking in more general terms about *all* young people.

Khalid also talks about young people's language practices. His suggestion that they speak 'mainly English' (line 8) implies mixed or translanguaging.

Extract 28

1. younger age groups
2. I doubt they speak much Bengali
3. it's mainly English
4. they might (…) you know
5. if you wanna speak about somebody else
6. or something they don't want anyone to understand
7. they might say a few words
8. but it's **mainly speaking English**

However, a chat to Abdul Hussain and his friend Aysha reveals that perceptions can be quite different: I ask them about how they talk with their friends.

Extract 29

1. Becky: in your friendship group, what are people speaking?
2. Aysha: mixed (..) but I'd say I speak more English
3. Abdul H: we actually have a have a separate group
4. with her and this other girl
5. and two of my boys (..)Rid and Omar
6. we have our own little small group
7. and I would say
8. even in that group
9. we do speak a lot of Bengali
10. Aysha: I'd say Mem speaks a lot of Bengali
11. Abdul H: Mem speaks a lot of Bengali..
12. I think even I do (..) I think

The conversation shows them trying to think through their language practices and it is clear from some of the language they used that they weren't sure. They used

some phrases that expressed uncertainty: *I'd say* (lines 2, 7 and 10) and repetition of *I think* (line 12). However, they appeared to agree that whatever the ratio of languages, a mix of English and Bengali was present in their regular day-to- day practice. Interestingly their evaluations related to *amount* of Bengali spoken rather than quality. This suggests that for this group their language choices are about identity and ideologies rather than concerns about language proficiency.

6.2.1 Mixing and translanguaging practices

In chapter 2, section 2.2.4, I highlighted studies that pointed to the frequency of language mixing with English and Sylheti. Canagarajah (2019) put forward the idea that language mixing is becoming enregistered, or established, as part of everyday communication in heritage languages. Talking about Sri Lankan Tamil, he argues that 'it is difficult to tease apart the HL[32] from the other languages. In fact, a good argument can be made that it is such mixed languages that might be considered the HL for diaspora participants' (ibid: 20). Although more research would be needed to make stronger claims with regards to my data, there are nevertheless interesting examples that appear to point towards this.

The following extract from a walking interview with Abdul Hussain can give a flavour of the kind of practices Abdul Hussain and Aysha talked about. We had just started and we were walking along a busy street getting warmed up for the walk ahead. Abdul Hussain had just been orienting me with some geographical locations and street names, when his phone rang:

Extract 30

1. Abdul H: ((phone rings)) hey FK khoy tui?

         <where are you?>

---

[32] Heritage Language

2.	Friend:	((other end of the phone line barely audible))
3.	Abdul H:	amar …Vallance Road
		<I'm on Vallance Road>
4	Friend:	((inaudible))
5.	Abdul H:	I'm kinda busy right now bro (…) where you going?
6.	Friend:	((inaudible))
7.	Abdul H:	are you actually? khar logeh? with Rid?
		<who with?>
8.		£100 ticket?
9.	Friend:	((only very faintly audible))
10.	Abdul H:	ah sick man sick man sick man…
11.		well that's a banger is it just the two of youz?
12.	Friend:	((faintly audible))
13.	Abdul H:	go on (…) I'm (…) with somebody now (…)
14.		give me a phone later ok?
15.	Abdul H:	if I don't speak to you (..) enjoy
16.		make sure you enjoy man
17.	Friend:	((inaudible))
18.	Abdul H:	OK bye bye bye
19.		((to me)) somebody was flogging £100 United
20		Old Trafford tickets for tomorrow
21.		one of my other friends just bought it

In the extract we can see smatterings of Sylheti words scattered throughout an animated conversation about football tickets. The conversation also incorporates standard and youth English (lines 10 and 11). In fact the whole conversation recalls Creese and Blackledge's description of practices in their study of complementary schools: 'their complex linguistic repertoires bear the traces of past times and present times, of lives lived locally and globally' (2011: 1206). The kind of mixing or translanguaging practices in this phone call could correspond to Aysha's description of their practices in section 6.2 which she suggests are 'mixed'
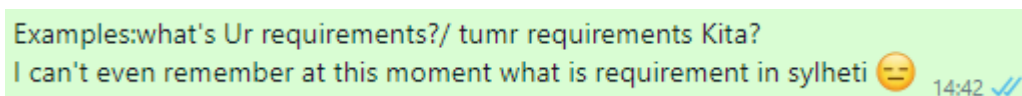
but 'more English' is spoken. Although Abdul Hussain describes himself as speaking a lot of Bengali, we know that 'self or other reports of [bilingual] language practice may not match observed conduct since many phenomena related to performance, like code switching, operate on a subconscious level' (Codó, 2008: 161). It is also the case that both practices and declarations about practices fluctuate and are context specific. In another interview, for example, Abdul also says he generally speaks 'mainly English with bits of Sylheti' which aligns perfectly with the football tickets phone call above.

Another aspect of language mixing in the data refers to what previous studies have called '*Banglish*' (Hoque, 2015:61), the incorporation of English words into Sylheti as if they were Sylheti words. Canagarajah (2019) also discusses this in his research into attitudes to Sri Lankan Tamil in diaspora contexts. He also found that mixing with English was very commonplace and he highlighted: 'the distinction between Tamil and English was fluid. English was closely meshed with Tamil, to the extent that it was treated as Tamil' (ibid: 27).

In my study English vocabulary meshed with Sylheti is similarly unmarked, often with Sylheti inflections or pronunciation and I found multiple examples of English used with Sylheti as if it were English. In the example in section 6.2 in which Abdul Hussain's relative talked about her son speaking to his gran, she highlights the register error he made in the phase 'heh bathroom-or'. She didn't mention his choice of the English bathroom because this is treated as Sylheti (cf. Canagarajah, 2019: 27) and as such is completely unmarked. It also has the Sylheti prepositional suffix 'or', he's *in* the bathroom. That it is hard to know whether 'bathroom' here is to be considered Sylheti or an aspect of enregistered translanguaging practices reflects the limitations of linguistic categorisations and language separation. Examples such

as these underpin the argument that Sylheti is often not separable from English and that such type of translanguaging practices are not just a result of situated language use but have been developed over generations of mixing (see chapter 2 section 2.2.4).

This unmarked mixing is also very common among expert Sylheti speakers in the UK and Sylhet (cf. Canagarajah, 2019 in relation to Sri Lankan Tamil). When I discussed this with a friend and English teacher in Sylhet, she gave me many examples similar to the one in Figure 20 below:

Examples:what's Ur requirements?/ tumr requirements Kita?
I can't even remember at this moment what is requirement in sylheti 😑 14:42 ✓✓

Figure 20 Personal WhatsApp message November 2023

I highlighted a similar example earlier in this chapter during the conversion about home tuition between Gulabi and the café owner in section 5.4.1 Gulabi is speaking in Sylheti but she uses some vocabulary in English: *quite rare, hard, tuition and important*. She says: '11+ exam beshi furrtain te kore na, quite rare… because 11+ ita hard asi, tuition-or important.'

<not many kids take the 11+ exam, it's quite rare. It's hard so it's important to get tuition>.

It is important to highlight here that Gulabi hasn't forgotten those words in Sylheti. Instead the words are incorporated into Sylheti *as if they were* Sylheti. There is also another example of the prepositional suffix, 'tuition-or'. Again these examples highlight the inadequacies of language naming, categorisation and separation. According to Canagarajah (2019) this challenge to linguistic purity affords opportunities for languages to adapt and grow in diaspora contexts, potentially allowing people to continue to maintain elements of linguistic heritage long after the

heritage language had ceased to be the dominant linguistic resource. He suggests:

'We can treat HL[33] as preserving its autonomy and status despite language contact

and mixing' (ibid: 4). I return to this later in the chapter when I discuss future

opportunities for Sylheti.

6.2.2 The struggle for intergenerational language transmission in families

In this subsection I explore how participants are grappling with why the younger

generation are somehow failing to pick up Bengali or Sylheti. Although there appear

to be consensus among them that Sylheti use is declining, the data reveal a range of

sometimes contradictory positions regarding why this might be. Additionally, most

participants, interestingly especially the younger ones, expressed frustration and

disappointment that Sylheti might disappear, but there were varying degrees of this.

Some expressed the idea of inevitability and other grappled with the possible

reasons for the decline.

Participants with children such as Joy, Khalid and Amena all speak of how hard it is

to maintain Sylheti as the language of the home, when everyone is so tired and busy

with their everyday lives and when children do not seem to want to make the effort.

Joy, who himself is a keen advocate of Sylheti and Bangla maintenance, expresses

some of the difficulties parents face when tasked with passing the language to their

children.

> My kids picking up English very quicky seven and three. I am trying.. not trying..
> I need to try a little bit harder to basically install Bangla in them from an early
> age. But it's a struggle. At the moment, it's a predominantly English-speaking
> household (Joy, biographical interview September 2020).

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[33] Heritage Language

Joy's characterisation of keeping Sylheti going within a family as 'a struggle' will be a familiar one to many multilingual families. We can sense his dissatisfaction with himself and it is as if he scolds himself about not trying hard enough, 'I am trying, not trying…I need to try a little bit harder.' Canagarajah comes across similar results in his ethnographic data of Sri Lankan Tamil language maintenance. He points out that 'the data show how families can be self-critical of their failure, or acknowledge the importance of the family for transmitting mother tongue, and yet fail to act according to their beliefs' (2008: 173).

Abdul Hussain's friend Aysha (see section 6.2) highlights that even in predominantly Sylheti speaking households, it is still hard. She too alludes to the notion of effort and struggle as well as the sense that Sylheti just can't compete with English.

> We speak Bengali at home to communicate with our parents, but if my sister is fluent in English and then school's English, her vocab in Bengali is very low and I feel like you have to put a lot of effort in to make them fluent in Bengali, so I feel like over the generations that Bengali language will kind of die down, our generation if we have kids (Aysha in Abdul Hussain's walk September 2021).

As we discuss the issue Abdul Hussain, himself a young third generation British Sylheti who does speak Sylheti, tries to understand the difficulties.

> But I can't even put my finger on what that is. even in households where both parents are from Bangladesh and they can't. Their kids. Actually no….I think the case may be there's a lot more modern parents now (Abdul Hussain- biographical interview).

Here he suggests that the cause of the difficulties achieving intergenerational language transmission faced by Sylheti families are due to families being 'modern'. Abdul Hussain's focus on 'modern parents' in the comments above appear to allude

to families where both parents are busy, perhaps going out to work, with less time to focus on duties traditionally thought of as the mother's responsibility, including heritage language transmission. Chowdhury's case study of two young second-generation Bangla speaking women, also highlights the gendered aspect of heritage language transmission. He points out that both his participants associate their use of Bangla with 'an affectionate relationship with their mother' (Chowdhury, 2016: 486) and he suggests that despite the general pattern of shift towards English, heritage language is often maintained through the role of the mother (ibid). Abdul Hussain's comment about 'modern' families, alluded to the changed status of women as busy workers and the resulting increased difficulty of providing enough exposure to Sylheti in the home environment. This theme was taken up by Ruby whose 2017 book, *Family Jigsaws*, highlighted the role of grandparents in heritage language transmission. She described how - while the mothers were busy juggling the household, jobs and liaising with schools and other agencies - the grandparents were able to spend time with children, providing that link to language and culture from Bangladesh.

Another project, 'Stories from Home' (Burns, 2021) (see section 2.4.4) consisted of a series of short films based on stories grandparents told to their grandchildren in various languages, including Sylheti and Bangla. These projects consider the role of language in young people's lives at the interface between gender and social class and perhaps also generational changes affecting working cultures and practices. They highlight the importance as well as the difficulty of simply finding time in busy lives to focus on language. With many parents out at work during the day and fewer families living in traditional extended family units where children are in daily contact with Sylheti speaking grandparents, the work or the struggle to pass on the language

cannot rely on the home alone. It must extend out into shared social life outside the home.

6.3 'We've moved on'

6.3.1 We've moved on - from a difficult past

The idea of 'we've moved on' was most fully articulated by Khalid, who used the same expression multiple times throughout interviews. It emerged in different forms throughout the dataset, and it was a concept that kept coming up again and again. There are many complexities contained in this idea of moving on, which I draw out in this section. I focus my analysis on three connecting threads that emerge in the data. First of all, the sense that people have moved on or want to move on from a difficult past. Secondly, as well as ongoing migration from Sylhet and other parts of Bangladesh, there is a solid British-Sylheti foundation that has been fully established in Tower Hamlets for many generations - meaning Sylhetis should be considered the 'hosts'. Finally, I explore the idea that people are moving away from Sylheti or 'Bengali' and the implications of this.

All of these factors have implications for attitudes to Sylheti as a language and attitudes to participants' own repertoires and those of people around them. Sylheti speakers are now hosts in a multilingual area and this means managing a repertoire of linguistic and communicative resources where Sylheti co-exists alongside other languages and communication resources.

The phase 'we've moved on' seemed to sum up a feeling that emerged predominantly among the older participants - Khalid and Joy and Ali - and I felt it captured some of the particularity of their experience. All three men were born in

Bangladesh but had moved to the UK as children along with their families in the 1980s. They had suffered the harshness of 1980s and 1990s Tower Hamlets where overt and often violent racism was part of everyday life. The history of this period and the multiple hardships of racism, poverty, work and housing insecurity endured by that first generation of Bangladeshi migrants and their children has been written about by many of the authors I have drawn on in this thesis (*inter alia* Wemyss, 2009; Ullah and Eversley 2010; Hoque, 2015, 2018; Raychaudhuri, 2018; Begum, 2022) and it forms an important backdrop to my own and any study of Tower Hamlets.

There is no single study about Tower Hamlets that does not mention the racist murder of Altab Ali, a young textile worker, on his way home from work. Altab Ali's murder is widely thought to have been the catalyst for widespread anti-racist mobilisations on 1970s and 80s (see Wemyss 2009, Hoque 2015 and 2018, Four Corners, 2022). The struggles of this time, including the murder of Altab Ali, were also recently incorporated into three-part documentary 'Defiance: Fighting the Far Right' (2024), which tracked the fightback against the appalling racism South Asian migrants and their families were subjected to in 1970s and 80s Britain. Most of these sources report that racism has become less overt since those turbulent times in which anti-racists were forced to physically defend neighbourhoods from the far right. Raja Miah, writing as part of the 'Brick Lane 1978: a turning point' archive, film and photography exhibition, which was a collaboration between Four Corners and Swadhinata Trust, talks about the moment people started to fight back against the horrific racism endured for too long:

> Four decades have passed since the death of Altab Ali. Today a new generation confronts different forms of racism and anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination. Recently a Bengali anti-racist activist labelled the death of

Altab Ali as "our George Floyd moment". The death of Altab Ali was a clarion call to the Bengali community to rise up and protest against the racist violence they faced. It is recognised as the turning point in the political awakening of the community, and made the slogan 'Here to Stay, Here to Fight', a reality (Raja Miah in Four Corners, 2022: 32).

