

## 'Below English Line': an ethnographic exploration of class and the English language in post-liberalization India

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*‘Below English Line’: An ethnographic  
exploration of class and the English  
language in post-liberalization India\**

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**Abstract**

Anthropological studies of India’s post-liberalization middle classes have tended to focus mainly on the role of consumption behaviour in the constitution of this class group. Building on these studies, and taking class as an object of ethnographic enquiry, I argue that, over the last 20 years, class dynamics in the country have been significantly altered by the unprecedentedly important and complex role that the English language has come to play in the production and reproduction of class. Based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork—conducted at commercial spoken-English training centres, schools, and corporate organizations in Bangalore—I analyse the processes by which this change in class dynamics has occurred, and how it is experienced on the ground. I demonstrate how, apart from being a valuable type of class cultural capital in its own right, proficiency in English has come to play a key role in the acquisition and performance of other important forms of capital associated with middle-class identity. As a result, being able to demonstrate proficiency in English has come to be experienced as a critical element in claiming and maintaining a space in the middle class, regardless of the other types of class cultural capital a person possesses.

\* I conducted the research on which this article is based during my PhD studies at the University of Cambridge. I am grateful to the Cambridge Commonwealth Trust for generously funding my research, to the Board of Graduate Studies at the University of Cambridge for supporting my fieldwork expenses, and to Darwin College and Santander Bank for providing additional financial support. I am also extremely thankful to my interlocutors in Bangalore, and to all those who provided valuable feedback on my drafts, particularly James Laidlaw, Romelia Calin, and the two anonymous reviewers.

There is now a new caste system that divides people—either you have English or you don't. Instead of BPL [Below Poverty Line] I would like to propose BEL ... Below English Line ... the new cut off ... it determines whether you belong to the haves or the have nots.<sup>1</sup>

Vanamala Viswanatha (Writer and teacher educator)

## Introduction

Since 1991—with the implementation of policies of economic liberalization—the category of the Indian 'middle class' has come to occupy a prominent position in public discourses in the country, and in the national imagination. Nevertheless, who constitutes this middle class is ambiguous. This demographic has most commonly been defined by scholars in terms of income levels<sup>2</sup> and consumption patterns,<sup>3</sup> though some have used criteria like level of education and type of occupation,<sup>4</sup> or a combination of these variables. Estimates of the size of the middle class vary considerably, depending on the definition used. Furthermore, these definitions of the middle class do not necessarily correspond to people's lived experiences of middle-classness. As Dickey argues—based on her fieldwork in Madurai—an increasing number of people are identifying as middle class, many of whom would not be included within this category based on analysts' definitions.<sup>5</sup> This article is not concerned with trying to define the middle class 'objectively', but joins a growing body of scholarship that is focused on exploring how India's post-liberalization middle class think

<sup>1</sup> From her speech at the Regional Institute of English's All India Seminar on 'Second Language Teacher Education: Issues and Challenges' in February 2012.

<sup>2</sup> E. Sridharan, 'The Growth and Sectoral Composition of India's Middle Class: Its Impact on the Politics of Economic Liberalization'. *India Review*, vol. 3, 2004, pp. 405–28.

<sup>3</sup> S. Deshpande, "Mapping" the "Middle": Issues in Analysis of the "Non-Poor" Classes in India' in *Contested Transformations: Changing Economies and Identities in Contemporary India*, M. E. John, P. K. Jha, and S. S. Jodhka (eds), Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> A. Beteille, 'The Social Character of the Indian Middle Class' in *Middle Class Values in India and Western Europe*, I. Ahmad and H. Reifeld (eds), Social Science Press, New Delhi, 2001, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> S. Dickey, 'The Pleasures and Anxieties of Being in the Middle: Emerging Middle-Class Identities in Urban South India'. *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 46, issue 3, 2012, pp. 559–99.

about and experience their class identity.<sup>6</sup> Following this scholarship, I find it productive to think about class as a cultural practice or process rather than a static social category. As Herring and Agarwala observe, ‘at the micro-level, where all of us live, are the day-to-day practices through which classes define and reproduce themselves’.<sup>7</sup>

Anthropological studies of India’s post-liberalization middle class have tended to concentrate mainly on the role of consumption practices in the production and reproduction of this class group, discussing the kind of consumption that is important, and also the type of middle-class body that must be cultivated in order to successfully carry out such consumption.<sup>8</sup> However, the role of the English language in the production of the middle-class body, and in middle-class formation more generally, has attracted little attention. A small number of studies have examined English-language proficiency and class in contemporary India, through a focus on English-language instruction and English-medium schooling. These studies have investigated topics such as parents’ views on the importance of English for their children’s lives and future prospects; the manner in which English-medium and vernacular-medium education is imagined and experienced; and the pedagogical practices employed in the English-language classroom and in English-medium schools, and their outcomes.<sup>9</sup> However, they do not offer

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; S. Srivastava, ‘Shop Talk: Shopping Malls and Their Publics’. *Consumer Culture, Modernity and Identity*, vol. 26, issue 6, 2014, pp. 45–70; H. Donner and G. De Neve, ‘Introduction’ in *Being Middle-Class in India: A Way of Life*, H. Donner (ed.), Routledge, Oxon, 2011, pp. 1–22; R. Herring and R. Agarwala, ‘Introduction: Restoring Agency to Class: Puzzles from the Subcontinent’. *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 38, issue 4, 2006, pp. 323–56.

<sup>7</sup> Herring and Agarwala, ‘Introduction’, p. 325.

<sup>8</sup> Dickey, ‘The Pleasures and Anxieties of Being in the Middle’; N. Nisbett, ‘Friendship, Consumption, Morality: Practising Identity, Negotiating Hierarchy in Middle-Class Bangalore’. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 13, issue 4, 2007, pp. 935–50; L. Fernandes, ‘Restructuring the New Middle Class in Liberalizing India’. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 20, issue 1–2, 2000, pp. 88–112; W. Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2003; M. L. McGuire, “‘How to Sit, How to Stand’: Bodily Practice and the New Urban Middle Class’ in *A Companion to the Anthropology of India*, I. Clark-Decès (ed.), Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, 2011, pp. 115–36.

<sup>9</sup> C. LaDousa, *Hindi is Our Ground, English is Our Sky: Education, Language, and Social Class in Contemporary India*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2014; R. Ganguly-Scrase and T. J. Scrase, *Globalisation and the Middle Classes in India: The Social and Cultural Impact of Neoliberal Reforms*, Routledge, London, 2009; D. Faust and R. Nagar, ‘Politics of Development in Postcolonial India: English-Medium Education and Social

a comprehensive, ethnographically grounded analysis of the role of the English language in people's class projects. In this article, I will demonstrate that such an analysis is critical in order to complete the picture of class in post-liberalization India.

The article draws on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bangalore—the capital of the South Indian state of Karnataka—between 2010 and 2012. Over the last 20 years, Bangalore has gained iconic status as the 'Silicon Valley of India', because of the growth and success of its information technology (IT) industry.<sup>10</sup> In city schools run by the state government, the medium of instruction is Kannada, a Dravidian language with over 50 million speakers, which is the official language of the state.<sup>11</sup> However, the vast majority of private schools, from the elite to the low-cost, teach in English (or claim to do so), in response to the great demand for 'English-medium' education. Indeed, there has been a dramatic growth of private, low-cost English-medium schools, and these are attended by the majority of the city's school-going population.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the city has seen a proliferation of privately run English-language training centres that offer spoken-English courses for adults.

I had three main field sites at which I conducted interviews and participant observation: English-language training centres (hereafter ETCs), government and private schools, and workplaces running English-language training for their staff. At all three field sites I worked as an English trainer and also had the chance to observe the

Fracturing'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 36, issue 30, 2001, pp. 2878–83; H. Donner, 'Children are Capital, Grandchildren are Interest: Changing Educational Strategies and Parenting in Calcutta's Middle-Class Families' in *Globalizing India: Perspectives from Below*, J. Assayag and C. J. Fuller (eds), Anthem Press, London, 2005, pp. 119–39; U. Bhattacharya, 'Mediating Inequalities: Exploring English-medium Instruction in a Suburban Indian Village School'. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, vol. 14, issue 1, 2013, pp. 164–84.

<sup>10</sup> According to the National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM), in 2012–2013 Karnataka was responsible for \$45 billion of the country's \$118-billion IT business, and the state's contribution to India's IT industry increased from 33 per cent to 38 per cent between 2012–2013 and 2013–2014. 'Karnataka is Way Ahead of Others in IT Sector, Govt Says', *The Times of India*, 13 November 2014a, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/tech/tech-news/Karnataka-is-way-ahead-of-others-in-IT-sector-govt-says/articleshow/45129659.cms>, [accessed 31 October 2017].

