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Challenging the discursive positioning of young British Muslims through the multilingual performance of devotional song and poetry

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ABSTRACT

This article presents data which challenge current hegemonic discourses in public and media spaces which reductively position young British Muslims as linguistically problematic. Framing these data are public space statements which argue for an overly simple linguistic basis to so-called extremist behaviour based on the presence or absence of the English language. Through an analysis of a questionnaire and interviews carried out with young performers, singers and reciters of devotional song and poetry in a range of language varieties, this article shows how such performance practices lead to the deployment of complex and mobile language resources which help negotiate and fashion rich linguistic repertoires and fluid identities for these young British Muslims. The article argues that these are (a) more representative of the wider British-Muslim youth community, (b) unmarked, and thus generally invisible within public discourses and (c) a far cry from the prevailing discursive attempts to frame young Muslims as posing a linguistic problem.

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Introduction

The performance practice of reciting and singing devotional poetry and songs in a range of languages, including heritage ones, has recently become a central preoccupation in the lived experience of many young British Muslims. Linked to a growing interest in the performance of similar devotional song and verse elsewhere, this is an accompanying part of the significant growing religiosity manifest in the Islamic world in the past thirty years (Rasmussen, 2010; van Nieuwkerk, 2011). This article attempts to provide a snapshot of how, for those taking part, such practices are major drivers in the construction and negotiation of their religious and linguistic identities. Equally, it hopes to challenge essentialising discourses in public and media spaces that often conflate avowed serious religious activity of young Muslims with so-called radicalisation or extremism. The data shared in this article represent serious, regular and intense practices of multilingual performance that contradict such unfortunate characterisations.

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The article discusses the results of a questionnaire completed by young (mainly between the ages of 11 and 25) male and female British Muslims, mostly of Pakistani-heritage and of Mirpuri-Punjabi¹ language background living in a northern UK city. The questionnaire collected self-ascribed identifiers relating to ethnicity, language, performance involvement and (loose) doctrinal affiliation. Other data included in the article are extracts from interviews conducted with a subset of the questionnaire respondents shortly after completion of the questionnaire. The characteristic practices associated with these performances include listening to, both online or offline, transcribing, recording, collecting, sharing, memorising, discussing and gathering to rehearse and perform, the forms of sung or recited poetry traditionally associated with the Islamic literary heritage. The article seeks to align these language and aesthetic performance practices with matters of identity and shifting notions of ethnicity.

Background

In 2002, the then UK Secretary of State for the Home Office, David Blunkett, published an essay in *The Observer* newspaper in which he criticised what he called at the time ‘the Asian British’ community for not speaking English at home. The rest of the speech, ostensibly to do with citizenship, covered issues more to do with national security than with anything else and had headings such as ‘11 September’, ‘Defending democracy’, ‘Security and social order’, among others.

... speaking English enables parents to converse with their children in English, as well as in their historic mother tongue, at home and to participate in wider modern culture. It helps overcome the schizophrenia which bedevils generational relationships. In as many as 30% of Asian British households, according to the recent citizenship survey, English is not spoken at home (Blunkett, 2002)

Fast forward to January 2016 and the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, appearing on the BBC radio breakfast news show *Today* deployed a similar discourse to that of 2002 when he said,

I am not saying there is some sort of causal connection between not speaking English and becoming an extremist, of course not. That would be a ridiculous thing to say. But if you are not able to speak English, not able to integrate, you may find therefore you have challenges understanding what your identity is and therefore you could be more susceptible to the extremist message. (*Today*, 18 January 2016)

Apart from his use of the more recent sense of the word ‘extremist’ (used only once in Blunkett’s essay in the sense of a far right ‘extremist’), the tenor of the comment is broadly similar. Not speaking English in the home can lead to religious extremism – and despite half-hearted caveats (‘I am not saying ...’, ‘that would be a ridiculous thing to say’), it is never in doubt that the ‘extremism’ he has in mind is religious, and almost certainly, Muslim or Islamic.

Research from earlier in the century (Rosowsky, 2008) shows how even in 2002 the fear that a lack of English in the home might lead to intergenerational dislocation and identity crises was, in fact, almost the opposite of the truth, with parents and other elders complaining that, far from the home being an English-free zone, the younger generation was losing its heritage languages and making the home an English-only area. Fourteen

years later, with some of the same young people now parents themselves, the shift (Fishman, 1991) from recognised minority community languages such as Punjabi, Urdu and Bengali to majority English is by far the ‘unmarked’ linguistic profile of the same ‘speech communities’ (Lothers & Lothers, 2012). In certain contexts, however, there exist possibilities of this language shift being, if not reversed, then at least forestalled a little by a recent revival, driven by younger people, of the performance of devotional song and poetry in the heritage languages. The current article explores this phenomenon.

Performance, identity and language

The performance language practices described later in this article, are, to a large extent, invisible within the public sphere and take their place against a political and media backdrop that often positions the young people involved within an essentialising and reductive discursive framework. Drawing on Furedi’s (2002) ‘culture of fear’, this has been characterised by Allen (2011, p. 221) as an atmosphere of ‘fear and loathing’. ‘Fear and threat’, moreover, he suggests are integral and indeed almost necessary aspects in all discursive undertakings or delineations linked to Islamophobia (Runnymede Trust, 1997). This prevailing political discourse of Islam in the West constructs, therefore, Muslims as a threat.

The Orientalist connotations suggested by discursive positionings such as ‘Muslim masculinities’ (Abbas, 2005) add to the idea that Muslims are the ‘enemy within’ and that their very difference from ‘us’ is to be resisted and demarcated. Concern around so-called home-grown terrorists (Mullins, 2016) adds to notions of fear and threat. Politicians, from the left and the right, urge schools and universities to be vigilant and look out for ‘tell-tale signs of extremism’ (Khaleeli, 2015). Whereas *old* racism (Barker, 1982) was about inferiority associated with physical or biological markers, now culture and, in particular, religion and language (Blunkett, 2002) signal difference – which ipso facto, as the hegemonic discourse goes, means difference in values and mores.

Much identity research has sought to destabilise these essentialising fixities (Dwyer, 2000). Cultural theorists such as Bhabha (1990) have theorised notions of hybrid identities as migrant generations give way to the born here generation. This has led to notions of ‘hyphenated’ or ‘bicultural’ (Saeed, Blain, & Forbes, 1999) or ‘compound’ or ‘diasporic’ (Dwyer, Shah, & Sanghera, 2008) identities. These bifurcated identities draw on cultural characteristics and competences coming from competing and complementing directions and, whilst recognising that even in more stable settings transmission is never preservation, in the dislocation and disjuncture of translocalities, cultural transmission is inevitably fractured and unstable, and therefore always quite ripe for hybridity. Such cultural competences obviously include sociolinguistic processes such as linguistic repertoires (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972, pp. 20–21) and linguistic resources (Blommaert, 2010) which actors draw upon in the negotiation of their composite and multiple linguistic and social identities, including religious ones. We see in the data below how young British Muslims negotiate, construct and contest their identities through the transnational processes and translocal settings facilitating the language and artistic practices embodied in the multilingual performance of devotional poetry and song. Recent research has shown that children within UK Muslim communities deploy their linguistic repertoires in secular and faith settings as part of their socialisation into language and religious practices (Rosowsky, 2008). Rampton (1995) and Harris

(2006), in non-religious contexts but with young people from similar language backgrounds, have reported on how language-mixing or code-switching, together with other translingual communicative acts such as 'styling' (Rampton, 1999), among British Asian young people can contribute to newer secular youth identities. This article reveals the under-reported and unmarked alternatives to recently described more popular and marked constructions of identity amongst British-Muslim young people (Abbas, 2005; Archer, 2001; Dwyer et al., 2008).