Raychaudhuri (2018: 47) also points to this moment as pivotal, arguing that the murder of Altab Ali has been, 'nostalgically mobilised to represent the process through which British Asians are able to reclaim an alternative narrative of history as important and defining, thus constructing distinctive models of British Asian identity'. But of course, the spectre of racism has not disappeared. It has evolved and taken on other forms, especially Islamophobia since 9/11 (see Ahmed 2005; Wemyss. 2009). The rise of Islamophobia in the UK and worldwide has hugely impacted on how Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets are positioned and position themselves and Sylheti Bengalis, as predominantly Muslims, again found themselves on the front line having to fight back. Despite the difficulties and suffering of this time there is the sense that the foundations for defending against these attacks were more solid, thanks to the legacy of hard-won battles of the 1970s and 1980s.

Talking about racism, Abdul Hussain explains how he feels living in Tower Hamlets: 'You feel more accepted because it's a Muslim dominated area'. This notion is also explored by Ahmed (2005) who, talking about the wave of anti-Muslim violence that took place after 9/11, argues 'the residents of Tower Hamlets were to a large degree able to insulate themselves from such attacks drawing on the protective force of the large Muslim community' (ibid 2005: 206).

Moving forward to 2022, most of the participants did not refer directly to racism or linguistic discrimination. The following extract from a conversation with Amena, illustrates this. I had asked her whether she had ever suffered language

discrimination when speaking Sylheti at the primary school, when dropping off her children.

Extract 31

1. **Becky**: in the school when you're outside chatting in your group
2. do you feel comfortable?
3. **Amena:** yes comfortable because **nobody looking**
4. **Becky:** so you don't feel judged? nobody is thinking what are they doing?
5. **Amena:** <u>No::</u>

Amena reported feeling comfortable speaking Sylheti at the playground during school drop offs, 'because nobody looking' (line 3). Amena arrived from Sylhet 10 years ago, and so in a sense she is reaping the benefits of the hard-fought battles or as Raychaudhuri highlights the 'fights that had to be fought in order to be able to create a British Asian community, to create spaces where people could belong as British Asians' (2018:17). Amena's emphatic dismissal of the idea that she might experience hostility at the school gates, communicated by an elongated vowel sound as she says 'no' in line 5, is in stark contrast with some of the witness accounts of the 1970s and 80s (see *inter alia* Hoque, 2015; Four Corners, 2022; Begum, 2022). It should also be mentioned that the school her children attend is in Bow, far away from the traditional Bangladeshi 'safe zone' of Spitalfields and Banglatown. Later I discussed this with Khalid who outlined a number of factors he thinks have led to people 'moving on' from the racism of the 1970s, 1980s and 90's.

Extract 32

1. They are not getting abused now (..)
2. working class white people have accepted *it's their language*
3. *they're not saying anything to me (.) they're just talking*

4. and I think there's a general acceptance of other people (..) other cultures

5. and we have to get on with it in terms of social housing and so on (…)

6. and I think you know ehm you come out on your doorstep

7. and you see a person with hijab and whatever

8. and you're not fearful of that person anymore

9. because you see that person going to school every day with you as well

10. you're taking your child to school and so are they

11. that fear factor (…)

12. some of the working-class white people have moved east

13. so if they didn't like what they (….) what the neighbourhood is (..)

14. the people living in their blocks (...) they've moved on

15. and some people who might not like it

16. they're stuck (.) they got no choice (.) but some people (..)

17. their kids have grown up with Bangladeshi and Somali kids.

Here, Khalid presents a distilled but complex account of changes to everyday racism He highlights his perception of a reduction in overt language discrimination in line 2 (white people have accepted, "it's their language") and in line 4 he talks about a general acceptance. He makes similar comments regarding Islamophobia in lines 7 and 8 (you see a person in hijab and you're not fearful of that person anymore). Importantly, he does not suggest that he thinks there is no longer racism to contend with and he makes it clear that racism has not simply disappeared but has been driven out, 'white people have moved east if they didn't like what the neighbourhood is (lines 12-14)' and 'some people might not like it, they're stuck, they got no choice' (lines 15 and 16). He also highlights the importance of shared social experience, 'you're taking your child to school and so are they'. These examples align with other studies that represent Tower Hamlets as a place that has fought back against racism and this fight back has enabled a certain amount of 'moving on' to take place, allowing people to get on with their lives with a degree of normality.

Khalid's account recalls the discussion of 'heterotopias in chapter 2, section 2.3.5.

As in Gilroy's (2004) formulation of conviviality, heterotopias are not simply racism

free zones, or idyllic places of equality, but places where difference is negotiated,

often through 'tense interactions' (Williams and Stroud, 2013:3). This is important as

it gives weight and credit to struggle. In chapter 2, I cited Wang and Lamb (2024:14)

who emphasised that heterotopias: 'Conjure up a space of difference and a space of

negotiation, in which diverse discourses, experiences and pursuits are brought

together to be represented, contested and reversed, creating an opportunity of

becoming'. Similarly Raychaudhuri (2018) highlights the political potential of

heterotopias, where moments of on-the-ground resistance of the type implied by

Khalid in extract 32 above, also point forward to a better future.

6.3.2 Tower Hamlets as heterotopia

The rise of linguistic racism post Brexit has been well documented in the press and

social media with numerous reports of ways in which multilingual communities

around the country have been targeted with 'speak English' taunts and anti-

multilingualism graffiti. For example, in February 2020, anonymous poster was put

up at the entrance to a Tower Block in Norwich to celebrate 'Brexit Day'. The poster,

which was widely reported in the press, stated, 'We do not tolerate people speaking

languages other than English in the flats' (see Schmid, 2020). However, this did not

emerge as a key theme in my data and there was no evidence that people feel

prevented by such taunts to limit speaking Sylheti when out and about. This

underscores the 'Tower Hamlets as heterotopia' argument (see chapter 2, section

2.3.5, 2.3.1). Like Amena, most participants reported feeling free to speak Sylheti

without constraints. Farhad, talking about life in neighbouring Newham also commented:

Extract 33

1. yeah I love it a lot
2. it feels very (..)
3. it feels homely
4. even though I never really grew up in that kind of
5. yeah
6. I don't feel like people are going to judge me here
7. or look at me or whatever
8. as I would in like a white area

(Farhad walking interview Green Street March 2021).

A clear sense of Tower Hamlets (and neighbouring Newham) as 'a place where you can speak Bengali' as Mr Kahn states in chapter 4, emerged very strongly. Cooke et al (2018) reported similar findings in their work with first generation ESOL students in the aftermath of tensions rising from the Brexit referendum in 2016. They found that Bangladeshi migrants felt constrained when using Sylheti or Bangla only when they were *outside* of Tower Hamlets. They reported 'although many students agreed that as Londoners, they felt part of the multicultural realties of London life and comfortable with their multilingual identities and practices, when travelling outside of London to smaller towns and areas where monolingual white British people were in the majority, their experiences were less positive. Some said they felt uncomfortable, and some had had experiences of hostility' (2018:19). As part of the same project similar data were collected in South London but here however the migrants reported unbearable levels of language-based hostility and discrimination that affected their ability to lead comfortable day-to-day lives. Again, we see Tower Hamlets offering

'safety in numbers' (Ahmed, 2005: 207) in the face of the post Brexit anti-migrant backlash.

6.3.3 Linguistic racism

Alongside the sense of a 'Tower Hamlets heterotopia' emerging from the dataset, it was also clear from participants' comments that any protections afforded by this were limited. Participants reported experiences of structural racialised inequalities applied to language use, especially in employment and education contexts. For example, Abdul Hussain talked about the success he had in job applications after changing his name to a more 'white sounding' name. He explained:

Extract 34

1. do you know how hard it is
2. to get a job with Abdul in your name?
3. it's very hard
4. so hard that I actually requested (…)
5. I changed my name
6. even like I once worked agencies (…)
7. and stuff where I was working
8. but I always like (…) applying like for a job and
9. just to see if I can get it
10. I'm telling you
11. as soon as I have a different name
12. I got <u>wa:::y </u>more phone calls
13. just one name

The emphasis in lines 10 'I'm telling you' and in line 12 the elongation of the vowel in way indicate that even Abdul Hussain was surprised by the racism embedded in employment practices.

Other examples across the data revealed a reluctance to speak Sylheti at work. All the participants who worked in office-type jobs stated that Sylheti was not acceptable in the workplace. Omar's description of his language practices in the bank where he worked reveal the tacit language policies that exist in workplaces which reproduce and are reproduced by dominant language ideologies that place certain languages in hierarchies of value.

Extract 35

1.	**Omar:**	at work is 100% English……it was always English
2.		it's the professional atmosphere
3.		we cannot, we're not allowed to speak any other lingo
4.		apart from English
5.	**Becky:**	you're not allowed to? is that like written in the contract or -
6.	**Omar:**	it wasn't really in the contract
7.		but that's what they would say you know
8.		please er speak in English and stuff like that
9.		it wasn't written in the contract
10.		so we we take it as we're not allowed
11.		and there is I mean when you're in that kind of atmosphere
12.		ehm then you don't want to speak in another language
13.		or it doesn't come up
14.		so if you're speaking like for example at work
15.		I go and speak Bengali all day ((corrects himself)) English all day
16.		and one Bengali guy came in, my words doesn't come out
17.		you're just so used to speaking in that language constantly
18.		and then one word doesn't (…) it just ehm doesn't' happen

Badwan (2021: 32) explains that this kind of structural racism, 'directs individuals to invest in certain languages, it degrades the value of other languages and their speakers, and it creates new types of social divisions which are configured based on access to the language that dominates the market'.

Even in larger shops which were more corporate, the constraints were much more apparent. For example, data collected during an in-situ interview in the Canary Wharf business and shopping complex, show that Sylheti speaking workers tended to speak English the majority of the time. Joy, talking about his language practices at work said:

> Very seldom would I engage in a Bengali ((self corrects)) Bangla Bangla[34] conversation (Joy walking interview).

He added that Sylheti was used only in fleeting moments of banter or during specific times of the day such as before opening time when there were no customers (interview with Joy).

Rosa and Flores' (2015; 2017) work on 'the white listening subject' can be usefully applied to these examples. They use this term to describe contexts in which speakers use ways of communicating that unconsciously address an 'idealised monolingual white speaking subject' (Rosa and Flores, 2015) (cf. Bakhtin's 1981 notion of super-addressee). This creates the tacit expectation that people adapt their speaking practices to perform to what they know to be expected by the dominant white culture. The Watney Market described in chapter 4 and 5 appears to be considerably less influenced by the 'white listening subject' with language resources appearing to circulate more freely.

Redclift et al's work explores this expectation of linguistic performance from another angle. Their argument highlights what they call 'the burden of conviviality', which relates to the emotional work that racialised minorities and specifically Muslims in their study have to do in everyday interactions in order to make themselves 'appear unremarkable' (ibid) to the white majority. This includes speaking English (2022:

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[34] Here he could be talking about Bangla or Sylheti

1171). Similarly to the studies mentioned in section 6.3.1, they highlight Tower Hamlets as a place where Bangladeshis felt some protection from this burden. They suggest that for those participants used to travelling frequently outside Tower Hamlets, for work for example, the sense of Tower Hamlets as a place of relative safety is felt more keenly (ibid 1171). The link between racism, linguistic racism and language maintenance is of course a complex one with multiple layers. The successes of anti-racist struggles in Tower Hamlets do appear to have afforded some level of protection from the everyday racist attitudes that multilingual speakers across the UK frequently report. The vibrant Sylheti and Bangla speaking hubs in Whitechapel and Watney Markets are a good example.

However, there are of course no such protections against discourses of racism and linguistic hierarchies diffused nationally through social and mainstream media, emboldened by the comments of the mainstream and far right in political discourse, embedded in policy through the hostile environment and so on (see chapter 1). Even in Tower Hamlets, structural inequalities embedded in the world of work, where participants highlighted clearly the pressure to perform to the 'white listening subject' are inescapable.

6.3.4 We've moved on - we're the hosts now

The second sense of 'moving on' relates to Sylhetis becoming 'hosts. Again Khalid's analysis in the following extract is revealing.

Extract 36

1. I think the whole community **has moved on**
2. er I think you look for someone in an office(..)
3. I remember back in the days
4. when someone actually
5. worked in Tower Hamlets Council (…) a Bengali person

6. and it's like wow

7. or an admin person

8. *and you take your mum to translate and you think*

9. *ok one of ours there*

10. *and I guess there you probably spoke*

11. *cause you could explain to that person*

12. *but now I can (..) do you see..*

13. *I don't nee:d that person on the other side*

14. *and there's hundreds of them working there*

15. *so that I think has changed (..)*

16. and again I think it was just us

17. **we were thinking about us then**

18. **now (..) you know**

19. **we think about the other communities**

20. **because we're the...**

21. I don't know (…) as a community obviously we've been here longer

22. so we look at the new communities

23. and we need to accommodate them and try to help them

24. so we (..) and we understand that they not speaking English

25. and try to help them and translate for them or know

26. we know that they're broken (..) English

27. interestingly I was at my daughters ehm school on Wednesday

28. and they had this maths

29. they're teaching maths differently

30. trying to pick up a Singaporean method

31. where its pictorial and more reasoning behind the maths[…]

32. I was sitting next to (..) it must be a Syrian or Moroccan lady

33. and she obviously couldn't understand

34. what the person was asking us to do

35. they asked us to do a little maths question

36. so I had to sort of explain to her in **broken**.

37. so that's the sort of experiences we've had

38. that I think as a community **we've moved on.**

The picture painted here by Khalid is one of language facilitator, of citizens with multilingual sensibilities drawing on all their linguistic, semiotic and embodied resources to help out newcomers. He highlights his perception of the move from the more insular protective mode of the first generations having to deal with a multitude of hardships and hostilities, to an openness and outward focus. Although he doesn't use the word 'host', the trailing sentence in line 20 evokes the idea. He presents an image of hosts as welcoming and helpful, even in cases where there is no shared language code. In the example above, we see Khalid explain that he speaks 'broken' (line 36) to help her out. He is using a simplified English to communicate and explain, a register that is familiar to him from speaking to many non-proficient speakers of English, one which he identifies as part of his own linguistic repertoire although this would not appear in any lists of named languages. Additionally, although he doesn't make this explicit, his description of the context implies use of visuals and gesture as communication resources. He rounds off his anecdote with the phrase, 'we've moved on', encapsulating again the idea that the days when Bangladeshis were struggling to communicate and find their place of belonging are firmly in the past.