<sup>11</sup> A small percentage of state schools offer instruction in one of the eight 'mother tongues' that the state recognizes as belonging to its major linguistic minorities.

<sup>12</sup> Government of Karnataka, 'Education in Karnataka State, 2012–2013', *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, June 2013, [http://www.schooleducation.kar.nic.in/databank/analyticalreport1213\\_eng.pdf](http://www.schooleducation.kar.nic.in/databank/analyticalreport1213_eng.pdf), [accessed 31 October 2017].

classes of my colleagues.<sup>13</sup> My interlocutors included students and staff at ETCs, staff at schools, parents of school-going children, and English trainers and employees at the workplaces where I conducted fieldwork. In this article, I will demonstrate how—among my interlocutors—proficiency in English had come to be perceived and experienced as a particularly significant marker of middle-class modernity, as a class identity, a fine differentiator of status within and among the middle classes, and an important vehicle of class mobility.

My interlocutors, who came from a range of socio-economic, educational, and occupational backgrounds, all identified as ‘middle class’. Though the term ‘middle class’ was one that everyone appeared to be familiar with (it was quite common even for people who knew very little English, to use the English words ‘middle class’ to refer to themselves), my interlocutors more commonly spoke of class in terms of the English word ‘level’. For instance, one of my interlocutors told me that she did not like to go to parent-teacher meetings at her daughter’s school because she could not speak English properly. ‘[ . . . ] *It won’t look good, no, if we speak Kannada?*’ she observed. ‘*It will be below our level.*’<sup>14</sup> A man who came to enquire about English courses at Ascent—one of the ETCs at which I worked as a trainer—explained to me that he wanted to improve his English in order to get a job. He clarified that he had been able to get a sales job at a mall and an insurance company, but his older brother had advised him against taking these jobs because they were not suitable for people of their ‘level’. One of the branches of Ascent at which I taught was located right above a bank. A middle-aged woman who worked at the bank, Veena, was a student in my class.<sup>15</sup> Pushpa, who worked as a cleaner

<sup>13</sup> I worked as an English trainer at two ETCs, and conducted interviews and some participant observation at ten others. Similarly, I worked as a conversational-English teacher at two schools (one government-run and one private), and conducted interviews and some participant observation at 20 others. I also conducted fieldwork at three workplaces in the city that were running English classes for their employees: a multinational bank, a multinational IT consulting company, and a reputable private hospital in the city. At the bank, I observed a week of English communication skills classes being conducted for employees who were about to start working at the bank’s call centre, and conducted interviews with the trainers. At the IT company, I taught an 80-hour English communication course for 20 newly recruited hardware engineers. At the hospital, I observed a spoken English course being conducted by a trainer from a popular ETC for some of the hospital’s clerical staff.

<sup>14</sup> All text that appears in italics was spoken in Kannada; words that do not appear in italics were spoken in English.

<sup>15</sup> In order to protect my interlocutors’ anonymity, I have used pseudonyms and also changed certain details of people’s stories. I have used the real names of people and

in the same bank, would sometimes come upstairs to give us our electricity bill, and the counsellor and I often chatted with her (at an ETC, a 'counsellor' was a person who met with enquirers, and found out why they wanted to learn English). Pushpa did not speak English and was highly critical of Veena's attempts to learn the language. *'I wonder why she needs to learn English,'* she would remark caustically, rolling her eyes. *'She isn't of that level.'* The clerical staff at Netra, a hospital in the city, complained to me that some patients liked to speak in English in order to *'show their level'*. When my interlocutors referred to their own or another person's 'level' in all these cases, they were not simply making distinctions between the 'middle class', the 'high class', and the 'poor'. More often, they were engaged in the task of ranking people *within* the middle class. Far from being a space in which everyone was at the same 'level', the middle class was experienced as an arena of continual competition. Proficiency in English was viewed not just as an important type of capital required in order to claim membership of the middle class, but also as an important means of ranking within the middle class.

What constituted proficient or good English varied, depending on whom one asked. However, in broad terms, my interlocutors spoke about good English as being the combination of correct grammar, a good vocabulary, and a good accent. All regarded a 'foreign accent' (British or American) as being unsuitable for an Indian person. The accent that was viewed as desirable was what ETC trainers referred to as a 'neutral accent': a pan-Indian educated accent that was free of 'Mother Tongue Influence' or 'MTI' (though not all my interlocutors used these particular terms). 'Fluency' was also widely regarded as an attribute of good English; my interlocutors would tell me that it was important to be able to speak without 'hesitation'. *'Without giving gap you should speak continuously,'* Kaveri, an ETC student of mine, explained to me. *'You shouldn't think when speaking. You should just keep speaking.'* Some of my interlocutors also spoke about tone (you should sound polite), volume (you should not speak too loudly or too softly), and speed of speech (speaking too fast was a common Indian error and should be avoided). They used a handful of terms to make distinctions between the different types of English they heard being spoken in the city. Most commonly, they made distinctions between

organizations only in cases where I have written about things that are in the public domain.

'local English', 'normal English',<sup>16</sup> and 'hi-fi'/'hi-tech'/'professional English'.<sup>17</sup> While the term 'local English' was usually used to refer to error-ridden English spoken with MTI, 'normal English' referred to English that was largely correct but not stylish, and 'hi-fi English' referred to very stylish English (a 'big' vocabulary, an MTI-free accent, and the confidence that came with such English).

During their interviews with me, most of my interlocutors stressed that good English did not necessarily mean stylish English, and it was more than enough if one spoke 'normal English'—as long as one was able to communicate with and understand others. However, outside of the interviews, nearly all brought up the importance of speaking with 'style', with 'a modern touch', and in an impressive manner. That it was no longer enough to speak 'ordinary' English in Bangalore—and that the level of English proficiency people were expected to possess was constantly increasing (an English inflation, so to speak)—was a point that I encountered repeatedly in conversations with them. 'Nowadays, even the bathroom people [cleaners] itself are speaking English, normal English,' Maria, a school teacher observed. 'Just you think [just think about it]. If we want to be above them ... we are educated, we must learn high English.'<sup>18</sup>

My interlocutors appeared to view a person's class position, or their 'level', as being a configuration of various types of capital which they possessed. In informal conversations, discussions, and interviews, I noticed that certain types of capital were most frequently referred

<sup>16</sup> Dickey describes people using the English word 'normal' when speaking in Tamil, in much the same way that my interlocutors used it (Dickey, 'The Pleasures and Anxieties of Being in the Middle'). Both Dickey's and my interlocutors used the word to mean 'average'.

<sup>17</sup> Those among my interlocutors who had attended relatively elite schools and were proficient in English made an entirely different set of distinctions between the different types of English spoken in the city.

<sup>18</sup> The kind of English a school was viewed as being able to teach its students was a major factor parents took into account when selecting a school for their children. My interlocutors categorized and ranked schools in various ways, using terms like 'convent school', 'fully English-medium', 'hi-fi', 'international' to designate the ones they imagined would equip students with a good level of English proficiency. The vast majority of schools at which it was imagined hi-fi English was used and taught were not affordable to my interlocutors. Most selected a school for their children which they felt was good for their 'level'. Similarly, when enquirers came to ETCs, the English of the counsellors and trainers they met played a big role in their decision to enrol for a course. While a counsellor/trainer who spoke 'local' English could damage business, equally, I was told by more than one ETC proprietor, staff who spoke 'hi-fi' English could intimidate and scare away prospective students.



to: cash wealth, consumption practices, profession, the potential to be 'mobile', educational qualifications, English proficiency and—more generally—a style of communication coded as 'modern'. In the first section of this article, I will describe how, apart from being a valuable type of class cultural capital in its own right, English has come to play an important role in the acquisition and performance of other important forms of class cultural capital. In the second section, I will argue that these various forms of capital were not spoken of, or experienced as, independent variables, but as being mutually constitutive.