Therefore, in contrast to prevailing discourses within which young British Muslims are held captive, this article argues that many young people in the same UK demographic identified as having the mere potential for extremist behaviour (Abbas, 2005), and as being linguistically problematic, participate regularly and enthusiastically in a range of religious and language practices. Although these practices can still be characterised as serious and even conservative, they are also aesthetic, performance-oriented and contemplative (or in some instances ecstatic) in nature. The performance-oriented nature of liturgical and devotional practices within the Muslim world, and in other faiths, has been well documented by scholars of comparative religion (Yelle, 2013). However, these can be misrepresented, misunderstood and often denigrated as being 'pre-modern', examples of rote practice and 'vain repetitions' (Yelle, 2013). What this article seeks to do is reveal more nuanced, and more recognisable (to the participants themselves), aspects of Muslim identity manifest in these performance practices which are, for the majority of young UK Muslims, unremarkable, quotidian and central to their lives. They are also quite distant from the type of extremist activity emphasised within the public and media spaces as seemingly characteristic of these young people.

Furthermore, in this more aesthetic context, traditional performance forms of the heritage languages are accompanied by a growing engagement with more popular and contemporary forms of verse and music in a dynamic example of the blend, or hybridity, of older and newer musical and literary performances. These sculpt out newer spaces, including online ones, for these sacred and sanctified practices, which are both private and public. This article argues that these practices may be playing a more important role in the formation and negotiation of religio-linguistic identity than prevailing notions of extremism.

Performance practice in religious contexts can be accounted for using Bauman's theoretical frame of performance (Bauman, 1975; Bauman & Briggs, 1990). A less emphasised aspect of this framework are the social and political dimensions of performance and in this article I try to make links from the performance practices in evidence to social and political processes which often attempt to discursively frame performance in certain restraining and stereotyping ways. In this way I will be responding to Bauman and Briggs' 'call [...] for greater attention to the dialectic between performance and its wider sociocultural and political-economic context' (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 61). For example, the decision by a young person to perform a devotional song in English or in Arabic rather than in a heritage H-language such as Urdu or Punjabi lays claims to different stances regarding authenticity, language competence and the centrality of meaning (referential or otherwise). These stances reflect a variety of connections between the young performer and their faith practice. Singing in Arabic may represent a desire to connect with the authentic traditions of the faith originating in the Arabic-speaking world. On the other hand, singing in English may represent how a young performer prefers to communicate with his or her audience

(and with him/herself) in a more referential manner. Both choices, in different ways, suggest a turning away from inherited cultural and linguistic tradition.

The performance of devotional song and poetry by young British Muslims

The article draws on data from an ongoing qualitative study exploring the linguistic and social processes at play in a revival of interest in, and performance of, devotional verse and song among young British Muslims in a northern city in the UK. In terms of linguistic repertoire, these young people have, or have experience of, what some consider, a spoken variety of Punjabi as their home or community language. Others, on the other hand, consider this variety a distinct language, Pahari or Pothwari (see Hussain, 2015; Lothers & Lothers, 2010, 2012). However it is defined or named, this variety, as a preferred language for inter-peer and intergenerational communication, has been shifting to English.

Alongside these mainly spoken varieties, Urdu, an accompanying prestigious variety in some families and in the community more widely, is undergoing a similar shift to English (Lothers & Lothers, 2012). The devotional poems and songs performed by these young people can be either traditional (i.e. composed in Punjabi or in Urdu, using standardised poetic forms) or 'modern' (i.e. composed in English, or bi- or multi-lingually, and adopting a range of literary and musical forms). Features of this revival include the practice, both online or offline, of listening to, transcribing, recording, collecting, sharing, memorising, discussing and gathering to rehearse and perform the forms of sung or recited poetry traditionally associated with the Islamic literary heritage translocated to the emerging Muslim communities of the west and across the transnational settings of the *ummah*, the pan-Islamic global community, one of the world's oldest and ever-spreading diasporas.

A number of terms are used for the specific forms of this devotional poetry and song. The term 'naat' (Persian, and subsequently Urdu, lit. *hymn*) is commonly used for more formal Urdu and Punjabi recitations and is a poetic form reserved particularly for odes to the Prophet Muhammad. The Punjabi of the *naat* here is not the spoken variety used in family, neighbourhood and community interactions,² but a prestigious variety strictly compartmentalised mainly to this function and domain for poetry and occasional literary revivalist movements in Punjabi (Rehman, 2005). This will be referred to in Ferguson's (1959) nomenclature as H-Punjabi.³ *Naat* are recited in a 'sing-song' manner but are not understood normally as 'songs'. The discourse of the *naat* tends to be, in Fishman's (2006) sense, a co-sanctified one, with the Urdu or H-Punjabi traditionally suffused with Arabic and/or Farsi vocabulary and a form hallowed by tradition and a discipline associated with poetic style and normative conventions around recitation and performance (e.g. the standing up of all present at a recitation is associated with some *naat*).

Another common term is *nasheed* (Arabic, lit. *hymn or anthem*) which in practice tends to be a catch-all category for devotional songs in a wide range of forms, languages and styles. Most are sung by individuals or groups with choruses often sung by those in attendance at a gathering. *Nasheeds* are more informal than *naat* and, depending on context for performance, can involve instrumentation. In a mosque, a drum (*daff*) is likely to be the only instrument tolerated whereas outside the mosque more elaborate instrumentation is common involving stringed instruments and even electronic accompaniment. It is perhaps no surprise that it is *nasheed* which admits leakage from other varieties and

languages, including from English, whilst the *naat* is more carefully demarcated and restricted allowing almost exclusively only the sanctified varieties of Urdu, H-Punjabi and Farsi (Rosowsky, 2011).

The term 'qasidah' is also used. However, strictly speaking, in Arabic literature, this refers to a panegyric poem in particular. Many of these young people augment their heritage repertoires with Arabic devotional poetry and song or even sidestep their heritage traditions altogether. However, in 'naïve' and popularised usage all three of these terms can be heard being used interchangeably. The poetry is also closely associated with the Sufi tradition and its themes and vocabulary are replete with references to divine and prophetic love and mystical intoxication and experience.

For the purposes of this article the composite phrase 'naat/nasheed' performance will be used to refer to the social, religious and cultural practice of reciting devotional poetry and song. The discrete words 'naat' and 'nasheed' will be used, for example, in specific discussions connected to the languages associated with each genre.

The study

The data come from two distinct datasets. The first dataset consists of the responses to a questionnaire distributed to 66 young (between the ages of 11 and 35) male and female British Muslims, mostly of Pakistani-heritage and of Mirpuri-Punjabi⁴ language background living in a northern UK city. The sample, though not a randomised sample of this speech community more broadly, was based on a convenience sample provided by the segregated male and female audiences at a *naat/nasheed* gathering. It was followed up by a snowball sampling process generated by attendees of the original gathering. The questionnaire (Appendix 1) had four sections. The first section, apart from some demographic questions included two questions which allowed respondents to reflect on how they might identify themselves against a set of given categories (including open categories). These categories were an amalgam of categories compiled by drawing on similar surveys such those carried out by Thomas (2009) and Maxwell (2006). The second section aimed to reveal language use claimed and was based on language and language varieties identified in recent local and national language surveys (Lothers & Lothers, 2012; ONS, 2012). The third section focused on the level of participation and nature of interest in *naat/nasheed* and included questions which allowed respondents to reveal a preference for performing in different combinations of language and genre. The fourth section was related to religious/doctrinal allegiance. In this article, only those elements of the questionnaire related to language, identity and devotional performance are presented and discussed. Results reflecting on the impact of these performance practices on language maintenance and shift within this community have been published elsewhere (Rosowsky, 2016). The data are presented and analysed below under three principal themes, *Linguistic repertoire, the languages of devotional song and poetry* and *Language and identity*.