Extract 37 below highlights a similar sensibility. Moni, who works as a receptionist in a voluntary organisation, tells me about her efforts to use all her communication resources when needed. This includes language mixing. This welcoming of new migrant communities in the area is very different from Redclift's 'burden of conviviality' and suggests something more similar to solidarity resulting from personal experiences. This recalls the willingness seen in chapter 6 to accommodate to the newly arrived Bangladeshi Italian migrants.

Extract 37

1. we do have clients who is like
2. sometimes they can't speak
3. they can't understand Sylheti and they can't understand English
4. so that time I kind of talk to them in Bengali
5. but I'm not perfect (...)
6. sometimes if there is people Indian or Pakistani
7. I can understand a bit of Hindi
8. this is when I struggle (..) I feel I can't even say this
9. sometimes I mix a lot of English
10. and if they don't understand me I say
11. you know what? (…)
12. you need an interpreter ((laughs))

The picture painted here, similar to Khalid's example, shows a certain sensibility and understanding of difficulties of new migrants and the need to help and support. The idea of using language to help and support was very common across the whole dataset: in reference to new migrants as in these examples but also in reference to Sylheti elders.

Aysha, Abdul Hussain's friend met earlier in the chapter explained:

My choice is to speak English, but if I see someone like my parents age and I know they're finding it a bit more uncomfortable to speak English then I would cater for that, but in general I would speak English (Aysha-walking interview with Abdul Hussain September 2021).

Even in the corporate spaces described earlier where the 'burden of conviviality' weighed heavily and the 'white listening subject' loomed large, the need to help an elder took precedence.

Joy who very strictly adhered to the English at work code, highlights his commitment to use language to make people feel comfortable.

> Yeah we get plenty of elderly people err or Bengali elders and just by looking at them you know they'll struggle with language. I tend to approach them and start talking in the village Bangla and they start feeling much more comfortable (Joy).

A sense of responsibility to others, especially elders, emerges from this section, and this provides another layer of complexity to the perhaps overly simplistic binaries of linguistic heterotopia (section 6.3.1.) and white listening subject /burden of conviviality (section 6.3.2.). Embedded in this responsibility is perhaps another super-addressee (Bakhtin, 1981) that of the elder. But reflected in my data is also a sense of responsibility to newcomers, including migrants of all backgrounds. For example Khalid stressed that although the Osmani Trust preferred to present itself as an English-speaking organisation, this was less to do with the notion that English is the language of professionalism, and more to do with notions of inclusivity with wanting all communities to be able to access the services, and the understanding that English is the local lingua franca. These are new terms of reference within Gilroy's 'cultures of conviviality' in which is not about interactions between the white population and non-white migrants but with new categories of difference (Gilroy, 2004).

The examples I have presented here show a sense of welcome and social responsibility to the newcomer. I do not, however, want to present an idealised account of harmonious conviviality and solidarity among Bangladeshis. There are plenty of well documented accounts, anecdotally and in the media and social media evidence that point to exploitation of newcomers *vis a vis* housing and employment for example. Although these did not appear in my data it would be misguided to

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imply only positive experiences. Nevertheless, there is clearly no comparison between the welcome received by the newcomers to Tower Hamlets in 2020s and that received by the those first generations of Sylhetis.

The expression 'we've moved on' is complex and multilayered and is connected in different ways to developing language ideologies and attitudes to Sylheti. It is a phrase that implies a welcome departure from past struggles. Embedded within Khalid's comments is the idea that Sylheti speakers no longer need Sylheti in the same way as they used to. People are comfortable with English now. This suggests recognition of the inevitability of language shift in diaspora contexts, and that this marks the passage of time. If 'moving on' means not needing to speak Sylheti any longer then this adds to the sense that Sylheti may not be as accessible to younger generations. This is in tension with the desire to keep the language and culture alive.

6.4 The role of language education

The final section in this chapter explores changes in attitudes to language education and the role of language education for the future of Sylheti, along with how Sylheti could take a more central role in language education in Tower Hamlets. In this section I argue that the depletion of the once vibrant network of Bengali complementary schools in Tower Hamlets over the last 10-15 years has contributed to the new generations' drift away from Sylheti.

However, at the same time I also point out that the reduction in traditional Bangla classes may also be providing openings for a new model of 'Sylheti' language education, one focused on oracy and communication skills and digital literacy practices rather than standard models of Bangla language and literacy.

6.4.1 The affordances of Bengali language education for Sylheti

Although traditional Bangla complementary schools concentrated on literacy skills in the standard language, Bangla, rather than spoken Sylheti skills (cf. Blackledge and Creese, 2010; Lytra, 2011), they nevertheless had a positive impact on Sylheti. Literacy classes in Bangla reinforced oral proficiency in Sylheti due to the many shared lexical and grammatical features of the two languages. In addition, Sylheti was often the language of informal chat in these classes and Sylheti students, who were in the majority, were able to connect with other Sylheti speaking students outside the home. Additionally, the teachers were also mostly Sylheti speaking, and although many brought with them normative ideas based on standard language ideologies (see Blackledge and Creese, 2008 and cf. Lytra, 2011) teachers were sometimes

more flexible when it came to the practicalities of classroom talk (see Blackledge and Creese, 2008:546).

6.4.2 The decline of traditional Bengali classes

However, it seems that many UK based Sylhetis have 'moved on' from Bangla classes which were once so important for the upkeep of Bangladeshi heritage and language in the UK, and which formed an important part of maintaining linguistic and cultural links to Bangladesh. Enrolling children into Bangla classes now appears to be the exception rather than the rule. The younger participants in my project, Gulabi and Abdul Hussain, had never been to Bengali classes and none of the older participants currently send their children to classes, nor do they encourage them to take Bengali as a language option at school. Neither of Gulabi's younger siblings had

chosen the available Bengali option at their secondary school, selecting Spanish instead.

The following extract from my field notes shows a conversation with Gulabi and her younger brother Raja about their language options at school.

Extract 38

> Both Gulabi and Raja told me they were learning Spanish at school. They could have opted for Bangla GCSE but neither had considered it. Both told me this was because they already spoke Sylheti pretty well and they thought learning Spanish would give them something extra, another international language which might be useful in the future. Gulabi focussed more on the positives of choosing Spanish, but I was struck by Raja's perspective which was more about the negatives of opting for Bengali. He told me he 'didn't really want to learn Dhakaiya' (a variety of Bangla). He also said that some of his Sylheti friends had chosen Bengali GCSE because they 'didn't know it was Dhakaiya' and he added that actually he would have wanted to improve his Sylheti, rather than learn Dhakaiya (field notes May 2020*).*

In the conversation described above, Raja questions why he would be motivated to learn the standard Bangla rather than improve his Sylheti. He did not follow the view expressed in chapter 6 by the Whitechapel grocer's that this is, 'Bengali language anyway' (see section 5.4.1) but made it clear that he considered Sylheti and 'Dhakaiya' to be completely different languages. His suggestion that some of his friends 'didn't know' and had found themselves unexpectedly learning a completely new language perhaps illustrates the confusion that can be created by the frequent use of the name 'Bengali' to mean Sylheti, or it reflects the view of their parents' multilingual perspective that the languages are the same or very similar. His comments also reveal the struggles of British born Sylheti speakers having to navigate the complexities of speaking a heritage language, without knowing the

associated script. Gregory and Williams outlined some of the difficulties of Sylheti children in the UK in their (2000) longitudinal ethnography of literacy practices across generations in Tower Hamlets:

> 'Bangladeshi British children are similarly learning classical Arabic at their Qur'anic class but in addition are learning to become literate in standard Bengali, while at home they speak Sylheti' (2000:7).

This complicated mix appears to be challenged by young people such as Raja, but also by Sylheti families who are removing Bangla language and literacy from the list of things to learn. There is a sense that it is no longer useful to day-to-day life nor for future aspirations.

A similar story can be found in the local further education college, just 10 minutes from Watney Market. In a conversation with the Bangla GCSE teacher there in 2022, he informed me that not one of his (albeit small) cohort that year came from a British Sylheti family, all were from Dhaka. The following extract from my field notes captures this conversation.

Extract 39
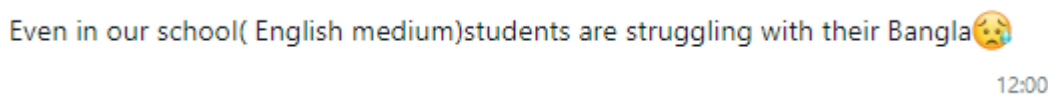
> I had an interesting chat with S. about the Bengali GCSE at college. He told me he has a small cohort of GCSE students, some newly arrived from Bangladesh, mainly from Sylhet and Dhaka, and some from Italy. He also told me he had *never* had a British Sylheti student take the GCSE. He did point out that he thought that in mainstream schools there may be some British Sylheti students taking it, but in college the cohort were already struggling with their core subjects and many considered Bengali a luxury, or even a 'useless' subject (field notes, May 2022).

This decline in interest in Bengali language classes can be partially explained by the notion of 'we've moved on' explored in this chapter. There is the sense that it is no longer useful either here or for returning to Bangladesh. Interestingly, even in Bangladesh, language ideologies that correlate proficiency in English to economic advantage and career opportunity are increasingly dominant. During a trip to Bangladesh in 2022, I made the following observations in my field diary.

> I have noticed that younger middle-class people we chat to who have attended EVS[35] or EMS[36] do indeed speak English very well. However, one young student, a friend's son, who had attended an EVS complained that his final school leaving result had been brought down by a low Bangla score. As well as being schooled in English, he and his younger brother watch Netflix in their free time, Korean drama with English subtitles, post on Instagram in English and speak Sylheti at home with parents. So unsurprisingly Bangla does not play a prominent role in their lives. Exposure is limited and day to day language practices are dominated by Sylheti and English and literacy practices in English (field diary, Sylhet, December 2022).

Later a friend of mine who works as a teacher in and English Medium School expressed her concerns about the decline of Bangla among children in Sylheti.

Even in our school(English medium)students are struggling with their Bangla😓
12:00

Figure 21 WhatsApp message from a teacher in Sylhet

How far this increase in the status of English as the language of prestige in Bangladesh has influence on the language priorities in diaspora contexts is beyond

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[35] English version schools- Bangladesh curriculum taught in English
[36] English medium schools- UK curriculum taught in English

the scope of my project but it nevertheless is plausible that these ideologies give weight to the increased perception of the irrelevance of Bangla in the UK.

However, I suggest that there are two additional factors that explain the downtown of Bangla education in the UK: competition with other forms of supplementary education, and the effects of austerity in the UK. In the next 2 sub-sections I discuss each of these perspectives in turn.

6.4.3 Competition with Arabic classes and extra tuition in mainstream subjects

The photograph of a faded sign below (see Figure 22) taken in an estate just off Watney Market along with the accompanying field notes in extract 40, describe a situation that is replicated across the borough.

Figure 22 Faded Bengali school sign

Extract 40

> As I was walking through to Shadwell Gardens I spotted a sign. It was a
> Friday and there were a lot of people popping in and out of the community

mosque for Jummah prayer so I took the chance to ask a couple of people about it. One man I spoke to, laughed when I asked him whether there was still a Bengali school, as if my question was a little absurd. He explained to me the set-up of the current community school-Arabic (Qur'anic) classes, taught in Bangla for the children newly arrived from Italy who don't know English very well, and in English for the British children. So Qur'anic Arabic through the medium of Bangla and English to accommodate the kids' different linguistic backgrounds (field notes January 2022).

I discussed the idea of competition between Bengali and Arabic classes in chapter 2 section 2.4.1. Although studies point to competition with Arabic being one of the main reasons for the decline in Bengali classes, as does the above vignette, I suggest that this does not reveal the whole picture. While Arabic classes are popular, and perhaps more so than in the past, my data also shows that the older participants in this project. Khalid, Joy and Omar, all in their early to mid-forties, had had some form of Bangla instruction either at school or in complementary classes and had also taken Bangla GCSE at secondary school. They had also, however, all attended Arabic classes at the same time.

Ahmed, writing in 2005, citing one of her participants Nuresa, highlights what this weekly routine was like for many families. Nuresa says:

> I pick up the children from school at 3.30. Then at 4.30 I drop them off to Bangla school and pick them up at 6. At 7 they go to Arabic classes and come home at 9. They go to Arabic classes on Thursday, Friday and Saturday and Bangla classes Monday to Thursday' (Ahmed, 2005: 197).

This description, dating back 20 years, chimes with Khalid, Joy and Omar's experiences.

For the younger participants it is the Bengali classes that have been removed from family schedules with Arabic classes continuing in much the same way.

It is likely of course that when faced with making financial and time decisions between Arabic and Bengali, families prioritise Arabic as it is higher in the language hierarchy, but I suggest that the idea that it is Arabic classes have replaced Bengali classes needs to be explored further.

Another area of potential competition with Bengali classes is tuition in core mainstream school subjects, especially English and Maths. Figure 23 shows a large banner stretched across the entrance to the market on Watney Market. Tuition centres have gained in popularity over the last decade, arguably in response to austerity-fuelled decline in mainstream education. Such centres mean further competition for Bengali language classes, with regards to family finances and the time children have available for after school activities. The size and glossy nature of this banner gives an indication of the commercial success of this kind of education facility. It is noticeable that Bengali is not advertised here, even though it is an option at both A level and GCSE.

Figure 23 Tuition advert on Watney Market December 2022

6.4.4 The effects of austerity

In addition to this change in priorities and attitudes, there have also been savage cuts to the complementary school provision in Tower Hamlets and the funding of Bangla classes and it would be misleading to suggest that the only reason for the decline is because families are no longer interested or have different priorities. Khalid makes this point clearly:

> When we were growing up there used to be 3 days a week of Arabic classes and 2 days of Bangla classes. Back in the days. You hardly see anyone doing that anymore. **The whole Bengali has been cut.**

Here Khalid attributes the reduction in Bangla classes to the cuts in funding to available classes. The cuts mentioned by Khalid, derived from austerity measures put in place by successive Conservative and Coalition governments since the financial crash in 2008, have hit council budgets hard - and with that the funding of mother tongue provision including the Bangla classes like those attended by Khalid, Joy and Omar and referenced by Nuresa in Ahmed (2005: 197) In 2019, after a decade of dwindling resources, Tower Hamlets Council made the decision to close the community language service altogether (Brooke, 2019). Despite the perceived waning of interest in Bangla classes described in section 6.4.2 above, a campaign ignited against this closure. Two petitions, with a total of more than 600 signatures were presented to the council there were also protests outside the council chamber (ibid). The council responded by stating it was committed to the service but was not able to fund it and announced it would transfer from funded to voluntary services, which meant parental contribution would be required to keep the services afloat. The East London Advertiser reported local MP Apsana Begum as saying:

A lot of families can't afford £8 a week for lessons — many are already struggling on benefits. To expect them to pay for a service that the council has run for 30 years is a shattering blow (ibid).

