The role of Muslim devotional practices in the reversal of language shift

Andrey Rosowsky

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS

The role of Muslim devotional practices in the reversal of language shift

Andrey Rosowsky

School of Education, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT
Fishman's scale for evaluating language vitality proposes a stage in language shift where exclusively the older generation takes part in 'rituals', 'concerts' and 'songfests' in the minority language. Once this generation dies away, according to the scale, these cultural practices disappear with them. Within certain Muslim youth communities in the UK, counter examples exist where the younger generation leads the way in reviving, performing and extending the repertoire of this religio-cultural heritage. Although this emerging expanded repertoire of song and poetry is clearly multilingual in nature, recitation and performance of the community heritage languages, Urdu and Punjabi, feature strongly. What remains to discover is whether such increasing familiarity with poetic language and form can impact positively on reversing the language shift these communities are experiencing in their third and fourth generations. Although there is evidence that singing and reciting in other minority language settings, secular and religious, are not infrequent pursuits of youth, it is argued in this article that an accompanying religious revival provides an important extra, galvanising, boost to the process of possible reversing language shift. It is suggested that available scales for evaluating language vitality are inadequate in the face of complex diasporic minority language settings.

Introduction

In many diasporic settings, it is not unusual, to the extent that it can be considered a sociolinguistic principle (Fishman 1989, 1991, 2001), that minority language usage shifts to majority language usage by the third or fourth generation. Well-documented exceptions to this principle are, for example, the closely knit exclusionary Haredi communities of New York and London where sociocultural circumstances favour minority language, Yiddish, maintenance (Kliger and Peltz 2002; Mitchell 2006). Beyond these rare cases, it is usually only vestigial language practices, often limited to lexical and phonological awareness, that remain as part of the linguistic repertoires of the later generations.

Fishman's (1991) framework for evaluating language vitality, the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), has been called the 'foundational conceptual model for assessing the status of language vitality' (Lewis and Simons 2010, 104). The GIDS proposes a stage in language shift (Stage 7) where exclusively the older generation takes part in 'rituals, ceremonies, concerts, lectures, contests, readings, songfests, theatrical presentations, radio and television programmes and publications' (Fishman 1991, 397) in the minority language. Once this generation dies away, and with no

accompanying intergenerational transmission of the language (Stage 6), according to the scale, these cultural practices disappear with them. This scale, the GIDS, has been since expanded by Lewis and Simons (2010) who, drawing on similar scales developed by *UNESCO* (Brenzinger et al. 2003) and *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009), have proposed an Expanded-GIDS (E-GIDS). Their critique of the original GIDS is that there is inadequate accounting for the role of institutions above Stage 6 (the important intergenerational stage) and that the lower stages of the scale (the two stages, 7 and 8, that treat non-transmission and potential extinction or loss of the language) need a more nuanced and 'granular' (Lewis 2009, 107) approach. Both these ends of the scale of interest to Lewis and Simons are relevant to the data explored in this article. For example, according to Lewis, the *Ethnologue* category of 'Second Language Only' includes both liturgical languages and those languages which have been lost and are being revitalised. The young people in this article certainly learn a liturgical language (i.e. Classical Arabic), but many of them are also re-learning, or learning for the first time, their heritage languages, Urdu and Punjabi, particularly through the genres of song and poetry. In a sense, and although we are here only talking about diasporic minority languages, themselves unendangered in their heartlands, there is a particular example here of 'no-longer-spoken languages that still have a self-identifying ethnic population' (Lewis 2009, 109). As hinted at here, these scales for assessing language vitality, by and large, are intended to be applied to autochthonous endangered languages rather than languages of the diaspora which, ordinarily, in their heartlands are unendangered. However, language shifts among migrant communities have their own narratives of despair too and those involved certainly experience a sense of cultural loss and regret similar to those struggling to retain languages which may disappear absolutely. The E-GIDS here, like Fishman's GIDS, is not always a good fit for assessing the vitality of such languages. For example, the fact that the language variety has a 'safe' heartland means there is always the possibility of regeneration and revitalisation, even where in the diaspora the language may be either at GIDS Stage 8, 'disappearing with elders', *UNESCO*'s or *Ethnologue*'s 'Extinct', or E-GIDS's 'Dormant'. The institutional support necessary for language maintenance may often be present for literacy purposes. In the UK, the possibility of studying Urdu at examination level exists in many urban schools and community-run institutions (*madrassahs*) often provide instruction in Urdu, as well as in, of course, the liturgical language, Qur'anic Arabic. These prestigious varieties, however, may coexist with the spoken language having shifted to English. At least two of the scales under discussion here (GIDS and E-GIDS) both position literacy in the 'safe' categories, whereas it seems more appropriate that the particular literacy practices featuring in this article are more relatable to the most vulnerable categories which link to features such as 'symbolic proficiency' (E-GIDS) or 'ethnic identity' (*Ethnologue*) and nothing more substantial or communicative.

This article, then, takes as its topic the combined religious and language revival at present taking place among many Muslim young people in the UK. They have generally been born in the UK, educated in local schools and universities, and linguistically would generally self-designate as English mother-tongue speakers. This group of young people, as part of their faith practices, spend time and effort discovering and listening to, recording and performing the songs and poems of their religious and language literary heritage. This is, in two senses, an 'unmarked' linguistic and cultural practice as it is (a) participated in by the vast majority (Birt 2006) of young British Muslims rather than being a specialised interest of a few and (b) is rarely reported on within prevailing pubic and mediatised spaces which tend to discursively favour alarmist and sensational reports on a minority of practices linked to so-called 'radicalisation' or 'extremism'. These 'unmarked' practices can be characterised as ritualised, musical, aesthetic and artistic and other-worldly oriented in contrast to the literal, doctrinaire and worldly oriented practices of those deemed 'radical' or 'extreme'.