A second dataset is made up of extracts from the transcripts of seven semi-structured interviews carried out with *naat/nasheed* participants and performers at various locations in the community (homes, a mosque, a café) shortly after completing the questionnaire. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. A 'participant' here denotes any young person with an interest in *naat/nasheed* regardless of level of participation. Some of the participants were public performers and local organisers of *naat/nasheed* events

whilst others simply expressed an interest in listening to *naat/nasheed*, both in public or private contexts, and often via various electronic platforms. As a participant observer within the community for a number of years, it was fairly straightforward to secure the agreement of these interviewees. As I was also a performer as well as a researcher, they knew of my personal interest in and knowledge about this topic and were happy to discuss it with me. In addition, this extensive participatory observation over many years has been used to provide contextualisation to the interpretation of the data examples below. For example, comments about performative practices other than those involving language are informed by a range of personal, family and community experiences. Interviews were transcribed by the author, member-checked by the interviewees and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Key words, phrases and topics were identified in an iterative process resulting in a set of key quotations reflecting each theme. This process resulted in an extra theme to those generated by the questionnaire – *Language, poetry and love* (see below).

Forty-four males and 22 females completed the questionnaire. Nearly half the respondents were employed, 40% were students of some kind and 12% were unemployed (many of these were mothers looking after small children at home). This performance practice is particularly popular among young people which is reflected in the ages of the respondents attending the event where the questionnaire was first administered – though it needs to be borne in mind that as the initial sample was a convenience sample of a typical gathering, this was always likely to be the case. Eighteen per cent were between the ages of 11 and 16, 40% between 17 and 25 and 33% between 26 and 35.

Findings

The data arising from this study of linguistic, literary and musical processes are explored in this article against the backdrop of prevailing public and media discourses involving young Muslim identities in the UK and elsewhere. It is perhaps axiomatic that the social processes at play in the relationship between language and religion are complex and multifaceted. These young people become socialised, formally and informally, into both their language repertoires and religious practices through a nexus of family, community (including peer-group processes) and officially sanctioned state settings. And whilst there is often commonality between these socialising processes across individuals, they frequently adopt different trajectories resulting in multiple identities.

The data in this article present ample evidence to counter tendencies that essentialise young Muslims in the UK. The discursive power of such descriptors as ‘moderate’ and ‘radical/extremist’ needs to be challenged by more nuanced commentaries and analyses of specific contexts and settings. The performance practices highlighted here are usually associated with religious contexts considered by many as ‘moderate’ and draw upon traditions and practices that emphasise mystical and aesthetic approaches to faith – the ‘greater jihad’ no less. The performance of religious poetry is associated, in the main, in the Pakistani-heritage mosques of the UK with a Sufi tradition (see Malik & Hinnells, 2006). It is well-attested that the majority of UK mosques and their communities subscribe to such an orientation (Birt, 2006).

Part of the discussion that follows (in the interview data) explores the relationship between these young performers and broader practices linked to transnational Sufi

orders and their organisation in the UK. This is manifested often in the subject matter of the devotional songs and poems performed. However, it is also not uncommon that outward performance (what Bauman calls 'heightened attention to externals') at times 'outrun' meaning inasmuch as reading and reciting as decoding will often dominate in performance with only a generalised recourse made at times to referential meaning. This is an example of the almost universal practice of cultural decoding which whilst used often in liturgical settings (Spolsky, 2003, p. 83) such as in the recitation of sacred texts, also occurs in secular settings such as the annual Eurovision Song Contest and much of the classical repertoire for voice.

Questionnaire – linguistic repertoire

There were a number of items in the questionnaire (see [Appendix 1](#)) about use and knowledge about language. One of the questions ([Appendix 1, Q7](#)) asked respondents to declare their first language and was there solely to provide unambiguous evidence for the shift to English that had taken place principally among the third and fourth generation speakers of this speech community. As the older attenders (those in their late 20s and early 30s) were known personally by the author to be third generation speakers, it was a sensible assumption that younger attenders would either be at least third generation or younger. Indeed, some of these youngsters were children of the older, third generation, attenders.

Eighty-two per cent of the respondents claimed English to be their main or first language. All of the 18% non-English first language speakers reported English as their principal second language in Question 8. However, a limitation of the questionnaire is the ambiguity of the term 'first language' which may have been understood as first language learnt rather than main language of use. Even though learned in the home, first languages such as Punjabi (or rather its variants such as Pahari and Pothwari) or Urdu, in this minority context, are generally used a lot less frequently once speakers reach school age. The small number of Mirpuri (Pothwari, Pahari) claimants may reflect a sociolinguistic reality but may also represent a fluid picture in the home and in the community of language shift and varying degrees of Mirpuri proficiency. Often, the relatively high claims for Urdu as a first language in the community reflect an over-claiming due to its prestigious nature within the community as a whole. Regardless, the dominant conclusion here is that English is the first language for the majority of these young people.

Another question ([Appendix 1, Q6](#)) asked respondents to state their 'knowledge' of other languages without specifying to what extent that knowledge should amount to. This was done deliberately to try and access information about varying levels of language knowledge, use and understanding with no expectation that 'speaking' the language was necessary. It was assumed that each respondent had a linguistic repertoire which may or may not have included spoken competence in their heritage languages but, nevertheless, could still allow for claiming an element of language usage outside of regular conversational communication. It aimed to give a sense of the linguistic 'resources', no matter how slight, these young people had at their disposal. For attenders at the original gathering, this question was mediated orally by the researcher in order to emphasise the scope of this question. A limitation in the data is that this oral instruction was not available for those who completed the questionnaire via the subsequent snowball sampling process.

However, this amounted to only a modest percentage of the total number of questionnaires completed (8%).

The responses represent the variety of language knowledge expected and a range of languages, including lesser known varieties, are identified. The relatively large claim for 'Punjabi' may reflect a 'catch-all' category subsuming other varieties such as 'Pahari', 'Pothwari' and 'Mirpuri' which are spoken varieties related to (western) Punjabi.⁵ My experience indicates that few young people of Pakistani-heritage are aware of the names of varieties such as 'Pahari' and 'Pothwari' and tend to use 'Mirpuri' and 'Punjabi' indiscriminately. Furthermore, few respondents, if any, would be referring to eastern Punjabi, the variety of the language used by the Sikh community in India. It should be noted that many respondents assumed (understandably) there was no need to include knowledge of English in their responses though some still did and this explains the discrepancy between 82% in Figure 1 and 70% in Figure 2.