The decision to cut funding to Bengali education, undoubtedly took away opportunities from many families to access Bengali classes for their children and at the time of writing this thesis there are very few classes in operation.

In 2023, under pressure from campaigners, the presiding mayor of Tower Hamlets, Lutfur Rahman, pledged to reinstate the complementary schools budget (LBTHf)[37]. A consultation of local stakeholders in 2023 revealed that 56% of respondents felt that 'Bengali' was the most important language to fund (personal correspondence). However, in the consultation document it was not specified whether 'Bengali' was being interpreted as Bangla or Sylheti. Although the council has never run formal Sylheti classes before, attitudes have changed. As I will outline below, there are already Sylheti classes in existence that are run by other providers. It was perhaps a missed opportunity not to have had Sylheti specified as a language option.

6.4.5 Grassroots Sylheti classes

During the period when Bengali complementary schools began to decline in numbers, and council funding for heritage language maintenance was subsequently withdrawn, a small number of complementary schools struggled on. Nevertheless, it can be argued that there was something of a vacuum with regard to Bengali language education. In this vacuum some interesting new developments occurred and opportunities to learn 'Sylheti' and to learn 'speaking' without the reading and writing emerged. These education opportunities are not widespread but nevertheless

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[37] In August 2023 LBTH sent out a consultation document asking which community languages should be included in the re-instated community language programme.

indicate a new grassroots interest in 'Sylheti' education that does not require Bangla literacy, using instead the Roman script for learning materials and activities.

In this section I focus on two examples: Babel's Blessing language school offering Sylheti for Adults and Children in Tower Hamlets since 2017, and Heritage Heroes, a 26-week heritage funded Sylheti language programme for children, designed and delivered by the Hedgecock Community Centre in Newham (bordering Tower Hamlets).

My own experience of attending one of the Babel's Blessing Sylheti classes (see chapter 3 section 3.1.1) gave me first hand insight into the running of the class and the students accessing the courses. While most students on the courses had a Sylheti background and wanted to build on existing Sylheti knowledge, some were learning from scratch, either as non-Bangladeshi spouses or as non-Sylheti Bangladeshis wanting to learn Sylheti to participate in Tower Hamlets life. This included professionals such as doctors, social workers, writers and teachers who work with Sylheti speaking families.

Although most of the British-Sylheti students could have practised at home, they said found it less intimidating to be in a class with other students because there was a sense of solidarity and concerns about grammar or proficiency were less pronounced.

> Students often talked about lacking confidence even in their own families, but especially out and about, that they didn't speak Sylheti 'well'' (field notes July 2021).

Farhad, one of the students in the class, also became a core participant on this project. Farhad's parents were both from Chattogram but he had grown up in Manchester and he had never really learned to speak their 'Bengali', Chatgaiya and

he and his brother grew up speaking English. Because they didn't live in a Bangladeshi neighbourhood, they never had the opportunity to speak Bengali at school. Apart from his home life, where his parents spoke to each other in Chatgaiya, his main exposure to Bengali consisted of regular visits to Bangladesh and the mosque in Manchester. None of these things had given him any kind of fluency however. He pointed out, 'you can't learn a language via osmosis, otherwise I wouldn't be where I am now'. Farhad's example shows that he was one of those 'kids', who growing up 'cannot speak Bengali to save their life (Abdul Hussain, this chapter section 6.2)'. Now as an adult, married to a Sylheti woman and living in London, his situation has completely changed and he joined the class to learn Sylheti.

He told me it didn't matter that his family was not from Sylhet and that living in east London Sylheti made the most sense to him because everyone speaks it here. This brings an interesting dimension to ideologies of language tied to origin and history, rather than to social practice (see chapters 2 and 5). From a social practice perspective it makes perfect sense that Farhad would be wanting to learn Sylheti. The following comments reveal his motivations:

> I just want to learn Sylheti because I want to be able to speak with my mother-in-law.. can't really speak English and a lot of the family just speak Sylheti ..so for me I need to know this language. I wanna take part. Whereas Chatgaiya is only useful when I go to Bangladesh which is once every five years really. So for me it's like I wanna learn Sylheti and almost unlearn the other stuff I've learned.

I asked him what his family in Chattogram thought about him learning Sylheti.

I think my cousins would be so happy if I spoke Sylheti, they can probably understand it and I think they'd just be happy that I'm engaging slightly in the Bangla language.

6.4.6 Pedagogical approaches

The Babel's Blessing class proposed a model of heritage language learning that is very different from that of traditional Bangla classes in complementary schools. The curriculum followed participatory models and centres on students' lives in London, rather than focussing on communication in Bangladesh. Source materials include role plays of shopping situations in London markets or material produced by BBC Asian network where, especially during covid, public information videos were broadcast in Sylheti in recognition of the size of the Sylheti speaking population in the UK (BBC Asian Network). Oral models of the language were offered by both the teacher and the students and notes were taken in Roman script. There was no set curriculum and students often collectively created resources in class based on their own experiences of speaking Sylheti, at home and out and about in the local area. This marks a transformation from what Canagarajah (2019:10) terms the 'primordialist ideology of HL[38]' which is based on 'the equation of bounded communities with a territorialised language that indexed their place, ethnicity, identity and heritage' (ibid) to a social practice model (ibid). The social practice model proposed by Canagarajah aligns well with the democratic principles of linguistic citizenship (Stroud, 2018) which foregrounds nonstandard varieties and the everyday communication practices. These Sylheti classes were not teaching students to speak Sylheti in a Bangladeshi context, but to be able to participate fully in life in the UK.

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[38] Heritage Languages

Lytra's study of Turkish complementary schools also explored the importance of localised curriculum content. However, while Lytra's study found a complex mix of 'localized understandings of Turkish language and culture' (2011: 31) alongside the reproduction of 'Turkish, "national" culture and identity, mediated through the use of standard Turkish' (ibid: 27), the Babel's Blessing course contained elements of local culture and language only, without linking to the national culture and language of Bangladesh. This was especially evident in approaches to literacy development where focus on Bangla script was completely absent from the curriculum and instead, students drew on localised texting practices such as mixed codes, voice notes and Sylheti written in Roman script.

There is a distinction to be made between children's (in Lytra's study) and adult's classes. There is also a distinction between complementary schools which often include a specific focus on cultural heritage as part of the curriculum aims (see also Blackledge and Creese, 2008) and Babel's Blessing which is describes itself as a community language school with focus on local communication rather than a focus on heritage. They offer classes in languages of local importance. Other language offered have included Latin American Spanish, Turkish, Arabic and Yiddish.

The privileging of non-standard varieties over standard models as language of instruction is a departure from most examples of heritage language education contexts in the literature. Such classes mark a change from attitudes expressed in Blackledge and Creese's (2008) research into Bengali complementary schools in Birmingham. In their study they found that although the children used Sylheti or mixed codes while chatting, the curriculum was nevertheless based on traditional standard models of Bangla with a focus on standard models of literacy in particular.

They also found that 'the school leaders spoke emphatically about the need for children to learn the standard variety' (ibid: 542).

6.4.7 Sylheti classes for children

In 2020, during the Covid pandemic, Babel's Blessing realised there was also a demand for children's classes. In the following interview on of the teachers describes the decision to set up Sylheti rather than Bengali classes at the school.

Extract 41

1.	Moni	I wanted to do that as Bengali not Sylheti
2.		the children's class (..)
3.		I was thinking that Bengali kids would come
4.		and they would want to learn more like
5.		ehm Bengali reading (..) writing and stuff like that
6.		for me that would be more easy to teach
7.	Becky	hmm
8.	Moni	yeah (..) and I have the books and everything
9.		I've got a lot of books yeah
10.		but I never use them
11.		because it's about like alphabet
12.		and ehm and beginning of writing and stuff like that
13.		because I don't really do any writing classes
14.		that's why it doesn't really (..)
15.		it's just there I don't really use it
16.		so I was thinking to have that opportunity
17.		to use those books and stuff like that
18.		But (...) it didn't work
19.		it turned out like people were more interesting in Sylheti ((laughs))

This extract show that parents have also begun to challenge the dominant standard language ideologies inherent in traditional complementary schools and have been actively seeking out 'Sylheti' specific language classes for their children. Just because the learning is increasingly no longer happening in the home as we saw in section, 6.2.2, it does not mean that families are not concerned or do not want their children to speak Sylheti. Although the Babel's Blessing children's classes seem to have dried up in the post Covid world, this example is indicative of a change of thinking around Sylheti and Bengali language education, and this is not the only example of Sylheti classes for children.

Another model of Sylheti language education was designed specifically for children by the Hedgecock Community Centre in the neighbouring borough of Newham. In 2022 they secured Heritage Fund funding to design and deliver a 26-week Sylheti course. I contacted Hedgecock to ask them about the initiative and spoke to the initiator and author of the course. He explained he had been motivated by his own experiences as a Sylheti speaking parent whose own children did not speak Sylheti and he made similar observations of his friends' children and other families he came across locally. The course he designed provided a mix of language and cultural activities. The language activities, consisting of fun tasks, quizzes and games, used Sylheti and English and translanguaging. Appendix J gives an example of one of the worksheets in which the completed sentences comprise both Sylheti and English[39]. The course states: 'Our curriculum incorporates both interactive and traditional activities to provide a solid foundation for communicating in Sylheti'.

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[39] I include this an example of translanguaging pedagogy with Sylheti and English rather than as an example of innovative language pedagogy. The activity itself is a traditional grammar worksheet but it is the use of languages which is of interest here.

Karatsareas, drawing on his (2021) study of tensions between standard and non-standard varieties proposed in Greek complementary schools in the UK, argues for a move away from the 'preservation and maintenance of an idealised and received linguistic form towards a mission of linguistic vitality that will foster the continuous deployment of the full linguistic repertoires of learners in expressing their multilingual and multicultural identities' (ibid:116). Karatsareas' arguments are more theoretical in nature, based on what he sees as way to innovate complementary school education to bring the schools up to date with more recent understandings of multilingual repertoire.

What is interesting about the two examples I have drawn on in my data above, however, is that they are derived not from sociolinguistic research but from observation of grassroots linguistic practices, and the need to bring those into formal language learning environments. It is here that we can reimagine language learning spaces as more in tune with the kind of sociolinguistic descriptions of Watney Market presented in chapters 4 and 5, perhaps also adhering to Stroud's principles of linguistic citizenship discussed in chapter 2 section 2.4.5 (2001, 2017). Rather than seeing the development of this kind of non-normative language education as difficult or requiring a dismantling of the system, perhaps we need seek out and grasp the lessons that small grassroots organisations such as Hedgecock Community and Babel's Blessing are offering to language researchers, language activists and critical policy makers.

6.5 Discussion

I began this chapter by presenting data that highlights a clear concern among participants that Sylheti is not being passed down in the home from parents to children in the same way as it had been in previous generations, and this aligns with

common circulating discourses. However, the data also suggest a high degree of complexity in this regard. First, the concerns about the younger generation contrast sharply with the Watney Market data, presented in chapters 4 and 5, which reveal the importance of Sylheti in everyday multilingual interactions in public places that index aspects of Bangladeshi and British-Bangladeshi culture and identity. Secondly ideas of language purity are being contested in everyday practices, with Sylheti used as a part of broader communicative repertoires and mixing practices are becoming more stable, opening up ideas of enregistered translanguaging (cf. Canagarajah, 2019; Sankaran, 2021).

Although there has been a marked decline in the amount of Bangla complementary schools in the last fifteen years, and a reduced interest in maintaining Bangla literacy, the data still reveal an interest in maintaining spoken Sylheti among the new generation of young people. Despite the changes in attitudes outlined in this chapter and the sense that 'we've moved on', there is a continuing linguistic sensibility and a desire to keep Sylheti as a part of individual, family and place repertoires.

7 Conclusions

7.1 Introduction and chapter orientation

As I outlined in the introduction, the impetus for this collaborative PhD came from local perceptions, including those voiced by the Osmani Trust, that pointed to fears or concerns about the loss of Sylheti language proficiency for future generations. The study is a response to calls for further research and as such it set out to better understand the role of Sylheti in 2020s Tower Hamlets. My own interest in this research stems from my work as an ESOL teacher with Sylheti students in Tower Hamlets for over 25 years, and as part of that job, a commitment to promoting the importance of linguistic diversity in the UK.

Following preliminary participatory research in which project participants highlighted the public place as a fruitful area for language research, this study explored public places and neighbourhoods as potential spaces for language socialisation and maintenance. This was a small-scale ethnography and any conclusions I drew were formed on the basis of the data that I was working with, my reading, my own interpretations and dialogue with participants. The work can by no means be construed as any kind of definitive account of the state of Sylheti in Tower Hamlets. Not only is Sylheti part of the repertoire of more than a quarter of a million people in east London alone but, as I highlighted throughout the thesis, and as other authors have also pointed out (Blackledge and Creese, 2008; Hamid, 2011; Hoque, 2015), there are multiple orientations to and understandings of what Sylheti is, making definitive accounts almost impossible even in larger scale projects. Nevertheless, the detail and accuracy involved in small scale ethnographies such as this can offer

insights into how things look from a broader perspective. Monica Heller articulates this perfectly when she says:

> They allow us to see complexity and connections, to understand the history and geography of language. They allow us to tell a story; not someone else's story exactly, but our own story of some slice of experience, a story which illuminates social processes and generates explanations for why people do and think the things they do (2008a: 250).

The timing of this study is important. This study captures elements of the major events of the of the early 2020s and resulting sociolinguistic changes that have not yet been researched. It takes into account the accumulated Sylheti experience of 7 decades after the first substantial migration to Tower Hamlets in the 1950s. It incorporates changes to the demographic makeup of Tower Hamlets - gentrification in the Brick Lane area and the Bangladeshi Italian migration. It also identifies the cultural celebrations of BD50 and the social and political upheaval of Covid as marking a renewed interest in local history and culture linked to Bangladesh and linguistic heritage.

Much has been written about the Bangladeshi experience in Tower Hamlets (*inter alia* Begum and Eade, 2004; Ahmed, 2005; Wemyss, 2009; Alexander, 2011, Hoque, 2015; Rosenberg, 2018; Begum, 2023), but surprisingly very little from the perspective of language[40]. This study brings language in Tower Hamlets to the centre of a social research project and, in doing so, sheds light on the profound interest in, knowledge of and passion for issues pertaining to language displayed by all the participants.