In terms of language varieties, as with many communities and residents of urban settings in the UK and elsewhere (Busch 2012), there is a fluid and dynamic pattern of linguistic repertoires and resources made up of different languages, different varieties of those languages, different scripts and registers and a complex and rich picture of domains and boundaries leading to language use being determined by a range of constellations of participants, locations and functions. The interplay

and relationship between these languages and varieties have been well researched in the past two decades with attempts made to denote the fluidity and mobility of these language practices. Blackledge and Creese's (2010) 'flexible bilingualism' and Garcia and others' 'translanguaging' (García 2009; Busch 2012) are two recent examples. For these young people, the presence of a regular and established faith context for much of their language use adds to this complexity and richness. The varieties that are deployed for performance, variously, are literary Urdu, literary western Punjabi, Classical Arabic and English. Many of the songs and poems recited and sung are from the rich Urdu literary heritage which the young people either have familiarity with through their parents/grandparents and, often, the ethnically oriented mosque they attend (most mosques in the UK reflect the ethnicity and culture of the largest Muslim community in the UK, the Pakistani one). This language of prestige is not usually the language of the home where, instead, a variety of Punjabi is spoken, if shift to English has not taken place entirely. This variety has a number of names depending on the exact location of the original settlers or precise linguistic awareness of the variety name. Pahari, Pothwari, Mirpuri and even just 'Punjabi', are commonly used to describe these varieties (Lothers and Lothers 2010, 2012). Alongside literary Urdu, some of the songs and poems are in the lesser known, but potentially more useful in regard to language revival, literary Punjabi, which is closer, but still problematic, to the spoken varieties than Urdu is. These young people, to use the terminology of Ferguson (1959), have L-varieties in English and Punjabi and H-varieties in Urdu and Punjabi. Some will also make use of Classical Arabic as an H-variety and, where singing is in English, Standard English another H-variety – making for a rich and complex pattern of language usage both communicative and performative.

In terms of the language revitalisation scales discussed earlier, many of these young people have shifted to English as a spoken language and so would match those categories where the heritage language was no longer being transmitted to the next generation which on the E-GIDS would place it at either 'shifting', if there was still some use of the language at home but it was not being used to bring up the children, or 'moribund', which means only grandparents were using the language regularly. Where heritage language instruction is concerned, there is the regular and resilient (Ferguson 1982; Fishman 1989) practice of acquiring liturgical literacy (Qur'anic literacy) which is part of the majority of children's language practices (Rosowsky 2008). Some children may also acquire Urdu literacy, including acquisition of the Perso-Arabic script, either in mainstream school (though here there is a mixed picture of success and competence), the madrassah (if time is allotted to it – not universal) or at home. A small minority of families have a rich tradition of Urdu in the home and the expertise to teach Urdu literacy.

Taking part in the ritual and devotional practices described in this article requires these young people to (re)learn the lyrics and melodies of poems and songs in their various heritage languages. Where this activity differs from more general learning of languages in order to perform (secular examples might be singers from non-English-speaking countries singing in English or operatic singers learning to sing in different languages), is the potential for mutual reinforcement from the vestigial bilingualism of home and community as well as the possibility of supporting this (re)learning through links, physical and virtual, to the heartlands of the languages and varieties in question. Another important extra impetus to learning is provided by the religious context which, with its revivalist characteristics, acts as a catalyst to learning the poems and songs in the heritage languages.

The study on which this article is based set out to determine whether there is some evidence that, potentially, such activity can lead to a reversal in language shift. This seemed to be evident in individuals but unclear on a community basis. In order to explore this possibility, a questionnaire was used with over 60 young performers/participants, who, demographically, matched the linguistic profile of the Pakistani-heritage, Urdu and Punjabi variety-speaking community in a large northern UK city. The questionnaire data were supplemented by more qualitative data provided by a series of interviews with both performers and 'fellow-travellers'[1] where motivation, level and nature of language knowledge were some of the topics covered. These data appear later in the form of relevant extracts from interview transcripts. A number of gatherings were observed by the writer, but field

notes from these are not included in this article. However, the overview of these practices which appears in this article is derived from such observations.