### **English and the acquisition of class cultural capital**

#### *English and jobs*

Many anthropological studies of the post-liberalization middle classes in India have made reference to the ambivalent impact of the policies of liberalization on the lives of this demographic.<sup>19</sup> While a small section of the middle class—sometimes referred to as the 'new rich'—have benefited as a result of these policies, it is said that the impact on the majority has not been as straightforward. It has been argued that while economic restructuring has reduced secure public sector jobs (typical avenues of middle-class employment), secure sources of employment in the private sector have not increased proportionately. These studies bring out the struggles of middle-class people to negotiate an economy experienced as lacking sufficient opportunities for suitable employment. I would argue that my interlocutors experienced the economy of Bangalore slightly differently. Unlike in the Kolkata that Donner describes,<sup>20</sup> the Meerut that Jeffrey describes,<sup>21</sup> or the Varanasi that LaDousa describes,<sup>22</sup> where it appears that the benefits of IT were not felt tangibly by people, in

<sup>19</sup> Dickey, 'The Pleasures and Anxieties of Being in the Middle'; C. Jeffrey, *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2010; C. Jeffrey, 'Timepass: Youth, Class, and Time Among Unemployed Young Men in India'. *American Ethnologist*, vol. 37, issue 3, 2010, pp. 465–81; C. Jeffrey, P. Jeffery, and R. Jeffery, *Degrees Without Freedom: Education, Masculinities, and Unemployment in North India*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2008; Donner, 'Children are Capital, Grandchildren are Interest'; Fernandes, 'Restructuring the New Middle Class in Liberalizing India'.

<sup>20</sup> Donner, 'Children are Capital, Grandchildren are Interest'.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey, *Timepass*; Jeffrey, 'Timepass'.

<sup>22</sup> LaDousa, *Hindi is Our Ground, English is Our Sky*.

Bangalore there has been a proliferation of employment opportunities in the city's IT and ITES (information technology enabled service) sector.<sup>23</sup> A wide range of employment opportunities have also been created with the growth of the city's non-IT-related service sector (e.g. malls, hospitals, hotels). Unlike government jobs, my interlocutors told me, these private jobs could not be obtained through 'influence' and the payment of bribes, but only by 'merit'.<sup>24</sup> These employment opportunities in the new sectors of the city's economy, then, had not only come to be viewed as acceptable—indeed desirable—alternatives to traditional middle-class employment in the public sector (which is becoming harder and harder to obtain),<sup>25</sup> they also provided a route for new sections of the population, who until now did not identify as middle class, to begin to make claims to middle-class status. Although I do not wish to suggest that jobs in the new sectors of the city's economy were bringing about a revolution and shaking up the class system, it would be incorrect to assume that they brought about no socio-economic mobility. Based on his fieldwork among young men in Bangalore, Nisbett describes how new hierarchies were emerging in the city based on the type of employment a person held, and stresses that these new hierarchies did not merely reflect older ones.<sup>26</sup> This trend was something that I noticed during my own fieldwork.

<sup>23</sup> Employment in the ITES sector includes jobs in call centres, back office operations, medical transcription, medical billing, and coding, etc.

<sup>24</sup> Nisbett warns against accepting at face value the rhetoric of IT-based meritocracy, demonstrating how having social contacts in IT-ITES companies can be helpful in getting a job, though it does not guarantee one a job; see N. Nisbett, *Growing up in the Knowledge Society: Living the IT Dream in Bangalore*, Routledge India, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 181–82. See also C. Upadhy and A. R. Vasavi, 'Work, Culture and Sociality in the Indian IT Industry: A Sociological Study', Final report submitted to the Indo-Dutch Programme for Alternatives in Development, School of Social Sciences, National Institute of Advanced Studies. 2006, p. 29, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278002564\\_Work\\_Culture\\_and\\_Sociality\\_in\\_the\\_Indian\\_Information\\_Technology\\_IT\\_Industry\\_A\\_Sociological\\_Study](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278002564_Work_Culture_and_Sociality_in_the_Indian_Information_Technology_IT_Industry_A_Sociological_Study), [accessed 26 January 2018]. Though some of my interlocutors did speak about a friend who had told them about a vacancy in their company, or a relative who had got them an interview, they still maintained that it was not necessary to possess such connections to get these jobs, and indeed most of my interlocutors who had jobs reported having got these jobs without having had to draw on social contacts.

<sup>25</sup> With increasing privatization, there are fewer government jobs available. I was told that, even more than in the past, having 'influence' (social connections) and paying bribes had become crucial for getting any kind of government job. Though some of my ETC students spoke about secure government jobs as being the best kind of employment a person could have, most were not actively seeking government jobs.

<sup>26</sup> Nisbett, 'Friendship, Consumption, Morality'.

All my interlocutors, without exception—in both interviews and informal conversations with me—spoke about Bangalore as a city of opportunities, based on the jobs available in the new sectors of the city's economy. Some of them, who were not from Bangalore, said that they had moved to the city precisely for this reason. Nevertheless, a number of these same people struggled to find the kinds of jobs they wanted or felt they were qualified for. This was, however, frequently explained as being more the result of their own 'poor communication skills' (in English), rather than inadequate jobs being available. Manu Joseph, an Indian journalist, observes that 'there is not a single well-paying job in the country that does not require a good understanding of [English]'.<sup>27</sup> While the accuracy of this statement is questionable, many of my interlocutors appeared to feel that this was indeed the case, at least in Bangalore. They spoke about how—with regard to jobs in the private sector—having good educational qualifications, technical skills, or talent did not amount to much and might not be recognized if one were not proficient in English, and also about how English proficiency was often the main skill on which people were hired.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, an extremely wide range of jobs now required people to be able to communicate in English: it was not just software engineers and call centre workers in multinational companies who were required to be proficient in English, but also salespeople in malls and waiters in cafes (though of course the expected level of English proficiency varied). There was also a strong feeling that, with time, the importance of English for getting a job would only increase. One of my interlocutors, who worked as a cook, told me, '*I don't need education to cook, sweep and swab. But even there [with this job] a need for education may come in the future. When you become older, maybe you will want an educated, English-speaking cook, I don't know. After a few days [some time] even this type of job may not be available for me.*' My interlocutors described to me how knowing English could lead to progress in any kind of job: if you were a software engineer, knowing good English could mean being promoted to a managerial level; if you worked in a mall, knowing English could mean getting a better-paid salesperson position instead of working in the backroom; waiters said that learning English would

<sup>27</sup> M. Joseph, 'A Linguistic Truth: Now, English is Our National Language' in *Deccan Herald*, 5 January 2013, <http://www.deccanherald.com/content/140180/a-linguistic-truth-now-english.html>, [accessed 31 October 2017].

<sup>28</sup> When I use terms like 'good English' and 'proficient English' I am referring to my interlocutors' assessments. Of course, different people meant different things by these terms.

allow them to get jobs in a better quality of restaurant or hotel. I was told that even state government jobs—which had for decades required only proficiency in Kannada—now expected one to be competent in English, and it was only the low-ranking government positions that were accessible to those who weren't proficient in the language (this was also something that newspapers reported).<sup>29</sup> The kinds of jobs for which English made one eligible, not only provided increased income, but also job designations that were viewed as valuable sources of capital in themselves. As Nisbett writes, 'Bangalore's role as an industrial and high-tech capital of software production and outsourced employment is never far away from middle-class strategies of identification and social reproduction.'<sup>30</sup>

Given the importance of English in the job market, proficiency in the language was experienced as a powerful vehicle of socio-economic mobility. The view that English was a 'social good' that enabled socio-economic upliftment and advancement was widely expressed—by the students and staff at ETCs, by NGOs working in the field of education, by parents of school-going children, and in the media. In one *Deccan Herald* article, for instance, we read about the son of an illiterate security guard who, by learning English, was able to 'escape' from the course his life would have taken and become a marketing executive. He was quoted as saying that this twist of fate was possible 'only because I can speak English'.<sup>31</sup> I encountered numerous stories like this in the course of my fieldwork. Most of my interlocutors could tell a story about how a friend, relative, or neighbour had—despite their poverty—invested in an English-medium school for their children, and how these children had subsequently found good jobs and had bought a car or bike or were renting a better house. Indeed, some of my

<sup>29</sup> For example: Azmath, 'Wanted: English-Speaking Policemen' in *The Times of India*. 22 June 2005, [http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2005-06-22/bangalore/27863546\\_1\\_constables-control-room-english](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2005-06-22/bangalore/27863546_1_constables-control-room-english), [accessed 31 October 2017]. In 2014, in the months preceding the highly competitive Indian Civil Service examination, there were street protests regarding one component of this exam: the recently introduced Civil Service Aptitude Test. Protestors argued that this test demanded a level of proficiency in English that most students who had not attended an English-medium school did not possess, and thus was biased against such students. The government eventually announced that students' marks in the English component of the test would not be included for grading. "Anti-Hindi Bias" Argument Behind Row over CSAT in *The Times of India*. 26 June 2014b, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/education/news/Anti-Hindi-bias-argument-behind-row-over-CSAT/articleshow/39013446.cms>, [accessed 26 January 2018].

<sup>30</sup> Nisbett, 'Friendship, Consumption, Morality', p. 936.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph, 'A Linguistic Truth'.

interlocutors told me about how English had turned around their own lives. Furthermore, many of the enquirers we got at ETCs spoke about their difficult economic circumstances, and how they wanted to learn English in order to be able to get a better-paying job.