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[40] Rajina, F. (2024) *British Bangladeshi Muslims in the East End: The Changing Landscape of Dress and Language*. Manchester University Press, was published after the submission of this thesis

The theoretical focus on language practices in multilingual places foregrounded how Sylheti speakers intertwine Sylheti with other linguistic and multimodal resources as part of a multilingual and multimodal repertoire. The focus on place helped me to link my study with non-linguistic studies of Tower Hamlets (Wemyss, 2009; Hoque, 2015; Raychaudhuri, 2018; Alexander, 2022; Begum, 2023), to explain how place identity and legacies of struggle connected with how speakers draw on the Sylheti in their repertoires. Through my two main data sources - individual participants' perspectives gathered through walking tours around Tower Hamlets and a case study of the linguistic landscape of Watney Market - the study foregrounded socially situated language practices and the interplay between participants' perspectives and identities and ground-level conditions in which people draw on resources available in the locality.

The study suggests three things. Firstly I suggest that the long history of Sylheti in Tower Hamlets has created the conditions for linguistic solidity, a solidity that has in fact maintained a surprising Sylheti vitality way beyond the timespan suggested by Pauwels (2004, 2016) and Canagarajah (2008). The strong Tower Hamlets identity, steeped in a background of political struggle, holds unexpected affordances for the maintenance of Sylheti beyond what might be ordinarily expected. Secondly Sylheti is inevitably part of an environment in which languages are not separate, but interwoven and enmeshed with each other in a communicative patchwork. I argue that this should not be cause for concern but shows that speakers are adapting to new circumstances, allowing Sylheti to continue to play a part in people's complex linguistic lives. Thirdly I argue that there is evidence of a revival of interest in

maintaining Sylheti, as part of a multimodal, multilingual repertoire of communication resources.

In the next section of this chapter (7.2) I discuss these findings in more detail by responding directly to the three research questions that have guided me through the project. In doing so I highlight the contribution to knowledge that this study has made. In 7.3 I discuss the theoretical and methodological contributions of this work. I then finish with three sections on the implications of the work for policy and practice, limitations and the next steps. I conclude with brief final remarks.

7.2 Answering the research questions

In this section I take each research question and bring together the findings of the 3 empirical chapters, by way of summary of the chapter findings and overview of the overall thesis findings. In doing this I highlight the ways in which my findings contribute to the sum of knowledge with regard to Sylheti and how my study has extended existing research on Sylheti.

7.2.1 Research question one

How do participants' experiences of place affect how they draw on their multilingual resources in everyday encounters?

7.2.1.1 Sylheti as already local

In chapter 2 I discussed Pennycook's (2010) work, *Language as a Local Practice* and Badwan's (2022) concept of 'unmooring' language from origins. Pennycook argued that 'processes of localization are more complex than a notion of languages spreading and taking on local forms, rather we have to understand ways in which they are *already local'* (2010: 70) (my emphasis). Just as Pennycook argues that

English is simultaneously 'local' in different places across the globe, I have argued that Sylheti is 'already local' in Tower Hamlets. Sylheti speakers have over 70 years linguistically and semiotically transformed Tower Hamlets, and Sylheti has become 'a central organising activity' of social life (Pennycook, 2010:2).

This is not just about migration which is a temporary situation. Languages continue long after the process of migration. They become durable and stable as is the case of Sylheti in Tower Hamlets, where decades of connections and repeated habitual communication practices (Bucholz and Hall, 2005) have connected the Sylheti language to a new place. There is no place therefore for the use of lazy dichotomies such 'local/national' versus 'international/diverse' (Badwan, 2021: 168). The findings in this study show that positioning Sylheti as *only* associated with Bangladesh or only with processes of migration, fails to take into account the importance of Sylheti in the UK context and that some speakers' families have been rooted in the UK for many generations.

Sylheti as 'already local' is however not simply a question of multiple generations of speakers or intergenerational language transmission in families, but also an imagining of Tower Hamlets as a Sylheti area, rooted in UK life. I highlighted the example of Farhad in chapter 4 who decided he needed to learn Sylheti even though his family background is not Sylheti but is Chatgaiya - because Sylheti makes much more sense for him in a Tower Hamlets context. His orientation is local rather than bearing relation to his origins in Bangladesh.

The idea of Tower Hamlets as a Sylheti area holds considerable sway for Sylheti speakers across the UK, many non-Sylheti speakers who live and work in the area[41],

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[41] The viral circulation of an interview in Sylheti with retired local GP, Anna Livingstone, by a local TV channel in January 2023 shows that this aspect is perhaps more widespread than generally believed.

as well as newcomers to the area. People's sense of self and community- both

Sylheti, Bangladeshi and non- is visible and audible on the very rich and compelling

linguistic landscape.

7.2.1.2 Spaces of sociolinguistic resistance

Further findings regarding the link between language and place point to the

importance of legacies of anti-racist struggle in the local place-based identities. This

emerged in the literature, the metacommentaries and as visible and audible semiotic

manifestations on the linguistic landscape.

In chapters 4 and 6 I argued that the important history of struggle in Tower Hamlets

has led to a sense of collective confidence in the form of 'battles won'. I drew on

Raychaudhuri (2018) and Wang and Lamb's (2024) understandings of Foucault's

notion of 'heterotopia' (1986: 24) to understand how the multilingual visibility and

audibility in the Watney Market case study can be understood as resistance. In

chapters 4 and 5 I showed how sociolinguistic placemaking, past and present,

bottom-up and top-down, produces and is produced by the presence of what can be

thought of as 'language heterotopias' (Wang and Lamb, 2024: 18) around Tower

Hamlets.

The importance of places such as Watney Market is in their apparent, perhaps

unselfconscious, resistance to the continued onslaught of discourses more recently

associated with Brexit and the 'hostile environment', but in actual fact these are just

reformulations of age-old negative tropes about multilingualism. Communication

practices which are counter to the monolingual norm are reproduced on a daily

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https://www.timesnownews.com/viral/british-doctor-speaks-fluently-in-sylheti-dialect-of-bangla-says-she-picked-it-up-to-understand-her-patients-article-98604732

basis, offering a different vision of a multilingual UK and these ideas destabilise

dominant notions of English as the only language needed for life in England.

This vision is the everyday experience of people shopping, socialising and passing

through on their way to the tube stations, but the mundanity of these actions do not

mean they are not important. They are a daily challenge to the post-Brexit 'speak

English narrative' which finds voice in the mainstream and extreme political right,

and again to cite Raychaudhuri (ibid) it is 'a resistance to an ethnocentric, white

nationalist perception of what Britain looks like, and what it should value'.

These findings confirm recent studies by Rajina (2023) and Redclift et al (2022) that

suggest that Tower Hamlets is a place where people of Bangladeshi origin, and

particularly Muslims, can feel less constrained in their communication practices than

other areas, of even multicultural London.

7.2.1.3 Alternative language socialisation spaces

The final point I would like to make in answer to the first research question speaks

back to the concerns for the next generation of Sylheti speakers.

This study showed that there are particular 'spaces' where people use Sylheti and

where Sylheti is an important part of the 'spatial repertoire' (Pennycook and Otsuji,

2015) that can be effective places for language socialisation for Sylheti speaking

young people growing up in Tower Hamlets. The current literature on Sylheti does

not refer to public places such as streets and shops and markets, where Sylheti,

combined with other languages and communication resources, is vibrant, dynamic

and, at times and in certain places, central to social life. Although Sachdev and

Lawson (2004) asked respondents about language use in public places, the survey

responses say little about *how* language is used in these places and they rely on

reported data based on language names Sylheti and Bengali which, as this study

and other scholars (Hamid, 2011; Hoque, 2015) show, are often used interchangeably and therefore unreliable. In other studies the focus is on either on individual identities (Hoque, 2015) or family practices (Hamid, 2011; Ruby, 2017).

My findings connect well with other studies which highlight multilingual vibrancy in public places, such as the TLANG project and Blackledge and Creese's (2017) studies of the Bull Ring Indoor Markets in Birmingham. However, whereas the Bull Ring study relates to multiple languages and the development of ways of communicating across languages through a multimodal communicative repertoire, my study concerns the long-standing roots of one particular language to one area and explores how this links to language maintenance.

The evidence from my study suggests that places such as shops and markets are not just sites for inter-cultural communication but also intra-cultural communication, second language socialisation and heritage language maintenance. This is important in the current UK context where families, including among my participants, report that family life is increasingly dominated by English. The younger people on my project Gulabi and Abdul Hussain, both highlighted shops cafes, and markets as important for their own second language socialisation as spaces where Sylheti is mixing with an array of linguistic and semiotic resources. While it is true that conversations in these places can be highly context specific with ritualised interactions, children accompanying their parents shopping are nevertheless exposed to Sylheti and are made aware of a wider multilingual aspect of UK life. Ritualised interactions can also provide a kind of scaffolding where less confident speakers can still have a go, supported by prevalent mixing practices referred to many times throughout this thesis (see section 7.2.2.2 below) and by the

accompanying non-linguistic resources available such as products and fruit and vegetables.

Moreover, the importance of personal relationship building highlighted in chapter 4 allows much scope for non-ritualised interactions and there were many examples of these in the dataset. During research in the Whitechapel grocery store (see chapter 6) at one point Abdul Hussein and the shopkeeper are captured chatting for a few minutes about the shopkeeper's nephew who had just had an operation, and we can imagine many other examples of this types of conversation happening in between the buying and selling transactions. Such interactions become an important stage in young people's language learning and language socialisation experiences.

7.2.2 Research question two

> What is the relationship between Sylheti and other linguistic, semiotic and embodied communicative resources used in the local area?

Another affordance of carrying out research in public places is that Sylheti repertoires are captured the midst of other local linguistic and semiotic resources. The next sub-sections discuss the related findings.

7.2.2.1 Sylheti is a part of the local language and communication ecology

As I discussed in chapter 2, theoretically this thesis is aligned with repertoire approaches to language which problematise structuralist orientations to named languages. Such approaches not only have been discredited in terms of accuracy, but also linked to colonial oppression (*inter alia* Heller, 2008b; Canagarajah, 2022).

A focus on a single named language in any research runs the risk of unnecessary language bordering and reification and this has been a source of tension and potential contradiction throughout the project. The results of this study however have shown that fixed language categories cannot hope to describe accurately either the use of, or ideological orientations to Sylheti. The complexities of histories of place, of individual migration trajectories, of connections with the local, and of language ideologies mean that it is not possible to isolate individual elements of language nor disentangle them from the other communicative resources that shape ground-level social action, nor is that, in many cases, desirable. I argue throughout the study that the complex interplay between Sylheti and other language and literacy resources can only really be captured via a practices approach which refrains from imposing fixed categories or borders onto on-the-ground communicative activity (Blommaert, 2005, 2013a; Pennycook, 2018).

The evidence in the data points to Sylheti being used as an integral part of a local language and communication ecology which includes standard English, Bangla, Cockney, Arabic, Italian, Hindi and Bangla and Roman scripts; semiotic and embodied resources; dress, gesture; emplaced signs and objects including the built environment; and orientation to locally circulating discourses (Pennycook, 2010; Lytra, 2012; Rymes, 2014).

7.2.2.2 Mixing and translanguaging practices

In chapter 2 I referenced a number of sources that pointed to how Sylheti combined with other languages in the local language ecology. In fact, there was no study that did not at least mention this. In her conclusions, Hamid talks about mixing with English and she suggests further research 'to investigate the extent to which loan words lead to mixing and eventual language change' (2011:189). Ruby (2017) talks

about 'flexibility' with regard to her young participants' communication practices with their grandmothers. Hoque's participants 'alternate naturally using Sylheti, Bangla and English, using both within familial and community contexts. The languages are often combined in everyday speech' (2015: 60). These findings are consistent with my own, but whereas for previous studies these are mentioned more casually, or as pointers for further research, in mine they took a more central focus.

Badwan rightly poses the following questions however: 'what is strange or unexpected about individuals drawing on their linguistic repertoires? Isn't that what human's do?' She goes on to suggest that to focus on multilinguals' translanguaging practices as something of interest to sociolinguistics is potentially an act of othering (2021: 167) and her challenge recalls the western centric approaches to language and migration explored in section 2.2.3. I was mindful of this contestation in my analysis, and became aware that multilingual, multimodal practices are not a conclusion or a finding in and of themselves, but rather a foundation upon which new insights could be built, something I attempt to do in this subsection.

The study showed ample evidence of a high degree of tolerance to language mixing. Abdul Hussain is very relaxed when he talks about 'majority English but I would slip in a few Bengali words.' Also, ubiquitous and unmarked was Sylheti combining with Arabic phrases in greetings often indexing politeness or gratitude, and are therefore also common in shopping and ordering transactions. Similarly, mixing across Bangla and Sylheti is a feature of everyday communication and many Sylheti speakers, especially those born in the UK, are often not sure if certain words are Bangla or Sylheti.

In chapter 5, I highlighted some newer mixing practices taking place in Watney Market and, likely other places around Tower Hamlets and Newham where 'onward migration' (*inter alia* della Puppa, 2021) from other parts of Europe has become a new but defining feature of the neighbourhood. Despite some inevitable differences, historical and arising tensions, the close cultural and linguistic relationship between the Bangladeshi 'Europeans' and the local, mainly Sylheti speaking, residents allow for the creation of a specific linguistic and cultural socialisation space. The Watney Market context recalls what Simpson and Bradley (2020: 31) drawing on Pratt (1991) describe as 'contact zones', where a variety of resources are colliding and where people are in the process of trying and testing new ways of being and new ways of drawing on their repertoires. I argue that the close linguistic and cultural connections between these two groups facilitate and perhaps speed up this process of repertoire expansion, where English, Sylheti and Bangla become key linguistic components in the resources available.

Receptive repertoires have expanded as a result of contact between languages with linguistic similarities and cross overs, particularly in relation to Bangla speakers incorporating Sylheti into their receptive repertoires and vice versa and, as Creese and Blackledge have highlighted, these practices mean that 'both sets of linguistic resources contribute to meaning-making, which becomes more than the sum of its parts, in ways that language separation would not allow' (2011: 1202). In some cases Bangla speakers reported also speaking a bit of Sylheti, for example using the Sylheti 'bala ni?' (how are you?) -as a mark of respect or recognition or just to fit in. Younger British-born Sylheti speakers such as Gulabi and Abdul Hussain are beginning to understand Bangla for the first time. These findings point to the

importance of language and multilingual repertoires for cultures of conviviality (Gilroy, 2004, 2006; Williams and Stroud; 2013).

The data show that Sylheti as a 'Bengali language anyway' (section 5.4.1) is an important reference point for the Europeans who prefer to draw on shared resources from Bangladesh rather than use English as lingua franca. I also suggest that this can even encourage the use of Sylheti. When confronted with someone who initiates a conversation in Bangla, a Sylheti speaker is more likely to respond in Sylheti than English, which may be perceived as face-threatening and may also not be understood. Much of the data point to Sylheti speakers not needing to 'speak' Bangla because conversations can take place using both codes. This creates an unexpected situation whereby an increase of Bangla has increased opportunities to speak Sylheti.

