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Sacred language acquisition in superdiverse contexts

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Abstract

This article presents and discusses data which reveal the multilingual contexts of contemporary UK mosque schools offering Muslim children liturgical (Qur'anic) literacy acquisition. It contrasts significantly with data collected twenty years earlier from broadly similar contexts. That data, gathered in the years 1998-2001, suggested relatively stable but complex patterns of language use including codeswitching, reading as decoding, memorisation and localised di/triglossia involving both prestigious and vernacular community languages, a sacred language (Classical Arabic) and a majority language, English. Nearly two decades later, findings from similar UK contexts present quite different linguistic profiles with less stable and much greater linguistic diversity, the more widespread – in some cases, the dominant – use of English, and the ever-increasing publication and use of English language and bilingual teaching resources and practices. This article attempts to bring research into liturgical literacy practices in such settings up to date by sharing data drawn from a range of sources gathered recently across a range of mosque schools in a northern city in England.

Key words: mosque; multilingual; Qur'anic; literacy, language shift; supplementary school.

Introduction

This article presents and discusses data which reveal the multilingual contexts of one particular type of UK supplementary school, namely, contemporary UK mosque schools[1] which offer Muslim children sacred language[2] (Qur'anic) literacy acquisition. It contrasts significantly with data collected twenty years earlier from broadly similar contexts. That data, gathered in the years 1998-2001, suggested relatively stable but complex patterns of language use including codeswitching, reading as decoding, memorisation and localised di/triglossia involving both established H and L[3] community languages, a sacred language (Classical Arabic) and a majority language, English. This research later appeared in Rosowsky (2008).

Nearly two decades later, findings from similar UK contexts present quite different linguistic profiles with less stable and much greater linguistic diversity, the more widespread – in some cases, the dominant – use of English, and the ever-increasing publication and use of bilingual, trilingual and English language teaching resources and practices. This article attempts to bring research into sacred language practices in such settings up to date by sharing data drawn from a range of sources gathered recently across a range of mosque schools in a northern city in England.

These current findings suggest more fluid and dynamic linguistic landscapes informing and impacting upon faith-based supplementary schools in the UK. New configurations of

[1] In this article and elsewhere I have chosen to use the phrase 'mosque school' to denote the site where much of the learning relating to the sacred text, the Qur'an, takes place. I am aware of other terms in use, the main one being 'madrassah' or 'madrassa'. However, these terms are also used in other contexts to denote very different places of learning, e.g. the religious day and boarding schools in Pakistan are known as 'madrassahs'. In the Arabic-speaking world, 'madrassah' means a 'school' of any kind. Furthermore, some 'mosque schools' call themselves 'madrassahs' but some do not. From an emic perspective, many young people talk mostly of 'going to the mosque' or 'I've got mosque' when referring to attending their evening classes.

[2] After a number of years using Fishman's (1989) 'religious classical' as the generic term for the archaic languages used for liturgical purposes, I now follow Bennett's recent definition of 'sacred language' for this linguistic code. See Bennett (2017, pp.1-18).

[3] These are Ferguson's terms for distinguishing between informally spoken, less prestigious, vernaculars (L) and more formal and prestigious written varieties (H) (1959; Fishman, 1970).

language and identity resulting from changing patterns and directions of human mobility (involuntary and other) are here complexified by the inclusion of the languages and literacies traditionally associated with faith practices. They also reflect a period of significant social change in the UK, and elsewhere, which Vertovec (2007) has characterised as 'superdiversity'. This has coincided with a move in sociolinguistics away from notions of fixed and stable language codes and speech communities to a need to discuss language practices and networks operating with and within multiple language resources which are considered to be fluid, flexible and mobile. Concepts such as 'language disinvention' (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007), 'translanguaging' (Garcia & Li, 2014), 'flexible bilingualism' (Blackledge & Creese, 2010: Creese & Blackledge, 2011) and 'metrolingualism' (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010) have been deployed variously to account for this lack of stability, rapid change and fluidity of practice. These concepts, though by no means identical in meaning, share a concern with fast changing social contexts which require innovative sociolinguistic theory to account for language practice. Instances where one or more of these concepts have saliency are identified in the data below.

The particularised setting of a faith-based supplementary school is a rich environment for tracking how the fluidity of these fast changing social contexts has impacted on the language practices of a significant faith and linguistic minority in the UK. For example, alongside the fluid multilingualism of the present moment, a faith-based supplementary school such as a mosque school provides the relatively stable language practice of acquiring proficiency in decoding a sacred text in an archaic classical language, a language and pedagogical practice with a centuries old tradition. The notion of metrolingualism, "where fixity … fluidity … hybridity … coexist and co-constitute each other", is particularly applicable here (Otsuji and Pennycook, 2010, p.252).

The shift to English as a first language of wider communication which has taken place in the contexts described below has led to different, if not greater, complexity in the language interactions observed in the course of children acquiring Qur'anic literacy. Whilst the dominant pedagogical language heard is English, it is often one of a variety of Englishes (Kachru, 2006) such as a local variety, Standard English, non-indigenous Englishes such as Nigerian English, or English learnt as a foreign language. Children may be first language English speakers but often have varying levels of proficiency in a range of languages reflecting more recent (for example, Syrian Arabic, Iraqi Arabic, Kurdish varieties such as Kurmanji, or a southern variety of Somali such as Maay) and older patterns of migration (for example, Yemeni Arabic, Northern Somali or more predictable South Asian varieties such as Pahari/Pothwari and Urdu). In their social interactions with one another in the mosque school and in their pedagogical interchanges with their teachers, this dynamic and fluid use of linguistic repertoire and language resources reflects a 'flexible bilingualism' (Blackledge & Creese, 2010) characteristic of superdiverse contexts where newer and older patterns of minority/majority settlement continue to present unprecedented social challenges and opportunities. These translanguaging (Garcia & Li Wei, 2017) practices challenge notions of discrete and separate languages whilst operating within a learning context which has a discrete and fixed (because immutable) sacred language at its centre.