The linguistic repertoires exemplified in these figures contrast significantly and dramatically with the prevailing essentialising discourse that often accompanies discussion

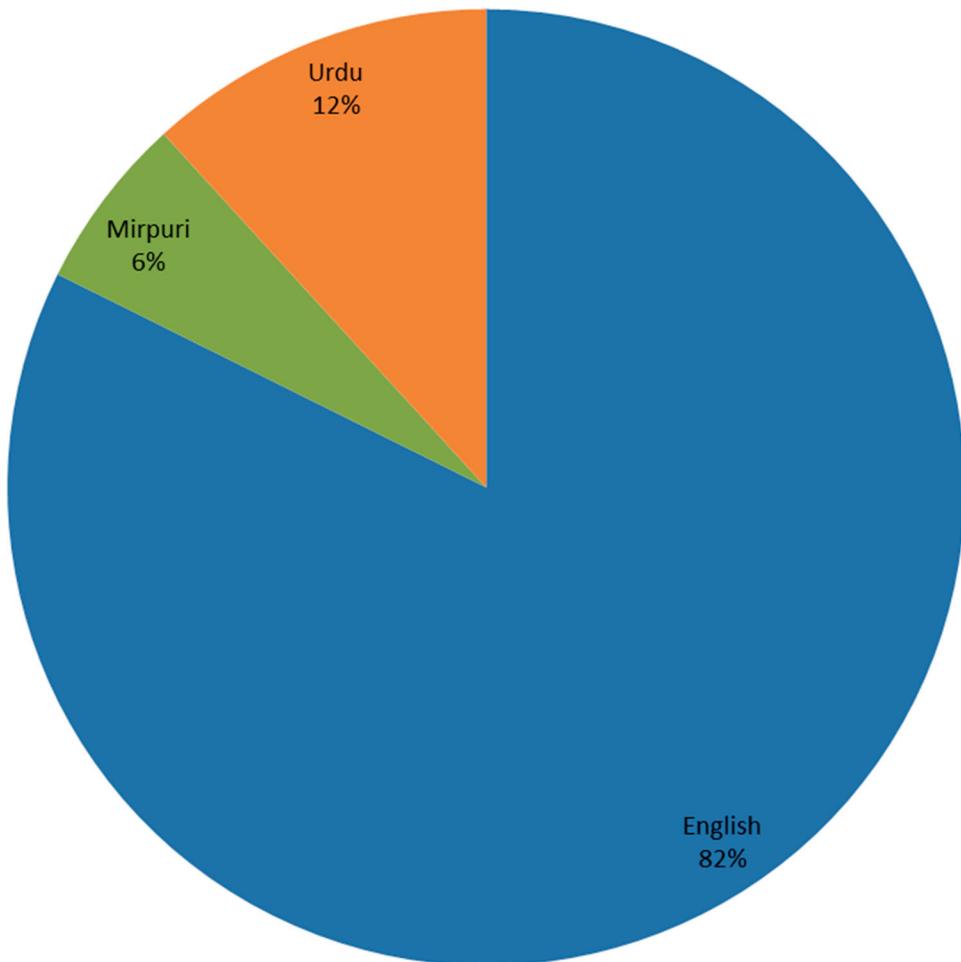


Figure 1. First language (% , $n = 66$).

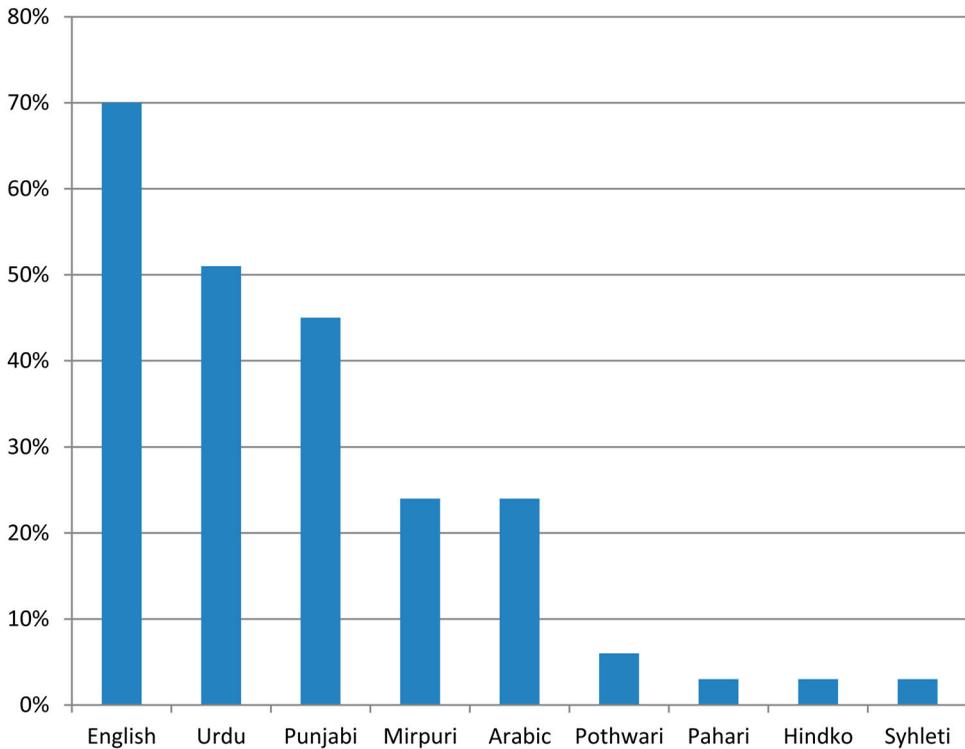


Figure 2. Other languages used/known (% , $n = 66$).

around young Muslims and languages. The language ‘problem’ identified in the political statements at the beginning of this article is challenged by (a) the clear dominance of English as a first language for the young people in question and (b) by their rich and complex linguistic repertoires. On their own, these would be adequate responses to the discursive misrepresentation of these young people as a linguistic problem. However, their regular involvement in the performance of devotional song and poetry adds an extra, richer, dimension to their repertoires.

The languages of devotional song and poetry

A key question regarding language and performance asked respondents for their preferred genre-language combination for performance ([Appendix 1](#), Q10).

A significant number of performers (60%+) preferred to perform their devotional songs and poems in either Urdu or Punjabi (in addition to *naat*, *gazzal* would be in Urdu and *Qawalli* in Punjabi). This is in spite of an increase in the number of English language devotional songs and poems authored and available in English. What is being referred to as ‘Punjabi’ is almost certainly literary H-Punjabi and not the spoken⁶ varieties of Mirpuri, Pahari, Pothwari or Hindko identified in [Figure 2](#) although there is some evidence of folk poetry and song in these varieties (Rehman, 2005, p. 4). It is clear here that it is the ‘nasheed’ which lends itself to performance in English rather than the ‘naat’ which tends to be exclusive to Urdu or Punjabi.