*English and educational credentials*

Apart from the fact that they were an important marker of middle-class identity in their own right, educational credentials were also valued as a means to get jobs. My interlocutors told me that in order to be eligible for a wide range of jobs in the new sectors of the city's economy, one had to have an undergraduate degree,<sup>32</sup> and in order to get even menial jobs a pre-university degree was often necessary.<sup>33</sup> Many of my interlocutors felt that through education it was possible for people to enter into a totally different social station in life than their parents. Vishala described to me how she had taken on various jobs—from working as a nanny, to a stint as a cook, to doing some tailoring—in order to supplement her husband's income (he worked as a tailor) so that they would be able to provide their daughter with the kind of education that would enable her to get a good job: first at an English-medium school, and then at an engineering college. 'We were middle class,' she told me. 'My daughter has moved from middle class to high class. How? Because of the foundation I laid.' She went on: 'A girl in a slum [can become] an engineer [...]. Today becoming an engineer is not a big thing. A sweeper's daughter [can become] an engineer. Whether her mother scrubbed the floors, washed the bathrooms, or cooked, does not matter. Education is so important.'

The role of English in the seeking and using of educational capital was overdetermined. To begin with, many of the more prestigious degree programmes are taught only in English (science, engineering, and medicine programmes, for instance). In any case, given the importance of English in the job market, almost all of my interlocutors felt that studying for any degree in a Kannada-medium institution was a waste ('What is the point of learning accounts in Kannada? When you start working everything will be in English'). Kaveri, a student of mine at Ascent who was in her early twenties, came from a town in north

<sup>32</sup> See also Nisbett, 'Friendship, Consumption, Morality'; Nisbett, *Growing up in the Knowledge Society*, p. 53.

<sup>33</sup> Pre-university courses (usually two years long) are intermediate courses attended by graduates of Standard 10.

Karnataka. She had studied in a Kannada-medium school there, done a teaching diploma in a government-run Kannada-medium college, and then moved to Bangalore when she got married. Her family had not even considered putting her in an English-medium school, she reflected. It was only now that they understood the value of English. Kaveri told me that when she first moved to Bangalore, a few years ago, she had wanted to study for a Bachelor's degree. Her mother had told her, *'If you do a degree now, you'll have to do it in Kannada-medium. It won't be of any use. Instead of doing a degree why don't you go for an English course?'* All of the young parents I met at Ascent told me that it was best to put one's children in an English-medium school right from the start of their education. Many of them had attended Kannada-medium schools themselves and felt that this had put them at a major disadvantage when they joined English-medium colleges later. They described to me how they'd struggled to read their textbooks, write answers in exams or even understand the questions. They did not want their children to have to face the same problems. Secondly, as I have already described in the previous section, it was strongly felt that possessing good educational credentials in the absence of English proficiency did not amount to much. Ascent was full of people who possessed educational qualifications but were not able to get jobs because they could not speak English properly.

*English and being a 'mobile' person*

Another dimension of being successfully middle class, which emerged powerfully from my fieldwork, was the potential to be mobile and function competently in a community of mobile people. For this, proficiency in English was viewed as a crucial skill. As an outcome of increasing migration from other parts of India into Bangalore (the most recent wave being the result of the IT-ITES boom), in many places in the city—malls, restaurants, banks, hospitals—one could not rely on Kannada to be able to communicate with members of staff. Furthermore, jobs in the new sectors of the city's economy had created opportunities for an unprecedentedly large section of people in Bangalore to interact, on a daily basis, with people from other states and countries (both in person, and via telephone or email), and to travel for work both within and outside India. In fact, in order to be eligible for a job at many multinational companies (MNCs), a person had to possess a passport. English was thus viewed both as an important 'all India language' and 'global language'.

Constructed in opposition to the mobile person, I came across the category of the 'local' person in my interlocutors' comments and conversations. I quickly learned that being local did not mean that one was from Bangalore or Karnataka. Indeed, from time to time, I heard people from the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh—who had recently moved to Bangalore in search of work, and did not know much English—being referred to as 'local people'. The term 'local' was used to refer to someone who did not know English or was not very educated, and consequently was not capable of being mobile in the same way as those who spoke English. This lack of English- and education-enabled mobility was imagined to result in a parochial outlook. When students and trainers at ETCs described to me why people felt under pressure to speak English in places like malls and restaurants, a frequent observation would be that people who spoke broken English or Kannada would be viewed as 'local' and would not be treated with respect. Some of my interlocutors self-identified as 'local people'. Rajani, who worked as an 'attender' (housekeeping attendant) at Ascent, for instance, was a Kannadiga, born and brought up in Bangalore. She was in her fifties and spoke very little English. She regularly complained to me about how the staff at malls, banks, and restaurants often spoke to her in English. *'They know we are local, but they still speak to us in English,'* she said angrily. They did this, she told me, in order to show their own 'level'.

The word 'local' had come to be imbued with negative qualities to such an extent that it was sometimes used as an adjective that meant 'of poor quality' or 'bad'. As I've described earlier, I heard people use the term 'local English' to refer to broken English. One of my interlocutors complained to me that many English-medium schools in the city did not teach English properly. *'They [students of such schools] learn English in a local way,'* she said. *'It won't go to their mind properly.'*

### *English as consumption*

As I described earlier, an important theme in anthropological studies of the post-liberalization middle classes in India has been the central and constitutive role of consumption in middle-class identity.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Dickey, 'The Pleasures and Anxieties of Being in the Middle'; Nisbett, 'Friendship, Consumption, Morality'; Fernandes, 'Restructuring the New Middle Class in Liberalizing India'; Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke*.

Liberalization policies have created opportunities for production and consumption on a much larger scale than before, with the result that there has been a significant increase in the quantity and variety of consumer goods in Indian markets, and the section of the population to whom these goods are accessible. Consumer goods—ranging from mobile phones to motorbikes to ‘fashionable’ clothes—have thus come to be experienced as an important means of producing and claiming distinction, and are viewed as potent indices of a person’s background and identity. Dickey writes: ‘Whilst the use of consumption to create distinction has a centuries-long history in South Asia, contemporary consumption differs in the breadth of consumer goods available, their accessibility to a wider range of consumers, and the more finely nuanced distinctions that they enable.’<sup>35</sup> Liechty, writing about the middle classes in Kathmandu, also describes how consumer goods have come to be harnessed as important social currency in local class projects.<sup>36</sup> He writes: ‘middle-class consumption is less about having or possession than it is about being and belonging. As such middle-class consumption is “about” middle-class production; it is in the practice of consumer regimens (from “doing fashion” to restaurant going to watching videos) that the middle class performs its cultural existence, day by day.’<sup>37</sup>

The consumption of English, so to speak, has received only passing mention in the accounts of these anthropologists. The transformation of English into an important type of social currency in people’s class projects in many ways parallels that of consumer goods, as described above. In response to the increasing demand for English, there has been a ‘democratization’ of access to instruction in the language: privately run, low-cost English-medium schools have mushroomed, government schools have begun teaching English earlier, and an entire industry has developed around the teaching of spoken English to adults. This has led to an unprecedentedly large section of the population experiencing proficiency in the English language as a new mode of claiming distinction that is available to them, as well as a norm expected of them. In many ways the manner in which my interlocutors experienced the need to be able to ‘display’ English, strikingly resembled the way in which Liechty and Dickey recount

<sup>35</sup> Dickey, ‘The Pleasures and Anxieties of Being in the Middle’, pp. 583–84.

<sup>36</sup> M. Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.



how their respective interlocutors felt the need to be able to own and display various consumer goods associated with middle-class identity.

Liechty and Dickey describe how, among their interlocutors, a person's consumption practices were thought to determine to a great extent the impression that other people formed of them. People felt that in order to 'count' in society and be treated with respect, acquiring and displaying the consumer goods and engaging in the consumer practices associated with middle-class identity was necessary. For instance, one of Dickey's informants says that if one did not own 'up-to-date' consumer goods, 'you don't get people's attention, you don't get their respect, and then you are just like a small insect crawling around'.<sup>38</sup> First impressions, particularly, were thought to be made on the basis of a person's consumer behaviour. Thus, even if a person possessed other less immediately visible forms of capital and social prestige (like education and caste status)—which formerly guaranteed middle-class distinction—their failure to engage in appropriate consumer behaviour would result in them being written off. On the other hand, consuming appropriately could create new 'identity possibilities'<sup>39</sup> for a person, allowing them to 'pass' as someone of higher social standing than they actually were. Liechty relates a story that he frequently heard from informants. One of his informants told it like this:

These days even an ordinary person—even a peon—if they go somewhere suited and booted, with a tweed coat and tie, if he goes to the [government] minister's office, even he will be immediately respected. But if the same person goes without this, he'll be stopped at the door.<sup>40</sup>

People who could not afford to engage in appropriate consumer behaviour reported suffering from inferiority complexes. Anxiety about how they would be perceived by the 'relevant communities'<sup>41</sup> around them—based on the commodities they owned and the way they dressed—weighed heavily on their minds and 'played with their brains',<sup>42</sup> putting pressure on them to engage in certain consumer behaviours or at least hide any evidence that they were not able to do so. Dickey illustrates how people felt that they were always at risk

<sup>38</sup> Dickey, 'The Pleasures and Anxieties of Being in the Middle', p. 580.

