Apu’s Brown Voice

_The Simpsons_ and Indian American Accents

I cannot deny my roots and I cannot keep up this charade. I only did it because I love this land, where I have the freedom to say, and to think, and to charge whatever I want! Apu, “Much Apu about nothing,” May 5, 1996

_The Simpsons’_ ninth-season episode “Much Apu about Nothing” reflects the conflict between the promise of the American Dream for immigrants and the pressures of cultural assimilation that lead immigrants to deny their cultural identity and focus on how the vocal nature of brown voice operates as an Indian accent. Apu vents his frustration, after masquerading in both dress and accent, as someone who is culturally and stereotypically American—an identity that does not reflect his experience. Apu expresses a love for the freedom of speech and free enterprise in the United States, but his “charade” to appear as American reveals to him that the values he loves about the United States do not apply to someone like him (an immigrant without legal papers). In the episode, Apu is compelled to purchase false citizenship papers in order to avoid being deported as an undocumented immigrant. He then dresses up in what he thinks is the persona of an American citizen—a man who wears a cowboy hat and baseball shirt and talks with a John Wayne accent. This is the only occasion in the series when Apu does not speak in his signature accent. As mentioned in the introduction, it is his lack of an Indian accent that draws attention to how Apu is racialized in the show.

This chapter begins with a discussion about the representation and performance of South Asian American voices and accents in American culture in the 1990s. The term “brown voice” identifies a specific racializing trait among South Asian Americans in Hollywood productions, which simultaneously connotes both foreignness and familiarity because the accent is identified with an English-speaking identity and hence offers some cultural privileges of assimilating into American culture. Apu is identified as Indian in the series, so when he is referenced here, his accent is Indian, but his accent stands in for a more general South Asian accent. Despite the inclusion of Apu in a social satire of American culture, his signature voice, I argue, is an example of a racialized performance of South Asians in the United States that reinforces rather than challenges stereotypes of South Asian Americans and, more generally, Asian Americans in American media.

Ultimately, the practice of brown voice is a form of cultural inflection: a variation on cultural citizenship that reinforces a static, racialized position for South Asian Americans regardless of their status or occupation in the United States. South Asian American groups are represented as one undifferentiated group who are saddled with one accent and one voice. This image frames
South Asian Americans as an acceptable and privileged ethnic group (in comparison to other minority and immigrant groups) that in current times also has considerable political and economic consequences in terms of business deals, state security, or celebrity status. This static and fixed position, signaled by a singular and stable “voice,” develops through the particular historical representation of difference in mass media in the United States and combined with prior and current relations of the Indian diaspora with both British and U.S. culture. This static position is illustrated by what may arguably be the most recognizable and definitive Indian accent to American audiences established by Hollywood in the 1990s: that of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon on the long-running animated series *The Simpsons*.

In the first scene described, Apu’s cultural appropriation of American icons is extreme and, thereby, emphasizes how different he is with respect to the other citizens of Springfield. Apu’s flawed attempt to impersonate an American with a celebrity accent attaches him to an American cultural history and, hence, (in his mind) an American cultural citizenship. But to the audience (including me), this is a humorous scene because we know Apu is not culturally American. Our expectation of Apu when we see him onscreen is for him to speak English with what we have been culturally primed to hear as an “Indian accent.” This satire of ethnic assimilation illustrates how racial and ethnic identities operate beyond the visual and are influenced by the reception of accented speech. It also illustrates the notion of “the charade” of taking up another’s cultural behavior by performing a cultural accent. I am less interested in the phenomenon of cultural masquerade than in the meaning generated by this practice in relation to Indian Americans in the United States. The character of Apu offers an ideal case study to portray how Indian Americans are situated and understood in the popular American imagination. Unlike Peter Sellers’s Hrundi Bakshi, who is distinguished by his break with colonial narratives and his outsider status in 1960s Hollywood, Apu is a part of the Asian American (rather than the British) immigrant narrative in the United States. As a character, he represents many of the key themes from the 1990s to current times associated with Indian Americans in popular depictions, such as the model-minority image, subdued or hypo-masculinity, and an informant on Indian culture and religion. Apu, a fictional construction, helps us to revise theories of racial performance and, therefore, examine American racial hierarchies and the formations of Asian American communities in popular culture.
immigrants. Sociolinguists, such as Rosina Lippi-Green, have chronicled how language and accent stereotyping influence social-identity formation and how these stereotypes are reinforced in educational institutions and media outlets. Feminist theorists, such as Kaja Silverman, have explored the power dynamics of masculine and feminine voices but have not explored national and ethnic accents in relation to the articulation of power. I am interested in studying the value of vocal accents in relationship to the concept of cultural citizenship. By focusing on cultural definitions of what an Indian accent means and how it is used in performance, this chapter explores how television sanctions a limited vision of Indian American and South Asian American presence in the United States as a foreign immigrants rather than cultural Americans. The emphasis on the aural sound allows for a reevaluation of how racial categories are socially constructed through representations of Asian Americans and South Asian Americans.

