Restorying Indenture
The First Fiji Hindi Speakers Narrate Girmit

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Linguistics
at Massey University,
Palmerston North, New Zealand

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2011
Dedication

To Ryan

for understanding I needed to find myself

And

To my great-grandparents

for the journey
Abstract

This research is about the framing of Girmit through Fiji Hindi life narratives. The study is symbolic as it focuses on the life narratives of the first generation of Fiji Hindi speakers. The seven narrators in this study are part of 60, 965 Indian indentured labourers, or Girmityas /ˈɡɪrˌmɪtʃə/, who voyaged to Fiji between 1879 and 1916, most to work on the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company’s plantations. This study traces their experiences of indenture, or Girmit /ˈɡɪrɪmt/, through their life narratives. To date, Girmit researchers have relied on official documents about the Girmit system while the Girmityas’ voices are either absent, or, at best, excerpted to support the master narrators’ discourse on Girmit. This study turns to the Girmityas’ life narratives with the question: How do Indian indentured labourers to Fiji construct life narratives in Fiji Hindi to reconstruct their indenture experiences, and through the narration process, negotiate positions of identities and agencies? Beginning with Labov & Waletzky’s (1967/1997), and Labov’s (1972; 1997; 2001; 2004; 2006) high-point analysis, the study analyzes how each Girmit recollection has been re-constructed. Further, using Bamberg’s (1997; 2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c) positioning analysis, the study analyzes the Girmityas’ adopted positionings in, and through their life narratives. The interweaving of the two frameworks takes the life narratives from the textual back into the social world of production. The scope of the research is limited to understanding the interconnectivity between structure, focus, and manner of narration, within the bounds of memory, the shared knowledge of cultural ideologies, and the master narratives of indenture, for the purpose of negotiating identities and agencies favourable to the Girmit narrator. The variables conform each other, and help explain why these seven life narratives are told. The research makes the following major contributions: it uses a culturally relevant model of analysis, it details the movement from structural to performative analysis, it analyzes the factors underlying the performativity of the Fiji Hindi life narrative; and it analyzes the consequences these performativities have for the contextually produced self(s). In working towards these contributions, the study also contributes back to the Fiji Indian community.
Acknowledgements

This research has been possible because of the immense support I have received.

My thanks and admiration goes, firstly, to my team of advisors. Martin Paviour-Smith for (re)reading everything, for replying to my copious emails, for the narratives on storytelling practices in Vanuatu, for your patience and humour; Cynthia White for your words of wisdom, understanding, and encouragement; Peter Petrucci for your input at every meeting, and for those interesting asides on the Okinawan diaspora.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to everyone who has worked behind the scenes on the life narratives. Rishan Gounder for digitalizing the life narratives. Nani Ram Brij, and Narayan Gounder for your enormous help with the translations, and for sharing with me your wealth of knowledge on Fiji Hindi. The staff at the Fiji Museum, and Jitendra Shyam at the Fiji Broadcasting Commission for assisting me, via email, with information on Girmit. Savitri Gounder for giving me your grandfather’s picture. And Ryan Gounder for travelling to Fiji in search of your great grandparents’ Girmit passes.

I also thank my colleagues at International Pacific College, where, coincidently, I began lecturing at the same time as I began the research: Thank you for taking care of all those expenses associated with embarking on a PhD. Thank you especially to the librarians, Tracey, Janet, and Chris for the interloans. To the President, Wayne Edwards for your insights, and words of encouragement that helped in the PhD writing journey. And thank you to everyone for listening to me talk about this research.

Thank you to the Massey University Linguistics Department staff, in particular Ute Walker for discussing methodologies with me; France Grenaudier-Klijn for introducing me to ‘post memory’; and Gillian Skyrme for organizing roundtable discussion sessions for PhD students, and ensuring the time was outside my teaching schedule.