<sup>39</sup> R. A. Lukose, *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, p. 138.

<sup>41</sup> Dickey, 'The Pleasures and Anxieties of Being in the Middle', p. 591.

<sup>42</sup> Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, p. 87.

of being ‘assessed’. Ranging from a disparaging look from a fellow passenger on the bus to being explicitly rejected at a job interview because of the way one was dressed, assessments could come in various forms and have a wide range of repercussions. And as Dickey observes, ‘all serve to alter or reinforce a person’s worthiness, opportunity, and belonging within a class’.<sup>43</sup>

Apart from indexing modernity, sophistication, a person’s belonging to a particular socio-economic background, and so on (which consumer goods are also described as indexing) being proficient in English was, in addition, strongly associated with being socially skilled, well educated, intelligent, and ‘professional’.<sup>44</sup> As Srivastava notes, mastery over English has come to be viewed as a measure of competence and skill. This has made proficiency in the language an exceptionally potent index of value and vehicle for claiming distinction.<sup>45</sup> Among my interlocutors, a person’s ability to speak English—and the kind of English they spoke—was experienced as shaping significantly how they were viewed and treated by others, in an increasing number of spaces and contexts in the city. Not being able to demonstrate competence in English was imagined to reveal one as uneducated, unintelligent, rural, and from a low socio-economic background, among other things. Anxiety about how they would be ‘assessed’, based on their English, ‘played with [my interlocutors’] brains’, shaping their behaviour and affecting their self-confidence and sense of self-worth.

Very interestingly, many felt that even if the people one was speaking with did not understand English, speaking the language could still be advantageous. One of my interlocutors, Somanath, told me:

SO: The very fact you speak English, people will start looking at you at a totally different level. At work, and even in private life. [...] When you talk [in Kannada], automatically whether you want it or not, some English words will come. Suppose you talk in Kannada and a few English words appear in your talk, people observing you will say ‘Oh, this man has good knowledge.’ Even if they don’t understand [English]. The manner in which those English words flew across [naturally], those people will say, ‘Oh, this man knows beautiful English.’ If you know English people look at you differently.

<sup>43</sup> Dickey, ‘The Pleasures and Anxieties of Being in the Middle’, p. 596.

<sup>44</sup> See also R. Sheorey, *Learning and Teaching English in India, Volume 7 in Research in Applied Linguistics*, Sage Publications, London, 2006, p. 14; K. Kumar, *Learning from Conflict*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 59–73.

<sup>45</sup> S. Srivastava, ‘Alphabet Order to Discrimination’ in *The Hindu*. 4 March 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/alphabetical-order-to-discrimination/article4573888.ece>, [accessed 11 November 2017].

INT: In what way?

SO: Basically he is knowledgeable, capable and [...] intelligent ... ok, suppose I go in a market, maybe I may not say I am a manager in a bank. But the manner in which I behave, the manner in which I talk, people think maybe he is holding a very important position.

Somanath describes the power of these unintentional displays of English, almost making proficiency in the language akin to possessing a fancy watch or piece of jewellery, a glimpse of which conveyed powerfully a person's social station. Even the people I interviewed who had gone to elite English-medium schools and were proficient in the language, observed that if one wanted to 'kick up a fuss' about something, it was best to do it in English—again, even if the people to whom one was speaking did not know English. It could be said then that English, almost like a mantra, had a certain 'performative efficacy', in that people did not have to understand what was being said in order for it to have an impact.<sup>46</sup> So while, on the one hand, English was viewed as a valuable skill, it was also experienced as a commodity, the mere display of which earned one status and respect.

*English as an agent of transformation*

However, the role of English proficiency in people's lives was experienced as going beyond the indexical. It was seen not just as an index of social skill, sophistication, competence, and intelligence, for instance, but also actually engendering these qualities in a person. An improvement in a person's English, ETC trainers would tell me, led to certain other changes as well: in personality, attitude, behaviour, way of thinking, way of dressing, demeanour, and overall confidence. As a way of illustrating the power of English, trainers, and sometimes even students, would describe how a particular student had been very quiet, introverted and unsure of themselves when they first started ETC English classes and then—as their English improved—their confidence increased, they started dressing more stylishly, their body language changed, and they became more polite and refined. Some

<sup>46</sup> See also: V. Bénéï, *Schooling India: Hindus, Muslims, and the Forging of Citizens*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, Bangalore, 2008, p. 44; S. J. Tambiah, 'The Magical Power of Words'. *Man*, vol. 3, issue 2, 1968. Interestingly, a common critique of the way English was taught in Kannada-medium schools was that students there learned English as if it was a mantra—they committed their English lessons to memory, without understanding them.

of my students even told me that when they had enrolled for an English course, they had expected to gain more from it than just increased proficiency in English. For instance, Satish, a student of mine at Ascent, told me: '[I thought if I learn English] I can develop in all kinds of ways. I thought if I join English classes I can improve my fluency, develop my personality ... If you learn English, your behaviour, character, everything will change.'

In this regard, the way in which my interlocutors imagined the benefits of knowing English showed some strong parallels to the way that the young men Jeffrey et al. worked with imagined education.<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey et al.—based on their fieldwork in rural Uttar Pradesh—observe that 'young men's belief in education was not founded solely or even primarily on their conception of its transformative potential in the economic sphere'.<sup>48</sup> Rather, education was valued for other transformations that it was felt to bring about, and capabilities it was believed to instil in a person. Some of the transformations that education brought about were seen to be related to the practical skills—reading, writing, mathematics—that one learns in school. The inability of the illiterate to read shop signs, bills, legal documents, medicine prescriptions, and so on was thought to render them unable to negotiate their lives competently and confidently, making them dependent on others, and susceptible to being cheated. Education enabled one to become independent, competent, and confident of handling whatever came your way. However—interestingly—education was also imagined as having a 'civilizing' effect on a person, instilling in them good manners, refinement, moral strength, and 'correct' conduct.<sup>49</sup> Their informants derived great enjoyment from telling stories of 'uneducated incompetence', which involved imitations of the way the uneducated carried themselves and behaved, and portrayed them as being dull, backward, and uncultured. Jeffrey et al. write, 'In the narratives of educated young men, education [...] has also come to define what it means to be civilised.'<sup>50</sup> Sarangapani—in her ethnography of a village school in Delhi—also writes about similar embodied capital resulting from education, using the concept of '*bol-chal*' (literally, 'talk-walk').<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey et al., *Degrees Without Freedom?*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>51</sup> P. Sarangapani, *Constructing School Knowledge: An Ethnography of Learning in an Indian Village*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California, 2002, p. 58.

My interlocutors experienced English as something that was required for a wide range of purposes: in order to get a job, perform well in one's job, play the role of parent or spouse, and negotiate many parts of the city. Unsurprisingly then, many spoke about how their lack of proficiency in English had made them feel inadequate, dependent on others, and unable to cope with their roles and responsibilities. Proficiency in English, it was imagined, led one to become more confident, capable, and independent. Some of my interlocutors also spoke about how learning English made a person more knowledgeable because of the kind of information that became available to them through the language. In my interlocutors' comments and discussions about the importance of learning English, English was constructed as a language that gave one greater access to 'knowledge' and information than Kannada or other Indian languages, and also to the 'latest' and most 'updated' information. Most higher education options were available only in English-medium, my interlocutors would tell me, and the information on the internet was not accessible to people who did not know English. Venkatesh, a student of mine, asked me, 'If you didn't know English, do you think you could be doing a PhD?' He answered for me: 'No. Do you think you'd have been able to find all the books you're referring to in Kannada?' Satish, another student of mine, told me:

*[If I learn English] my conversation will develop ... I will get a broad mind ... there will be a change in my thinking level. English is a global language, a world language. [...] Kannada students will have a lower thinking level. Meaning they won't be able to think in a global manner. Their thinking will be within one state [Karnataka] only. If they learn English, they will get a broad mind. If you want to study, better to study English books than Kannada books. English books contain more knowledge. More information. Eighty per cent of the education system is in English.*

He gave me an example to illustrate this point: if you knew only Kannada, he said, you could watch only Kannada news channels and read only Kannada newspapers and books. This would result in a limited kind of thinking. However, if you knew English there was no limit to the kind of information you had access to. A person's thinking would become global.

