Mobile (dis)connection:
Migrant narratives about social media and the homeland

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Research on language and migration has adopted a transnational approach, shifting away from notions of static home and host countries, and focusing instead on how transnationals orient simultaneously to these centers through discursive practices (Koven 2013). New technologies, in particular, are argued to have intensified the dynamic between both countries (Vertovec 1999); however, there has been little analysis of how these technologies are invoked in migration discourses – that is, how migrants construct their relationship to the homeland and to these technologies through their language. In this paper, we focus on how social media is invoked in migrants' discursive construction of their identities, and we argue that references to social media are used not only to *adequate*, but also to *differentiate* (Bucholtz & Hall 2005) the identities of those abroad from those in the homeland.

The data for this study are drawn from 45 hours of recorded interviews and naturally occurring conversation among members of two diasporic communities: Iranians and Uzbeks living in the U.S. Using a socially situated approach to careful linguistic analysis, we examine migration discourses, paying particular attention to the use of deictics and affective language. As in the following example, migrants may reference technology in order to discursively construct differences between themselves and those in the homeland.

"If I'm on Facebook and the news feed that I get from my generation of people who are in Uzbekistan raising their kids there, and then my friends who have moved to the US, it's a stark difference."

This woman invokes Facebook when asked for clarification on her larger assertion as to the differences between those in her generation who have stayed in Uzbekistan versus those who have left the country. In this case, social media is invoked to provide evidence of difference from the homeland, demonstrating that despite facilitating *connectedness*, technology can also be seen as increasing feelings of *disconnectedness* for those living abroad. This may be in part because technology disrupts the imaginations of an unchanged homeland by confronting those abroad with images of a temporally *present* homeland – one with which it may be more difficult to adequate. In turn, technology is invoked to highlight identity differences, which are then manifest linguistically through explicit deictics (e.g. "Us and Them") and implicit discursive moves (e.g. intonation).

The invocation of technology and the emerging feelings of disconnection in fact helps highlight not only the differences between migrant and non-migrant identities, but also the sharedness of migrant experiences. By examining both the discourses about technology as well as the language use surrounding real-time reactions to images of the homeland available through technology, we demonstrate how migrant identities are formed in part through the narration of the unique (dis)connection to the homeland that is facilitated by technological advances. This work has implications for understanding the impact of technology on notions of migration, language and belonging, and for challenging the ideas that equate technological advancement and greater exposure with greater affiliation.