

‘My language, my people’: language and ethnic identity among British-born South Asians

Rusi Jaspal

Royal Holloway, University of London

Adrian Coyle

University of Surrey

This study explores how a group of second generation Asians (SGA) understood and defined language, focusing upon the role they perceived language to have played in their identity. Twelve SGA were interviewed and the data were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis. Four superordinate themes are reported, entitled ‘Mother tongue and self’, ‘A sense of ownership and affiliation’, ‘Negotiating linguistic identities in social space’ and ‘The quest for a positive linguistic identity’. Participants generally expressed a desire to maintain continuity of self-definition as Asian, primarily through the maintenance of the heritage language (HL). An imperfect knowledge of the HL was said to have a negative impact upon psychological well-being. There were ambivalent responses to the perception of language norms, and various strategies were reported for dealing with dilemmatic situations and identity threat arising from bilingualism. Recommendations are offered for interventions that might aid the ‘management’ of bilingualism among SGA.

Key words: ethnic identity, language, bilingualism, British Asians, qualitative, social psychology

There is a substantial amount of empirical and theoretical work on the relationship between language and ethnic identity (Fishman, 2001; Harris, 2006; Omoniyi and White, 2006), as well as some important contributions from social psychology (Giles and Johnson, 1987; Lawson and Sachdev, 2004; Bourhis, El-Geledi and Sachdev, 2007; Chen and Bond, 2007; Jaspal and Coyle, 2009). However, there has been little social psychological work on language and ethnic identity specifically among British South Asians, the largest ethnic minority group in the UK, although some attention has been paid to questions of ethnic identity in general (Ghuman, 1999; Robinson, 2009; Vadher and Barrett, 2009; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Nonetheless, sociolinguists have exhibited some interest in language and ethnic identity specifically among second generation Asians (SGA), but this research has focused mainly upon youth culture and upon the notion of ‘new ethnicities’ (Rampton, 1995; Harris, 2006) primarily in school settings with adolescent participants (Rampton, 1995; Moore, 2003; Harris, 2006). Here it is argued that a social psychological perspective constitutes a fruitful point of departure, given the discipline’s long tradition of studying both the micro and the macro levels of identity, including categorisation and identity processes as well as intergroup processes (Verkuyten, 2005). The present paper offers such a perspective.

The study of language and ethnic identity among SGA is particularly interesting, as their linguistic repertoire often features English (the ‘dominant’ language), the language associated with their ethnic culture, which is termed the heritage language (HL) and, in many cases, a liturgical language associated with religious identity (Jaspal and Coyle, 2010). Such multilingualism is constructed in the

media both positively (as ‘bilingual Asian children do better’ in school – Casciani, 2003) and negatively (as an obstacle to integration – Blunkett, 2002). Today SGA outnumber the foreign-born first generation and their HLs continue to be widely used (Harris, 2006). Theoretical generalisation across different cultures is problematic in this domain because not all cultures have the same relationship to language (Myhill, 2003), which partly constitutes the rationale for the present study.

Taken-for-granted terms such as ‘native speaker’ and ‘mother tongue’ form part of the way that individuals think and talk about language (Myhill, 2003). An individual might consider their ‘dominant’ language to be the language they speak most fluently (Fillmore, 2000), although it would not be surprising for someone of Pakistani descent, for instance, to claim that their native language was Urdu, a language associated with Pakistani identity, on the basis of ethnic identity. This discrepancy in interpretation demonstrates the arbitrariness of terms such as ‘native speaker’ and ‘mother tongue’ and thus doubts arise regarding their acceptability in research.

A related issue is the relationship between language and ethnic identification, which has been addressed in research on bilingualism (Baker and Jones, 1998; Cho, 2000), albeit with other ethnic groups. It has been argued that through the HL, ethnic identity can be ‘expressed, enacted and symbolised’ (Baker and Jones, 1998, p.113). Myhill (2003) discusses the ‘language-and-identity ideology’, which assumes an inherent emotional connection between an individual and their language. Proponents of this ideology suggest that in order ‘to be a better, more authentic, more loyal, more committed’ member of the group, one must speak the language associated with it (Fishman, 1972, p. 46). Language is thus conceptualised as a marker of ethnic identity.

Conversely, the work of some sociolinguists problematises the role of language as an essential component of ethnic identity. Myhill (2003), for instance, makes the contentious claim that, for many diaspora Jews, their ‘native language’ is merely a ‘tool’ due to the convenience of speaking the dominant language of the host country natively. Furthermore, Daller (2005) postulates that language may not necessarily be an intrinsic property of ethnic identity but that it can provisionally serve as an instrument with which a given group asserts its differential identity. Language allegedly performs this function when group identity is felt to be threatened and it might be abandoned when it no longer serves this function. Moreover, research undertaken by May (2000) shows that Welsh speak who do not speak Welsh can nonetheless exhibit a strong sense of Welsh identity. Given the ambivalent role of language in ethnic identity, this research seeks to explore the meanings and perceived functions of the HL among SGA. Research on the social psychological implications of a lack of proficiency in their HL is lacking, although it is often suggested that only proficiency in the HL allows complete access to the ethnic group (You, 2005).

There exists some research on the use of ‘Black English’ among British black youth (Hewitt, 1986; Alexander, 1996). The present research acknowledges the possible presence of varieties of ‘Black English’ in SGA participants’ linguistic repertoires and more generally in their psychological worlds, since some sociolinguistic research has identified possible Asian appropriation of this language variety (Rampton, 1995; Harris, 2006). Such outgroup appropriation of ‘Black English’ has been described in the literature as ‘language crossing’ (Rampton, 1995), that is, the use of a given language by an outgroup member. It allegedly reflects an anti-racist practice and the desire of youths to redefine their identities. The act of using a variety that ‘belongs’ to another group contests racial boundaries, so this

perhaps reflects self-representation based upon the adoption of a ‘linguistic’ self-aspect associated with the outgroup (Simon, 2004). Rampton’s (1995) work on this appears to reiterate the notion that it is primarily language that enables identification at the expense of other dimensions of identity. The present research explores this notion through reflective accounts from a group of SGA.