A significant number (50%+) of the young people state that they prefer to perform in Classical Arabic (‘Nasheed (Arabic)’ and ‘(Qasidah Arabic)'). There is a growing tendency for

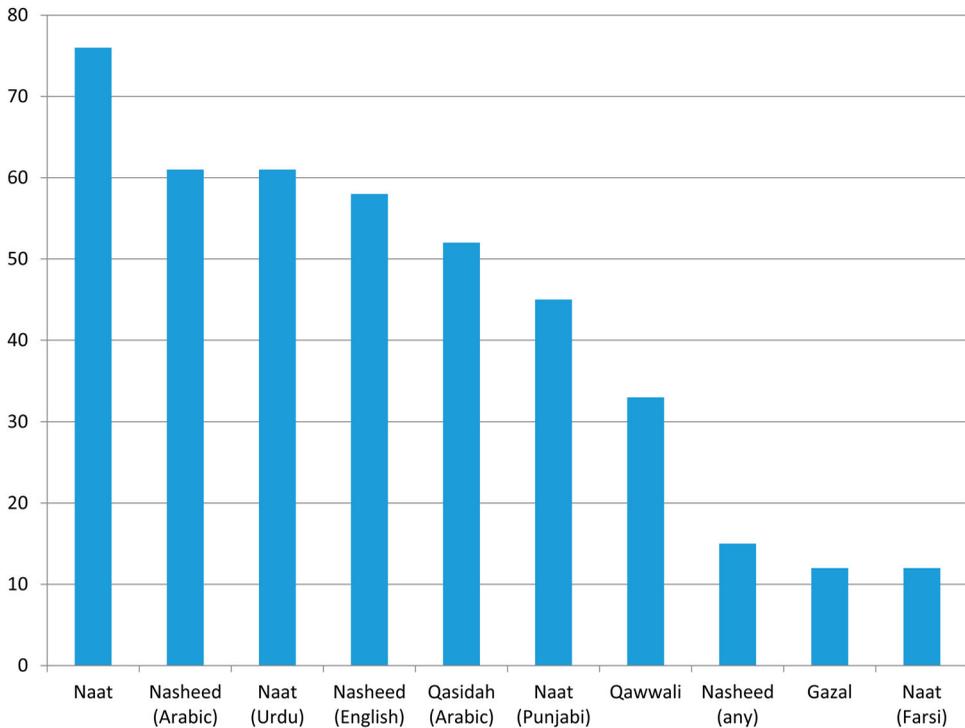


Figure 3. Preferred language for performing (%), $n = 66$.

some young performers to disregard their linguistic and literary heritage, as well as any repertoire in the English language, and perform almost exclusively in Classical Arabic not only through the mainly informal practices described in this article, but also through the existence of semi-professional ensembles.⁷

There is little doubt on the evidence of these three charts (Figures 1–3) that the linguistic repertoires of these young British Muslims are varied, complex and layered. They are far away from the political rhetoric based on banal binary English/non-English distinctions made at the beginning of this article. It reveals a dynamic and fluid contextualisation (and, in respect of the poetry and songs, entextualisation) of cultural, linguistic and religious practices operating transnationally and translocally. The translocal contextualisations of these performers and their emulators result in a rich and vibrant experience of language and faith practices. At the same time, there is little doubt that these young people are earnest and serious about their performance practices which they see very much as part of their identities as young Muslims in the UK. The recitations of these poems and songs reflect a traditional approach to faith which some might deem conservative, but which nevertheless cannot but be interpreted as ‘moderate’ practices, if one wishes to use such a simplistic distinction. Many of these young people accompany their performances of devotional song and poetry with a commitment to their faith that may entail change in behaviour or the adoption of a new appearance. There is a strong sense of a range of performative practices involving not just language and performance *sui generis* but also dressing, speaking, travelling and eating – a panoply of performative

practices in the Butlerian sense (Butler, 1997) as well as the Baumanian (Bauman, 1975, 2004; Bauman & Briggs, 1990).

However, in the latter sense, the type of performance driving these young British Muslims runs the full gamut of Bauman's continuum for framing verbal arts performance (1975, p. 303). An Urdu *naat*, transcribed and then memorised for a future performance by a young Muslim performer, sits clearly at the end of the continuum which is characterised by verbatim performance and where 'getting it right' constitutes accurate recall of the lyrics and clear enunciation of the words in an appropriate style. Those performances which are more innovative, perhaps using the English language and western musical modes and instrumentation, are further down towards the improvised performance end of the continuum. In the interview data below we see how those who choose to perform the more traditional and formal repertoire in heritage languages position themselves differently to those who prefer other languages and other styles of performance (see interview extracts from 'Shahid' and 'Hamid', pp. 25–26). This is not to discount the possibility, of course, that the same performer can span the two modes in their own individual repertoires.

Language and identity

There were two questions in the questionnaire about identity. The fourth question (Appendix 1, Q4) asked participants to claim one or more identities selected from a list or by suggesting one of their own, and allowed participants to reflect on the multilayered identities they might claim. The categories were either nationality- or language-based (British, Pakistani, English and

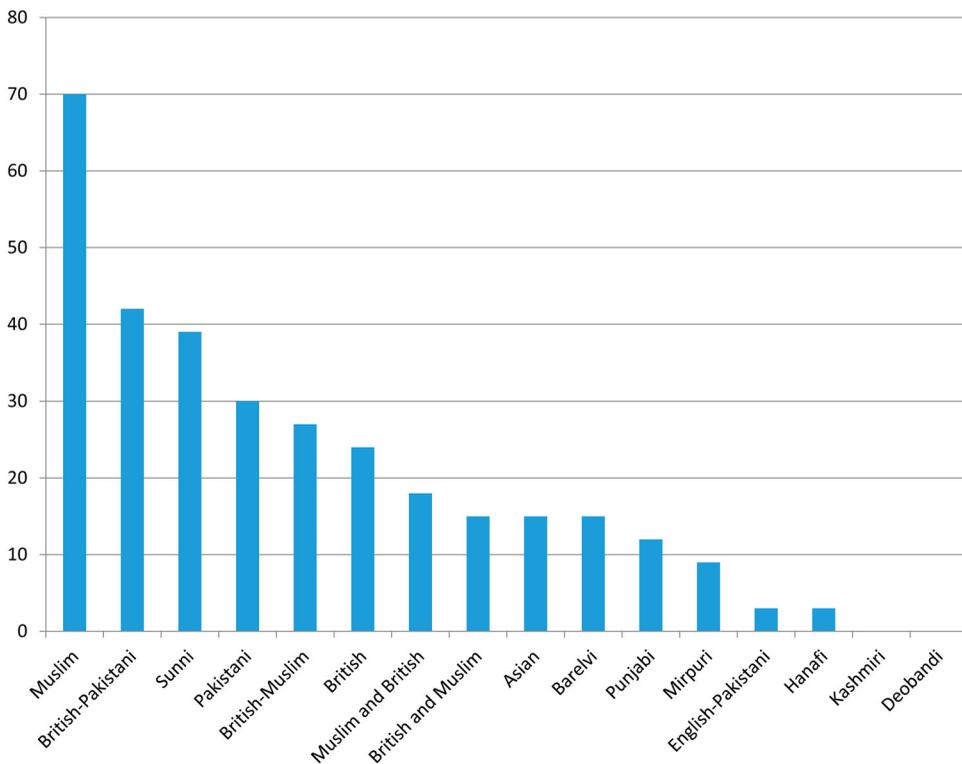


Figure 4. Identity claims.

hyphenated hybrids) or religion-based (Muslim) though some were locality- and language-based (Mirpuri, Kashmiri, Punjabi) and doctrinally based (Deobandi, Barelvi, Hanafi, Sunni). Participants were encouraged to select as many categories as they felt appropriate.

As expected (Figure 4), a range of identifications were made reflecting the complex and multifaceted aspects of identity among young UK Muslims in the early part of the twenty-first century. The bifurcated identity categories were variously worded and allowed respondents the opportunity to make nuanced responses. For example, selecting 'British-Muslim' represents a slightly different stance to 'British and Muslim'. For example, this question may indicate the growing acceptance of bifurcated identities as argued for by Bhabha (1990) and others (Dwyer et al., 2008; Saeed et al., 1999) and its accompanying term. An ancillary purpose of this question was to prepare respondents for the question that followed on primary affiliations. By not including every possible combination of identity in the questionnaire (although there were 'empty boxes' for respondents' use), it is, of course, possible important identity nuances have been missed.