My study also highlights that mixing with English is so widespread as to be transforming ideas about the nature of Sylheti. The evidence for this is found in both practices and in participants' metacommentary, with most participants highlighting the ubiquitous nature of mixed practices with English as unproblematic. I suggest that in the London or Tower Hamlets context, Sylheti, as part of mixed or translanguaging practices, rather than as a single discrete named language, appears to be in the process of being enregistered (Agha, 2007; Madson, 2017). This confirms and extends Canagarajah's work on Sri Lankan Tamil. He suggests, 'it is difficult to tease part the heritage language from the other languages. In fact, a good argument can be made that it is [such] mixed languages that might be considered the heritage language' (2019: 28). I show that this is most certainly the case with regards to Sylheti.

One of the affordances of a repertoire approach is that mixing and translanguaging practices need not be discounted as diluted forms but can be evaluated as authentic manifestations of multilingual language practice. This approach has implications for how speakers evaluate their own and others' language use. Rather than seeing Sylheti as an isolated language in decline, it can be viewed as an integral part of a patchwork of communication resources. Although these resources are just as susceptible to power and racial dynamics in the context of UK monolingual language ideologies, as we have seen, the existence of language heterotopia can resist this to a certain degree. However, there was still some ideological resistance to this notion evidenced in my study and it would require further research to understand why certain mixing practices were unmarked and others considered as lack of proficiency or lacking authenticity.

I propose the following question for future research: how far might the ubiquitous nature, or enregisterment, of translanguaging and mixing practices with Sylheti (especially with English) facilitate the continuation of Sylheti for future generations, in the face of English dominance? This question would also apply across other linguistic contexts in which heritage language are so deeply embedded in local cultures.

7.2.2.3 Mixing across modes - Sylheti speakers and script resources

The investigation of signage on the linguistic landscape of Watney Market in chapter 5 brought me face to face with ideologies relating to Sylheti and script and the dominant ideological perspective of Sylheti as language with 'no script' or in the process of reclaiming a lost script, Nagri (see Simard et al, 2020).

 A repertoire approach combined with a social practice approach (Canagarajah, 2018, 2019) allowed me to view the multiple script practices of Sylheti speakers as a

part of communicative repertoires and mixing or translanguaging practices. The study problematises the deficit concept of Sylheti as a language 'no script' to argue that Sylheti speakers draw on multiple scripts in their literacy practices. Such an approach, which foregrounds what people do with literacy, rather than literacy products (signs, texts and so on) exposes the limitations of structuralist perspectives, which take code rather than practices as a starting point and uncritically present a one-to-one relationship between script and language. For example, I found that Bangla script was often used as part of Sylheti speakers' literacy practices, but this did not always necessarily constitute a switch into the Bangla language. Of course, in the case of street signs, it is impossible, as well as unnecessary, to ascertain whether a street sign which uses the Bangla script to render a transliteration of the words 'Watney Market' is Sylheti or Bangla, (although ethnographic knowledge of the history of the area will suggest the former as I argued in chapter 5).

Within the ideological trope of Sylheti as a language with no script is an implication of lack of literacy or limited literacy. In fact, common negative evaluations that position Sylheti as 'uneducated' show how structuralist and colonial notions of language feed negative language ideologies, despite being erroneous. All the participants in my project were highly literate but their literacy practices were varied. For example, Gulabi had had no access to Bangla script but is highly literate in English. When reading and writing in Sylheti she employs Roman script alongside her generic literacy knowledge and skills. The study of Sylheti is particularly illuminating in this regard precisely because it is possible to observe the fascinating manipulation of a wide range of language and literacy resources.

Further complexity regarding literacy practices was discussed in chapter 6 in relation to both language learning and digital practices. Both Hedgecock and Babel's

Blessing programmes used Roman script to represent Sylheti in teaching materials and expected outputs from students. The use of Roman script for Sylheti has become extremely widespread also in digital literacy practices such as personal texting and social media communication such as comments. All of my participants reported using Roman script for texting and comment in Sylheti and the increased use of voice notes opens up Sylheti speakers' literacy practices further.

The linguistic citizenship (*inter alia* Stroud, 2001) approach to language inequality which promotes multiple language and literacy practices rather than trying to push particular languages into the ranks of the powerful, discussed in 2.4.5.2, is a way to promote on-the-ground practices without, as Severo and Makoni (2020: 154) challenge, 'using colonial frameworks to describe and problematize historic power relations.

7.2.3 Research question three

How do participants construct ideas about and attitudes to Sylheti and Sylheti maintenance?

This final research question focuses on discursive aspects of the data: what participants articulated explicitly during interviews and in-situ conversations about their relationship with Sylheti, and other aspects of their repertoire, and what they thought about the future of Sylheti in Tower Hamlets.

7.2.3.1 Concerns relating to the future of Sylheti

As discussed extensively in chapter 6, most, if not all, of the participants, expressed concerns regarding the loss of Sylheti in the next generation. These concerns are also reproduced across a variety of interactional spaces, in conversations in families,

among language activists, in print and social media and in academic literature (Quasar, 2020; Simard et al' 2020, Naylor Marlow, 2024). My findings reveal that knowing 'Bengali' in 2020s UK is very focussed on spoken skills and is often expressed as a question of pride and identity and respect, either for shared history or for elders.

Most core-participants, secondary-participants and ad-hoc participants in this study oriented to concerns regarding the loss of 'spoken Bengali', which in most contexts in my study I understood ethnographically to mean 'Sylheti'. Very rarely was any practical necessity to use Sylheti for communication purposes mentioned and this is perhaps one of the biggest changes in relation to previous generations. Most people are using English alongside Sylheti, even elders. Immigration laws now require new arrivals to have basic English and as well as commit to obtaining a higher-level qualification for renewal of leave to remain documents. Nowadays it is rare for people to arrive from Bangladesh without having completed at least secondary education. Only Farhad and Sarah spoke about practical communication difficulties of not being able to join in complex conversations at their in-laws, but even there they were supported by the continuous mixing with English.

The worry that young people would not be able to communicate with people, particularly elders, back in Bangladesh, or older grandparents in the UK who don't speak English, was barely mentioned, although the correlation between speaking Sylheti and respect for elders remains important as I highlighted in the 'heh bathroom-or' example in section chapter 6, section 2.

The other important aspect raised was in relation to identity and specifically that people would lose the cultural legacy of language tied to a Bangladeshi identity.

However my findings indicate that this identity is no longer linked *only* to Bangladesh but to generations of Sylheti language and culture in Tower Hamlets. The desire to be part of 'community' life in London and of Sylheti or Bangladeshi as an important identify marker in London, indexed through cultural, religious and communication practices, including knowledge of and use of Sylheti. This was renewed during the BD50 celebrations in 2021 to mark the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh, and a whole host of events, seminars and activities throughout the year refreshed this interest and brought this awareness to a younger audience who might be getting information for the first time (LBTHC).

Within my small cohort of core-participants there were varying degrees of intensity expressed regarding the concern about language loss. For parents like Joy, it was more a reason to feel guilty than to act on the concern, 'I have to try harder'. For Khalid it was not even a reason to feel guilty. Instead of chiding his children for not speaking, 'Bengali' he teases his mum, 'mum why don't you learn English?' I found the younger participants, especially Gulabi and Farhad were the most focused on preserving their own Sylheti language practices for the future. This appears to confirm that young people are more likely to be focussed on identity than any practical reasons for speaking Sylheti.

7.2.3.2 Attitudes to language education

The findings of this study point to a small but growing interest in Sylheti language education. The study confirms the narrative that there have been significant changes in attitudes towards Bangla/Bengali classes that have dominated the secondary school and complementary school sector for many years and reveals a significantly reduced interest in maintaining Bangla literacy among young people. Despite this however, language classes remain an important focal point for the task of

maintaining the Sylheti language. Motivations are perhaps different from the past when there was a necessity to speak, and a strong desire to keep alive connections to Bangladesh. Changes revealed in the data suggest that the desire to keep the language alive is often more to do with being part of 'community' life in London. My study showed second and third generation young adults and their spouses seeking out Sylheti learning opportunities for themselves and busy parents seeking out language classes for their children to replace the home-based learning that is proving increasingly difficult to fit into tight schedules.

This interest was intensified during the Covid lockdowns, and Babel's Blessing language school was inundated with requests for online children's Sylheti classes. This was perhaps because children had more time to fill or perhaps because having the whole family together day in day out highlighted the linguistic disparities between the generations, prompting parents to act. It is also possible that these programmes are in a sense liberated by the decline in influence of the national language of Bangladesh, opening the door for Sylheti language education. Although interest has now dropped as people get back to busy lives, seeds have been (re)sown and interest continues, albeit at a slower pace.

New grassroots developments show how language activists are beginning to create their own pedagogical models, based on an idea of developing Sylheti oracy using Roman script in resources and materials. This is part of the long tradition of Bengali complementary education. Creese and Blackledge pointed out that:

> The complementary schools exist in relation to, in response to, and perhaps even in spite of, a strongly felt public discourse of monolingualism and homogeneity in the multilingual, heterogeneous state. This impetus towards the erasure of minority immigrant languages is resisted where complementary schools have been set up by communities which have gathered whatever

resources are at their disposal to teach and maintain the heritage/ community language (2011: 1197).

The difference here is that the ideological positioning of which language should be considered the heritage/community language has begun to change. Language activists are beginning to create their own pedagogical models, based on an idea of developing Sylheti oracy using Roman script in resources and materials, bypassing the need to learn Bangla script. These are education models that allow children and adults to develop their locally situated language practices.

This marks a significant departure from previous studies of Bangla complementary schools where there were tensions between the school leaders and curriculum which espoused traditional standard language models and the students who often contested this with their own practices (see Blackledge and Creese, 2008).

I do not want to suggest that there is no longer any interest in Bangla language education in Tower Hamlets. Although this interest did not emerge strongly in my data, there are indications that the new Dhaka families are drawing on the meagre opportunities available and will welcome the chance to gain valuable GCSE and A level qualifications. A smaller amount of Sylheti families will also welcome and take up any opportunities as they are renewed. However, I argue that alongside this there is an opportunity to develop language education models that allow students to develop their locally situated language practices.

7.2.3.3 English is the language of work and a lingua franca

Certain places emerged as more or less fruitful for language socialisation and language maintenance. I have already mentioned the importance of smaller shops and markets in this regard. On the other end of the spectrum corporate workplaces emerged as less effective as language socialisation spaces. Participants were very

reluctant to use Sylheti in work or professional contexts, and they oriented to dominant language ideologies which position English as the language of professionalism. English, as a high-status language indexing professional and economic success, was privileged in the workplace over other linguistic resources in the repertoire, especially Sylheti. I drew on Rosa and Flores (2015, 2017) work on Racio linguistics that suggest that it is workers from racialised language minorities who have to restrict their repertoires in certain workplaces, due to tacit expectations of the dominant white culture. This was confirmed by evidence of resistance to these ideologies in the more community-based workplaces represented in the data. The core business of these workplaces was related to migration, community and diaspora and the workforces were more racially, culturally and linguistically mixed, reducing the power of 'the white listening subject' (Rosa and Flores, 2015). Consequently more Sylheti was used.

However, there was more complexity revealed in the study with the emergence of another discourse, that of selections from the repertoire based on care towards others or wanting to help others. This emerged with both English and Sylheti. Joy, who was virulently against speaking Sylheti at work, nevertheless would do so immediately if he saw an elder in need. Similarly workers at Osmani, rather than feeling restricted by the ideological weight of English as the language of the professionalism, said they used English as lingua franca or language of welcome towards other linguistic minorities who came to the centre. These are interesting contrasts which point to a need for further research into the role of language in producing and maintaining cultures of conviviality and to how selections from a multilingual repertoire reproduce or resist dominant discourses. Such a focus would

speak to the work carried out by Redclift et al (2022) and Williams and Stroud (2013) which both explored the link between language and conviviality.

7.3 Theoretical and methodological contributions of the study

7.3.1 Theoretical contributions

As well as contributing to the sum of knowledge in relation to Sylheti as outlined in section 7.2, this study also brings theoretical insights. The contribution of my study is in the innovative combinations of lenses and methods that have stretched existing frames of repertoire to include place and linguistic landscapes, but also in how these frames have spoken to studies of, and concerns with, heritage language maintenance. Throughout the study I set up a fruitful three-way theoretical 'conversation' between repertoire approaches, place-based approaches and Sylheti practices. It was the combining of these methods and frames that captured the complexities of histories of place, of individual migration trajectories, of connections with the local, and language ideologies that allowed me to bring the right data to shed light on the research questions. A focus on both place and repertoire allowed Sylheti practices to be understood as embedded in local activities, incorporating other language resources, materiality, knowledge of circulating discourses including ideologies of language. This contributes to recent work which has begun to push repertoire approaches away from individual biographies and migration experiences (*inter alia* Pennycook, 2018: Rymes, 2023).

My investigation of the linguistic landscape stretched the repertoire lens to incorporate visual and multimodal elements to what remains a predominantly 'logocentric' frame (Bradley and Simpson, 2020). It was the linguistic landscape

frame for example that directed my attention to script practices and allowed me to

bring alternative interpretations of Sylheti as a language with no script to this study.

As such the work responds to Kusters et all's (2017) observations that, traditionally,

work on multimodality has not been done in multilingual contexts (and vice versa).

Additionally, an investigation of the linguistic landscape in combination with the

walking tours focussed attention on the role of the history of Tower Hamlets and on

what Peck et al (2018: 225) refer to as 'historicities of semiotic landscapes. They

argue that to some degree 'linguistic landscape research always invokes history,

either explicitly or tacitly: the materiality of signs and the physical landscape are

embodiments in and of themselves of things that have been said before, made all

the more legible in the 'historical layers' of the material world'.

By the same token, working with a repertoire frame encouraged me to bring a more

dynamic and linguistic focus to the analysis by thinking about the linguistic landscape

as having its own multilingual repertoire. Using Scollon and Scollon's nexus analysis

as a thinking frame meant that I could think about the linguistic landscape from the

discourses in place perspective, interaction order perspective and the historical body

perspective (2003, 2004). I suggest that these adaptations to existing frames allowed

this study to give a fuller account of the local area and show communication in its full

complexity.