In contrast to the largely quantitative survey-based social psychological research on language and identity (Lawson and Sachdev, 2004), the present study explores how a group of young SGA individuals subjectively understand and define language and identity and associated terms and concepts (e.g. ‘mother tongue’). It is believed that a qualitative approach would complement existing quantitative research in this area by offering holistic and contextual analyses, which consider the subjective meanings attached by participants to language and ethnic identity in a largely exploratory fashion (Coyle, 2007). Furthermore, in-depth qualitative research is likely to inform future quantitative studies of language and identity specifically within this population. Through the analysis of participants’ reflective accounts, this research endeavours to discern the role of language in ethnic identity. Since language is generally understood as a context-dependent phenomenon (Meyerhoff, 2006), this study explores the role of (linguistic) socialisation upon individuals’ sense of self. As a logical continuation of this, participants’ evaluative attitudes towards languages are investigated. These complex issues are explored qualitatively through the analysis of participants’ first-hand accounts of their experiences.

Method

Participants

A sample of twelve participants was recruited from the South Asian Community in a city in the East Midlands of England. The study focused solely upon the experiences of SGA of Indian and/or Pakistani heritage in order to recruit a more homogeneous sample, which was deemed important due to the small sample size.

A snowball sampling strategy was employed, with the initial participants recruited through the first author’s social networks. Of the twelve participants recruited, seven were male and five female, with a mean age of 21.6 years (SD: 1.3). Six participants were university students, one had a Masters degree and the remaining five had GCSE/A-levels. Nine of the participants were of Punjabi origin, two were of Gujarati origin and one was mixed race (one parent was from the Punjab and the other was white British). Five participants identified as Muslim, four as Sikh and three as Hindu.

Procedure

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of eleven exploratory, open-ended questions. The schedule began with questions regarding self-description and identity, followed by questions on home and school socialisation, the construction of participants’ ethnic identities, the role of the HL and other languages in their lives, the management of their linguistic repertoires and reflections upon linguistic experiences. Five participants were interviewed in their homes, three in the interviewer’s home and the remaining four at a youth centre. Interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. They were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analytic approach

The data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was considered particularly useful since it allows the researcher to draw upon relevant theoretical concepts in order to add theoretical depth to the data analysis. Furthermore, this approach enables the analyst to engage with both the phenomenological and rhetorical aspects of participants' accounts. Borrowing strands from interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith and Osborn, 2008), the study also aimed to capture participants' attempts to make sense of their personal and social worlds, with a particular focus on identity.

The study employs a critical realist approach to the analysis of participants' accounts. The realist approach has been subject to criticism from a social constructionist perspective on account of its assumption about the representational validity of language and its inattention to the constitutive role of language for experience (Willig, 2007). While the present study is located within a critical realist rather than a social constructionist epistemology, the analysis considers the use of discursive categories and the functions performed by participants' accounts as part of a pluralist interpretative endeavour alongside more phenomenological analyses. It is hoped that such epistemological experimentation will allow a richer and more thorough analysis of participants' reflective accounts of language and ethnic identity (see Frost, 2009 for more about the value of a pluralist interpretative endeavour in psychological research).

Turning to the analytic procedures, the transcripts were read repeatedly in order to become as intimate as possible with the accounts. The right margin was used to note emerging theme titles which captured the essential qualities of the accounts. This procedure was repeated with every interview transcript. Four superordinate themes representing the 12 accounts were then ordered into a logical and coherent narrative structure, at which point relevant theoretical constructs were drawn upon as a means of theoretically enriching the more phenomenological interpretations.

In the quotations from participants that are presented in the next section, three dots within square brackets indicate where material has been excised; other material within square brackets is clarificatory.

Analysis

This section reports some of the most important themes, which elucidate the nature of SGA individuals' experiences of language and the repercussions of these experiences for their identities. These themes are entitled 'Mother tongue and self', 'A sense of ownership and affiliation', 'Negotiating linguistic identities in social space' and 'The quest for a positive linguistic identity'.

Mother tongue and self

The following section guides the reader through participants' meaning-making in relation to self and the mother tongue in their bilingual environment.

'My mother tongue needs to make me feel like me'

Participants widely expressed their desire for the mother tongue to represent 'me', that is, individual identity. Raheela's account of her understanding of her mother tongue, Urdu, was unambiguous in its prioritisation of individual identity:

With me my mother tongue needs to make me feel like me. I sleep and think and dream in it and I use it when I get happy, sad and when I talk to myself.

Raheela's 'mother tongue' seems to be constructed in terms of a psychological trait or cognitive category which serves to process information and knowledge of self (Simon, 2004); it is categorised as an instrument of communication with the self. Dreaming and talking to oneself most convincingly reflect the personal importance of the mother tongue in Raheela's process of self-interpretation. Although her account indicated harmony between self and mother tongue, this was by no means a universal commonality. Some participants' accounts indicated a sense of incompatibility between self and mother tongue. For example:

I'm not one hundred per cent fluent in it [Punjabi] so it feels like my thoughts and my feelings are ruled by a language [English] that isn't really my own. (Baljit)

It was not uncommon for participants to express feelings of anxiety because of their perceived lack of proficiency in their HL, which echoes the idea that ethnic minorities can experience feelings of regret and guilt due to their lack of fluency in their HL (You, 2005). This perhaps implies that knowledge of the HL increases the possibility for minorities to develop a more positively evaluated ethnic identity. Accordingly, participants generally expressed the opinion that the HL was an important shared self-aspect, as a result of which collective (ethnic) identity emerged (Simon, 2004). From a sociolinguistic perspective, participants' reported lack of proficiency in the HL may be explained in terms of language shift, since the English language achieves social and ideological priority subsequent to school enrolment (e.g. Fishman, 1991).