This next question (Appendix 1, Q5) asked respondents to choose a 'primary' identity from among the various categories selected for the previous question. In an analysis of the complex relationship between language and religion operating across the transnational and translocal dislocations and disjunctures of the present age, it is virtually impossible to disentangle ethnic or other allegiances of human subjects vis-à-vis languages and religious

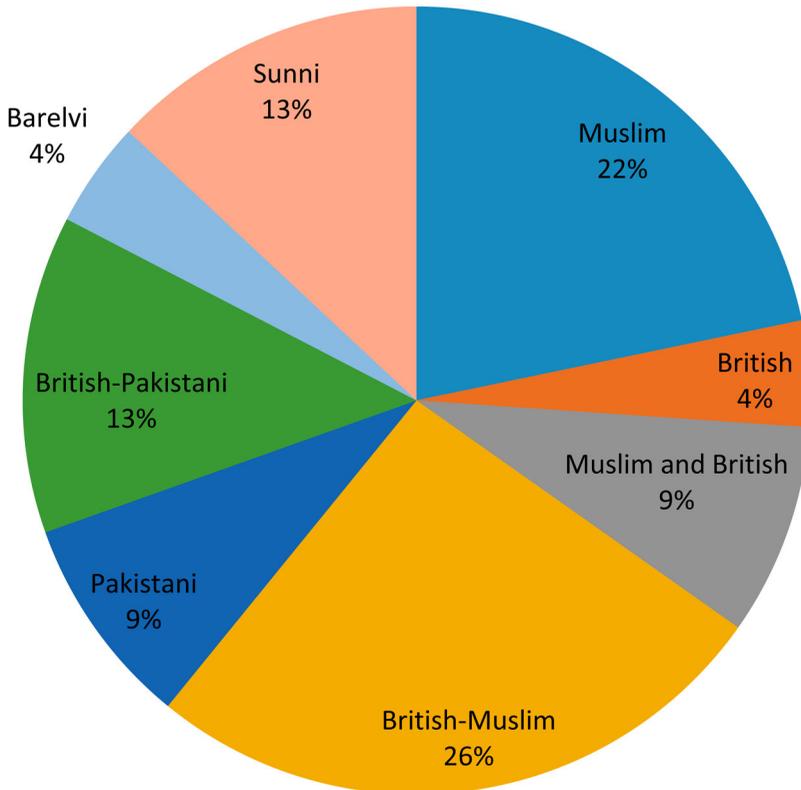


Figure 5. Claimed primary identity.

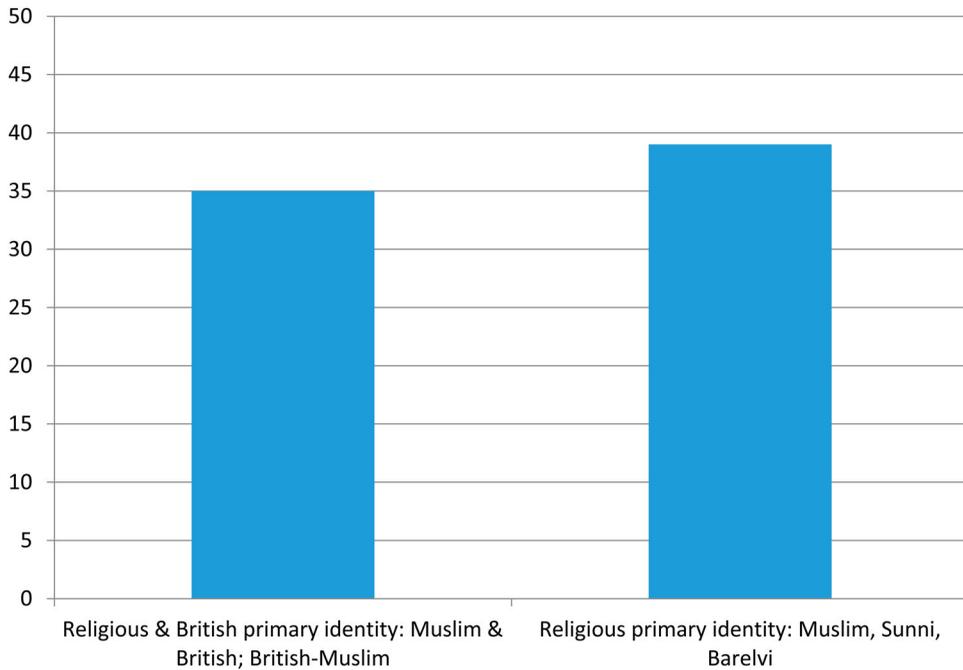


Figure 6. ‘Religious’ and ‘religious-British’ primary identities.

practice. This question, therefore, aimed to signal a third social process, ethnicity/nationality (or doctrinal affiliation), contributing to questions of religious identity and practice.

Thirty-nine per cent of the participants claimed an exclusively religious primary identity (Figure 5 – Muslim, Sunni, Barelvi). However, a similar number (35%) combined a religious identity with the national identity of ‘British’ indicating perhaps no contradiction between the two allegiances (Figure 6). This supports Thomas’ (2009) and Maxwell’s (2006) findings that the overwhelming majority of British Muslims demonstrate a positive allegiance to being British.

Thomas’ ‘Last Britons’, however, do not tend to consider themselves as ‘English’ as perhaps indicated by no participant choosing to enter ‘English’ as a primary identity in one of the empty boxes (and only one participant claiming ‘English-Pakistani’ as one of their multiple identities). Interestingly, the majority claim of English as a first language (Figure 1) makes no difference to responses suggesting that here, at least, the modernist link between language and nationality is missing. English is seen principally as part of their general linguistic repertoires. This phenomenon suggests a degree of decoupling of language from nationality, or even ethnicity, with a British-Muslim identity no longer designating any particular language unlike corresponding national-religious categories such as Arab Muslim or Turkish Muslim or religious-ethnic categories such as Christian Arab or Hindu Tamil. A British-Muslim identity is more than likely to have English as a first or additional language but this is no longer indicated by the identity markers. Part of this is down to historical accident with ‘British’ and ‘English’ (and Welsh) both co-existing in a way that allows for the disappearance of language as an identity marker in contexts such as this one.

As has been indicated above, some of these young British Muslims construct and negotiate their Muslim identities through more transnational processes one of which is by preferring Classical Arabic as a performance language. Rather than (re)learning heritage languages or consolidating their ethno-religious identities via Urdu or Punjabi, they are learning Arabic, or at least enough Arabic linguistic resources (e.g. script, decoding, pronunciation), to perform convincingly in Arabic. This opens up a massive alternative repertoire for the young performers. Some have seen this repertoire as a means of resisting the Urdu/Punjabi monopoly of traditional *naat/nasheed* performances.

I guess a saw a space in that field [the weekly *naat/nasheed* gathering] and one was representing that [Arabic] and felt this could make a strong point in our weekly events. (Shahid – interviewee)

It is perhaps too soon to suggest this is a growing trend though there is obvious potential for this form of performance practice to develop further and become more popular. As subsequent generations distance themselves from the original settlers, who mediated their faith through the culture of ‘back home’ where Urdu and Punjabi were essential to that process, they both adapt to the majority society culturally and linguistically more readily, and also construct their religious identities relying much more heavily on pan-Islamic processes. This can be by wearing Middle Eastern clothes rather than traditional Pakistani ones, or by side-stepping Urdu/Punjabi languages and engaging with Arabic to a degree more than that required for the performance of the religious classical (i.e. the liturgical literacy needed for recitation of the Qur’an).