Another set of transformations that English proficiency was imagined to bring about relate to the central role that English played in performing a cultural style locally coded as 'modern' and, depending on the context, 'professional'. Performing this style involved speaking, interacting with others, and carrying oneself in

a certain way. Interestingly, this cultural style was imagined as being closely related to English proficiency, or even an extension and development of English proficiency. Communicating well in English—as most of my interlocutors described it—meant not just speaking the language proficiently, but also being able to perform this cultural style. As one trainer at an ETC put it, ‘It’s not enough if you talk English. You also have to walk English, think English, eat English, and drink English.’<sup>52</sup> Being able to perform an English cultural style was thought to be advantageous not only in the workplace, but in the increasing number of ‘English spaces’ in the city. Just as the educated informants of Jeffrey et al. enjoyed performing ‘uneducated incompetence’, during my fieldwork I noticed a common strategy through which people who were relatively proficient in English (corporate trainers, for instance) performed a lack of competence, sophistication, or social skill by speaking in what was ostensibly constructed as the opposite of this style, and was marked—particularly—by ungrammatical English spoken with ‘Mother Tongue Influence’.

Many of my interlocutors spoke of this English cultural style as being a natural and automatic accompaniment of increased proficiency in English. ‘Once you start thinking in English, you cannot come out of it,’ Tanvi, a colleague of mine at Ascent observed. ‘It affects your personality.’ ‘How?’ I asked. She explained:

In many ways. Have you seen women in foreign countries? They talk so loud. [laughs] I talk so loud now. [...] With language comes behaviour, with language comes personality. [...] Mannerisms ... everything changes. The way you talk, the way you dress up, your composure, your body language, your gestures, everything changes when you pick up English. You definitely no longer remain very feminine in your approach. The other day I was talking to one of my friends and we had a very good observation. I used to have long hair before marriage. I was telling her, ‘Prachi, you know I was more soft and feminine when I had long hair. I used to put proper clips and everything ... But the moment I cut my hair in a step cut [laughs], that softness has gone, and I’ve become more outspoken, and outgoing.’ These same kind of changes can happen with language as well. When you pick up English you become more outspoken, more confident ... and sometimes even when it’s not required [laughs].

In Tanvi’s view, then, acquiring an English cultural style was an inevitable effect of becoming proficient in English. Languages brought

<sup>52</sup> By this, he did not mean that one should literally eat English food, but that one needed to immerse oneself completely in the English language.

with them ways of behaving and interacting. When one became proficient in English, that proficiency changed the way you felt and the way you behaved.

That the inherent properties of English allowed for and led to certain ways of being and sounding was an opinion that was expressed by many others too. For instance, I kept coming across the view that English was a language that enabled a person to be more polite and refined. Chacko, the founder of the English Academy (one of the ETCs at which I taught) told me that one of the benefits of learning English was that it made one more polite:

I think I learnt a lot of manners and good things through English. I mean in my language [Malayalam] also we are well-mannered, but English has got a lot more [scope for politeness]. For example, to make a request you can say, 'I was wondering . . .' [he said this in an extremely polite tone, his entire body language changing as he spoke these words]. You can start like that . . . You feel much more comfortable in formal situations [where you need to be polite] when you know English.

Biju, a student of mine at English Academy, reflected:

Sometimes I love English more than Malayalam [his mother tongue]. Because the accents and the behaviours and the way they are expressing the attitude. Very good, actually. Polite language. 'Could you possibly give your pen?' [when he said this his tone became markedly polite, and he appeared to be savouring the way the words rolled off his tongue]. I used to say sometimes: 'Please give your pen.' But that is a command actually. Actually in Malayalam also [you could say things politely], but the way it is expressed in English [is so much better].

Satish, a student of mine at Ascent, was not proficient enough in English to be able to converse with me comfortably in English. When I interviewed him, we spoke in Kannada. Satish chatted with me in unselfconscious and animated Kannada right through the interview. However, when I was speaking (in Kannada), he would lean back in his chair and say, 'Sure, sure' in English. During the time that he said these words his tone, posture, and body language were visibly altered. He appeared to experience himself as being more refined, more sophisticated, during these moments of English. '*When I speak English I feel professional,*' he told me at one point in the interview. '*It really creates a good impression when you speak English.*'

Sharon, the proprietor of one of the ETCs I visited, told me that English was inherently a more refined language than Kannada, Tamil, and other Indian languages. 'Kannada and Tamil sound rude even without meaning to,' she explained to me. Somanath, who taught

English in schools and to people in his neighbourhood, as a kind of social work, felt that the ‘sweet’ and ‘smooth-flowing’ qualities of English could even rub off on one’s Kannada:

A village boy, the manner in which he speaks Kannada, his roughness, the type of words he uses, the methodology, the manner in which he pronounces ... You [teach him English] for three or four months [and see what happens]. English is a very sweet language. That which is [there] in Kannada—the stress letter, big alphabet, small alphabet—these are not there in English. It’s a smooth-flowing language. So the moment you put him on [spoken] English [...] methodology, the softness [...] which he is able to pick up [through] this language [English], he starts applying to his own mother tongue. The manner in which I was speaking Kannada before I was able to converse in English, and the manner in which I am able to speak Kannada now, there is a huge change. This change I am [noticing] among people whom I am teaching English.

From the way some of my interlocutors spoke about this cultural style, they viewed it as stemming not just from the inherent properties of the language but also a certain confidence often associated with English proficiency. Nadia, the proprietor of one of the ETCs I visited—after telling me that it was not enough just to speak English and that one also needed to ‘behave English’—added that it was not possible to teach people how to do this:

I believe that you can’t teach body language. Body language is a manifestation of your attitude. You can’t fake it. If you are faking it, you can fake it only for about three minutes. I don’t teach people to fake body language. I help them to change their attitudes which, in turn, will take care of the body language. That’s how it is. And English is one aspect of this. Because confidence ... very many people don’t have confidence, for the simple reason that they are not good at English. So when they start improving in English and speaking English, everything about them changes.

Nevertheless, most ETCs attempted to teach this ‘English cultural style’ by offering courses and modules named ‘Soft skills’, ‘Social English’, ‘Body language’, ‘Personality development’, and so on, in addition to grammar modules. In fact, ETCs often positioned English-language proficiency as the foundation of this style by offering English grammar courses at the beginner level, and then introducing courses like ‘Accent neutralization’, and ‘Social English’ at intermediate and advanced levels.

Thus, much like the descriptions Jeffrey et al. give of their informants’ imagined education, among my interlocutors, English proficiency was seen as something that did not simply index who



a person was, but was capable of altering them intimately and powerfully, and enabling them to function more competently.

### **The gauging and performing of 'levels'**

As I argued earlier, people experienced their 'level' as being a configuration of various types of capital. These different types of capital were not viewed or experienced as independent variables, but as intersecting and interacting with each other in various ways, as I will attempt to illustrate. How a person's configuration of capital was viewed (or assessed) appeared, to some extent, to be dependent on place and the age of the person concerned. For instance, the English proficiency of a person above a certain age might be viewed as a less powerful indicator of their 'level' than the English proficiency of someone who was younger. Furthermore, some of my students spoke about how it was all right not to be able to speak in English in certain other cities and towns, but in Bangalore it was important to be able to demonstrate proficiency in the language in order to maintain one's 'level'. In addition, how a person's 'level' was assessed also depended on the assessor. Just as what constituted good English or proficient English varied depending on whom one asked, people's views on what different configurations of capital amounted to were not uniform.

Many of my ETC students perceived a 'mismatch' between their level of English proficiency and the other sources of capital they possessed. A common type of mismatch people experienced was between their educational qualifications or technical knowledge/skill, on the one hand, and their English proficiency, on the other. Quite a few of my students had Bachelor's and Master's degrees, and felt that their English was not reflective of these credentials. Also, many felt that although they had 'subject knowledge', 'technical knowledge', and were intelligent and competent, their English portrayed them as lacking in education and intelligence. Another type of mismatch people experienced was between their English and their profession. It was generally expected—my interlocutors felt—that people in certain kinds of professions should be able to speak English proficiently. Those of my students who were software engineers or—more generally—those who worked at MNCs, for instance, felt that it was particularly embarrassing that their English was not good ('How does it look for a software engineer not to be able to speak English properly?'). The more

senior a person was in terms of job title, or the more work experience they had, the more shameful a lack of proficiency in English was experienced as being. A conversation I had with Venkatesh, a student of mine, illustrates how these ‘mismatches’ could be experienced as embarrassing:

INT: So none of your colleagues at work goes for English class?