Participants' 'confessions' that they were less than proficient in their HL sometimes caused dilemmatic 'tension points' in the interviews. Baljit, for instance, having defined herself as Punjabi and having identified Punjabi as her mother tongue, recognised that she was not 'one hundred per cent fluent in it'. It became apparent that Baljit followed her commonsensical conceptualisation of the mother tongue as a language 'learnt at the mother's knee', which she can claim as her own (Fishman, 1991). The psychological dilemma arises as Baljit senses that her lack of proficiency in her mother tongue contradicts her commonsensical conceptualisation. Possibly to remedy this, she reports her lack of control over the matter by constructing English as a language she is compelled to use, almost as a last resort. Her use of the verb 'ruled' is of particular interest due to its connotations of a higher authority exerting its control over her, which suggests that she is the passive recipient of a language with which she does not identify. Baljit defines herself as a native speaker of Punjabi and the fact that she is compelled to acknowledge that her knowledge of this language is deficient may undermine her self-interpretation as a native speaker. Some participants faced similar dilemmas in the interviews but appeared to develop strategies to deal with them.

Mutability of the mother tongue

Two participants expressed what appeared to be coping strategies for potentially dilemmatic positions *vis-à-vis* the mother tongue. These entailed the amendment of their conceptualisation of 'mother tongue' in order for it to accommodate their own linguistic situations. This represents one of the many possible coping strategies that individuals may develop in response to threat to their (linguistic) identity. The following extract illustrates this:

Tanveer: Like mine is like Tagalog. I mean, that was my mother tongue once.

Interviewer: It was? Isn't it any more then?

Tanveer: Well, it's changed now of course, because I don't remember Tagalog anymore. I was really young. It quickly changed to Punjabi and then it changed to English.

Having lived in the Philippines during childhood, Tanveer considers Tagalog his first mother tongue. Although he no longer speaks it fluently, it has retained a level of symbolic importance in his life narrative (Hudson, 2001). He subsequently 'acquired' Punjabi as his mother tongue, since this language was most prevalent in his community. However, Tanveer's mother tongue changed once again upon entry into an English school. His account indicates his perception of the mother tongue as a context-dependent, mutable concept; for him it is by no means static and uniform. The social context appears to govern Tanveer's understanding of what his mother tongue actually is. While some participants retained their 'original' mother tongue, which, in most cases, had been inherited from their parents, Tanveer was more pragmatic in his conceptualisation of it. This appeared to resolve the potential psychological dilemma which arose from conflict between his commonsensical interpretation of 'mother tongue' and the language to which he ascribes that role. He re-conceptualises the mother tongue so that, in his psychological world, it is deemed to be mutable and thereby adjusts to the social context. This elucidates one of the psychological strategies employed by individuals to cope with language shift (e.g. Fishman, 1991), which may require changes within the identity structure (Breakwell, 1986).

An alternative strategy for coping with such dilemmas is outlined in Saeed's account:

I guess you don't necessarily need to have one. You can have mother tongues in plural too.

Research has highlighted the sequential acquisition of the HL (at home) and English (primarily, at school) (Baker and Jones, 1998). Therefore, it perhaps seems logical, in the psychological worlds of participants, to lay claim to both languages to the extent that they would consider both to be their 'mother tongues' ('in plural'). The gradual abandonment of biological heredity as a prerequisite for mother tongue status is particularly interesting. The language in which people write, think and dream is also eligible, according to participants' personal criteria. However, one aspect of the mother tongue debate appears to remain constant, namely the necessary sense of ownership over it and psychological affiliation to the speech community.

A sense of ownership and affiliation

Participants quite readily offered evaluative comments about languages; there were frequent prescriptive remarks regarding what they felt constituted 'good' language use. Crucially, the data revealed that participants' perceived sense of ownership over a given language played an important role in the social psychological repercussions of their attitudes towards the language.

'Us' and 'them': Evaluating linguistic identities

It seemed that those individuals who positively evaluated their ethnic identities generally exhibited a positive view of their HL. Participants generally referred to the 'correctness' and inherent eloquence of their ingroup language and some made

reference to etymological and philological factors in order to justify the high status they attributed to it. The following extract demonstrates this:

Gujarati Muslims are brought up to think that our Gujarati is better and nice and beautiful because we are the descendents of the upper class in Gujarat, we're clever, educated and stuff. (Saeed)

There is wide consensus among social psychologists that individuals generally seek positive self-evaluation (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and it is likely that participants' tendency to evaluate their own linguistic variety positively is perhaps tantamount to their search for overall positive self-evaluation. Conversely, Negy et al. (2003), in a study on ethnocentrism, found that the more individuals embraced their ethnicity, the more negative views they held towards people who did not belong to their respective ethnic group. This is exemplified by the account offered by Raheela, a Muslim speaker of Gujarati:

Our language [Muslim-Gujarati] is beautiful [...] With Hindu-Gujarati, it's funny at home, and when I speak it, it makes everyone laugh [...] We take the mick. I know that sounds so bad. I shouldn't do it. (Raheela)

Some contextual information is useful in interpreting the significance of this extract. The Indian state of Gujarat has a Hindu majority (89%) and a sizeable Muslim minority (9%) (Census of India, 2001). Linguists generally delineate the linguistic varieties of Gujarati in accordance with the geographical zones, in which they are habitually spoken, rather than on the basis of religion (Cardona & Suthar, 2007). However, Raheela and others appeared to differentiate between the variety of Gujarati perceived to be spoken by religious ingroup members (i.e. Muslim-Gujarati) and that perceived to be spoken by religious outgroup members (i.e. Hindu-Gujarati) particularly in comparative contexts (see also Jaspal & Coyle, 2010).

