

## **“Come, Let's Wrestle: Language and the Struggle for Authority in 'Iranian Vines.’”**

The recent significance of social networking and online media as tools for connecting people across geographic lines has given rise to new forms of expressing and formulating the relationship between language and power within diaspora. Not only do social networks such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter facilitate relationships between members of geographically disparate communities, they also engender innovative expressions of identity negotiation. Moreover, the relocation of diasporic communities from shared geographic spaces to virtual ones has transformed the relationship between the diaspora and the home country, placing the two often over-lapping spaces in dialogue with another in new ways worthy of investigation. This shift, together with the recent attention given to the role of social networking and online media in Middle Eastern political uprisings, necessitates a critical look at the function and organization of these spaces.

This paper focuses on one particular online community, the Iranian Vines Facebook page, a site which proves especially fruitful as a source for examining the methods by which new media technologies create space for previously unknown forms of identity negotiation, particularly for heritage speakers of Persian. This site features short, (6-15 second) videos that explore myriad aspects of Iranian identity and of life in the Iranian diaspora, primarily in North America and Europe. While second-generation Iranian immigrants, most of whom would identify as heritage speakers of Persian, produce the majority of the videos posted on the site and so portray and address experiences particular to those who have grown up outside of Iran, more recently-arrived immigrants as well as Iranians still living in Iran also participate.

Through a close analysis of several of these vines as well as their accompanying comments, I seek answers to the following questions: how do new methods of articulating cultural identity, made possible by the advent of emerging technologies, inform and/or alter the power dynamics of a diasporic space? To what extent do language ideologies shape these dynamics? What can these spaces teach us about the role of language, identity and performance in the relationship between heritage and native speakers of Persian?

I argue that interactions between heritage and native speakers within this virtual space result in a site of contestation for the authority to define Iranian identity and that this contestation primarily expresses itself linguistically. While heritage speakers use code-switching to demonstrate their facility in moving across cultural identities, native speakers of Persian challenge the authority of second-generation Iranians to define Iranian identity by questioning and/or denying the legitimacy of heritage Persian. Facebook's built-in system of evaluation through the use of "likes" "comments" and "shares" functions as a frame that makes visible the processes by which members of the community challenge and perpetuate language ideologies and cultural value systems. Responses to the vines both show the conversations surrounding the identity negotiation which takes place through the videos as well as provide insights into the ideologies underlying the performances and their reception. Analysis of these conversations and meta-commentary exposes the ways in which people use online spaces to reinforce or challenge language ideologies, particularly language purism, and the effects of such practices on the online community and its space.

Language plays a multi-faceted role in the identity-negotiation and identity performance evident on the Iranian vines site. Foremost, the use of video as a medium allows for the juxtaposition of multiple performances of identity that not only involve linguistic code-switching, themselves, but that can also be interpreted as a kind of "identity-switching." As such, these performances underline the function of code-switching as a form of identity performance and as a third space from which second-generation youth maneuver in and out of cultural identities.