Taken together, this collection of related sociolinguistic theory suggests the necessity to account for language practices which defy notions of unerring fixity and separate codes. At the same time, however, in this particular context, a degree of 'unerring fixity' remains necessarily central. In the analysis below, I bring aspects of this complex theoretical orientation to this lesser-researched setting which has experienced similar levels of change in the past 20 years to other, perhaps better known, pedagogical contexts.

Faith-based supplementary schools

Supplementary[4] schooling has been a growing dimension within the UK educational system for a number of years (DCSF, 2010). Much of this growth is down to both recent and relatively less recent periods of immigration to the UK resulting in the emergence of a highly multicultural and multilingual society (Mason, 2018: Modood & May, 2001). Through supplementary schools, minority communities have sought to create ways to preserve and transmit their cultural and linguistic heritage to new generations. There has also been greater interest in the supplementary education sector from a succession of UK governments in recent times as they have sought to extend centralised control of, and introduce regulation to, all educational sectors more generally. This interest, aided by local authority monitoring, has sought to harness the growth of this predominantly community-led emerging sector which for certain types of supplementary school has been more intense than for others. One type of supplementary school which significantly pre-dates the current regulatory purview is the faith-based supplementary school. In the UK, the Sunday School, though not as ubiquitous as it once was, is still functioning as a Christian supplementary school providing religious instruction and often extra support for literacy (Brickman, 1980). The cheder within the Jewish community fulfils a similar role as do equivalent schools attached to the places of worship of other minority faiths in the UK (Miller, 2010; Rosowsky, 2013). Most UK mosques have a mosque school associated with them (Rosowsky, 2008; Cherti & Bradley,

[4] I use the adjective 'supplementary' here rather than 'complementary' solely because it is more generally understood and found in policy literature. I recognise the arguments and have some sympathy with those who argue for 'complementary' (e.g. Blackledge & Creese, 2010) as a more accurate and positive term.

2011a). Although this particular sub-sector of supplementary schooling has had less attention paid to it in recent times in a research sense, greater media and political attention of late, linked with the ever-increasing securitisation of the UK (Miah, 2017), has cast a suspicious glance at these community-run Islamic schools in the UK and in other western countries.

In the past decade, there has been significant research carried out into language practices in supplementary schools in the UK (Creese et al., 2008; Blackledge & Creese, 2010). This has revealed ideological tensions between institutional aims (and the communities that articulate these) and the actual language practices which dominate. Alongside the prevailing language ideology of community language acquisition as a means of consolidating linguistic and national identity, with its notion of national and standard languages as symbols of that identity, in the face of ongoing and inevitable language shift (Fishman, 1991, 2001) the children in these supplementary school settings have been getting on with the business of negotiating their linguistic identities using a wide range of language resources including but not limited to the target national language. What Blackledge and Creese (2010; Creese & Blackledge, 2011) call 'flexible bilingualism', conveys the fluidity and mobility of the children's language resources at play in their interactions with one another and with their teachers reflecting a complex entanglement of language ideologies.

Within a superdiverse social context, with its fluid combination of both recent arrivals and established minority populations, faith-based supplementary schools such as mosque schools have had to adapt to changing linguistic demands. Whereas once they served relatively stable speech communities, comprising citizens from New Commonwealth countries (mainly Pakistan, India, Bangladesh) and their descendants, changing social conditions brought about by political change at home and, especially, abroad in the late 20th century onwards, has meant that mosque schools often now cater for children from a diverse range of linguistic and national backgrounds. Adding to this complexity is the gradual shift from minority to

majority language (English) among the 3rd generation of those original more stable communities. This has had a number of consequences. The main language of wider communication in the community, and thus in the mosque school as well, is increasingly English. The teachers in the mosque schools tend to be mainly English-speaking with many of them having been educated in the UK (often to degree level or higher) and having experienced both systems of schooling, mainstream and mosque. An obvious implication here is that the sacred text, the Qur'an, and its language, Classical Arabic, are now mediated and taught through English rather than through one of the community languages such as Urdu[5] as was the case 20 years ago.

Although comment in the public and media domain relating to the acquisition of sacred language literacy within mosque schools is often reduced to simplistic notions of 'rote learning' and 'unquestioning compliance' (Cherti and Bradley, 2011a, p.13), a wider lens reveals a more complex, more varied and richer picture. In line with recent sociolinguistic studies tracking the dynamic and fluid patterns of language use in ever-increasingly multilingual spaces, the interface between religious and language practice reveals similar degrees of complexity and fluidity. At the same time, the presence of practices centred around sacred texts and languages, whilst adding to this complexity, also serves as a more stable reminder of continuity amidst the fluidity and mobility of language practice surrounding it (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010).

Understanding language practice in devotional settings

A useful theoretical framework for understanding the performance characteristics at the heart of sacred language and literacy acquisition, and the devotional practices linked to them, is the

[5] As the main Muslim community in the UK, and in this study, is Pakistani in origin (and Mirpuri predominantly), the majority of my language examples reflect this fact. However, references to Urdu and spoken vernaculars such as Pahari and Pothwari have their diglossic equivalents in the smaller Muslim communities originating from Bangladesh (Bengali and, for example, Sylheti) or India (Gujerati and, for example, Kutchi).

framework of Bauman (1974; Bauman & Briggs, 1990) and his conceptualisation of how verbal arts are framed into performance by certain culturally agreed conventions. An earlier study of mosque school reading practices (Rosowsky, 2001) showed that reading for referential meaning could not be the main purpose for reading experienced by these young readers in their sacred text practices. Given that so much of their reading was a decoding divorced from referential meaning, motivation, from a reading for meaning point of view, was, surprisingly, always present. Reading as decoding, therefore, has an intrinsic value for these young readers not available to their peers who had no experience of valorised decoding in other contexts. What might account for this value? A growing proficiency in accurate pronunciation, fluency in blending and combining syllables into words and then into phrases and verses, followed by acquiring the conventions for recitation in an artful and melodious manner, are all part of what Bauman considers the 'getting things right' aspect of performance in the verbal arts (1974, p.293). This is as true for an actor learning his lines, a singer her lyrics or a speaker delivering a prepared speech, as it is for these young British Muslims in their development as reciters of the Qur'an. The external form and conventions of language are no longer incidental or arbitrary and a means to the end of successful communication. Rather they become, often, the end in themselves and are all evaluated above and beyond the referential content of what is being uttered. Bauman would consider this an essential aspect of performance in the verbal arts.