As exhibited in the above-cited account, in the home environment, the outgroup language (i.e. Hindu-Gujarati) becomes an object of amusement. By virtue of Raheela's perceived affiliation to the Muslim-Gujarati speaking group and not the Hindu-Gujarati one, she herself views her derision of the outgroup language as unjust; there is an awareness that her jocular use of the outgroup language could cause offence to a Hindu-Gujarati. Crucially, her positive evaluation of her HL *vis-à-vis* her derision of the outgroup HL could be tentatively interpreted as a means of enhancing the collective self-esteem of her religious ingroup. More specifically, this is achieved through the socio-psychological strategy of downward comparison; the ingroup HL is perceived to be 'better' than that of the outgroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wills, 1981).

The complexity of this became particularly evident as many participants, who exhibited less ethnocentrism, were critical of their own HL:

I take the piss [out of the HL] but they [white Scottish people] are different, they are like white and er it's not like the same thing. With the Indian accent, you know that you mean no harm and that, so you just can. (Neha)

Neha's account reveals that she sometimes uses the HL comically and imitates the Indian accent in order to evoke amusement among her peers and family. In contrast with Raheela's account above, Neha sees this as unproblematic, since she herself claims affiliation to the ethnic group that she parodies and thereby claims ownership and entitlement over the HL. This notion is also expressed in Veer's account of the same phenomenon:

My language, my people, so yeah, I take the piss, just messing around like.

Participants appeared to equate the HL with ethnic identity; they were perceived as an entwined compound of two inseparable elements (Baker and Jones, 1998). The examples that have just been presented suggest that some participants see themselves in a 'privileged position' to criticise and mock their own HL by virtue of their perceived ownership of the language. Neha's comparison between white Scottish people, a group she would be sceptical about criticising, and Indians, against whom she could 'mean no harm', manifestly exhibits her perceived right to use the HL in this way. However, this in itself raises the question of precisely *what* constitutes an authentic group member and *who* may 'rightly' claim ownership of a given language.

Questionable authenticity

The question of authenticity was frequently invoked by participants. Several discussed Asian appropriation of 'Black English' which they unanimously referred to as 'Slang'. Their accounts revealed who, they felt, had the right to use it. In the following extract, Tanveer contemplates how he might respond to a white British male (an atypical speaker) addressing him in Slang:

I'd find it kind of surprising. It'd be barbaric but it'd make you think, 'Hang on, is it because of the way I look that he's talking to me like that or does this guy genuinely talk like that?' To a person like that I wouldn't talk back in Slang because it would make me think that this guy is taking the piss. I couldn't take him seriously. I'd like try talking back in proper English and see if that like made him change his opinion of me being a typical Asian.

This demonstrates the important role of authenticity in language crossing. Tanveer's use of the adjectives 'surprising' and 'barbaric' demonstrates the perceived surreality of an outgroup member (in this case, a white middle-class British male) using Slang, which in turn engenders feelings of insecurity (note the use of rhetorical questions). This hypothetical person is not viewed as an authentic speaker of Slang and cannot possibly be accepted into the speech community to which Tanveer feels affiliated.

Invoking Fishman's (1972) criteria for group membership, the analysis of participants' accounts regarding outgroup use of their language reveals that *some* outgroup members are unlikely to be given the opportunity to 'prove themselves' as potentially authentic, loyal and committed group members, since the very act of language crossing is generally viewed with suspicion and engenders fear of persecution or ridicule. It is, in many cases, considered almost as a criticism of or attack against Asians, due to the stereotype reported by many participants that 'a lot of Asians think they're black'. Consequently the only rational response, from Tanveer's perspective, is to use a 'neutral' language, which acts as the *lingua franca* of different social/ethnic groups. This implies that the use of an outgroup language by 'non-authentic' speakers can appear somewhat abrupt and incongruous, with potentially negative consequences for interpersonal/intergroup relations.

The analysis also explored authenticity at an intragroup level, namely within the same ethnic group. Participants referred to SGA who are unable to communicate in their HL:

You see other British people go there [to India] [...] Complete coconuts – brown on the outside but white on the inside, and they don't know the language [...] These people are white, they aren't true Indians. (Manjinder)

Many participants were fairly unsympathetic towards SGA who had little knowledge of their HL, since it was generally constructed as a prerequisite for ethnic identity:

Knowing the language is really the first step to being Indian. (Saeed)

Monolingual SGA were often constructed as inauthentic members of the ethnic group; they were derogatorily referred to as 'coconuts', for instance. Whilst Myhill (2003, p.78) is highly critical of the language-and-identity approach due to its danger of creating 'an atmosphere of suspicion towards members of certain ethnicities', it would appear that this ideology is indeed echoed in the accounts of many participants in this study. Monolingual Asians are viewed as inauthentic members of the ethnic group and the pervasiveness of this attitude is best exemplified by the use of derogatory labels against monolingual SGA such as 'coconut'. In this case, both ownership of the language and affiliation to the ethnic group are questioned by HL-speaking group members.

This would come as no surprise to many proponents of the language-and-identity ideology, since the HL is conceptualised as the dominant shared self-aspect, which gives rise to collective identity (Simon, 2004). However, the matter is further complicated by the accounts of several participants, who indicated that one's *level* of proficiency in the HL is also a governing factor in authenticity. Baljit, who claimed to be a fluent speaker of her HL, Punjabi, recounted a telephone conversation with an uncle from India in which she committed a linguistic error which could potentially have caused offence:

He was just laughing his head off [...] He didn't take any offence at what I said because he's like 'Oh she's from England and she doesn't know what she's on about'. That is kind of putting you down.