Data set 1 – questionnaire responses

The poems and songs performed are invariably religious in content. There may be parallel interest from some of the young people in the secular songs and language varieties of Bollywood films, but these sociocultural domains are kept separate. Nevertheless, there is evidence elsewhere that this activity has an impact on language awareness and development (Ilankuberan 2015). There are three main genres involved in any gathering of devotional singing though knowledge of the exact distinction among the three depends on an individual's level of involvement with devotional song. *Naat* is a formal, almost always composed in Urdu or Punjabi (or other South Asian varieties), poetic form associated with the praise of the Prophet Muhammed, and is usually sung or recited with deep reverence and emotion on the part of the performer and his or her audience. Although derived from an Arabic word, this term is used more in South Asia with other related terms used in the Arabic-speaking world. The *nasheed*, on the other hand, another Arabic word used across the Muslim world, is the word used for a devotional song which can cover a range of topics and styles. Whereas the discourse of the *naat* (and the Arabic *qasidah*) is a heavily sanctified one (Fishman 2006), with the Urdu or H-Punjabi lyrics often suffused with poetic and archaic Arabic and Persian lexicon and themes, the *nasheed* tends to be more informal and more flexible musically and linguistically. It is no surprise that it is the *nasheed* which admits non-traditional language varieties such as English as lyrics. The hegemony of English in the Islamic world and its encroachment into domains previously the preserve of the standard Islamic languages – Arabic, Turkish, Persian and Urdu – remains a dynamic and fluid process affecting all genres and settings. The *nasheed* has now its own English-language repertoire with individual and group performers often performing exclusively in English. This obviously impacts negatively on the potential for *nasheed* in heritage languages to support language (re)learning. As the door for heritage language (re)learning starts to open the spread of English-language, *nasheed* appears to close the door once again. The regular gatherings of young people take place in mosques and often in homes. They generally link to a devotional event such as a weekly prayer meeting or one of the annual Islamic celebrations (such as the *Mawlid*[2] or the *Miraj*[3]) but sometimes can be rehearsal-type meetings in order to broaden and practise their existing repertoires.

The *naat* and *nasheed* are either voice-only performances or accompanied by simple percussion such as the *tabla* or *daff* or even simple handclapping. Many *naat* and *nasheed* have a soloist or blend a solo performance with choruses provided by the rest of the attenders. As the individual repertoires can be quite varied, the level of knowledge of lyrics can range from mere parroting, recognising words (Baker 1993) through to a general understanding of at least the choruses. Much of the *naat* poetry is in a register too archaic for immediate comprehension and often needs preliminary study and translation before understanding takes place. The individuals who take the time and effort to do this are those for whom some modicum of reversing language shift can be realised.

In terms of Fishman's original GIDS, this level of language (re)learning approximates to the last stage, but only superficially. The language does not need to be reconstructed (as a lost language might have to be, for example, Cornish) as the language has no threat to its status in its heartlands. The young people have ready access to older informants and role models even if the language is not a language of wider communication within that younger generation. However, a lack of literacy in those languages, among both the younger and older generations, may be a factor. In addition, a lack of education beyond primary level for many of the elders may restrict their knowledge of the special forms and styles of poetry in these languages. The provision of literacy via either mainstream schooling (some schools offer examination classes) or supplementary schooling is often patchy (many single classes have a range of abilities from absolute beginners to moderate learners). Despite

this matching, to a certain extent, Fishman's Stage 5, with no accompanying Stage 6 (intergenerational transmission'), the shift is not really reversed in any other way than symbolic.

In terms of Lewis and Simons' E-GIDS, this level of (re)discovery of a language is most closely matched to the latter stages though even then the names of the stages seem inappropriate in this context. Although all four scales referenced, rightly focus on the spoken language as the yardstick for language revitalisation, Fishman's GIDS and E-GIDs both refer to literacy. However, the provisions of the opportunities to acquire literacy in these languages (strictly speaking this would be for Urdu only – though once acquired it would be straightforward to apply this to H-Punjabi too) can appear merely symbolic as the possibility of pursuing the language to advanced level is restricted. Much then of the language (re)acquisition is self-taught and literary-inflected. To what extent should this be considered reversing language shift? It should be made clear at this stage that there are few voices claiming such a direct consequence for these practices. However, what is apparent is that the various tools for measuring language vitality are inadequate in the face of these complex sociolinguistic situations.

The shift to majority English from their minority language among this youth community is clear. Figure 1 shows the percentage of young people who now consider English to be their first language and, thus, the first language of their own children.

A question was asked about language usage after English. The term 'usage' was used deliberately to access information about varying levels of language knowledge, use and understanding rather than a more specific question about 'speaking' the language concerned. This decision was made on the supposition that the respondents had a range of linguistic repertoires which may or may not have included spoken competence in their heritage languages but could still allow for claiming an element of usage variously understood. Qualitative data in the form of interviews with selected respondents amplify on what this usage might consist of (see later). Figure 2, therefore, shows which language is used mostly after English. Most respondents choose a variety of Punjabi with some selecting Urdu. Choosing Urdu may be a response based on attitude to language status. The 2011 UK Census (ONS 2012) revealed a likely over-claiming of Urdu speakers in the UK – reporting almost as many Punjabi as Urdu speakers, which when matched to other data (Werbner 2005) on origins cannot be true. The vast majority of the Pakistani-heritage community in the UK originate in Mirpur which was not a fully Urdu-speaking part of Pakistan at the time of migration. The original settlers of the 1950s and 1960s would also have had little exposure to Urdu as a spoken and literary language as a language of elementary schooling. This is not obviously an unusual phenomenon when you find H- and L-varieties alongside one another. In a parallel scenario in the US, the same Pakistani-heritage and generally Punjabi-speaking community over-claim Urdu to make a distinction between themselves and Punjabi-speaking Sikhs.