In addition to questions about identity and language, respondents were asked (Appendix 1, Q12) to indicate how much of their lives was given over to these devotional performance practices.

Figure 7 shows how pervasive such practices are in the lives of these young people with 65% of respondents indicating this was at least a daily experience and over 70% taking part in some way weekly. Taken together with Birt’s (2006) and Lewis’ (2011) observation that the mosques with a Sufi tradition in the UK are still in the majority, and thus sympathetic to such activity, this intensity and regularity of participation provides a strong contrast to generalisations made about radicalisation and extremism within the same religio-ethnic community. The aesthetic, performance-oriented and contemplative (or in some instances ecstatic) nature of these practices is incompatible with the notions of being susceptible to radicalisation and extremism often associated with young Muslims in the UK.

Interview extracts – language, poetry and love

In order to amplify some of the results from the questionnaire a series of conversations was had with a number (7) of the young participants. In terms of identity, the multiplicity and complexity of their linguistic repertoires were exemplified in many of the comments. Many of the interviewees spoke of feelings or emotional and psychological connections with the Urdu or Punjabi ‘words’ of the devotional songs and poems before any sense of meaning developed.

I never understood but I liked the tone or the expressions of the person reciting or the reaction of the audience. What is this person saying that is getting so many people smiling? (Latif – interviewee)

Some of the Urdu words were a bit advanced for me at that stage. (Tanveer – interviewee)

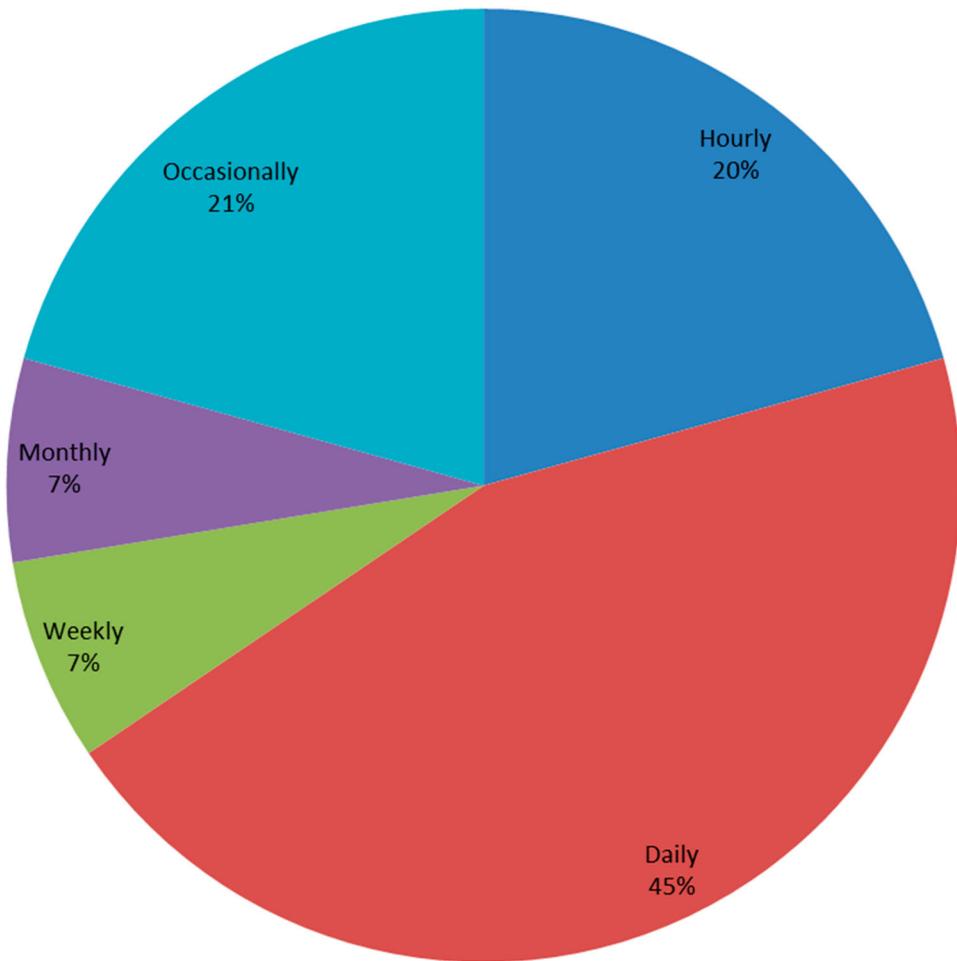


Figure 7. Frequency of engagement in multilingual devotional performance.

Reciting *naat* in Urdu is not developing speaking and listening skills but it is picking up key words...but you wouldn't be able to have a conversation with a person. (Tanveer – interviewee)

The emotional and psychological connection identified here is complex. There is the familiarity with the sounds of the languages involved despite the lack of comprehension. There is an affinity with the phonology over the syntax and the semantics. Rhyme and style are recognised aurally allowing for a somatic appreciation of the poetry and song. Another source for this connection is the experience of listening in a gathering of one's peers where some are 'smiling' and perhaps understanding, and others are moved emotionally ('the love coming out'). Bauman's twin defining characteristics of performance – heightened experience of language and accountability to an audience – are very much in evidence here. The entextualisation of heritage poetry in these new and translocal contexts through these young performers (Rosowsky, 2013) allows for a range of refined and nuanced elements within their linguistic repertoires.

Another aspect of the emotional and psychological connections identified is how these performance practices link into the young performers religious practices more generally. As stated above, and in the questionnaire responses related to religious affiliation, the performance of devotional songs and poetry is generally associated with the Islamic Sufi Orders, a strong feature of most Pakistani-heritage mosques in the UK (Birt, 2006). Often equated with approaches to the Divine which are ecstatic and imbued with love, both Prophetic and Godly, these young performers emphasise the feelings of love their performances evoke in them or in others.

Even if we don't understand it, we can see the love coming out. (Akhtar – interviewee)

I think that the group generally who adopt the *nasheeds* are the ones who practise love – and try to obtain to the love of the Prophet. Ideally the *nasheed* is recited in order to please the Prophet. (Shahid – interviewee)

Such sentiments and practices are far removed from the fearmongering rhetoric conjured up by the concern that non-English communication among this target group is potentially dangerous, conflictual and a threat to national security.

There is even a sophisticated recognition that devotional song and poetry in English or in translation is not yet able to reach the artistry of poets and lyricists in the heritage languages, though the door is left open to this possibility in the future.

You get the feelings, special feelings, through the words that you can't get in English. Maybe in 50 years or so there will be a poet who writes *naat* in English ... that when people read it they will feel that love coming out of the words ... but you can't get in English at the moment what you get in Urdu or Arabic. (Shahid – interviewee)

The 'schizophrenia which bedevils generational relationships' referred to by Blunkett and alluded to by Cameron at the beginning of this article is not quite what is intended by comments such as these, where intergenerational tension is a matter of poetry rather than a breakdown in communication.