Participants frequently reported feelings of inferiority ('putting you down') due to their perceived lack of competence in the HL. Although there is no doubt that Baljit is able to converse in Punjabi, the fact that she makes unconventional use of the HL, commonly associated with bilingualism (Ellis, 1985), calls her authenticity as a legitimate group member into question. Participants were aware of their 'questionable authenticity' and this frequently gave rise to feelings of confusion. It is commonly assumed that 'retention' of the HL is a sufficient means of ensuring that individuals develop a positive ethnic identity (Fillmore, 2000; You, 2005) but these data suggest that mere retention is perhaps not sufficient; a lack of proficiency in the HL possibly poses a threat to the individual's self-interpretation as a legitimate member of the Punjabi ethnic group.

From the perspective of identity process theory (Breakwell, 1986), the resulting feelings of confusion and helplessness in participants' accounts might perhaps be attributed to attacks on the value dimension of identity and consequential threat to self-esteem. Those lacking proficiency in their HL may be led to believe that they are inferior, inauthentic members of the group, who 'don't know what they're on about'. However, participants were mindful of the role of social space in others' interpretation of them as fluent or non-fluent speakers.

Negotiating linguistic identities in social space

Participants readily reflected upon their use of language in various social contexts and their accounts exhibited an awareness of ‘language norms’, which are social representations of ‘appropriate’ linguistic behaviour (Hudson, 2001; see also Moscovici, 1988).

Clearly defined language norms in social space

There was a general awareness of ‘appropriate’ language choice/use according to social context. Neha’s account exemplifies this:

When I'm wearing my work suit, I'm just automatically professional in talking. As opposed to like abbreviating words, I will say full sentences and correctly; instead of saying 'Isn't it?' I'll say 'Is it not?' [...] Professional in the office environment does not include speaking any language other than English.

Although many participants expressed pride in their HL, some clearly felt embarrassed about using it in predominantly English-speaking contexts. Neha referred to the apparently negative connotations of her HL; for her, Punjabi represents a rural language, used primarily to denote names of food which are untranslatable into English. Theoretically, her reluctance to associate the HL with her work environment is perhaps explicable; her HL constitutes a cognitive category or self-aspect which is shared with members of her extended family (and ethnic group) and self-interpretation on the basis of this self-aspect gives rise to a collective (ethnic) identity (Simon, 2004). However, the account above indicates that this identity is deemed to be incongruous with life at work; it would perhaps hinder the formation of a collective identity with work colleagues who, from Neha’s perspective, would share other self-aspects associated with ‘being professional’. Thus, it might be argued that Neha’s abandonment of her HL (even with other Asians) at work represents a strategy to deal with a potentially threatening situation. She justifies the removal of her HL from the social context by deprecating its importance and emphasising its potential disadvantages. Crucially, Neha constructs this idiosyncrasy as a socially accepted norm, as if it were not *her* view that the HL is incongruous in the office environment but society’s view.

As a possible consequence of perceived language norms, participants widely reported having been ‘forced’ to speak a particular language in a given context, which may have contributed to the psychological internalisation of these norms. For example:

When we were younger [...] my dad made us speak Punjabi and was like 'Ghar sirf punjabi bolni chahidi' [you should only speak Punjabi at home].
(Baljit)

She [mum] didn't believe in completely turning us English [...] If we spoke in English, sometimes she'd just say 'I'm not listening' and then we knew that we had to talk Punjabi. (Amardeep)

These examples demonstrate the imposition of language norms during socialisation at home. Many participants reported parents’ attempts to render the home environment a HL-speaking context; participants attributed this to the perceived fear among parents that their children would metaphorically ‘turn white’ if English were permitted at home.

Well, they [my parents] didn't want me to grow up a white man. (Raj)

In fact, these rules regarding desirable language use were so stringent that English, in some cases, ceased to be an adequate instrument of communication at home as a result of parents' rejection of it, thus thrusting individuals in the direction of the HL, the perceived desideratum. Parents' imposition of the HL at home may be viewed in terms of an attempt at language maintenance *vis-à-vis* their perception of language shift among the second generation (see Fishman, 1991). Interestingly, this seemed to be counteracted in the school environment, in which participants observed the imposition of English and, by implication, discrimination against use of the HL:

One thing that used to piss me off was like if I'm chatting to a mate in Punjabi, like an apna [literally 'one of our own'], white teachers would just butt in and be like 'Oh, talk English, you're in England' and we'd get in trouble for it. Such racists. (Daljit)

Participants generally referred to this as racism, possibly due to the widespread belief in the intrinsic relationship between HL and ethnic identity (Fishman, 1991; Baker and Jones, 1998). In any case, the strict norms of language use, both at home and in the school environment, appeared to have contributed to the establishment of a binary structure in their language use. Daljit uses the metaphor of crossing a geographical frontier to illustrate this dichotomisation:

At home we'd always speak Punjabi and English at school so it was a bit like the minute I got home I was like walking through a frontier into a different frontier.

Challenging language norms in social space

For most participants, it became increasingly difficult to negotiate or explore their linguistic identities in different social contexts, since the imposed norms seemed to hinder this. The desirable state of affairs was for them to use the HL in informal situations, such as the home environment, and English for official purposes such as school and later the world of work. One might argue that for many participants a quasi-diglossic situation developed (Ferguson, 1959) whereby one language was reserved for 'high' functions (such as education) and the other for 'low' functions (such as food):

Basically I'll just use Punjabi to talk about Indian food and stuff [...] Uni and work is talked about in English. (Neha)

Although participants generally perceived linguistic boundaries delimiting different social contexts, this is not to suggest that all participants were compliant. Participants subverted language norms in two principal ways, namely by speaking in Slang, a variety with which neither their parents nor teachers would identify, and also by challenging rules regarding 'appropriate' language choice. Amardeep offered his account:

Being in England makes me more Indian and being in India makes me more English [...] When I'm in England I insist on speaking loads of Punjabi in public as if I was in India. When I'm in India I always talk in English [...] I suppose it's because I don't want to conform.