V: If they go also, they won’t tell, no?

INT: Why?

V: Suppose if they say they are going for English class, people may think, ‘Why is this fellow going for English classes at this age?’ Naturally, nobody will tell others if they are going for classes.

INT: If they were younger, do you think they would tell others they’re going for English classes?

V: Depends upon his education. And depends on his position. Suppose if a person is tenth standard pass,<sup>53</sup> then he will tell, ‘I’m going to English Centre to learn good English.’ He will tell people. But if it’s a BTech or MTech fellow,<sup>54</sup> or a fellow in a high position, then he may feel ‘What will people think?’

Though these other types of capital were seen as being important and valuable, my interlocutors felt that in an increasing number of spaces and contexts people gauged a person’s ‘level’—at least initially—from their English proficiency. My interlocutors thus worried that their English would be viewed as a ‘badge’ of their identity, making less visible the other social currency they possessed which would otherwise have allowed them to make certain status claims. Karthik, a student of mine at Ascent, who worked at an accountancy firm, told me:

K: Most of our clients are English-speaking. When they came to us first [initially], they thought I knew only Kannada.<sup>55</sup> They did not think I knew English. So first, they were not talking to me at all, they were only talking to my boss. I felt bad. If I didn’t have the knowledge, then I would not have felt bad. But I had the knowledge. Language was my problem.

INT: Did these clients know Kannada?

K: Yes, they knew. But they didn’t speak to me, because they didn’t think I knew English.

<sup>53</sup> Somebody who has graduated from Standard Ten (the end of high school, in most Indian schools), but has no further educational qualifications.

<sup>54</sup> A person who has a Bachelor of Technology or Master of Technology degree.

<sup>55</sup> Karthik said that the clients had gained the impression that he knew only Kannada because when they had first met him, his boss had been speaking to him in Kannada.

Karthik felt that these clients were dismissive of him because of his perceived lack of English, which led them to assume that he was not very knowledgeable. Many of my other interlocutors also described similar situations where they felt they had been viewed or treated poorly because of their English. What was striking was that it was not so much that they were worried that their English would reveal or expose their 'level', but that they were concerned that their real potential, their *actual* 'level', would not be recognized because of their English.

By the same token, being proficient in English could also provide an exaggerated sense of the other types of capital a person possessed. Mohini, who did clerical work at a hospital, told me: *'If you speak in English, they give you more respect. Wherever you go it's like that. Shops, hotels ... if you speak English they give you more respect. They will think she must have studied a lot, she must be in a high position [job].'* Vishala, a middle-aged woman who worked as a cook, and her husband Manjunath, who worked as a tailor, had—despite their difficult financial situation—put their daughter, Ramya, through an English-medium school and then sent her to an engineering college. Ramya now worked at an MNC and earned a good salary. Vishala told me that Ramya's job, and the manner in which she spoke (in English) and dressed, all successfully hid her background. She said:

*At her work place, nobody knew how [small] her house is. She would get off [the office shuttle bus] at the main road. People think she must living one of those big houses on the main road, because of the way she speaks, clothes she wears, her style. She gets respect automatically, wherever she goes.*

A few months before this conversation with Vishala, Ramya had married a well-to-do engineer. Her husband and his family were under the impression that Vishala worked as a receptionist (Ramya had felt ashamed to tell them she was a cook). *'If I had known English, I could have become a receptionist, or managed a shop. . . ,'* Vishala mused. *'I would have spoken to customers in English. They would not have figured out I was not educated. Even now, nobody can make out I am not educated. I wear ironed clothes, have a neat plait.'* The last line of this quote illustrates another point: for someone of Vishala's age, not being proficient in English was less of an indicator or predictor of education and socio-economic status than it was for someone of Ramya's age.

The 'identity possibilities' that English proficiency could create were also something about which many of my interlocutors were resentful. Mahesh, a student of mine who had an engineering degree, felt

angered that when he went to a mall, he ended up feeling inferior to a salesperson (who was less educated than he was and in a less prestigious job), because the salesperson spoke better English. He said:

If you go [to] any mall . . . Yeah they [salesman] may speak in good English. But they didn't study anything, they have passed only SSLC [Standard Ten]<sup>56</sup> . . . but they are good in English. Even though I am engineering student, in front of them, I'll hesitate to speak with them. He speaks good English, I don't know English, I will feel like that.

English proficiency could thus, to some extent, temporarily unsettle or displace existing hierarchies and level the playing field in a way that my ETC students who possessed relatively prestigious educational qualifications and job credentials found unsettling. Like Karthik, whom I quoted above, and many of my other interlocutors, Mahesh appeared to feel that English was a superficial index of a person's 'level' and therefore ranking people on the basis of their English was not accurate. He seemed to feel that educational qualifications are a more accurate basis on which people should be ranked, and that this English-speaking salesperson was wrongly coming across as superior, just because he spoke more proficient English. This kind of distortion of hierarchies was perceived to take place in situations that would have more of a serious impact on my interlocutors' lives too: job interviews, for instance. Many of my interlocutors complained that people who possessed less impressive educational credentials than they did were frequently more successful in the job market, because in interviews English proficiency was often one of the main criteria on which people were hired. There was thus a tension between the view that English transformed a person, made them smarter, more competent, more 'professional'—all views that Mahesh and many others had voiced at other times—and the view that it was wrongly taken as an index of things it was not. The figure of the English-speaking bus-conductor or auto-rickshaw driver—which I came across several times in the course of my fieldwork—was viewed differently from the English-speaking salesperson. This auto-rickshaw driver/bus conductor was a tragic figure: a person whose linguistic capital suggested that they should be in a better station in life, and yet they were driving an auto-rickshaw or selling tickets on a bus for a living. What made them tragic, rather

<sup>56</sup> When students pass Standard Ten at schools that follow the state syllabus, they are awarded a Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC).

than threatening, was that their lack of capital besides English was very obvious.

Just as people's levels were gauged on their English proficiency, this was often guessed at or assumed, based on the other kinds of capital they possessed or were imagined to possess. This was why people sometimes reported feeling insulted when they were addressed in Kannada—they viewed it as an unfavourable indicator of how their 'level' had been assessed. On several occasions, salespeople—in malls or restaurants—pointedly responded to me in English (or sometimes, if they were very uncomfortable speaking in English, in Hindi) when I addressed them in Kannada.

My interlocutors told me that possessing other forms of capital would not necessarily guarantee status and respect unless one was also proficient in English. A person who possessed excellent educational credentials or had a prestigious job was still likely to feel inadequate and insecure if their English was not good. While these other sources of capital might be necessary, they were not sufficient. Sakshi, an Ascent counsellor, described how her husband—despite the fact he had more prestigious educational credentials than she did—was less confident and self-assured than she was because of his English:

Wherever I go, I speak and people tell me, 'Your communication skills are good. You don't have mother tongue influence also. Your accent is very clear.' See, I'll tell you one thing, one example—don't think I'm putting down my husband, he is BE [Bachelor of Engineering] and I am only BA [Bachelor of Arts]—but he cannot speak English like me. And I have that confidence that 'I can do'. He will think that he might go wrong, he has less confidence. He can speak, but not like me. My communication skills are much better than him.