The third chart (Figure 3) shows the significant lengths of time spent generally occupied, informally and formally, with devotional song practices. The preferred platform for much of this activity is now the mobile phone or other forms of mobile technology. In earlier fieldwork (Rosowsky 2010)
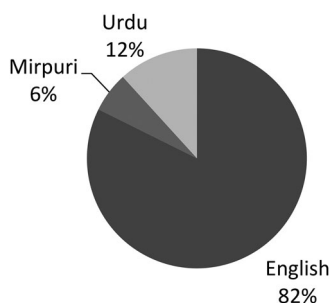

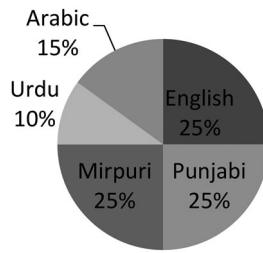**Figure 1.** Showing shift from Punjabi/Urdu to English (n = 66).

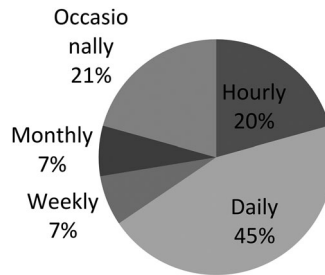**Figure 2.** Main second language usage (*n* = 66).

Figure 3. Frequency of *Naat* activity (*n* = 66).

with similar young performers, lyrics were recorded in notebooks and used at performances as aide-mémoires (see Figure 1). Urdu lyrics are almost always transliterated in Roman script with very little evidence of the use of Perso-Arabic or Shahmukhi script. Such notebooks are now invariably electronic and feature regularly during performances.

Figure 4 shows the young performers' preferred language when performing. Despite a growing number of English-language devotional songs and poems authored and available in English, for which there is a significant preference, there is a yet more sizeable proportion of performers still preferring Urdu or a variety of Punjabi (Mirpuri, Pahari, Pothwari and Hindko) for their songs and poems. A degree of folk-linguistics may be at play in the naming of these varieties of Punjabi which, by and large, are spoken varieties only (though see Rehman (2005) regarding a written form of Pothwari), though there is evidence of folk poetry and song in these varieties (Rehman 2005, 4). There is also a significant minority (11%) of the young people who prefer to
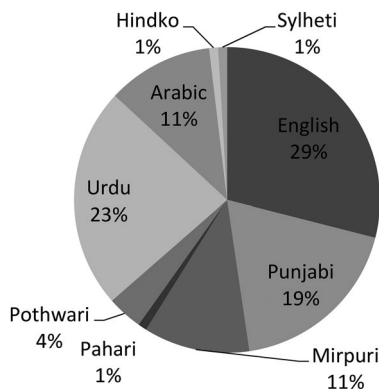

Figure 4. Preferred language for performing (*n* = 66).

perform in Arabic. The tendency for some performers to 'side-step' both their linguistic and literary heritage and any repertoire in the English language is a growing one not only within the mainly informal practices described in this article, but also through the presence of semi-professional groups such as the *Keighley Munshids (n.d.)* 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.

Whether all this musical and literary activity has an impact on the language maintenance of these young people still remains to be seen. Without detailed quantitative data across a larger population than is featured here, possibly made available through testing or careful ethnographic scrutiny and longitudinal observation of language use in naturally occurring situations, it is impossible to identify the full impact of these practices on reversing language shift. In a few individuals, it is possible to identify the potential of such practice for maintaining minority language usage. The survey data presented here and the national census data referenced (ONS 2012) rely heavily on self-ascription and self-designation and so can only provide a snapshot showing possible trends and only large-scale shifts in language usage. The over-reporting of Urdu as a main language in many households is an example of how self-ascription data can mislead. In this study, all the questionnaire data can do is provide some rough and ready information on the language and performance repertoires of these young people without attempting to ascertain an assessment of the extent of their knowledge of the languages involved. Below, I share some interview data, which although impressionistic and still reliant on self-evaluation, draw on a more expansive reflection made by the participants when talking of their language practices and, in particular, the possible effect of devotional songs on their knowledge and use of their heritage languages.

To sum up the discussion so far, the nature of this minority language activity is a complex blend of (re)learned religio-literary texts composed in the H-varieties of Urdu and literary western Punjabi, which are performed, memorised or recited using aide-mémoires, together with spoken varieties variously used – ranging from confident conversational usage to vestigial or even merely symbolic bilingualism. On the language vitality scales (GIDS and E-GIDS, for example), which, incidentally, appear to be most suited to single language evaluation rather than this complex pattern of related varieties, this young speech community ranges across a number of stages, Fishman's Stage 7 which is characterised by activities such as 'songfests' and 'concerts' and the Stage 8 characteristic of a language only being actively spoken by grandparents. However, the degree of literacy needed to perform in these languages is not inconsiderable and draws actively upon the linguistic resources of these young people. That much of this literacy is self-taught means there is no obvious stage on the scales which recognises these practices. The literacy identified by Fishman (1991) and Lewis and Simons (2010) on their scales pertains to state- or community-provided formal and structured instruction. This literacy, however, which draws on non-traditional resources, linguistic and otherwise, such as Roman script, the internet and mobile technology (reported on in Rosowsky (2010, 2015)), is a more individualised and idiosyncratic practice (transcribed songs and poems reflect the learner/reciter's needs rather than any desire for accuracy and convention) and supports rather than consolidates performances in heritage languages. Given that the sine qua non of reversing language shift is universally considered the intergenerational transmission of the spoken language, it is clear, using the various scales we have, that the spoken varieties of the languages represented in performance are 'endangered' ('severely', 'critically' [Brenzinger et al. 2003], 'definitely' [E-GIDS]) in this diasporic setting. On the other hand, *Ethnologue*'s 'Second Language Only' stage (2009) can only partially match the language learning practices of these young people. As mentioned above, there is ever-present the opportunity to (re)learn the heritage languages in a dynamic manner through sociocultural and transnational processes often linked to globalisation such as the comparative ease of present-day physical travel to the heartlands in contrast to the period of early settlement, the popularity of professional performers visiting the UK and the affordances of electronic technology which support all these processes.