It has commonly been hypothesised that if an individual's choice of language is recognised as 'normal' for a given group, group membership will follow (Fishman, 1991). Thus, arguably, language has a symbolic role, which was exploited by some participants who reported using language subversively; in the quotation above, this is unambiguously constructed as an attempt not to conform to societal norms. Sterling (2000) postulates that language can inspire deep group loyalties; it might be argued that his lack of 'loyalty' to English within English-speaking contexts demonstrates Amardeep's general disidentification with English culture. Many accounts appeared to indicate that this was an attempt to challenge the perceived hegemony of prescribers of 'appropriate' language use; participants intended to assert their own authority:

I know my dad'll understand both English and Punjabi so why should I just speak whatever he wants me to speak? (Baljit)

Other factors might perhaps underlie this. It is claimed that individuals construct their identity through the choice of linguistic forms that will convey specific information that categorises them as part of a particular social group (Sterling, 2000). Thus, in Britain, Amardeep refuses to be 'depersonalised' within English-speaking society and, conversely, in India he is averse to becoming part of the mass of Punjabi-speakers. It would appear that Amardeep seeks to maintain distinctiveness from others in both contexts. His act of challenging language norms in clearly defined linguistic contexts perhaps facilitates self-definition as a unique individual (Breakwell, 1986). In this way, participants' accounts of their language use reflect the widespread desire for a positive identity, which constitutes the focus of the next section.

The quest for a positive linguistic identity

Participants employed various strategies to ensure the development and maintenance of an identity, *inter alia*, the rejection of languages which were seen as stereotypical of the ingroup and downgrading the importance of the HL. The following section focuses upon the latter.

'I'm not missing out on anything': Downgrading the importance of the heritage language

Some participants acknowledged their lack of proficiency in the HL. Their accounts of this were generally constructed with an unambiguous tone of casualness, as depicted in Neha's statement:

Punjabi? Not really a big factor because my parents speak English [...] It's normal for kids my age [not to be fluent in their HL]. I mean it'll completely phase out in a few generations anyway.

The topic of language arose within the context of ethnic identity, which may have indicated that there was an implicit assumption that the two are linked in some way. Neha's response to this was to downgrade the importance of the HL. One of her initial comments about language and ethnic identity was that it was 'not really a big factor' for her as her parents are fluent in English, which perhaps implies that the HL is considered most important for those individuals whose parents are monolingual. This suggests that language is merely an instrument of communication and that English is the most desirable language for communication with her parents. Furthermore, these comments have interesting implications for cognitions on social background: use of English at home symbolises sophistication, a privileged upbringing and a history of

education in the family. For Neha, the HL is simply not *required* at the level of communication. Neha's case was not an isolated one; similarly, other participants constructed their linguistic repertoire as the norm for SGA in the UK:

Punjabi's good to know, yeah, but truth is a lot of us don't know how to speak it that well [...] That's the way it is nowadays. (Aamir)

Monolingual SGA generally constructed widespread use of the HL in the South Asian home as a rarity, although there is evidence that many SGA retain their HL (Harris, 2006). Participants denied occupying a differential position by constructing themselves as the norm, possibly because acknowledging this might compromise self-definition as authentic Asians. Many of the same participants, in other less 'threatening' contexts, asserted that the HL is indeed an important aspect of their ethnic culture:

I really want our children to speak fluent Gujarati and Punjabi [...] That's important to me. (Neha)

This appears to represent a dilemmatic position. If Neha is adamant that her future children should know their HL, presumably she attaches some importance to these languages. This perhaps suggests that Neha's convincing argument that her own lack of knowledge of her HL does not pose any grave difficulties for her British Asian identity is the product of 'blurring' the boundaries between the conceptualisation of language as an instrument of communication and as a marker of identity. Indeed, as an instrument of communication, it can satisfactorily be argued that the HL is relatively unimportant, especially if one's parents speak English fluently. However, if language is conceptualised primarily as a marker of identity (Hudson, 2001), this argument becomes less effective. It is contended that participants who advocate this argument in this context seek to maintain a positive identity through deprecation of their HL and by constructing it as unnecessary for their self-definition as British Asians.

Discussion

The present paper elucidates some of the potential implications of language for SGA individuals' sense of self and it seeks to sensitise readers to the diversity of experiences within this small sample. The lack of generalisability of this research, due to the small sample, should not be viewed as a shortcoming, as its theoretical and practical implications may be considerable.

It is acknowledged that there is a growing body of theoretical and empirical work which suggests that British South Asians of Indian and Pakistani backgrounds should be viewed as separate populations due to observed differences in *inter alia* their ethno-religious experience and distinct relationship to British national identity (e.g. Robinson, 2009; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). However, the results of the present study did not attest to any salient differences in participants' accounts regarding the role of the HL in ethnic identity construction on the basis of their Indian or Pakistani ethno-national identities. In research on language and *religious* identity, however, differences have been observed (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010). Consequently, it seems appropriate to consider the identity experiences of SGA collectively.

In terms of identity, the present research demonstrates the pervasiveness of language at all levels of identity; it can be 'a reminder of who I am' in individual terms but also a symbol of group identity. This challenges previous research on language and identity, which has often conceptualised language primarily as a marker

of group identity (Omoniyi and White, 2006). The meanings and functions of language appear to vary according to the various levels of social inclusiveness.

Moreover this research challenges assumptions and terminology commonly employed in the literature. Both researchers and laypeople discuss the mother tongue as if 'we all know what we mean by this' (Myhill, 2003, p.78). Although such terms have been debated and problematised by others (Edwards, 1985; Myhill, 2003), these findings may be viewed as a contribution to the 'campaign' against uncritical, casual use of such terminology in academic discourse. Future academic writing must be more tentative in its use of such terminology or better still, it might re-conceptualise the 'mother tongue' as a more fluid, context-dependent, mutable notion, as participants' accounts have demonstrated.