His other useful observation is that performance is intended to enhance the experience of an audience and that performance is not in itself a transactional communicative process designed to achieve comprehension, agreement, consensus, ordering, advising or any number of purposes of human communication. Instead, performance is always reflexive and self-referential (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p.73). It calls attention to itself of an audience who are expected to respond not just to the referential meaning of what is being said or recited but

also emotionally and affectively. This aspect of performance is tinged with something extra in a religious context. Alongside emotional and intellectual enhancement, there is religious or spiritual experience which, from the participants' point of view, can be every bit as real as feelings and thoughts and, indeed, may often transcend these.

Other theoretical principles regarding language in use in a superdiverse society are also crucial when exploring the complexity of religious and language practices. When 'language resources' (Blommaert, 2010) rather than discrete language totalities are the subject of the analytical gaze, the level of analysis is inevitably more refined and more comprehensive. Established sociolinguistic ideas such as repertoires (Gumperz, 1964; Hymes, 1977), at least in their original conceptualisation, have been challenged by such perspectives (Busch, 2012) with translanguaging (Garcia & Li Wei, 2017) and metrolingualism (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010) helping us understand the communicative processes underpinning language practices in these complex social settings. At the same time, however, a set of slightly older sociolinguistic concepts relating to language maintenance and language shift can also help identify trends in language use which are intensified by superdiverse settings (Fishman, 1991, 2001). There will be mention below of how minority community languages exist alongside the majority language, English, in an unequal relationship leading to language shift and language loss. The role of devotional practices in the delaying of such language shift will also be explored.

More recent literature in this area

Since Rosowsky (2008), there has been a modest development in the quantity and quality of published research in the field of faith-based supplementary education. At that time, the small amount of literature available came overwhelmingly from the anthropology of language practices. Thus, Street's (1984) seminal study on the autonomous and ideological models of

literacy drew on his research in Iran into Qur'anic literacy practices. A subsequent edited volume (Street, 1993) featured other writers drawing on the same tradition. Boyarin's (1993) collection on the ethnography of reading included a number of chapters devoted to forms of sacred language literacy from a range of faith contexts. Wagner's (1993) survey of pre-school *kutab* in Morocco was perhaps the first work of any significance to focus on the acquisition of Qur'anic literacy within early years' settings. Gregory and Williams (2000) had given brief accounts of Qur'anic literacy practices in their detailed study of literacy in the East End of London. In sociolinguistics, Ferguson (1982) and Fishman (1989) had both written about the role sacred languages play in communities that have them without necessarily describing in detail the practices involved.

Since then, and given the increased scrutiny and creeping securitisation surrounding the Muslim community in general since the events of 2001, it was almost inevitable that the mosque school would become a setting of interest for politicians, policymakers, media agencies and researchers alike. There have been a number of regional and national policy studies carried out by government departments and independent think tanks into the way mosque schools are run. Cherti and Bradley's (2011a & b) twin papers examining madrassa practice and madrassas in the media in the UK adopted a fairly problematizing approach listing perceived issues with the sector and showing limited understanding of the central element of mosque schools, the acquisition of Qur'anic literacy. Indeed, this centrality was deemed a problem in respect of 'rote learning' and little recognition was made of the value of such acquisition. As this is always the primary purpose of the mosque school, and irrespective of wishes for more attention to reading for meaning, any diffusion of this key activity is likely to be resisted. This represents a mismatch between outside expectations of the supplementary school sector and reasons why such schools are set up by their communities. For example, elsewhere in the reports are suggestions for greater external monitoring and incorporation of

mainstream school subjects into the 'curriculum' (Cherti & Bradley, 2011a, p.66-68). There is no focus on language. Indeed, the only publicly expressed position on the language of the mosque school and of the Muslim community in general has been the regular fear that the community is not speaking English enough (Blunkett, 2002; Cameron, 2016; May, 2015).

In the field of religious education research, Gent (2011), concentrating his research on the wider issue of supplementary school and mainstream school rapprochement, has explored the specific practice of memorisation of the Qur'an. In his work there are interesting observations made on the language practices involved in learning the sacred text by heart and how young people are able to transfer skills from one educational context to another. Although there is an aim to identify learning strategies across the two settings of mainstream and supplementary mosque school, Gent offers wider observations on the religious and cultural value of Qur'anic literacies. Interestingly for this article, apart from the Arabic of the Qur'an all language practice around it was in English. The majority of the young people featuring in Gent's study were born in the United Kingdom so were likely 3rd generation. Languages such as Urdu, Gujerati and Sylheti were part of their repertoires but, as in other communities, language shift had taken place to English. Exceptions were more recent arrivals to the UK and this reflects the greater, superdiverse, mobility at the present time.

In a parallel context to the Muslim one, Schachter (2010) has shown how learning to read Hebrew in the Jewish day school, or cheder, in the United States has faced similar challenges in adapting to the changing social and linguistic context the young learners find themselves in. Here too, interestingly, teaching materials are examined. In the contrasting diaspora settings of these two faith communities, the Jewish community has had a longer time in which to negotiate their linguistic trajectories and teaching materials are a reflection of this. Figure 1 presents a textbook for learning Hebrew which is not that dissimilar to a mainstream school textbook of any subject aimed at English-speaking children of the same age. We will

see below how innovative teaching materials are now being used in the mosque school settings. This itself sets up certain tensions between traditional and innovative approaches to the acquisition of Qur'anic literacy at the present moment.

