

“You were really good for your first time in English”: Raciolinguistic discourse, accommodation, and gatekeeping surrounding Harnarayan Singh’s English Canadian NHL broadcasts

Dakota Wing & Ana-Maria Jerca

When one thinks of Canadian identity, the two elements that most often come to mind are arguably hockey and multiculturalism (Szto, 2016, p. 208). However, it is a rare occurrence for the two to actually intersect. That is, despite 22.6% of Canada’s population identifying as a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2017), 97% of the NHL is white (USA Today Associated Press, 2018). Previous research has explored the economic factors leading to this discrepancy (i.e., the high costs of participation in hockey being a barrier to participation for immigrants and ethnic minorities) (Szto, 2018; Fitz-Gerald, 2019), as well as the social factors (i.e., racism experienced by non-white players before, after, and during games) (Bains & Szto, 2020). Others (e.g., Mastro et al., 2012) have discussed the absence of multiculturalism not on the ice, but in the broadcasting booth, concluding that white male sportscasters were rated more favorably in terms of experience and character than sportscasters of colour for hockey broadcasts (p. 468-469). Mastro et al.’s work supports the findings of research on language and race which has repeatedly shown that one’s race can affect how one’s speech is perceived and how one’s character or abilities are perceived as a result (see, for example, Rubin’s (1992) work on undergraduate students’ unfavorable perceptions of speakers assumed to be Chinese, Baugh’s (2003) work on his experience with discriminatory practices in the American renter’s market, and Rickford & King’s (2016) work on black teenage girls being perceived as incomprehensible and not credible when testifying in court).

It is against this backdrop that our research takes place. Following Szto (2016), we examine public Twitter responses to Harnarayan Singh’s national English play-by-play broadcasting debuts on Sportsnet (January 13, 2021) and Hockey Night in Canada (HNIC) (January 16, 2021). Harnarayan Singh is the first Sikh person to call play-by-play in English on a national broadcast, though he has been a sportscaster on HNIC Punjabi since 2008. Singh was born in Canada and is a native English speaker, but as the work mentioned above has shown, this does not preclude him from being racialized and linguistically profiled by viewers. Our study qualitatively examines Twitter data related to five main tweets (MTs), one by the NHL, Sportsnet, HNIC, each and two by Singh himself that explicitly call attention to Singh’s broadcasts between January 13 and 17, 2021, namely: the replies to the MTs, the comments with retweets of the MTs, and the replies to the latter. The data were grouped into positive, neutral, and negative evaluations of Singh and his broadcast by each author, assuring inter-rater reliability. Within these groupings, patterns are revealed (e.g., evaluations of speaking style and credibility). These patterns are discussed from a raciolinguistic perspective (c.f. Rosa & Flores, 2017), highlighting underlying ideologies. Relevant evaluations are compared to Singh’s own reflections on his language use using Giles’ Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) approach (c.f. Mastro et. al., 2012). Mainly, we explore Singh’s personal orientation to converging his communication style to the viewers’ expectations slowly, while still maintaining the unique “spice or masala” (Singh, as cited in Wagner, 2021) that made him popular in the first place. Through this comparison, it becomes clear that his critics act as gatekeepers, both potentially informing broadcasting corporations about who they’d prefer to see sportscasting, but also keeping people from ethnic minorities out of hockey in

general. However, these views are heavily outweighed by support for Singh, with authors praising him for challenging the hegemony of hockey and sports broadcasting and addressing the need for more diversity in the sport.