Similarly, participants' accounts indicate that such rigidity should be avoided in practical terms; the strait-jacket of language norms in different social contexts appeared to have a negative impact upon participants. They expressed their awareness of (implicit and explicit) norms in the home and school/work environments and (the prospect of) any contravention of such norms gave rise to a variety of emotions, such as embarrassment (Fillmore, 2000). While some participants appeared to have developed a problematic relationship with their heritage cultures due to a perceived tension between language and environment, others actively challenged such norms. This demonstrates participants' ambivalent responses to the perceived incongruity of language and environment.

It is unlikely that a degree of linguistic freedom in participants' school lives and elsewhere might pose a threat to the position of English (cf. Kirkup, 2007). This is not to express support for bilingual education in British schools but rather this is a recommendation to allow greater freedom for individuals to explore the multiple roles and functions of language. Participants recounted parental attempts to coerce them into using their HL and reported being reprimanded for failing to do so. Greater linguistic freedom and a celebration of multilingualism appeared to be endorsed by participants. Such an endeavour might enhance psychological well-being rather than creating situations/contexts which give rise to negativism, that is, 'doing the opposite of what is required in a given situation' (Apter, 1983, p.79).

Crucially, the recommendation of 'linguistic freedom' does not necessarily signal support for or encouragement of language crossing (Rampton, 1995) as this practice is problematised by the present research. The importance of phenomena such as authenticity, the language-and-identity ideology (Myhill, 2003) and level of proficiency have been largely understated in contemporary research on language and identity. *Prima facie*, the use of outgroup languages might appear to improve intergroup relations but it is argued that such an endeavour must be undertaken with caution since, as the analysis reveals, languages can hold deep and emotional meanings for speakers. The use of a given language in a given social context by a seemingly 'inauthentic' member of the speech community could have a variety of social psychological repercussions in participants' social worlds, from feelings of euphoria at the prospect of an outgroup member speaking one's language to feelings of suspicion at the thought of an outgroup member trespassing upon ingroup territory.

Some accounts demonstrated that participants were averse to outgroup appropriation of their language, perhaps as a result of the widely perceived stigmatisation of it. Such stigma may perhaps pose a threat to the value dimension of identity (Breakwell, 1986), given that language is seen as a vital aspect of one's ethnic identity. This work complements previous research whose findings have led to the

general recommendation that educators ought to encourage linguistic diversity and avoid prescriptivism in language (Fillmore, 2000).

The analysis signalled that prescriptive, evaluative comments about languages could have psychological repercussions for speakers. It has been argued that participants frequently seek to construct a positive identity by adopting or distancing themselves from certain languages. This included the denigration of languages with which they did not identify and the positive evaluation of languages with which they did. However, both the adoption and rejection of languages were reportedly met with resistance. Some participants claimed that there was an unambiguous sense of animosity towards SGA monolingual in English who could be positioned derogatorily as white. Such discrimination was unambiguously constructed as a consequence of participants' speech patterns, as opposed to any other trait.

In general terms, participants were unanimously positive about the implications of the interview discussions for their own sense of self; many reported never having reflected upon these issues but that having done so provided them with 'answers'. For instance, the accounts highlighted the difficulties that participants generally experienced in making sense of the 'boundaries' between the roles of language as an instrument of communication and as a marker of identity. Some accounts exhibited contradictions and dilemmas, whilst others demonstrated an initial lack of understanding of the dichotomy. Participants valued discussing such phenomena, as many felt able to make sense of their situations. The interviews undoubtedly constituted a dual learning experience: participants provided the researcher with a glimpse of their experiences but were also 'able to clarify their experiences and to become aware of the feelings underlying their words' (Coyle, 1998, p.58) in a quasi-therapeutic manner. Furthermore, at a therapeutic level, if counsellors are aware of the potential challenges that bi-/multilingualism can pose for SGA, this might enable greater identification with clients and greater understanding of their (bilingual) backgrounds.

Bilingualism tends to be viewed positively, especially in terms of its cognitive advantages (Kirkup, 2007). Although it is argued that linguistic freedom and widespread language learning should be encouraged, the social psychological approach has indicated how a 'mismanagement' of bi-/multilingualism might compromise psychological well-being. Future research must not conceal the potentially negative psychosocial issues associated with bi-/multilingualism and the possible repercussions for sense of self. Rather, it ought to create awareness of and engage with these issues in order to contribute to the developing picture of language and identity among SGA and to bring about positive social change.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for detailed and insightful comments on this article.

References

- Alexander, C., 1996. *The Art of Being Black*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Apter, M., 1983. Negativism and the sense of identity. In: G. M. Breakwell, ed. *Threatened Identities*. Chichester: Wiley, 75-90
- Baker, C. and Jones, S., 1998. *Encyclopedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education*. Philadelphia, PA: Clevedon