Figure 1 – Cover of popular primer for learning Hebrew in UK cheders

The sociolinguistics of mosque schools at the beginning of the 21st century

The findings from research carried out two decades ago identified a number of language issues within and across the research sites visited at the time.

The first of these was the recruitment of teachers. In the period of data collection (1997-2001), it was clear that it had been a regular practice to recruit teachers for the children from 'back home'. If teachers were not directly from the region of the community (mainly Mirpur in north east Pakistan), they were at least from Pakistan. 'Home-grown', UK-educated teachers were very much a rarity and sometimes treated with suspicion, or at least unfavourably compared to those from Pakistan (Rosowsky, 2008, p.95). Knowledge of English, and, as importantly, of English cultural and social norms, was not considered as important (Rosowsky, 2008, p.124). As a result, there was often a communicative dissonance in the mosque school between the teachers and their students. Parents interviewed often commented on the communication problems of the teacher and the imam, who, given his duties as imam and teacher, was left with little time for learning English (Rosowsky, 2008, pp.200-201). In the community, the presence of 3rd generation boys and girls was leading to a language shift from the community's first language (mainly Pothwari – sometimes called Mirpuri or Pahari) to English (Lothers & Lothers, 2012; Hussain, 2015; Rehman, 2005). Even

if the imam, when teaching, was able to speak the community language, some children would find it hard to respond and resort to code-switching. Where the imam had been recruited from a different region of Pakistan (in one mosque school the teacher was from Karachi and spoke no Pothwari) and spoke only Urdu, the communication problems for the students were exacerbated as their vestigial community language was almost useless[6] (Rosowsky, 2008, p.178). Thus, the mosque school at that time had a multilingual dimension quite different to the one that prevails today as the data will show below.

A second related finding was the call by parents, students and some teachers for English to have a much more regular presence in both the mosque and in the mosque school. Whereas some of the community elders appeared content to have a mosque school that mirrored to a degree practice from back home, where the Qur'an was taught via the medium of Urdu, diaspora parents were clamouring for the mosque to transform itself linguistically by recognising the social, cultural and linguistic context the mosque school was situated in and the needs of their children for learning about their faith in a more meaningful manner (Rosowsky, 2008, p.79-82).

The parental call for the greater use of English in the mosque school was a recognition that language shift was taking place in the community. The vast majority of 1st generation settlers in the UK from Pakistan during the 1950s and 1960s were from the region of Mirpur (ONS, 2012). Many of them were educated to elementary school level only (if at all) at a time when Urdu was yet to be declared the national language of the new nation state[7] and so had had little exposure to Urdu at school. The language of choice in the first decade or so of UK settlement was variously called Pothwari or Pahari or sometimes simply just 'Punjabi' (Lothers & Lothers, 2010, 2012). As spoken languages only, they had little status outside of

[6] Some children may have known Urdu but often at a very rudimentary level
[7] This happened constitutionally in 1956 and again in 1973 (Rahman, 1996).

the community and were often compared by their speakers very unfavourably with Urdu, which was a language of prestige and, ironically, encountered more substantially and acquired as adults in the diaspora setting. Their children to a greater extent and their grandchildren to a lesser extent inherited these spoken languages. Urdu was known by these later generations mainly as a formally learnt language not as a language of wider communication. The first generation worked predominantly in industrial environments doing unskilled and semi-skilled manual work often in very noisy settings (Ballard, 1994). There was less opportunity to develop fluent English in such places. As a result, Pothwari remained the spoken language of the community. When wives joined their husbands and children were born, this language was transmitted to the next generation. This second generation was often the first to use English regularly and attend UK schools. With time, and with the arrival of third generation children and grandchildren in the 1980s onwards, English has gradually become the language of choice of succeeding generations and language shift has taken place particularly among those aged 40 and below. Occasionally, there are exceptions where the community language has been maintained. This has usually been facilitated by greater involvement in family life of grandparents and endogamous[8] marriages taking place with relatives 'back home' (Ballard, 2008). Therefore, in 2001, with language shift to English taking place and with teachers in the mosque school unable to communicate effectively, parents had strong linguistic reasons for demanding change.

The central linguistic element to the mosque school is, of course, the acquisition and use of Classical Arabic in the context of learning how to read and recite the Qur'an. Against a background of fluid language practice involving language shift, code-mixing, spoken vernaculars and prestigious literary varieties, local and Standard varieties of English, the maintenance of the sacred language and its manifestation in liturgical literacy practice,

[8] 'endogamous' in terms of kinship but 'exogamous' in terms of country of birth.

throughout this period, appeared reasonably stable. As reported elsewhere by many other scholars (Fishman, 1989; Ferguson, 1982; Safran, 2008), in many faith contexts, the sacred language has a staying power and resilience that spoken vernaculars, particularly in diaspora settings, do not appear to have. It would appear that the combination of language learning, sacred text and religious context work together to ensure this stability. In the Jewish cheder, in parallel diaspora settings in the UK, the only language learning taking place on a regular basis is the acquisition of Biblical Hebrew literacy with Yiddish having long disappeared from the community and inconsistent learning of vernacular Hebrew (Rosowsky, 2013; Schachter, 2010).

Linguistically, a typical interaction in the mosque school at that time would involve the teacher speaking Urdu, using Arabic or Urdu/Arabic materials, to a student with possibly first language Pothwari but increasingly English dominant language proficiency. This is an example of what Fishman (1991), in the context of minority language maintenance, has called learning Xish via Yish, where Xish is the minority language being acquired (in this case Classical Qur'anic Arabic) and Yish is the majority language. Now, at this time, the majority languages of the teacher(s) and the older members of the mosque were Urdu in formal contexts and vernacular Pothwari for all informal settings. The student may have been learning Xish via Yish but quite likely was learning Xish via another Xish (i.e. Urdu, which he or she may not have acquired in the home). This rather complex state of affairs was at the same time impacted upon by the shift in the community to English among subsequent generations. Pedagogically, therefore, the process of learning was mediated often uncertainly as language differences and insecurities impeded successful acquisition.