Kaveri, one of my Ascent students, said, '*These days people don't look at clothes and jewellery. [ . . . ] These days everyone has clothes and jewellery. If I go to a wedding reception with my husband and someone talks to me in English, and I can't reply, then they may feel I'm not a good match for my husband.*' Similarly, Uttara, a trainer at Ascent, said, 'My sister-in-law, she's [a millionaire] with ten servants and all, but I still have an edge over her because I can speak English and communicate well. When we go for parties she feels insecure and envies me because I can speak confidently to everyone.' It was also felt that even if one was not able to perform other class behaviours and exhibit other signs of middle-class identity, being competent in English would still ensure social standing and the respect of others. Rajani, an attender at Ascent, told me, '*Even if you don't have one rupee in your pocket you can have attitude if you speak*

English. *People will respect you.*' Like her, many of my interlocutors appeared to feel that the power of English was so strong that being proficient in the language could allow one to make certain claims to status, even in the absence of other important forms of capital (e.g. money, educational qualifications). Vishala told me that while she needed to wear a certain amount of jewellery to be able to present herself as being of a certain 'level', I—because of a look of affluence, conveyed by the way I spoke [in English] and the way I dressed—could afford to wear no jewellery. *'If I don't wear this jewellery for a week, people will think, 'Auntie must be having difficulties!' They give you respect even if you don't wear all this,'* she observed.<sup>57</sup>

Just as Vishala described consciously displaying some of the kinds of capital she possessed in order to compensate for a lack of other kinds of capital, I also came across cases of people attempting to 'enhance' their English in various ways in order to compensate for other perceived lacks and present themselves as belonging to a particular 'level'. Cheryl—a corporate trainer I knew—told me that she altered her English accent according to whom she was speaking. She said that if she was being interviewed by someone, and she felt a bit nervous about not coming across as being qualified enough or not having enough work experience, she'd 'put on a slight accent' (speaking in what she felt was a 'sophisticated' way) to give the impression that she had 'roamed the world'. She said people were impressed more by accent than by vocabulary. Cheryl and I had both taught an 80-hour English course at a leading IT company in the city. Cheryl said that when she had spoken on the phone to Angela—who worked in the company's training department and who had coordinated the English course—Angela had said, rather apologetically, that Cheryl had a 'bit of an accent' and that this might 'alienate her students' (the implication

<sup>57</sup> Liechty tells us about how one of his interlocutors spoke about upper-class students having a 'certain (perhaps cultivated) indifference' to appearances. He writes: 'These students [...] have nothing to prove—and their families' financial security allows them to "just throw something on". On the other hand [...] The insecurity of middle-classness breeds a kind of focused earnestness about dress and the need to boast about new acquisitions. For them proper clothing is a "big deal" and constitutes an important part of their claims to membership in the urban middle class' (Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, p. 136). Similarly, most of my interlocutors who had attended relatively elite English-medium schools felt under no pressure to demonstrate their English proficiency. Indeed, some of them told me that—unhappy about how Kannada was disappearing from an increasing number of public spaces in the city—they had started making an effort to speak Kannada more, and encouraged others (salesmen, auto-rickshaw drivers) to speak in Kannada.

being that they were not very good at English and so would not be comfortable if their trainer spoke stylishly). Cheryl told Angela that since she was talking to a fellow trainer, this 'accent may have come', but she would not have it when she talked with her students.

However, my interlocutors' comments, observations, and experiences also suggested that a person's ability to perform alternative class behaviours—and harness the other sources of capital that they commanded—determined to some extent how their use of English would be interpreted and perceived. While some people's use of English might be viewed as a 'natural' reflection of their education, economic position, and urbane qualities, other people's English use might be interpreted as an attempt at claiming distinction that was not in keeping with the rest of their class capital. My interlocutors—ranging from the students and trainers at ETCs, to the auto-rickshaw drivers that I interviewed, to teachers and students at schools—all made reference to people who spoke in English and sometimes even pretended they did not know Kannada, in order to show off and act as if they were 'high level' people. In a conversation with Parthasarthy—who worked as a driver—about language use in the city, I asked whether it would be acceptable to speak in English at one of the city's bus stations or at a vegetable market. After a moment's thought, he explained that Kannada would be the best language to use in such locations. While it was possible to get by speaking in English in those places, it did not 'suit' these environments. If he were to speak English at such places, he told me, people would think he was trying to be arrogant and 'show his level' because they would be able to tell that he was 'Kannada-speaking'. If I were to speak English at the bus station, on the other hand, while I ran the risk of being viewed as too stylish and arrogant, it would be slightly more acceptable—though still not appropriate—as I 'looked' English-speaking.

### Conclusion

As I have illustrated in this article, my interlocutors experienced being middle class as a field of competition. Unlike caste where a person's 'level' was, to some extent, stable, a person's class position was always a work in progress. Liechty, in his writing on the middle class in Kathmandu, captures this very well.<sup>58</sup> He observes: '[...]

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

the middle class is a kind of performative space characterized by constant alignment and realignment with class others, and where goods play active roles. Ultimately, middle-class membership is not about fixing rank but about *claiming* and *maintaining* a place in the ongoing debate.<sup>59</sup> Though he draws on the language of debate, Liechty does not have much to say about the role that people's speech and language practices play in this process. In this article I have argued that—in Bangalore—being able to demonstrate proficiency in English is becoming increasingly important in order to claim and maintain a space in the ongoing debate, regardless of the other types of class cultural capital that a person possesses.

The emergence of English as a key index of middle-class status differentiation could be attributed to two things. First, as I have described, the role that English plays in people's class projects is overdetermined and different from that played by any other type of class cultural capital. English-language proficiency is viewed and experienced as more than a form of consumption; it is also an invaluable skill in the job market and necessary for the acquisition of information, 'knowledge', and educational credentials. The role of English in people's class projects, however, goes beyond being a skill, experienced as it is as an agent of transformation. Secondly, the relative complexity and difficulty of acquiring English-language skills can also be said to contribute to its key role in middle-class differentiation. Though one's economic resources undoubtedly determine the kind of English-medium instruction one has access to—and therefore the kind of English one acquires—English proficiency cannot, obviously, simply be purchased in the way that consumer goods can.<sup>60</sup> Writing about the new consumption possibilities that IT jobs in Bangalore enabled, Nisbett describes how the sharing of consumer goods, which took place within friendship groups, allowed even those without such jobs to assume the look of an IT worker.<sup>61</sup> Again, there are no such shortcuts or quick fixes available in the

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>60</sup> Of course, as Liechty illustrates, demonstrating appropriate consumer behaviour is also not a matter of simply purchasing goods—one has to know how to display the goods one buys. For instance, he argues that 'doing fashion' involved more than just wearing certain kinds of clothes and make-up: it also involved cultivating a certain kind of demeanour, comportment, and manners. Nevertheless, I would argue that performing English proficiency is still more difficult than performing consumer behaviour.

<sup>61</sup> Nisbett, 'Friendship, Consumption, Morality'.



case of acquiring English proficiency. Furthermore, unlike formal educational qualifications, becoming competent in English is not simply a matter of completing a programme or course. As Chang observes, one cannot memorize or improvise one's way to fluency in the language.<sup>62</sup> Possessing proficiency in English means being able to demonstrate it.

Being accomplished in English is thus usually viewed as being the result of a person's 'background' (rather than more recent economic circumstances). More specifically, this is achieved by having had adequate exposure to good English when one was a child, usually by having attended a 'good' school, which was typically made possible by one's family's economic position.<sup>63</sup> Such a background, combined with the proficiency in English that it enabled, is strongly associated with certain kinds of competencies, educational credentials, and jobs.<sup>64</sup> For all these reasons, a person's level of English has come to serve as a reliable index and predictor of other key forms of class capital, apart from indexing something beyond them. Furthermore, given that consumer goods, and even educational credentials and job designations, are increasingly becoming a relatively widely acquirable currency, a person's English proficiency is experienced as a very important, relatively reliable, and easily visible (or rather, audible) measure for ranking within the middle class.

I have also demonstrated how English is experienced as a double-edged sword by my interlocutors. On the one hand, it is believed to be a powerful vehicle of class mobility, which makes it a highly valued form of capital. English is widely spoken of as a social good and a tool of empowerment. On the other hand, for precisely the same reason, it is also experienced as very threatening, particularly to people who possess other forms of class cultural capital, the meaning and value of which have in various ways come to be altered, diminished, or perceived differently because of their English. While people spoke of the transformative potential of English, they also spoke of it as a superficial index of value, and something that could prevent their 'actual level' and 'real potential' from being seen.

<sup>62</sup> L. Chang, *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*, United States, Spiegel & Grau, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> There was an awareness that there were people who had managed to learn good English despite having attended a Kannada-medium school or 'local' private school, and such people were usually respected.

<sup>64</sup> See also Nisbett, *Growing up in the Knowledge Society*, p. 184.

Sugata Srinivasaraju, an Indian journalist and writer, observes: 'It is truly sad that the subaltern communities, who have been oppressed for centuries, have been trapped in the argument that the English language will create a level playing field and it alone will ensure their leap to freedom. They will soon realize that there are different kinds of English and economic and social exclusion will take place on this basis.'<sup>65</sup> As I have demonstrated in this article, my interlocutors were very much aware that there were different types of English being spoken in the city, and that some types were more valued than others. Or, to go back to Vanamala Viswanatha's idea of a 'Below English Line', they were aware that there was not one but many 'English lines'. It was precisely this awareness that made people invest heavily in getting their children into a school where it was felt they would learn good English, and go to great lengths to improve their own English, in order to be able to claim, maintain, or raise their position in the middle class.

<sup>65</sup> S. Srinivasaraju, *Keeping Faith with the Mother Tongue: The Anxieties of a Local Culture*, Navakarnataka Publications, Bangalore, 2008, p. 23.