In the remainder of this article, an attempt is made, using qualitative evidence (extracts from unstructured interviews with performers) to show the extent to which such language practice can have on reversing language shift. An attempt will be made at the end of each section to comment on the relevance of the various scales of language revitalisation (GIDS, Ethnologue, UNESCO & E-GIDS) to account for these language practices. It is recognised that such scales are traditionally used to measure community language revitalisation and much of the data reflect individual experience and self-ascription. It is recognised that such scales are traditionally used to measure societal language revitalisation and that much of the data reflect self-ascription and individual experience. However, what is also apparent is how much of the individual (re)learning takes place within communities of practice where regular and substantial informal interactions between members support community learning both real and virtual (see comments below from 'Tariq' and 'Kamran'). It is this aspect of the language learning taking place that lends some hope to, if not language revitalisation as such, then, at least, to potential deceleration of language shift processes. What follows is organised into six sections each briefly presenting a theme arising from the data: the existence of role models via transnational means; the initial, or vestigial, use or awareness of the heritage languages; the incipient interest in devotional song and verse; the learning of songs and poems; the characteristics of the language knowledge thus acquired; and, finally, the preference of some young performers for repertoire in non-heritage languages.

Data set 2 – extracts from interview transcripts

Transnational role models, technology and globalisation

As just mentioned, one relatively new transnational process supporting these young people in their (re)discovery of their language and literary heritages is the existence of touring artists known as *naat khawan – reciters of naat*) who bring their expertise, language fluency and authenticity from the heartlands to the diaspora communities. These role models provide considerable motivation and inspiration for those young pretenders seeking to emulate them in striving for ever-more confident and authentic performances of their own. These *naat khawan* travel widely through the heartlands and, increasingly, the diaspora, performing professionally their devotional song repertoire in the heritage languages. More than ever before, these popular performers from the heartlands visit the cities and towns of the South Asian diaspora performing in mosques, halls and homes. Young aspiring *naat khawan* in the UK now have frequent opportunities to become familiar with the *naat khawan* repertoire and experience professional levels of performance which they find inspirational and imitable. This physical activity has its counterpart in the virtual world of the internet and through mobile technology where audio and video files are viewed, shared and downloaded, as Figure 3 shows, on a very regular basis.

> Over the past six years, there has been a massive introduction of especially Pakistani-based, Urdu Punjabi speaking *naat khawans* and *munshids* from Pakistan. And I think there's been quite a few influential people who have come on to the scene. What it seems like to me, like you said, it's been a revival. You go into any cassette or book shop, you'll see loads of different artists, you can call them *naat* khans, who are promoting their own CDs or *nasheeds* or *naats*. Having said that, you now see so many *naat khawans* coming through but it's our generation that is interested. And it's having an impact on the fourth generation now. You can find *naat khawans* of the age of 7 who have a CD. (Atiq, male, 22)

Initial, or vestigial, use or awareness of the heritage languages

As noted above, the normal pattern of language shift has impacted upon this minority community since the arrival of its earliest settlers to the UK in the 1950s culminating in a gradual shift to the majority language, English, by the beginning of the twenty-first century. It was quite common for many of the young participants to report either their lack of understanding of Urdu or their limited use of spoken Punjabi.

> Many a time at a younger age I didn't know what the words meant. (Interviewee, Imran, commenting on Urdu)

> I've seen families where the children up to 5 or 6 are strong but then something happens and they begin to feel shy and they drift away from it. A few years later on they don't have that fluency of an earlier age. Because they're not practising that language. It's even worse when they get to adolescence. They feel embarrassed to speak another language [Punjabi]. (Interviewee, Tariq, commenting on Punjabi-Mirpuri)

The first comment relates to those occasions when these young people encounter the community's H-variety. This could be in a variety of domains, at home via print or electronic media, in the mosque or even in their mainstream schools (attempts are sometimes made to offer a high school qualification in the H-variety). The second comment makes the regular observation that once a minority language speaker leaves the intimate domains of 'hearth and home', a shift to the majority language, particularly of school, happens quite rapidly.

Such sociolinguistic patterning in any migrationary contexts is nothing exceptional. Yet, for some of these young people, a re-engagement with their heritage languages – and in many cases, it is not re-engagement but primary engagement – can take place at a later date through the youth revival of devotional songs. In respect of the language vitalisation scales we have discussed, there seems to be no direct correlation to any discrete stage. Whereas there is some degree of learning from scratch ('re-construction') for the individuals themselves, the fact remains that elsewhere, in the heartlands of the language, no such process is necessary, and, even in the diaspora, there are resources, both living and inanimate (books, recordings and so on), that support such (re)learning. Fishman's original Stage 7 restricts the practices observed here to older, and thus dying out, members of the community. The fact that it is predominantly young people involved in this revival is also not reflected directly in any of the scales referred to in this article. To complicate the issue further, the literacy acquired in these practices, though often based on highly poetic and often archaic literary language, is there in the main to support oral performance. The poems and, obviously the songs, are not collected, learnt and memorised for the purposes of quiet contemplation (though this is not precluded) but in order to be performed orally, musically and in public gatherings. As with much ritualised practice, these young British Muslims often partake in practices which are characterised by their hybrid mode of oral and literary performance centred on the recitation and intoning (or some other ritualised utterance) of sacred, or sanctified, texts.