The sociolinguistics of mosque schools today

Thus, this, from a linguistic perspective, was the profile two decades ago of a setting that one might describe as 'old' diversity. The early mosques and their associated schools were established very much along ethnic lines with a congregation unified as much by ethnicity and language as by faith. 'Pakistani' mosques or 'Yemeni' mosques were not inaccurate descriptions and these monikers apply to some extent today as well. Recently, however, these fixities have been disrupted to a degree and it is now not unusual to find mosque schools with children from a range of ethnic/national and linguistic backgrounds. One of the four mosque schools in this study could well be described as a multicultural or multilingual environment, where the languages involved are neither Arabic (apart from its particularised use in the reading of the Qur'an) nor Urdu. Another one has a dominant community but with a sizeable minority of children from diverse backgrounds. The two others at first glance might seem very similar to the mosque schools from 20 years ago. However, a more considered observation would reveal that students, teachers and teaching materials and the environment use language in quite different ways to their predecessors.

The superdiverse environment in which these mosque schools exist, therefore, is fully manifested in the activities taking place within them as regardless of the apparently more stable presence of the sacred language, it is impossible for the fluid and mobile linguistic ambiance outside of the mosque school not to leak into the traditional setting of the mosque school.

What follows traces the subsequent trajectory of the main findings of the study from 20 years ago (Rosowsky, 2008) and how the superdiversity of the present moment has led to very contrasting language practices in the mosque school in terms of teachers, students, materials and the physical spaces, and, of course, the way these elements combine to transform the educational and linguistic experience of the young people involved.

Methodology

The data presented below arises from a recent ethnographic study that took place in the years 2015-18. The research design and accompanying methodology in both this study and the one from 20 years ago (Rosowsky, 2008) were broadly similar but not identical. There was no intention to 'mirror' the earlier study in the later one. Using ethnographic approaches such as interviewing, observing and content and format analysis of teaching materials, supported by a participant observing stance, both studies gathered qualitative data that was collated, sifted and thematically analysed. One significant difference in the more recent study is that the ethnography that took place might best be described as a 'gentle ethnography', one which minimised the formal tools of interviewing and observing and deployed a much more low-key participatory approach involving extended informal observation over time and spontaneous conversations with key staff and students rather than pre-arranged formal interviews and set observations. This was the result of a much greater familiarity with the field sites and their personnel as well as the confidence that comes when working for many years in the same field.

Methodological Limitations

Comparisons will be made below between data collected at different times, under slightly different circumstances, and sometimes between different types of data. These relatively non-systematic comparisons are therefore decidedly tentative and in places subjective and impressionistic. There is no attempt here to make watertight claims that a more systematic generation and analysis of data would allow. The presentation and discussion of the data that follows explores aspects of mosque school language practices that have been observed, if not systematically then at least regularly, over a substantial period of time. There is no

suggestion, however, that these aspects are present in all mosque school practice in the UK or elsewhere.

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A number of language-related focuses emerged in the earlier study and three of these have been chosen for comparative purposes in this article. Drawing on recent theorising on the fluidity of language resources on the one hand (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Blommaert, 2010; Blackledge & Creese, 2010), and, on the other, on more established ideas on language shift and maintenance (Fishman, 1991, 2001), the comparative analysis which follows seeks to identify instances where the superdiverse context of the present moment impacts on language form and practice in UK mosque schools and contrasts significantly with what was taking place 20 years ago.

In respect of the current study therefore, data in part derives specifically from extended sojourns by the writer in four urban mosque schools (**MS**) in a city in the north of England. In what follows, these will be called **MSa**, **MSb**, **MSc** and **MSd**. Each visit lasted between 4-6 weeks and involved an approximate two-hour stay in each school on a daily basis. As a Muslim researcher, I was a participant observer and thus able to participate in prayers and other devotional acts when required. This blurring of roles as a researcher and as a fellow worshipper was critical. Although access was negotiated with mosque school administrators and permissions gained from teachers, students and their parents in the conventional ethical manner (Mercer, 2007; Aston et al. 2015), there was still the hard to resolve factor that my presence in the research setting could also be justified on matters of faith alone. The mosque school was taking place often in the main prayer hall of the mosque itself and as a worshipper I needed no permission to be there. Nevertheless, I endeavoured to separate the two roles as best I could. A consequence of this blurring is that it is almost impossible to separate my own

experience as a worshipper in each setting from the data collected more conventionally (Mercer, 2007) and my analysis inevitably reflects this. Having said that, it is this blurring that has allowed for the much gentler approach to data gathering than had been the case twenty years earlier, when, although still a participant observer, less familiarity with the field sites led to the adoption of more formal data gathering tools.

The current data consist of observations captured in field notes, conversations with teachers remembered and/or transcribed from audio recordings and photos taken *in situ* of teaching materials (Pole and Morrison, 2003). In what follows, when appropriate, data from the original ethnographic study of 20 years ago (Rosowsky, 2008) will be presented in italics alongside the new data to offer up significant contrasts. These contrasts will sometimes be like for like (i.e. an interview transcript in both cases) but occasionally comparative analysis will take place between two different modes of data representation (i.e. an interview transcript and a photo of a teaching resource).

Three analytical focuses which arose from the earlier study are used here to frame the new data and identify what, if anything, has changed in the intervening period.

1. The first of these were the linguistic implications of recruiting teachers from 'back home'.

This will be explored principally through data **Extracts 1** and **2**.

2. The second focus concerns the language practices surrounding pedagogical interactions including the use of language resources such as teaching materials.

This will be explored principally through data **Extract 3**.

3. A third related focus was the call by parents, students and some teachers for the English language to have a greater and more regular presence in both the mosque and in the mosque school.

This will be explored through all six data **Extracts 1-6**.