I am immensely grateful to everyone in the fields related to the research, who took time out of their busy schedules to correspond with me. France Mugler for your correspondence on Fiji Hindi, not just during the PhD, but from when I began my journey in linguistics all
those years ago. Richard Barz, for your interest in my research; for all the stimulating
e-mails; and for the articles, and references. Brij Lal, for your encouragement, particularly
in the early stages, when I was not sure if the life narratives from the *Girmit Gāthā* series
were still in existence. Michael Bamberg, for reminding me that the world is full of
friends, and for your articles. Gary Barkhuizen, for your comments during NZ Language &
Society Conference 2008, which helped me reformulate an entire chapter. Doug Munro,
Jeff Siegel, and Mary Bock, for your articles. And I’d like to thank everyone who provided
feedback at CLESOL 2008, NZ Language & Society Conference 2008, School of
Language Studies 1st Postgraduate Students Mini-Conference 2009, and NZ Linguistics
Conference 2009.

Thank you for being part of the journey
My journey with these Girmityas’ life narratives began when I was seven years old. In my earliest memories of visiting dādī, I see us all sitting, and listening, the Girmityas’ voices entering the house through the large speakers on either side of a silver rectangular box as we drink hot milky tea. The radio had pride of place in my grandmother’s living room, where the television now sits. We listened to the Girmityas recollecting their experiences, which they did with sometimes laughter, sometimes tears, and at other times with anger, bitterness, or resignation.

It was a time when Fiji Indians were searching to define who they were, a hundred years after the first Girmityas arrived in Fiji. As our family’s history with Fiji began with Girmit, we would listen to the life narratives with great interest, after which came the adults’ critique. This was the only time that I heard the life narratives, until I began this study twenty-one years later. But although I did not hear them again, the Girmityas’ narratives whispered to me through my memories.

In my mind, the hearing of the Girmityas’ life narratives is juxtaposed on the memory of Fiji’s first coup, which occurred a year later in 1987. We heard the news on the radio. My mother and the old man next door wondered what a coup was. I remember the fear and unease as Sakeasi Butadroka, the leader of the Nationalist Taukei Movement, re-voiced over the airwaves his 1975 parliamentary motion that Indians should be repatriated to India, courtesy of the British Government, which had brought them. I was eight years old, and my right to call myself a Fiji citizen was challenged. My hybrid identity, as a product of four generations of Indians living in Fiji, marked me out in the land where I was born.

I carry these memories to New Zealand. As I study the life narratives of the Girmityas, whose great-grandchildren are coming to terms with Fiji’s fourth coup, I admit that this research is not only about the understanding of the Girmityas’ identity constructions; it is also a research about my search for an understanding of the experiences that define “Who am I?”

Shards of Memories
In many ways, the telling of my life narrative mirrors that of the Girmityas. We are telling our narratives not in the country of our birth, but in our adopted homelands. We are taking the opportunity of speaking to a wide range of interlocutors to tell our narratives. And in shaping our narratives for, and with these interlocutors, we shape ourselves. We discover strengths within us to articulate experiences that we carry with us, and in doing so, we move our narratives into the realm of heard voices.
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xvi
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within their life narratives. The section that follows concentrates on the research undertaken. Here, the model of analysis is presented, the purpose and rationale behind the research are provided, the research question is identified, and the boundaries of the research question are defined, after which, the key areas of contribution of the study are discussed. The penultimate section outlines the structure of the study. The chapter ends with a discussion of my own positioning, as both an insider and a researcher, and the influences these dual positionings would have had on my point of view of the Girmityas, and my understanding of their life narratives.

1.1 The Girmit narrators

In order of the presentation of their life narratives, the seven Girmityas are: Gabriel Aiyappa, Ram Rattan Mishar, Guldhari Maharaj, Ram Sundar Maharaj, Jasoda Ramdin, Ram Dulhari, and Ghori Gosai. While six of the Girmityas describe their own Girmit experience, Guldhari Maharaj is an exception. She went to Fiji as a child, and describes her mother's experiences on a harsh plantation environment.

Of the seven Girmityas, Jasoda Ramdin appears to have been the earliest Girmitya to Fiji, although this is difficult to verify as Gabriel Aiyappa, Ram Rattan Mishar, and Guldhari Maharaj did not provide details of the year of arrival, nor the name of the ship. By noting the date of arrival to Fiji in Table 1 below, I am not attempting to verify their credibility as Girmityas; rather, I am attempting to put their Girmit experience in context, relative to the master narratives, and relative to the other Girmityas’ experiences.

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