Our parents do not really understand that there is such a thing as *naat/nasheed* in English. All their lives they've heard *naat* in Urdu. They've never thought someone could be praising the Prophet in English also. (Hamid – interviewee)

As with much liturgical literacy, in many faith contexts, there are no disconcerting feelings on the part of the performers accompanying the non-comprehension of what is being recited. The performance is key and is more about verbatim accuracy, authentic style and artful presentation than it is about referential meaning. This is also the case with the performance of devotional songs and poetry. Here the young performers are conscious of their lack of understanding but are knowledgeable enough to recognise the special nature of the texts they choose to perform.

As it's poetry, it therefore has a deeper meaning. To understand that you would need an advanced understanding of the language. Some (religious) scholars wouldn't understand some of the poetry recited. (Yasmeen – interviewee)

These performance practices encourage the accumulation of linguistic resources that may, or may not, lead to a (re)learning of the heritage languages involved. I have shown elsewhere how either outcome is possible and how this practice may contribute to reversing

language shift (Rosowsky, 2015) with some individuals but how this is less likely for the community as a whole which is, on the whole, shifting to English.

However, that's him as a reciter. The listeners can go either way. They may listen and not understand and withdraw from that [practice]. Others may have the opposite effect and say 'right, I want to understand that, what he's reciting' and take that step forward to try and learn about the language. So it can go either way. (Shazad – interviewee)

Conclusion

This article has shared findings from a study that seeks to investigate certain literary and literacy practices currently helping to shape and forge the negotiation of cultural, religious, linguistic and ethnic identities among UK Muslim youth communities; to wit, an interest in and performance of religious poetry. Drawing on theories of the sociology of language and religion (Fishman, 2006), language shift (Fishman, 1991) and performance (Bauman, 1975; Bauman & Briggs, 1990), it has sought to contribute to discussions where languages and identities are not understood as essentialised and homogenous fixed categories but are rather the consequences of subjects acting out, or performing, a fluid and dynamic series of roles and entering into multifaceted relationships that allow for simultaneous identity and community formations. Above all, it challenges those fixed binaries that characterise so much of the discourse relating to young British Muslims. Admittedly, there is no attempt here to analyse particular individuals for this linguistic fluidity and the data merely capture the perspectives of a group of similar individuals on their linguistic and performance repertoires. There is obvious scope here for a follow-up study presenting more detailed case studies of individual performers and fellow-travellers.

Returning to the aims of the article, on numerous occasions when discussing the data, it has been possible to draw attention to how the essentialising discourse around multilingualism among these young people is not only erroneous and facile but deeply misleading. The unmarked and 'invisible' nature of these linguistic and performance repertoires is itself a consequence of the marginalising effects of such discourse. However, these repertoires are dynamic and fluid, varying from one individual to another, and resist any simplistic attempt to stereotype a community linguistically. An accompanying discourse is that serious religious activity is often equated with radicalisation. The data here demonstrate a seriousness of religious and linguistic engagement (often equated to 'love') and represent regular and intense practices of learning, memorisation and multilingual performance that similarly resist such an unfortunate characterisation.

Notes

1. This author realises this term is unsatisfactory. See fuller discussion on page 9.
2. This variety is variously known as Pahari, Pothwari, Mirpuri-Pahari or simply as Mirpuri-Punjabi.
3. Also not to be confused with literary western Punjabi, the H-language of the Sikh community in India and the Sikh diaspora.
4. See note 3.
5. See note 3.
6. See Rehman (2005) and Hussain (2015) regarding written varieties of Pothwari/Pahari.
7. The *Keighley Munshids* (The Keighley Munshids, n.d.) are one such British ensemble who prefer to perform almost exclusively in Classical Arabic drawing on the rich tradition of devotional singing from Jordan and Syria despite their Pakistani-heritage.

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Appendix 1



Questionnaire on poems, songs and Islam

Questions about you

1. Name (optional):.....

11-16	17-25	26-35	36+	
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male	female	
------	--------	--

2. Age: Gender:

3. Are you:

employed?	unemployed/unwaged?	a university student?	a college student?	a school pupil?	
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4. How would you describe yourself – place a tick against any description that you identify with (you can tick more than one and can write in the empty boxes if you like).

Muslim	British	British and Muslim	Muslim and British	British-Muslim
Pakistani	British Pakistani	English-Pakistani	Mirpuri	Kashmiri
Punjabi	Asian	Indian	Bengali	Barelvi
Deobandi	Sunni			

5. Double tick (VV) the description you identify with the most.

Questions about languages

6. Tick the languages you speak/understand/have some knowledge of. Write in the blank boxes for other languages not mentioned here.

English	Punjabi	Mirpuri	Pahari	Pothwari	Pashto
Urdu	Gujerati	Arabic	Hindko	Farsi	Dari
Sylheti	Bengali				

7. Treble tick (VVV) the language you consider your first language.
 8. Double tick (VV) the language you use the most after your first language.
 9. For each language you ticked for Questions 7-9, tick below where/how you use these languages.

Language	Speaking	Reading	Reciting/performing	Writing	Listening
English					
Punjabi					

Mirpuri					
Pahari					
Pothwari					
Pashto					
Urdu					
Gujerati					
Arabic					
Hindko					
Farsi					
Dari					
Sylheti					
Bengali					

Questions about poems and songs

10. Which of these poems/songs do you listen to or are interested in the most? You can tick more than one.

Naat	Nasheed in Arabic	Gazal	Qawwali	Qasidah in Arabic
Nasheed in English	Naat in Punjabi	Naat in Urdu	Naat in Farsi	Nasheed in any language

11. Put a double tick (✓✓) against any songs/poems you have personally performed in public.

12. How often do you find yourself listening to/reciting or singing these poems and songs?

Hourly	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Occasionally
--------	-------	--------	---------	--------------

13. Where do you mostly listen to/experience these songs and poems?

Mosque	MP3 player	Television	Radio	Online	CDs	Mobile
--------	------------	------------	-------	--------	-----	--------

14. What are the topics/subjects of these poems and songs mostly about? You can tick more than one. Add a topic if you like.

The Prophet (a.s.)	Allah Almighty	Islamic events/history	Jihad	Love
Nafs (the ego)	Paradise	War/battles	Don't really know exactly	Injustice

Questions about religion

15. Do you try to follow a particular Shaykh (murshid, pir, spiritual guide/teacher, scholar)?

Yes No (circle) If you answer **No** to this question go straight to Question 20)

16. What is the name of this

person?.....

17. Have you followed this teacher for:

Weeks	Months	Years	Decades	Since birth
-------	--------	-------	---------	-------------

18. Roughly how many of your local friends are also following this person's teachings?.....

19. How many of your family members are also following this person's teachings?.....

20. From the people you know of your age and/or grew up with in the neighbourhood, what percentage in your opinion are following or are interested in sufi or tariqat pathways in Islam?

10% or less		10-25%		50%		Above 50%	
-------------	--	--------	--	-----	--	-----------	--

21. From the people you know of your age and/or grew up with in the neighbourhood, what percentage in your opinion are following or are interested in the so-called 'radicalised' or 'extremist' pathways in Islam?

0%		10% or less		10-25%		50%		Above 50%	
----	--	-------------	--	--------	--	-----	--	-----------	--

22. From the people you know of your age and/or grew up with in the neighbourhood, what percentage in your opinion are less interested in religious issues?

10% or less		10-25%		50%		Above 50%	
-------------	--	--------	--	-----	--	-----------	--

**Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Jazak Allah khayr.
All answers are confidential.**