Each of these focuses will be presented in turn. Key observations will link to the fluidity of language practices, the inherent fixity of sacred language acquisition and the interplay between these. This is not quite the 'metrolingualism' identified by Otsuji and Pennycook (2010), but it shares in that blend of the new and the old which they do identify:

> What sets metrolingualism apart is … its ability to accommodate both fixity and fluidity in its approach to mobile language use. (p.252)

1. Mosque school teachers and their changing linguistic repertoires

The first piece of data is an extract from a video transcript featuring a teacher (T) and a male student aged 8 (B) in one mosque school (**MSa**). The teacher is of Pakistani heritage but was born and educated in the UK and is a first language English speaker with some knowledge of the community L-variety, Pahari and the accompanying H-variety, Urdu. In the extract, he is teaching the student how to decode the Arabic diphthong /aw/.

Extract 1

T: Lesson 11[9], yeah?

B: Yeah.

T: Go on.

B: *nawman ... qaw- ... ghaw- ...*

T: *qaw-*

[9] (*nawman* – sleep, *qawman* – people, *khawfan* – fear, *qawlan* – word, *khalaw* – to be alone, *ghadaw* – leave early, *tahlawna* – be adorned, *fawqahum* – above them, * - non-word arising from incorrect letter identification)

B: *qawman.*

T: Yes.

B: *khawman**.

T: *khawfan.*

B: *khawfan ... qawlan ... khalaw ...* (inaudible)?

T: That's right.

B: *khalaw ... khadaw**, (self-correcting) *... ghadaw ... tahlawna.*

T: Yes.

B: (pause) Don't know it.

T: *fawqahum.*

B: *fawqahum.*

T: Again.

B: *fawqahum*.

T: Yes.

In **Extract 1**, all transactional and instructional talk is in English and the target language is the particularised form of Classical Arabic present in the Qur'an. This might appear unexceptional as it mirrors language instruction in many contexts – in Fishman's terms, this is learning Xish via Yish. It also emphasises the fixity and centrality of Qur'anic Arabic acquisition to mosque school practice. However, there is a significant difference to the language patterning from twenty years earlier. The pedagogical language of Urdu (plus or

minus the local community language) has now completely shifted to English (Fishman, 1991, 2001).

The common language the teacher and the student share (not only English but the local variety of English) now not only facilitates the learning process but also, significantly, allows for interpersonal communication in a more conventional way. The initial simple exchange of '… yeah? /Yeah.' represents a linguistic familiarity which symbolises a significant shift in both language and generational rapprochement. This contrasts with the linguistic and sociocultural distance that might have characterised the relationship between an imam from back home and the young student in the mosque school from twenty years previously. The linguistic familiarity between teacher and student of **Extract 1** contrasts starkly with the sentiments expressed by a parent from the earlier study:

> *Yes, because of the language as well. Because most of the kids, they are very fluent in English and were born here and most of the kids speak English and some of them have difficulty understanding Mirpuri or Urdu. Even Urdu. Mainly Urdu they have difficulty understanding it. I mean if they don't understand it how are they going to learn? So what I have been suggesting is that the teachers can't communicate well with kids or get the message across. This is why we're falling behind. (**interview with parent, December 27, 2001**)*

In the words of this parent, a communication gap created by a linguistic mismatch between teacher and students was leading not only to difficulty in understanding Urdu and even the community language ('Mirpuri') but also in understanding the content of what was being taught. There was also a suggestion that this unsatisfactory linguistic situation was leading to a general deterioration in the social standing of the community itself ('This is why we're falling behind').

However, in the following comment from another teacher in the same mosque school as in **Extract 1**, we see how interpersonal communication does not have the same linguistic or cultural barriers as it once did:

Extract 2

> We have been through the schooling system. That's unique. We relate with the kids. They see what we've seen. We've done what they do. You know. 'Don't tell me about Facebook. I know more than you do.' 'Twitter. How come you don't follow that?' What do you mean you're on Twitter?' I know more games than they know. And so that kind of stuff is different. (**Teacher A, MSa, September 2016**)

In **Extract 2,** Teacher A signals a collective stance with the word 'We' thus expressing solidarity with an unarticulated generation of teachers who have had a similar experience to his. His 'That's unique' lets us know that he recognises this has given him/them an edge in respect of being able to communicate with the young people in the mosque school. The triplet that follows ('We relate … They see … We've …') underlines this advantage and signals the teacher's/s' solidarity with the students. His examples draw on social media practice and claim his 'superior' knowledge in matters that might be considered the preserve of the children – it also signals his youth and generational connections to the children. The last utterance, 'And so that kind of stuff is different', again reprises the 'That's unique' theme by reminding us why he and his generation of mosque teachers are different from what has gone on before. This contrasts clearly with data from 20 years ago as in the example below where, in an interview with a mosque school teacher, formality is stressed with little mention of children:

> *AR: If you had to summarise to someone the main responsibilities and duties of a mosque teacher, what would they be?*

*T: The main duty of a teacher is they should have a good character, that's most important, obviously a beard as well…his recitation of the Qur'an has to be perfect…and he is mature… Well…it varies in every single mosque…very much so…In some mosques, the imam, his job is just to lead the salat (the Arabic word for 'prayer') and that's it…In other masjids, the imam has more duties, like he has to do the salat, he has to teach the children, he has to get involved with the community with its problems…I think in every masjid, the committee it has a set contract, as far as I know, for the imam… (**interview with mosque school teacher, December 19, 2002**)*

In his answer to the question about the main responsibilities and duties of a mosque school teacher, the formal characteristics he lists, such as having a beard, having perfect recitation, leading the prayers in the mosque and teaching the children, perhaps betray by their absence matters such as the ability to communicate with young people, particularly across the barriers of language, generation and culture. It is difficult to imagine how such a teacher might relate to social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook and video gaming with which Teacher A is so familiar.