These combinations align with Pennycook's notion of semiotic assemblages (2018),

but this study extends this frame by bringing and by bringing it to a focus on

language maintenance and language activism. To Pennycook's materiality of place, I

brought place-based identities, understandings of history, especially of struggle, making it 'responsive to the places in which, and the people with whom, semiotic resources may be deployed' (Blackledge, Creese, & Hu, 2015:100). My study shows that it is particularly in Tower Hamlets and particular in sociolinguistic spaces of resistance or 'heterotopias' that Sylheti can freely combine with other languages, artefacts, embodied practices, multimodal resources and agentic materiality of the built environment. In these heterotopias, the linguistic landscape and soundscape offer both stimulus and linguistic freedoms and with this the potential for change.

7.3.2 Methodological contributions

This study confirms and builds on the effectiveness of place-based walking methods for ethnographic research that has been suggested by other scholars and highlighted in chapter 3. Anderson (2004) talks about walking interviews tapping into participants embodied and emotional knowledge. Wells (2020) suggests that through walking participant's knowledge of place can come to the fore. Others (*inter alia* Szabó and Troyer, 2017) have talked about walking as disrupting the hierarchies between the 'researcher' and the 'researched'.

Additionally, the walking tours provided an effective combination of interview and participant observation, all incorporated into one method. As interviews, the walks produced metacommentary related to language practices giving important insights into participants' perspectives and aspects they wanted to foreground. But when participants bumped into friends for a quick chat, popped into shops, took a call, or responded in embodied ways the local environment, I was able to capture snippets of spontaneous interactions. At the same time, elements of the surrounding landscape were picked up by the voice recorder and could be analysed, adding further texture to the dataset. This combination provides a neat response to critiques

of both interviewing as being 'crisis oriented' and essentialist (Harris and Rampton, 2010:116) and spontaneous interactive data as risking missing the silences and things unseen that can often be discussed more candidly in one-to-one conversations between the researcher and participants (ibid).

Finally the walking interviews combined with the inclusion of a wide range of participants were a fruitful way to document and analyse the dynamic linguistic landscape. Through the variety of my participants and data collection methods, I was able to discern levels of complexity and the interplay between, linguistic, semiotic and paint a picture of a distinctive local language and communication ecology.

7.4 Implications

7.4.1 Implications of the study for activists, policy makers and educators

In the final section of this chapter, I suggest some implications of the study beyond the academy. As I highlighted in chapter 6, campaigners and activists have successfully fought for renewed funding for community language services in Tower Hamlets. Considering the pressure on council services during the cost-of-living crisis, this is an incredible achievement. The onus is now on policy makers, and in particular, LBTH, who have a rare moment of funding at their disposal, to be forward-looking and take into account changing language ideological orientations towards Sylheti and community language education outlined in this thesis.

The study can make a contribution to existing and ongoing discussions about reassessing dominant models of language in language education. I propose local initiatives, such as Hedgecock's, that are working from the grassroots, pushing boundaries and challenging dominant language ideologies by proposing non-

traditional practices, including mixing with English, and non-standard script practices, as central elements in language courses.

As I outlined in chapter 6, up until recently, heritage language education traditions for Sylheti speakers consisted of complementary schools which offered traditional curricula based on Bangla and Bangla literacy, or Bangla GCSE and A level offered as a language option in mainstream schools which were likewise based on standardised models of Bangla language and literacy. This situation has changed dramatically. As this thesis points out, after years of austerity, access to these classes has dwindled and at the same time, interest in Bangla has diminished in the UK. This however does not mean that people do not want to maintain linguistic connections to their Bangladeshi culture, or, as I have argued in this thesis, their local Tower Hamlets identity. Indeed my study suggests that for many this is extremely important and the BD50 celebrations and related cultural activities have injected new energy into this. These circumstances have led to openings for a different kind of language education, one based on spoken Sylheti rather than Bangla.

7.4.2 Linking with other forward thinking education models

The non-standard models of Sylheti education highlighted in this study are exciting also because there is the opportunity to link to what can be characterised as a broader movement in language education which also is in the process of challenging standardised curriculum models. There are currently moves among language educators in the UK, across a wide range of sectors, ESOL, EAL[42], Community/Heritage languages education, modern languages in schools, to propose

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[42] English as an additional language, normally refers to children in mainstream schools

alternatives based on participatory approaches to learning which draw on actual language practices as models for learning. These language education activists draw on Stroud's linguistic citizenship paradigm, which includes a rejection of language hierarchies and a foregrounding of non-standard models in language teaching (see Rampton, Cooke and Holmes, 2018; Rampton et al, 2024). This means language education that uses local practice, such as the examples in this thesis from the Watney Market case study, rather than prescriptive language models.

In November 2023, Kings College London's Hub for Education and Language Diversity (HELD) which has been organising around these ideas since 2018 (see Rampton et al, 2024: 9), recognised a growing interest in challenging existing outmoded models of language education in the UK and conducted a consultation calling a national conference of interested parties (see Coalition for Language Education, 2024). Such initiatives suggest that new models of Sylheti education that have come up from the grassroots, such as Hedgecock, connect well with current thinking among language educators across all sectors of language education and that there are potential allies for such projects.

Some examples of other projects are:

- Multilingual approaches to ESOL in the UK run by English for Action https://efalondon.org/ including the 'Our Languages' https://ourlanguages.co.uk/ programme which encourages a repertoire approach to English language teaching that incorporates students' other languages.

- A blueprint for Cockney; materials, resources and lessons for schools and adult learners to explore the Cockney variety (Strelluf et al, 2023).

- Mile End Community Project which has produced educational videos in both Sylheti and Bangla https://www.mileendcommunityproject.org/stories-from-home.

- SOAS Sylheti language society- classes for adults and children that also include Nagri script. https://sylhetiproject.wordpress.com/soas-sylheti-society/

- Babel's Blessing Language School. Language classes based on local needs and interests.

Tower Hamlets appears to have a unique opportunity to propose a new type of language learning for Sylheti, but what is required is a better understanding from policy makers of changes in thinking around language pedagogy that would also align with priorities of the local Sylheti speaking communities in Tower Hamlets. This study highlights some of the theoretical and empirical grounds to propose a more forward-looking provision of Sylheti language classes rather than a simple re-proposal of the traditional Bangla literacy classes of previous generations of language schools. Policy makers would do well to notice and act on local initiatives that are pushing boundaries and challenging dominant language ideologies by proposing non-standard languages as central elements in language courses.

7.5 Limitations of the study

I have already mentioned a number of limitations in the body of the thesis.

In chapter 3, section 3.1.3, I discussed the limitation of my own developing knowledge of Sylheti language and lack of lived experience as Sylheti speaker and moreover as speaker of a racialised language minority. There are affordances of being an outsider researcher, which I drew on, but overall I think the limitations outweighed the opportunities. I mitigated these as much as possible by following a

participatory research design which allowed me work dialogically with collaborators and engage with local knowledge.

Further limitations of the research design were linked to the unfolding nature of ethnographic research which often involves making research decisions without quite knowing where those decisions would lead. There were times in the process when this went well, but there were also times I felt I was unravelling confusions that stemmed from previous decisions I had made or had had to make. The participatory nature of the design, although crucial, brought with it some difficulties. First, the fact that the participants themselves selected the research sites led to having to focus on several fields of inquiry spread over quite a large geographical area. When each walk was collated, they were spread across the whole borough, and even into Newham, the bordering borough, making it very difficult to cohere the dataset. It would have been preferable to work with a group of participants rooted to a particular area but, as I have already discussed, Covid impacted greatly on how I could conduct the research and walking focus came about due to pandemic measures that limited meeting in indoor spaces. (see chapter 3, section 3.8). My selection of core participants was also affected by covid and ended up being a bit ad hoc. Participants came from very different walks of life and although this partly matched the criteria set out it my research design, it also meant that patterns were more difficult to come by in the analysis and there were *multiple* multiple perspectives.

To mitigate this, I selected a smaller area to focus on as case study (see chapter 3.3.3.2.). However, when I chose the Watney Market/Whitechapel area as the case study, I didn't have enough data, so I had to go back and search for more

participants as well as conducting linguistic landscape work. Despite narrowing down the dataset for analysis, the research focus remained broad and all-encompassing.

Although I found combining theoretical frames to be fruitful as outlined in section, it is also the case that my explorations of the literature of these theoretical areas, were less in depth. For example, I could not and did not read all the linguistic landscape available literature. Although my research was not exactly multidisciplinary I drew on a range of frames and methods which mean my study has some parallels with multidisciplinary research and the associated affordances and weaknesses.

Again, the strengths and limitations of these need to be weighed against each other. For example, the very broad participant base allowed me to see the complexities and also, interestingly, to observe the many patterns across first, second and third generation Sylheti speakers and to see that often there were more similarities than differences across generations, and different migration trajectories.

7.6 Next steps

I have already made a number of suggestions for further research. For example in section 4.2.4, I suggested research into the intangible, invisible elements of repertoire, in section 7.3 I suggested research into the enregisterment of mixed Sylheti and English forms and in section 7.2.2.3, an investigation of Sylheti online including literacy practices and further research into the link between multilingual repertoires and conviviality.

However, since I completed my data collection period there have also been changes related to Sylheti which would be very interesting to pursue. After many years of stagnation due to impenetrable immigration laws, there has been renewed direct migration from Sylhet. There are, as yet no statistics but anecdotally there is a new

trend. This has emerged from the introduction of the Health and Care Worker visa in July 2020 (Gov.uk)[43]. The end of EU freedom of movement following the Brexit referendum meant that the years of onward migration that brought the Bangladeshi Italians (and Spanish/French and so on) to Watney Market had come to an end. The new 'carers visa' has opened another door and there still seems to be a deep desire for Sylhetis to continue the long trodden migratory path from Sylhet to London. These carers are bringing different communication resources and priorities into the mix, and it will be interesting to investigate their sociolinguistic activity which will inevitably bring a further layer of complexity to the Tower Hamlets sociolinguistic landscape.

The second area of interest for future research is the recent upsurge in popularity of youtubers, podcasters and Instagram influencers who produce content, especially music and comedy, in mixed English and Sylheti. Two examples are Iksy (101K followers on Instagram) and Ali Official (309K followers on Instagram). This content is based on shared Bangladeshi and British-Bangladeshi cultural and linguistic references. The content often contains seamless transitions between English and Sylheti which would be generally accessible to a British audience but also generates language socialisation possibilities (see also Naylor Marlow 2024b). Some of this content is perhaps contributing to the idea of a Sylheti revival among young British-Bangladeshis, as well as the idea of enregisterment of English and Sylheti mixing practices that I discuss in Chapter 7, section 7.2.2.2. I suggest this would be a fascinating and fruitful area for future research.

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[43] And to a lesser extent skilled worker visas in other sectors

Final remarks

When I finished my study, I talked with my collaborators at The Osmani Trust about the kind of findings they would be interested in or expecting. They replied that they want to feel that 'all is not lost' that there will be some form of language legacy for the next generations of Sylheti speakers. Their reply recalled Hedgecock's community centre publicity for their Sylheti course which stated 'Don't let ours be the generation that lost the language our grandparents fought and died for.'

These aspirations connect well with my findings. Sylheti in Tower Hamlets will not stand still or ever be as it was. It will continue to mutate and shift shape to suit the motivations and purposes of its speakers. However, this study has found that that roots are so strong, whatever changes occur, Sylheti will continue to be a crucial part of social life in London and inextricably connected to the lives of people of Tower Hamlets, Sylheti and non.

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Appendix A: Information and consent form

Information about research project about (Sylheti) language in Tower Hamlets

This research study is about Sylheti language use in Tower Hamlets. In total there will be 10 participants in this study. All participants will have some connection to the Sylheti language (but will not necessarily be Sylheti speakers) and all will have some connection to Tower Hamlets.

Who is doing the research?

This is a PhD research which will be carried out by doctoral researcher in sociolinguistics, Becky Winstanley, under the supervision of academic supervisors at SOAS and Goldsmiths, University of London. The Osmani Trust is a non-academic partner in this research and will provide guidance, support and supervision.

Who funds the research?

The Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England (CHASE)

What is the research trying to find out?

It is trying to find out more about the languages people are using in their day-to-day activities in and around the borough. For example, home, markets, school, public transport, places of worship, streets, social media etc. Are there particular places where people are using or feel more comfortable speaking different languages or where people do not feel comfortable and why might this be?

It will be particularly interested in people speaking the many different varieties of Sylheti but also all the other languages and varieties people speak, including English, standard Bangla, slang forms, and how languages are often mixed together in conversations. People who can speak or understand any level of Sylheti, even people who do not speak very much can take part. Family members who do not have a Sylheti background may also take part.

As part of the research, participants will choose some places (5 or 6) which are important for in their lives and they will talk about these places with Becky.

They will then spend some time alone observing and reflecting on their own language use in your chosen places. This will include making some recordings. Afterwards participants will discuss their reflections.

Will it take a lot of time?

I will try not to take too much of your time, but there is no doubt that this is a time commitment and will involve between 4 and 5 hours of meetings as well as some time at home thinking and recording information. These meetings can be spread out, but if you do agree to take part, it will mean giving up some of your time so you should think about whether this is ok for you. If you would like to take part but don't have much time, it might be possible to do reduced activities. Participation is voluntary and should be something you choose to do.

Will there be any benefit for me?

There will be indirect benefits for all participants. You will be part of an exciting and important research which will add to knowledge about language use in Tower Hamlets and about the role of Sylheti. You will have contributed to that. You might enjoy talking to a researcher about your own language use and enjoy offering your knowledge and experience to the research process.

You will also be part of an academic process which you might find interesting and inspiring and may consider something you also would like to do in the future.

The research hopes to raise awareness about multilingualism in Tower Hamlets and how important it is in people's lives. It might also lead to more people knowing about the Sylheti language and maybe even people speaking more Sylheti.

Where will the information be published?

The research will become a published thesis available at SOAS and Goldsmiths. It is also common to use the thesis findings to publish small articles. I also want to create workshops and seminars to show the findings. No names or identifiable information will be used in the publications and workshops.
Where can I get more information?

Email or call Becky

Telephone No: 07929576407

Email Address: 677372@soas.ac.uk

You can also email Kamrul Islam at the Osmani Trust

Kamrul.Islam@osmanitrust.org

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The data controller for this project will be SOAS University of London. The SOAS Data Protection Officer provides oversight of SOAS activities involving the processing of personal data and can be contacted at dataprotection@soas.ac.uk

Your personal data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this Information Sheet. The legal basis that would be used to process your personal data under data protection legislation is the performance of a task in the public interest or in our official authority as a controller. However. for ethical reasons we need your consent to take part in this research project. You can provide your consent for the use of your personal data in this project by completing the consent form that has been provided for you or via audio recording of the information sheet and consent form content.