- Blunkett, D., 2002. Integration with diversity: Globalisation and the renewal of democracy and civil society. *In: M. Leonard and P. Griffith, eds. Reclaiming Britishness*. London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 66-78.
- Bourhis, R.Y., El-Geledi, S. and Sachdev, I., 2007. Language, ethnicity and intergroup relations. *In: A. Weatherall, B. Watson and C. Gallois, eds. Language, Discourse and Social Psychology*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 15-50.
- Breakwell, G.M., 1986. *Coping with Threatened Identities*. London: Methuen
- Cardona, G. and Babu, S. 2007. Gujarati. *In: George Cardona and Dhanesh Jain, eds. The Indo-Aryan Languages*. London: Routledge, 659-697.
- Casciani, D., 2003. *Bilingual Asian children 'do better'* [online]. Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/3236188.stm> [Accessed 2nd April 2008].
- Census of India, 2001. Population. Available from: <http://censusindia.gov.in> [Accessed 1st March 2010]
- Chen, S. and Bond, M., 2007. Explaining Language Priming Effects: Further Evidence for Ethnic Affirmation among Chinese-English Bilinguals. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 13 (4), 398-406.
- Cho, G., 2000. The role of heritage language in social interactions and relationships: Reflections from a language minority group. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 24 (4), 369-384.
- Coyle, A., 1998. Qualitative research in counselling psychology: Using counselling interview as a research instrument. *In: Petruska Clarkson, ed. Counselling Psychology: Integrating Theory, Research and Supervised Practice*. London: Routledge, 56-73.
- Coyle, A., 2007. Introduction to qualitative research. *In: Evanthia Lyons and Adrian Coyle, eds. Analysing Qualitative Data in Psychology*. London: Sage, 9-30.
- Daller, H., 2005. *Language Shift and Group Identity: Mennonite Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Germany* [online]. Available from: <http://www.lingref.com/isb/4/043ISB4.PDF> [Accessed 28th May 2008]
- Edwards, J., 1985. *Language, Society and Identity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Ellis, R., 1985. *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ferguson, C., 1959. Diglossia. *Word*, 15, 325-40.
- Fillmore, L., 2000. Loss of family languages: Should educators be concerned? *Theory into Practice*, 39 (4), 203-210.
- Fishman, J., 1972. *Language and Nationalism: Two Integrative Essays*. Rowley: Newbury House
- Fishman, J., 1991. *Reversing Language Shift*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Fishman, J., 2001. *Handbook of Language and Ethnicity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frost, N., 2009. 'Do you know what I mean?': the use of a pluralistic narrative analysis approach in the interpretation of an interview. *Qualitative Research*, 9 (1), 9-29
- Ghuman, P.A.S., 1999. *Asian Adolescents in the West*. British Psychological Society: Leicester.
- Giles, H. and Johnson, P., 1987. Ethnolinguistic identity theory: A social psychological approach to language maintenance. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 68, 69-99.
- Harris, R., 2006. *New Ethnicities and Language Use*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

- Hewitt, R., 1986. *White Talk Black Talk: Inter-racial Friendship and Communication amongst Adolescents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hudson, R., 2001. *Sociolinguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jaspal, R. and Cinnirella, M., 2010. Ethnic identity construction among UK South Asians: insights from identity process theory. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Jaspal, R. and Coyle, A., 2009. Reconciling social psychology and sociolinguistics can have some benefits: language and identity among second generation British Asians. *Social Psychological Review*, 11 (2), 3-14.
- Jaspal, R. and Coyle, A., 2010. "Arabic is the language of the Muslims - that's how it was supposed to be": exploring language and religious identity through reflective accounts from young British-born South Asians. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*, 13 (1), 17-36.
- Kirkup, J., 2007. English a minority language in 1,300 schools. *The Daily Telegraph*, 18th December, 2007.
- Lawson, S. and Sachdev, I., 2004. Identity, language use and attitudes: some Sylheti-Bangladeshi data from London, UK. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 23 (1), 49-69.
- May, S., 2000. Accommodating and Resisting Minority Language Policy: the Case of Wales. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 3 (2), 101-28.
- Meyerhoff, M., 2006. *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. London: Routledge.
- Moore, E., 2003. *Learning Style and Identity: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of a Bolton High School*. Thesis (PhD). University of Manchester.
- Moscovici, S., 1988. Notes towards a description of social representations. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18, 211-250.
- Myhill, J., 2003. The native speaker, identity and the authenticity hierarchy. *Language Sciences*, 25 (1), 77-97.
- Negy, C., Shreve, T., Jensen, B. and Uddin, N., 2003. Ethnic identity, self-esteem and ethnocentrism: a study of social identity versus multicultural theory of development. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 9 (4), 333-44.
- Omoniyi, T. and White, G., 2006. *The Sociolinguistics of Identity*. London: Continuum.
- Rampton, B., 1995. *Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents*. London: Longman.
- Robinson, L., 2009. Cultural identity and acculturation preferences among South Asian adolescents in Britain: an exploratory study. *Children and Society*, 23 (6), 442-454.
- Simon, B., 2004. *Identity in Modern Society: A Social Psychological Perspective*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Smith, J. and Osborn, M., 2008. Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In: J. Smith, ed. *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Methods*. London: Sage, 53-80.
- Sterling, P., 2000. *Identity in Language: An Exploration into the Social Implications of Linguistic Variation* [online]. Available from: <http://glasscock.tamu.edu/agora/winter00/sterling.pdf> [Accessed 10th March 2008]

- Tajfel, H. and Turner, J., 1979. An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. *In: W. Austin and S. Worchel, eds. The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations.* Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 33-47.
- Vadher, K. and Barrett, M., 2009. Boundaries of Britishness in British Indians and Pakistanis. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 19, 442-458.
- Verkuyten, M., 2005. *The Social Psychology of Ethnic Identity.* London: Psychology Press.
- Willig, C., 2007. Reflections on the use of a phenomenological method. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 4 (3), 209-225.
- Wills, T.A., 1981. Downward comparison principles in social psychology. *Psychological Bulletin*, 90 (2), 245-271.
- You, B., 2005. Children Negotiating Korean American Ethnic Identity through their Heritage Language. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 29 (3), 711-721.

Notes on contributors

Rusi Jaspal is a Social Psychologist at Royal Holloway, University of London. His research focuses upon the construction of national, ethnic and linguistic identities. He is particularly interested in socio-psychological responses to identity threat. Rusi has published in journals such as *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *Mental Health*, *Religion and Culture* and *Social Psychological Review*.

Adrian Coyle is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Surrey. His research has addressed a wide range of topics, including identity, religion and spirituality, bereavement and various issues within lesbian and gay psychology and qualitative psychological research methods. He was co-editor of *Analysing Qualitative Data in Psychology* (with Evanthia Lyons, 2007).