The shift to English within the community (particularly within the most recent generations) and in the mosque school has thus impacted on both the preferred instructional language and the general language of interpersonal communication employed more generally in the mosque school. This sits uncomfortably with public pronouncements of insufficient knowledge and use of English expressed by external voices such as UK policymakers and media commentators (see above). This shift therefore reflects, on the one hand, the mobility (this is only 20 years after all) of language resources characteristic of superdiverse contexts (Blommaert, 2010) and, on the other hand, retains the centrality of the sacred text acquisition in a striking example of the simultaneous co-existence of fixed and fluid language forms and practices (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010).

2. Teaching materials and changing language resources

Extract 3

The third piece of data is an image taken from a primer being used in another mosque school, **MSb** (Figure 2). This adds to the emerging picture of how the sacred language of Classical Arabic once mediated through Urdu or another community language is now being taught via English.

Figure 2 - Page in a basic Qur'anic primer from 2017 used in **MSb**

-

Taken from an early page in a basic Qur'anic primer where the lesson is on blending consonants with the vowel /i/ (the short diagonal line below each Arabic letter), the rubric in English is aimed at the teacher though of course the student can read it as well. The English is still rather stilted ('Teachers are required to teach every letter fluently …' and unidiomatic ('Mental faculties of children should be taken into account…'), 'but contrasts starkly with the equivalent textual support from twenty years ago as shown in Figure 3 where the rubric is in Urdu. In this particular primer, the Urdu rubric appears in the more cursive script placed beneath each sequence of Arabic letters.

Figure 3 - Page in a basic Qur'anic primer used in UK mosque schools in 2000

The introduction of bilingual teaching materials such as those in **Extract 3** into UK mosque schools has significantly altered the language pedagogy relating to the acquisition of Qur'anic literacy. The shift to English from languages such as Urdu and Arabic is represented here and recognises that written English is fast becoming the standard for these teaching materials. Although the replacement of one teaching language by another for purposes of acquiring a sacred language is not something new, this has historically usually taken place gradually as a religion spreads beyond its linguistic realm[10]. The sociocultural impact of the modern age has resulted in such change taking place in an accelerated manner with English becoming a regular language for teaching the sacred language of, in this context, the Qur'an, particular in contexts of diaspora. The occasional unidiomatic English in Figure 2 is possibly a consequence of the speed in which these developments are taking place.

Furthermore, these bilingual materials reflect how alongside the fluid linguistic conditions that result in one language shifting to another in a relatively short period of time, the fixity of the sacred language remains constant. This co-existence is typical of faith-based supplementary schools which offer sacred language acquisition. However, the crucial observation here is not that the sacred language is being mediated through language x as opposed to language y but that such a transition has taken place so rapidly. This speed and fluidity of linguistic change is what characterises language in superdiverse contexts. And even traditional language practices centred on sacred texts do not escape their impact.

3. The fluidity of language interactions in the mosque school and the use of English

[10] For a fascinating historical account of how the principal faith traditions have used language see Ostler (2016).

Extracts 4, 5 and 6

Extracts 4 and **5** come from field notes from **MSc** which capture some of the sociolinguistic dynamics of mosque school education as they are happening in the present day. This time, instead of showing how English has emerged as the preferred language of instruction, the notes reflect the superdiverse linguistic context in which these mosque schools now operate. In contrast to the exclusive use of the community language to teach the sacred text which was apparent twenty years ago, albeit often blended with some code-switching and other intercultural strategies for communication, a multilingual and even translanguaging approach is now in evidence.

Extract 4

> As I 'tune in', I note imperatives in English coming from both teachers, though UH[11]'s voice is strong and carries through the rest of the mosque space: "Again!"
>
> I begin to note language practices – Classical Arabic (CA) is obviously in evidence whenever someone recites aloud or the teacher provides a model whilst correcting the boys. Even when boys are reading silently they are decoding CA through the Arabic script. CA is also part of the wider practices of the mosque in which the mosque school is located as men sit and read and some read whilst listening to recitation on their iPhones (or equivalent). Bookcases are full of Qur'ans and religious texts in CA. The prayer takes place exclusively in CA though as it is the 'Asr [mid-afternoon] prayer less is audible than it would be for the morning or evening prayers where recitation is out loud.

[11] UH is the teacher – a middle-aged man born in Somalia.

Interpersonal conversations take place in at least three languages. Some of the Somali staff will converse with one another in a variety of Somali. Somali attenders will also talk to one another in Somali. Boys of all backgrounds tend to talk to each other in English. Teachers nearly always speak to the boys in English. There is some conversational Arabic (different varieties) as a significant minority of the congregation are Arabic speakers. BM[12] is a Yemeni national. Notices are mainly in English with Arabic words and terms transliterated. Communications between the mosque school and parents are in English and many leaflets and pamphlets left lying around are also in English. One of the bookcases has a row of books in English (on the bottom shelf). A few posters designed by children also feature English with some Arabic. I notice one leaflet in Somali. (**extract from author's field notes, MSc, October 2017**)

Extract 4 records my observations (visual and aural) of the language practices taking place in one of the mosque schools in and around the learning of the sacred language. There is a clear move away from the 'fixed' ethnic and linguistic identity of the mosque school from twenty years ago with the presence of different spoken varieties of Arabic, local and standard varieties of English as well as at least two varieties of spoken Somali, and, of course, the sacred language, Classical Arabic, itself. The pattern of interpersonal interactions, with ample evidence of translanguaging strategies, especially in teaching, reflects this complexity and provides the mosque school with its 'comfortable' multilingualism. The following is short exchange between BM and a student:

Extract 5

BM: Read. *Iqra'*[13]. You looking around you. You no read.

[12] Another teacher.

[13] The imperative of the Arabic verb 'qar'a' – to read.

S: I am reading

BM: You was reading '*ha*', '*ha*' (the Arabic letter ح). It's different from one person to another. Finished! (a calque of the Arabic '*helass*', often meaning 'that's enough').