Incipient interest in devotional song and verse

Most participants in the project describe how their interest in devotional song and poetry began in a similar way. It usually involves hearing a *naat* or a *nasheed* performed live at a public event or, perhaps, on satellite television, and increasingly nowadays, via some form of electronic media. My original, and oldest, participants had made their discovery of devotional song on the eve of the internet explosion of up- and downloading generated by Web 2.0, and began their interest through older technologies such as radio and CDs.

> I listened to CDs and tapes. My father used to bring them back from gatherings or buy from the stalls outside. Because at that time there wasn't the internet or lack of. So to listen to the CDs, the tapes, and from the television I picked up the words and the tunes. Initially it was just listening. (Farzana)

> I started with the local radio. They started playing the qasai'd and the *naat* and I really enjoyed them. They weren't really there in the mosques when I was there. I went down to the local bookshop and learnt a little about *naats*. I didn't really have an interest in them. I didn't know where to get them from. I bought some CDs and tapes … I put them on started listening to them. I didn't really understand them. Before that I was into rap, Tupac and Eminem. (Imran)

Out of this initial interest in listening to devotional song, these older participants moved on to collecting songs and poems and compiling books of handwritten, or computer-printed, transcriptions which were used to store and later serve as aide-mémoires for reciting and singing the poems, songs and tunes. Incidentally, this activity shows that the interest in and learning of the language of the

poetry does not necessarily extend to an interest in the original script of these languages which, in these cases, would be Perso-Arabic. Drawing on their linguistic resources, these young people make use of the most convenient scriptal resource at hand, 'Roman Urdu', to transcribe their songs. Furthermore, the scriptal style is often a very personalised and idiosyncratic one eschewing the conventions of official transliterations (usually more academic publications) and transcriptions found in some of the available bi-scriptal and bilingual published editions of collections of devotional songs in Urdu and Punjabi.

> Sometime it's difficult to pronounce the words [in official transliterations]. Personally, I prefer to listen and write the words down myself, the way I write them down. (Ashfaq)

The younger followers of these older pioneers, though, are much more likely to be using their mobile phones to listen to and share their favourite devotional songs.

> Whenever you come to a mehfil ('gathering') you'll always see some kids at the back blue-toothing each other, blue-toothing *naats* to each other or blue-toothing *nasheeds*. (Tariq)

> I've just got a new phone and the first thing I did was to upload all my *nasheed* and *naat* and put them into different categories. (Tanveer)

I have described elsewhere (Rosowsky 2010) how this manner of compiling collections of *naats*, namely transcriptions rather than transliterations, connects the reciters much more directly to the spoken, or recited, word rather than the written one. On the other hand, the widespread use of Roman Urdu on electronic platforms reveals something significant here about the hegemony of Roman script across many minority languages – often re-enforced by its earlier monopoly of the internet despite the recent expansion of the technology that enables the diversification of multilingual communication through UNICODE (Bennett 2015).

The patchwork nature of this language revival with its non-traditional and idiosyncratic scripts, its preference for oral performance and its initial lexical emphasis, as mentioned earlier, do not allow a neat match with any of the stages on the language revitalisation scales. It is likely the case that the fluid and dynamic nature of language loss and language revival within diasporic communities precludes such a fixed and demarcated schema against which it can be measured, at least on a micro level.

The (re)learning of devotional songs and poems

The self-scripted notebooks (and more recently mobile devices) as described above serve as aide-mémoires for these young performers' recitations and singing. As with liturgical literacy, in this case Qur'anic literacy (Rosowsky 2008), the availability of accurate transcription and striving for authentic pronunciation can lead to a developing understanding of the meaning of the words and verses.

> So if someone was reciting for example a word such as '*harwat*', I would just say it in my head 'h-a-r–w-a-t' and just write it in Roman English. Roman Urdu. Write it down and once I had all the text written down, I'd play the tape again and now get the tune by looking at the words in English. Obviously, sometimes, the pronunciation or the accent or the strength of the words wasn't there. But then listening and continuing to try and recite and listen. (Latif)

> … I got a friend to check that I was writing the words down correctly. In Roman English. I made quite a lot of mistakes but if I was stuck at all I'd ring him up and ask what it was and what it meant. I'd know what it meant bit by bit. I'd sit down with somebody and they would explain what it means. What each line means. (Kamran)

There is a strong evidence of a community of practice (Wenger 1998) developing around the various methods these young people employ in order to (re)learn, consolidate and develop their knowledge of the language of the devotional songs. The second comment here mentions a 'friend', who is accessible either in person or over the phone, helping the speaker both to transcribe accurately and to explore the meaning of what is being transcribed. The speaker also mentions another person, 'somebody', who they would consult to further develop their understanding of the meaning. The presence,

physically or virtually, of go-to people in the community plays a significant role in the development of language (re)acquisition.

Again, although there are some similarities with the later stages of the language re-vitalisation scales, for example, with the bottom-up nature of the 're-construction' of these language resources by these young people, the fact that this process is happening in parallel with the existence of both printed, academic, resources and the far from threatened devotional song practices in the heartlands of the languages in question make these diasporic practices less relatable to stages on the scales.