In a well-known study of undergraduate students' comprehension of lecture material at the University of Michigan, students listened to a lecture recorded by the same speaking voice (a native speaker of English from Ohio). Half of the students were shown a slide of a white woman, and the other half were shown a slide of an Asian woman. Students who saw the photo of the Asian woman recorded lower comprehension scores and were more likely to register the presence of a foreign accent in their responses to the lecture. In this case, the physical image of the supposed teacher heavily influenced the understanding of the material by students even when there was no accent. This study illustrates that accent reception is subjective. It also matches

Apu from *The Simpsons* (Twentieth Century Fox Television, 1989–)
representations of Asians in the popular media, which usually portray one type of “Asian” accent even though the difference between a Beijing accent and a Hong Kong accent is as distinct as that of Chicago and Boston accents. In popular culture, Asians are shown as speaking “broken English,” which is a cause of frustration and anger or ridicule to those listening to them. Indian-accented English, on the other hand, is not depicted in this way and offers an alternative way to understand representations of race and ethnicity in American popular culture. Lippi-Green asserts, “Accent serves as the first point of gatekeeping. ... [A]ccent becomes a litmus test for exclusion, an excuse to turn away, to refuse to recognize the other.”

Accent discrimination is not a novel experience in the United States, but it is rarely expressed in discussion of racial hierarchies or racial performance except to indicate difference or foreignness.

Practicing Brown Voice

The representation of an Indian American voice and in particular an Indian-accented English voice gestures toward a special status for Indian Americans, a status that mirrors the historically amorphous and ambiguous position that Indian Americans occupy in American racial hierarchies. The performance of this accent, which I term “brown voice,” is the act of speaking in an accented English associated with Indian American nationals and immigrants. While any person can perform an accent (as comic relief, to accentuate a point, for example), the cultural meaning changes depending upon the actor. The manner of speech is just as important as what is being said. For example, a South Asian speaking brown voice sounds very different from a white actor acting out an accent and playing an Indian American.

To be clear, brown voice is a performance in both senses of the word, not only does someone speak but someone also has to receive and recognize the implications or at least the intent of the accent that marks someone as Indian American. The “affect” of vocal accents and how they are socially constructed are topics that sociolinguists, such as Lippi-Green, have explored in productive ways. Understanding another person’s speech is often dependent on the listener’s good will. Prejudiced listeners cannot hear what a person has to say because accent, as a mirror of social identity and a litmus test for exclusion, is more important. While an Indian American may be speaking English in the way in which s/he is educated and not be aware of speaking brown voice, American dominant culture will hear the English as accented. Brown voice is just as much about how we “hear” and understand Indian accents as who is doing the talking.

The performance of brown voice comes out as an inflected version of English. In terms of linguistic form, these are not words out of order, such as “Milk, where can I get it?” instead of “Where can I get milk?” Inflected English, I argue, is an accessible dose of foreignness rather than an irritating form of speaking. Inflected English bears a similarity to American English. The implementation of brown voice is how Apu speaks in The Simpsons, a rote and consistent accent that is foreign but understandable.

Unlike other forms of Asian English often seen as broken English, Indian-accented English has a unique phonetic signature in which meaning