(**verbatim extract from author's field notes, MSc, October 2017**)

This exchange reflects more than modest conventional code-switching. The teacher is a native Arabic speaker with a rudimentary knowledge of English (in a sense this does not mirror the pattern found in **MSa** and **MSb**) who has to communicate in English with his English-speaking students. He nevertheless insists on emphasising the reading exercise by employing the imperative Arabic word for 'read', 'iqra'', which not only translates the English 'read' but is also highly symbolic as it is commonly accepted that this was the first ever word of revelation to the Prophet[14]. He proceeds to use English to mediate the teaching of the sound 'ha' but is exasperated by the student's attempt which signalled by the calque 'Finished!' which translates the Arabic '*helass*' literally but misses the idiomatic meaning of 'That's enough'. Thus, in **MSc**, superdiversity manifests itself in the presence of teachers who have newly arrived in the UK (BM was not a member of city's longstanding Yemeni community dating back to the 195Os but was seeking asylum from the current civil war.) and who are obliged to teach Classical Arabic through English to children from a range of national and linguistic backgrounds.

Extract 6

Finally, to further illustrate the linguistic diversity of the current generation of mosque schools in the UK, **Extract 6** is a list of languages spoken by the students attending **MSd**

[14] Read, in the name of your Lord Who Created'. Qur'an, Chapter 96 (my translation).

given to me orally by their teacher (himself a PhD student from the local university and a first language Hausa speaker).

English

Arabic (various varieties)

Somali (at least two varieties)

Kurdish (at least two varieties)

Turkish

Yoruba

Urdu (some Pahari/Pothwari)

Farsi

Dari

Twenty years ago the only spoken Arabic in the city would have been a Yemeni variety relating to the 'fixed' community originating in the 1950s. Today, by contrast, a number of varieties can be heard in the same learning space – Libyan, Iraqi and Syrian varieties of colloquial Arabic to name just a few. The same to a lesser extent applies to Somali and Kurdish. Once the only Somali variety heard in the city would be the one most usually associated with the north west of Somalia (once known as British Somaliland) and spoken by the first settlers also dating back, like the original Yemenis, to the 1950s. With civil war and Western interventions, other Somali varieties such as Maay have found their way to the city and to its mosque schools. Varieties of Kurdish such as Kurmanji and Sorani are present

because of the Iraq and later the Syrian war. In this mosque school not only are the students shifting from community languages to English anyway, but English acts also as a transitional lingua franca allowing interpersonal communication between students, their teachers and others in the congregation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Otsuji and Pennycook's (2010) call for moving beyond common frameworks of language in order to be able to account for one which is able to accommodate both fixity and fluidity is an important one. In contexts where 'fixity' is measured in millenia, as it is with sacred languages, this is even more crucial, particularly when millions worldwide regularly take part in sacred language practices. Superdiversity, as many have remarked, reveals language practices with significant degrees of complexity and fluidity (Garcia & Li, 2014). The combination of established minority communities, of a type that might be called 'old(er)' diversity, with more recent arrivals (a 'new(er)' diversity) entails significant linguistic consequences. Sacred languages practices certainly add to this complexity but serve as a reminder of continuity amidst this fluidity and mobility. What therefore remains the same? The central activity of the mosque school remains the acquisition of Qur'anic literacy, the ability to decode fluently the Classical Arabic text of the Qur'an. Regardless of the transformation of language practices taking place around this central activity involving language shift to English and greater linguistic diversity, the aim of the mosque school remains constant. Despite parental wishes for more English and the *de facto* emergence of English as the teaching language, little has changed in respect of this aim of acquiring Qur'anic literacy. In Fishman's terms Xish is still being taught by Yish, it's just a different Yish (a more confident Yish too). The purpose of decoding remains unchanged. Reading

acquisition takes place for the performance of devotional acts rather than for referential meaning. Calls for a broader curriculum (Cherti & Bradley, 2011a), often part of a closer scrutiny of the Muslim community, fail to make inroads as teaching time is finite. Any broadening of the curriculum impacts on the amount of attention devoted to the mosque school's main purpose. Personnel changes in respect of teachers reflect a generational shift in both language and cultural orientation and have both caused and helped to consolidate the sociolinguistic transformation that has occurred. Teaching materials, though still relatively undeveloped, reflect the linguistic realities of the mosque school and its context. These are still some way from publications in other faith contexts which have had longer to adapt such as *Time to Read Hebrew* (Lenchner et al., 2002) with its child-orientation and supportive text (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, English is now the pedagogical language of choice in all the mosque schools visited for this study. A dramatic change in such a short period of time.

This article shows, therefore, how some particular faith-based settings do not represent a throwback to a bygone age and something which might be resistant to innovation and the communicative dynamics of the present moment but instead negotiate their language practices afresh amidst the ever-evolving linguistic interactions of those attending them, either as worshippers or as students.

An ulterior aim of this article has been to present a community at ease with its multilingualism in the face of a prevailing politicised and mediatised ideology of monolingualism in both the UK and elsewhere (Wiley, 2014). The range and variety of rich and artful linguistic practices manifested through devotional practice provide a necessary balance to the reductive manner in which the community and its mosque schools are viewed by many in the public domain. The recent association of the community by some policymakers (Blunkett, 2002; Cameron, 2016) with extremism often takes a linguistic form through an insistence that a lack of English in the home leads to radicalisation. That this

description of family language practices was not true even 20 years ago (Rosowsky, 2017) makes little difference to dominant views about language in the community. The problematic "muddl[ing] together [of] counterterrorism work with community relations, particularly in relation to Muslim groups" (Ashcroft & Bevir, 2018), which has characterised recent backtracking on multiculturalism in the UK, has its linguistic dimension in the recent ideological reiteration of monolingualism as normative when confronted with language diversity (Blackledge, 2000, 2002; Ellis, 2007). As with Blackledge's (2000) Bengali women in Birmingham, who despite their obvious rich and varied linguistic repertoire, were socially marginalised by their lack of confidence with the English language, the young people featuring in this study excel multilingually and artistically, but are similarly invisible in prevailing discourses connected with UK Muslim youth. Ellis (2007), similarly, argues that the ideology that constructs monolingualism as normative, soon degenerates into viewing multilingualism as a threat, a position which has become more entrenched post-2001.

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