Characteristics of the language knowledge acquired

It is obvious, however, that such practices on their own do not directly lead to an ability to converse confidently in the language and is far from the competence represented by intergenerational transmission. On its own, it is most akin to learning a language in a restricted sense for academic or liturgical purposes. Often, in these cases, the languages in question are not related to the spoken language of the home. For example, Jewish children in the UK learn a form of Hebrew (Biblical Hebrew) in their *cheders* for liturgical purposes, a language which has no relationship to the language of the home. There is thus an understanding that such an interest cannot generally lead to communicative competence. Such a gap between learning devotional songs and spoken competence is recognised by the young performers.

> I think if a third or fourth generation young Muslim is reciting *naats* in Urdu he won't be able to develop his speaking and listening skills. He'll pick up some key words or the way to recite or how to pronounce or the accent. But he won't be able to have a conversation with another person. (Taseer)

There is, though, in the practices referred to in this article, at least the potential for a more meaningful communicative practice developing. If one links knowledge of the language of performance with the vestigial language of the home, there is the possibility of mutual re-enforcement and for some individuals, this can be the case. However, the relationship between Urdu and Punjabi here plays a significant role. As mentioned above, the language of the home is, or has been until recently, a variety of Punjabi, rather than the H-language of Urdu. Here, the Punjabi variety (e.g. Pahari, Pothwari) could potentially bridge the gap to the language of performance if – and it is a big if – devotional songs and poems in H-variety Punjabi were the primary focus of attention. Unfortunately, they are not as common in performance as Urdu devotional songs and poems, which are no doubt related to the relative status of the two languages in the community and the heartland where despite being an H-variety in its own right, Punjabi is not considered in the same light as the national and prestigious language of Urdu. There is local evidence of *naat* performance in H-Punjabi as well as in Urdu but this appears to remain an occasional alternative to Urdu performances rather than having a substantial presence of its own. There is also the nature of the poetry available in H-Punjabi which is, as for much literature of this nature, highly poetic (and thus less transparent), archaic and unfamiliar, even to fluent L-Punjabi speakers. It would be very similar to using Shakespearean English as a means of consolidating modern spoken English. However, there is enough similarity for the young performers to recognise meaningful utterances within the poetry and relate those to their own competence in their heritage language. However, it is probably more accurate to say that the main increase in knowledge of their heritage languages is in Urdu.

In terms of GIDS and so on, the language varieties and registers encountered and deployed in these practices, because of their literary origins, seem to relate, if they relate anywhere, to those stages in the scales which touch on literacy. These would be those stages where formal education is instrumental in supporting language maintenance (Stages 4 and 5 of GIDS and E-GIDS). However, the restricted nature of this literacy, its emphasis as a support to oral performance rather than an extension of the same, its non-dependence on formal contexts of instruction mean that, once more, there seems to be no ready fit on the scales for this form of language practice.

Preference of some young performers for repertoire in non-heritage languages

Finally, it is necessary to point out a likely negative factor in any potential for these practices for reversing language shift. In Figures 2 and 4, the languages used for performance are presented and in both, Arabic and English feature significantly. Figure 2 shows 25% of the 66 young performers claiming English as their second language (it is highly possible this figure reflects an over-claiming for the heritage language as a first language over English – for symbolic and identity purposes) and, more significantly, 15% claiming Arabic as the most used second language. None of the young people were of Arab descent and were, therefore, claiming Arabic as a second language on the basis of either liturgical competence (i.e. ability to decode and recite the Qur'an) or knowledge of devotional song and poetry. In Figure 4, 29% and 11% chose English and Arabic, respectively, as their preferred language of performance. A growing interest in English devotional songs and poetry, though contributing to a general revival of religious practice, and increase in meaningful communication, almost certainly means that any potential for devotional song practices in heritage languages is lessened. My data show that this dimension of performance is still secondary to performance in heritage languages though its popularity, especially for the youngest performers, is growing.

As for Arabic, as mentioned above, a number of young people choose to add to their heritage language repertoire through the learning and performing of devotional songs and poetry in Classical Arabic. Some make the decision even to reject the heritage repertoire and focus solely on developing an Arabic repertoire. This is possibly linked to a religious motivation to seek out authenticity in matters of faith and the performance of poetry in Classical Arabic, an obviously rich tradition on its own, is a linguistic and literary parallel to that process. Here, a young participant justifies his focus on Arabic devotional songs.

> 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)

As with the heritage varieties themselves, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which an interest in Arabic religious poetry and song can engender knowledge of the language. What is likely, however, is that such an interest might not support the reversal of language shift of the heritage languages themselves.

Conclusion

One finding from this ongoing study so far suggests that the twin drivers of faith and music can have some influence on attitudes and motivations for maintaining or recovering heritage languages. Although there is potential in the regular performance of devotional song in heritage languages for consolidating language use, the crucial factor for maintaining heritage languages remains the presence of intergenerational transmission. Contributing factors seem to be the importance of online resources and interactions, the existence of role models for young performers and, for these young people at least, an accompanying revival or resurgence of faith. A secondary finding of this project is that existing measures for evaluating minority languages in diasporic conditions are often inadequate. The scales available appear to be predicated on autochthonous minority languages, whereas diasporic minority languages often have a particular and frequently dynamic set of characteristics which do not allow for neat correspondences to universal schemas. The communities of practice which support the (re)learning of heritage languages for the purposes of performing devotional songs and poetry are more than a collection of individuals taking part in common social and cultural practices. The development of new measures to determine language vitality within these contexts is needed.