Your Rights

You have the right to request access under the General Data Protection Regulation to the information which SOAS holds about you. Further information about your rights under the Regulation and how SOAS handles personal data is available on the Data Protection pages of the SOAS website (http://www.soas.ac.uk/infocomp/dpa/index.html), and by contacting the Information Compliance Manager at the following address: Information Compliance Manager, SOAS, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1H 0XG, United Kingdom (e-mail to: dataprotection@soas.ac.uk).

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact SOAS In the first instance at dataprotection@soas.ac.uk   If you remain unsatisfied, you may wish to contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overviewof-the-gdpr/individuals-rights/

Consent form

Project Title: Multilingualism in Tower Hamlets: Sylheti practices, places, connections and ideologies

Researcher Name: Becky Winstanley

 If you would like to take part in the study, please complete and sign this form.

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 01/05/2020, or it has been read to me.		

I have been able to ask questions about the project		
I understand the potential risks of participating in this research.		
I agree to take part in the project, including recorded interviews.		
I understand that I can refuse to answer questions		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time by notifying the researcher/s involved and I do not have to give any reasons for withdrawing.		
I understand that my withdrawal or refusal to take part will not affect my relationship with the Osmani Trust, SOAS or Goldsmiths or anyone else involved in the research.		
I understand that that personal information, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the research team		
I understand information I provide will be stored securely.		
I understand that the information I provided will be used for publication in a PhD thesis, academic journals and educational workshops.		
I agree to waive copyright and other intellectual property rights in the material I contribute to the project		

Contact information

Becky Winstanley

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Email Address: 677372@soas.ac.uk
Alternative contact (supervisors): Julia Sallabank js72@soas.ac.uk, Vally Lytra v.lytra@gold.ac.uk

Research Participant Declaration

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant [printed]	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher [printed]	Signature	Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and to the best of my ability, ensured that that participant understands what they are freely consenting.

Please ensure a copy of this document is retained safely for future reference.

Appendix B: Biographical interview questions

Possible questions

(also- explain the interview process, my role, plus COVID secure measures)

Background

1. Can you give me a description of your home/ family/education/ and employment background?

2. Can you describe your daily life, activities etc.

Language profile

3. If someone asked you, what languages do you speak, what would you reply?

4. How would you describe your day to day language use? Including reading and writing, social media

5. How do you feel about the different languages you speak?

6. Is language important in your life, your thinking and your identity or is it just a practical tool to get things done? Is it an important part of who you are?

7. What languages are you currently learning?

Changes

8. Have you changed the way you speak? What has influenced that?

9. Have you had any positive or uncomfortable experiences with language in your life? Can you describe what happened?

Appendix C: Walking interview questions

Why did you choose this place? How does it connect to you life?

How often do you come here?

Describe what happens here?

What conversations take place? What do people talk about? What can you hear?

How do you speak? What languages/ ways of speaking do you use? What gestures do you use?

Is it the same every time?

Describe a typical conversation.

Is this always the same? What could change it?

Do you feel comfortable

Does anyone judge you?

Have you experienced racism or other discrimination?

Could you switch languages/accents comfortably?

Is there any way of speaking you wouldn't use here?

Can you recall and funny/tense moments?

Have there been any changes in the years you've been coming here?

Appendix D: Example of field notes

Watney Market field notes 20 October 2022

A warm sunny day in early October around 2pm on a Thursday afternoon, feels almost spring like. I walked down Watney Street and recorded the soundscape and took some photos. The soundscape was overwhelmingly Sylheti, a bit of English, but not much and I didn't hear anything else. Actually quite different from inside the café where there are more languages. No inkling of any Italian. Bangla, it's difficult to distinguish here. The conversations were of a variety of types, some people looking at products, some conversations between stall holders, some people passing talking on their phones and some people just chatting in the street. It was quite a quiet day but a general buzz around. The landscape could not be separated from the sound scape. Most of the sound was from chatting, in a pedestrian street there is no traffic noise so human voices are very audible. Some noise came from the mobile coffee stand. A group of women chatted in Sylheti amongst themselves and to the stall holder also laughing a giggling. Voices were generally low and conversational. I bumped into R. and her daughter, and we chatted for a bit in English, except for a moment when she checked a few dates with her daughter in Sylheti. She told me her husband had passed away in covid which was very sad, and she'd had subsequent mental health problems. There was no N.. today but I did see H…….., quite busy at his stall…

At the café I noticed a new extension to J…..id bhai's shop, a pan street food stall. It is the perfect synthesis between Italy and Bangladesh, although the more recent additions have been more Bangladesh oriented with the slush machines and the pan stall. The pan sign is also in Bengali only.

The print landscape on the other hand is predominantly English, aside from a few Bkash signs, Estate signs in dual language English and Bengali, and a couple of advertisements.

Appendix E: Record of data collection

Participant	contacted	information given	signed	biographical interview	walking interview 1	walking interview 2	covid check in	self research tasks explained	self research	self research ta	self research ta	post production
Khalid	yes	yes	yes	24/01/20	01/09/2020	02/09/2020						
Moni	yes	yes	yes	10/09/2020	19/09/2020	19/09/2020	16/01/2021					
A Hussain	yes	yes	yes	24/01/2020	24/9/2020	23/9/2021	26/1/2021	yes 28/09/21	12 10 21	12 12 21	19.10.21	
Joy	yes	yes	yes	11/09/2020	6/10/2020	6/11/2020	7/1/2021	yes 28/09/21	14.10. 21			
Gulabi	yes	yes	yes	08/10/2020	27/02/2021		15/01/2021		21.10.2021		18.10.21	05.12.21
Shaj	yes	yes	yes	17/11/2020	07/12/2020			yes 14/09/21	18/09/21	07.10.21	23.10.05	10.1021
Ilhan	Yes	yes	yes	13/11/2020	08/04/2021							
Omar	yes	yes	yes	19/01/2021	31.10.21							
Amena	yes	yes	yes	19/01/2021	22/09/21	23/09/21		yes	23/09/21	23/09/21	12.10.21	
Sara	yes	yes	yes	11/02/2021	25/03/21			yes	13/11/21	25/11/21		
Farhad	yes	yes	yes	19/02/2021	11/03/21	27/09/21		yes 27/09/21	13/11/21	25/11/21		

Appendix F: Example of coding
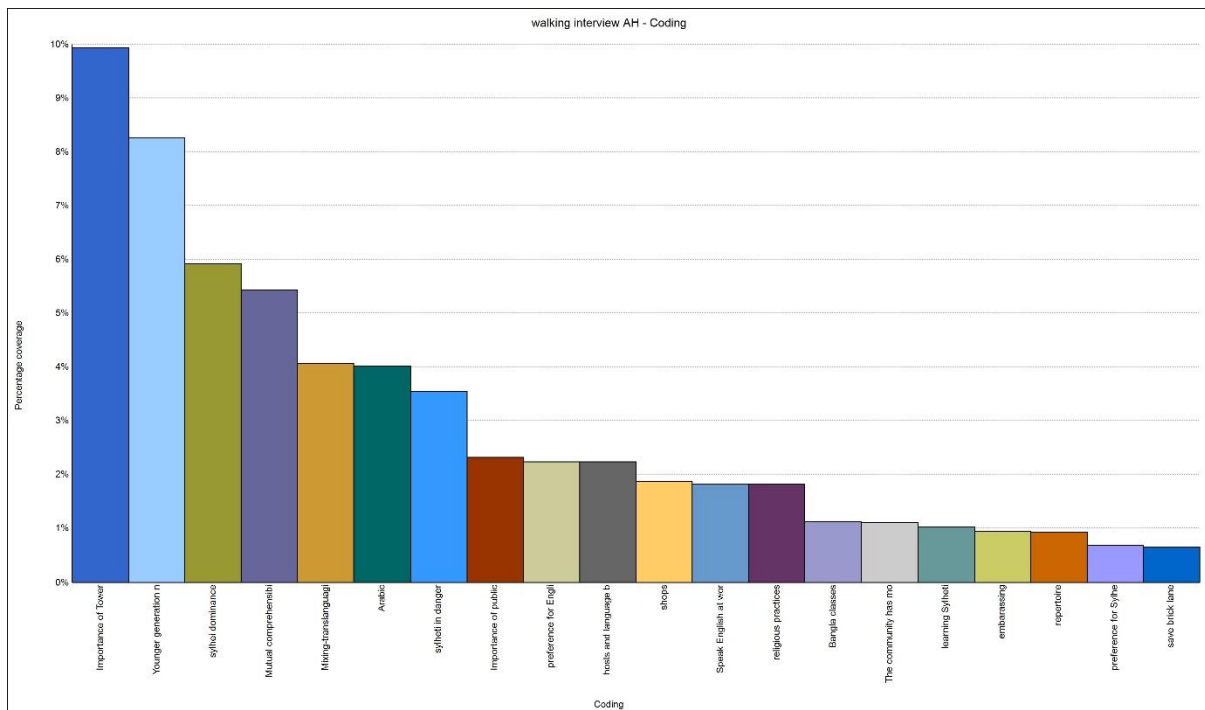
Appendix G: Emerging themes

Types of data	Units of observation	Relevant personal details of participants	Time frame	A priori themes	Emerging themes
Interviews (biographical) 12 Interviews (walking) Participants' observations and reflections Participants own recordings WhatsApps with participants Observational and reflective notes Photographs Sound recordings Recordings of conversations and background interactions taken during participant observation	**People** **Places** **Streets** Brick Lane, Green Street, Roman Road. Mosques, East London, Green Street, Manchester. **Education,** ESOL, Osmani, Sylheti x2., Primary School **Cafes**. Roman Road, Watney Caffe Italia **Shops**. Grocers, Waitrose, barbers	Age Gender Country of birth Migration (yes/no/date/age) Languages Education Jobs	2020-2022	**Enabling factors** Pride Ownership of language Proficiency Language learning Connection with Bangladesh **Limiting factors** Negative lang ideologies Hostile environment Religion\Arabic Decrease of interest. Shyness/lack of confidence	+ Professionalism **+ Language learning** + Connection with Bangladesh + Passing on culture + Religion +Shyness/ confidence **+Respect** +Class +Decrease of interest **+New era for Sylheti (no longer need for Bengali)-** **+Mixing** **+Enthusiasm (esp younger people)** **+Responsibility as 'hosts'.** **+Language choice as act of resistance.** +Speaking to grandparents **+Children- importance of age.** **+Expansion of repertoires.** **+British born Sylheti speakers new exposure to Suddho.** **+New interactions between Sylheti and Bangla.** **+New role of Bangla** +Mosques as places to speak/hear Bangla. **+Motivation to learn. improve.** **+ Gentrification** **+ Product marketing and language**

Appendix H: Linguistic landscape record

Watney Market linguistic landscape chart

Object	Date taken	Use	Material properties	Context/ purpose	Other similar examples	Language/ semiotic	Who produced it	Age	Notability on the street	Audience
Ibrahim tuition centre banner	11/10/2022	Advertise	Professionally made. Colourful, expensive	Education – denotational	no	English (all) But name Ibrahim suggests Muslim owner. Google reviews, many Bengali names. Suggests local clients English indexes 'education' but also it is a lingua franca.	Company	2021	Large and visible. Everyone. Taps into tuition of the area	Local parents
Bkash signs	7/09/ 2022	advertise	Various from sticker to poster photocopy. Some in the recognisable logo (pink bird)	Finance and banking Remittances- Denotational	Yes, a few	English and Bangla	Commercially produced.	new	Ubiquitous, can scan street and find one if your need it.	Bangladesh is with links to BD.
Watney Caffe product arrangement	7/09/ 2022	advertise	Various food products, packets, bottles, tins	Available to buy, To invoke Italian/ Bangladeshi	no	Bangla, English, Italian, Arabic,	Factory goods		Stands out	Bangladeshi Italians

Object	Date taken	Use	Material properties	Context/ purpose	Other similar examples	Language/ semiotic	Who produced it	Age	Notability on the street	Audience
NO BALL GAMES	6/10/2022	Civic sign	Wall plaque, Red, with white lettering on breezeblock. graffiti and stencilled	Civic rules- representational	no	English and Bangla	LBTH	Old maybe 1980s- but has a kind of permanence	Fades in the background. Has an obsolete feel. Feels a bit old and run down council estate	Residents,
Lampost signs	6/10/2022	Civic sign				English on top Bangla (white on red) transliteration underneath (white on blue)	LBTH	Old maybe 1980s- but has a kind of permanence	Conveys sense of importance and official	All residents/visitors/ passers by
Paan pawa zai	06/10/2022	advert	Colourful, home made but looks professional	Recreation- denotational	Maybe without pictures		Freelance stall holder	new		Bangladesh is
Watney Market Caffe canopy		canopy	Synthetic, stripe, Italian colours.	Representational To attract customers and sell goods	Other semiotic sign indexing Italian. (caffe Italia on new road)	Italian colours and signage	Shohid	2022	Stands out	Bangladeshi/Italians/ customers attracted by Italianess

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Name	Date	Type	Description	Purpose/Meaning		Language	Producer	Year	Visual	Audience
Noakhali festival poster		Poster	Colourful	Denotational	few	Bengali		2021	background	1st Gen Bangaldeshis
BD 50 mural		Wall paint	Colorful, professionally produced mural	- representational BD50 celebrations. Celebrate Bangladeshi heritage and thank TH for unity during covid	Brick lane mural	Bengali script and colours		2022	Stands out	Local people, Bangladehis and non
Sign on carpet stall	03/05/2023	Information	Cardboard and permanent marker	To inform customers no refunds will be given. To pre-empt and avoid dispute	no	English, handwritten	Stall holder	unknown	Quirky, old fashioned feel	clients
Keep calm and carry on	28/01/2023	Advert/ subvertising	Elevated Illumined glass sign	Not clear. To draw attention, create humor, protest	no	Roman script, English and Arabic	Prev sari shop Owner	2010	Strands out, captured in the literature	Visitors to shop/ passers by

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Appendix I: Research taking place here today notice

Multilingualism in Tower Hamlets

I am conducting language research in Tower Hamlets and xxxxx is taking part. I am recording the different languages people are using in various places in Tower Hamlets.

If you are interested or you would like more information, or if you are concerned that your voice has been recorded, please contact:

Becky Winstanley

677372@soas.ac.uk

You can find more information on the SOAS website

https://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff151699.php

Appendix J: Example of Hedgecock worksheet

Intermediate Class - Student's Version
3rd Lesson

Team Name: _____

TIMED TEST
MATCHING PRONOUNS

Thaayr   My **toot** is dry

Aa-mrar   He hurt his **zifra**

Aa-me   Their **faaw** is sore

Aa-mar   They covered their **nakh**

Tu-me   My friend, You hear with your **khan**

Heh   I see with my **eyes**

Tharar   His **golah** hurts

Thaar   Her **tootah** is pointed

Tharah   Our car is **furanah**

Date _____