Notes

1. By this term, I mean those who attend as members of the audience and who listen to devotional songs and poems in general. Their active participation, however, may be limited to joining in with the chorus when appropriate.

2. 'Mawlid' is the annual celebration of the birthday of the Prophet (or a Saint) in Islamic tradition.
3. 'Miraj' is another annual Islamic celebration.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

Baker, J. N. 1993. "The Presence of the Name: Reading Scripture in an Indonesian Village." In *The Ethnography of Reading*, edited by J. Boyarin, 98–138. California: University of California.

Bennett, B. 2015. "Unicode: Standardizing Sacred Scripts." In: *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization*. June 3–6 2016. Hong Kong. Accessed April 3, 2016. http://programme.exordo.com/slxg2015/delegates/presentation/237.

Birt, Y. 2006. "Good Imam, Bad Imam: Civic Religion and National Integration in Britain Post-9/11." *The Muslim World* 96: 687–705.

Blackledge, Adrian, and Angela Creese. 2010. *Multilingualism: A Critical Perspective*. London: Continuum.

Brenzinger, M. A., N. Aikawa, D. Koundiouba, A. Minasyan, A. Yamamoto, A. Dwyer, C. Grinevald, et al. 2003. *Language Vitality and Endangerment*. Paris: UNESCO. Accessed January 2016. http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages.

Busch, B. 2012. "The Linguistic Repertoire Revisited." *Applied Linguistics* 33 (5): 503–523.

Ferguson, C. A. 1959. "Diglossia." *Word* 15: 325–340.

Ferguson, C. A. 1982. "Religious Factors in Language Spread." In *Language Spread: Studies in Diffusion and Social Change*, edited by R. L. Cooper, 95–106. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Fishman, J. A. 1989. *Language and Identity in Minority Sociolinguistic Perspective*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Fishman, J. A. 1991. *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Fishman, J. A. 2001. "Why Is It So Hard to Save a Threatened Language?" In *Can Threatened Languages Be Saved?*, edited by J. A. Fishman, 1–22. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Fishman, J. A. 2006. "A Decalogue of Basic Theoretical Perspectives for a Sociology of Language and Religion." In *Explorations in the Sociology of Language and Religion,* edited by T. Omoniyi, and J. A. Fishman, 13–25. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

García, O. 2009. "Education, Multilingualism and Translanguaging in the 21st Century." In *Multilingual Education for Social Justice: Globalising the Local*, edited by A. K. Mohanty, M. Panday, R. Phillipson, and T. Skutnabb-Kangas, 140–158. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.

Ilankuberan, A. 2015. "Films & Faith: Exploring Identities of British Tamil Hindu Teenagers Through the Act of Viewing, Reflecting Upon and Performing Tamil Hindu Films." In: *Heavenly Acts II: The Acquisition of Performance Practices*. September 11–12, 2015. Sheffield. Accessed April 4, 2016. http://heavenlyacts.com/network-news/page/2.

Kliger, H., and R. Peltz. 2002. "Yiddish in New York: Communicating a Culture of Place." In *The Multilingual Apple: Languages in New York City*, edited by O. Garcia and J. A. Fishman, 93–118. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Lewis, M. P. 2009. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. 16th ed. Dallas, TX: SIL International.

Lewis, M. P., and G. F. Simons. 2010. Assessing Endangerment: Expanding Fishman's GIDS. *Revue Roumaine de Linguistique* 2: 103–120.

Lothers, M., and L. Lothers. 2010. *Pahari and Pothwari: A Sociolinguistic Survey*. Dallas, TX: SIL International.

Lothers, M., and L. Lothers. 2012. *Mirpuri Immigrants in England: A Sociolinguistic Survey*. Dallas, TX: SIL International.

Mitchell, B. 2006. *Language Politics and Language Survival: Yiddish Among the Haredim in Post-War Britain*. Paris-Louvain-Dudley, MA: Peeters.

ONS. (2012). *Language in England and Wales, 2011*. Office for National Statistics. Accessed February 3, 2016. http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_302179.pdf

Rehman, S. 2005. Diaspora and Diversity: The Development of Pahari Language in Britain. *Aalami Pahari Adabi Sangat Pahari Awareness Day*. Manchester. Accessed February 3, 2016. http://www.pahari.org/doc/apareportsmall.pdf.

Rosowsky, A. 2008. *Heavenly Readings: Liturgical Literacy in a Multilingual Context*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Rosowsky, A. 2010. "'Writing It in English': Script Choices Among Young Multilingual Muslims in the UK." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 31 (2): 163–179.

Rosowsky, A. 2015. "Heavenly Verses: The Role of Devotional Song in Minority Language Maintenance." In *The Music of Endangered Languages*, edited by N. Ostler and B. Lintinger, 92–99. Bath: Foundation for Endangered Languages.

The Keighley Munshids. n.d. Accessed February 12, 2016, from Abu Zahra Foundation. http://www.abuzahra.org/keighley-munshids.

Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Werbner, P. 2005. "Pakistani Migration and Diaspora Religious Politics in a Global Age." In *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World*, edited by M. Ember, C. R. Ember, and I. Skoggard, 475–484. New York: Springer.