

# Language and perceptions of identity threat

Rusi Jaspal<sup>1\*</sup>, Adrian Coyle<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway, University of London

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Surrey

Citing this article:

Jaspal, R. & Coyle, A. (2009). Language and perceptions of identity threat. *Psychology and Society*, 2(2), 150-167.

\*Requests for reprints should be addressed to Rusi Jaspal, Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20-OEX, United Kingdom (e-mail: rusi.jaspal@gmail.com).

# Language and perceptions of identity threat<sup>1</sup>

---

RUSI JASPAL

Royal Holloway, University of London

ADRIAN COYLE

University of Surrey

This study explores how a group of British South Asians (BSA) understood, defined and evaluated languages associated with their ethnic and religious identities, focusing upon the role of language in the negotiation and construction of these identities and particularly upon strategies employed for coping with identity threat. Twelve BSA were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Transcripts were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis. Participants' accounts were explored through the interpretive lens of identity process theory. Four superordinate themes are reported: "Maintaining a sense of distinctiveness through language use", "Exclusion of others and personal claims of belonging", "Deriving a sense of self-esteem from the knowledge of one's threatening position" and "Two identities, two languages. Searching for psychological coherence". While identity principles may be cross-culturally universal, coping strategies are fluid and dynamic. Individuals will act strategically to minimise identity threat. Some of the coping strategies manifested by participants are discussed.

In recent years there has been considerable theoretical and empirical work on the relationship between language and identity, primarily within the field of sociolinguistics. This has included research on *inter alia* language and ethnic identity (e.g. Rampton, 1995; Harris, 2006; Omoniyi & White, 2006), religious identity (e.g. Omoniyi & Fishman, 2006) and gender identity (Coates, 2002, 2003). More recently there has been some social psychological research on language and identity specifically among British South Asians (Jaspal & Coyle, 2009b, in press). Jaspal and Coyle's (2009b, in press) work, in particular, has demonstrated the usefulness of employing a social psychological approach to language and identity, given the discipline's long tradition of studying the micro and the macro levels of identity, including categorisation, identity processes as well as intergroup processes. The present article builds upon existing research in this area by exploring the area of language and perceptions of identity threat, specifically among British South Asians (BSA).

The decision to focus upon this particular population arose from the observation that the 'linguistic repertoire' of BSA (the collection of languages used by individuals) usually features three dimensions. These include the dominant language (i.e. English), which denotes the language in which individuals are most proficient; the heritage language (henceforth HL; e.g. Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi), which refers to the language(s) associated with

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon a paper presented by the first author at *Culture, Cognition and Culture*, the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Inter-University Conference, at the London School of Economics on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2009. The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

one's ethnic identity; and possibly a liturgical language (henceforth LL; e.g. Arabic for Muslims, Punjabi for Sikhs), which is the language associated with one's religious identity. It is noteworthy that the verb 'to use' employed in the definition of the linguistic repertoire is deliberately ambiguous since the presence of a given language in one's linguistic repertoire does not necessarily mean that one speaks the language fluently. For instance, BSA who practice Islam might be exposed to their LL, Arabic, in religious sermons despite their inability to speak or even understand the language.

It was deemed necessary to explore identity threat among BSA as their complex linguistic repertoire has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years. On the one hand, some media reports have highlighted the potential cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism, specifically among BSA (e.g. Casciani, 2003), while, on the other, use of the HL has been criticised by some social commentators. The former home secretary of the United Kingdom, for instance, expressed disapproval of the observation that 'in as many as 30% of Asian British households, according to the recent citizenship survey, English is not spoken at home (Blunkett, 2002, p. 77). These comments were framed within discourses of Britishness and, thus, it was implied that 'excessive' use of the HL could be viewed as a barrier to Britishness. It is noteworthy that there is considerable evidence that some ethnic and cultural groups may in fact attach a great deal of symbolic importance to the HL (Tse, 1998; Jaspal & Coyle, 2009b) and also to the LL (Rosowsky, 2007; Jaspal & Coyle, in press). Thus, it seems important to explore individuals' responses to the incipient, negative social representations surrounding use of the HL in the British context and, in particular, the potential implications for identity.

Given the potential for experiences of identity threat among participants, the theoretical approach employed in this paper is derived from identity process theory (IPT; Breakwell, 1986, 1988, 1992, 1993, 2001). IPT proposes that the structure of identity should be conceptualised in terms of its content and value/ affect dimensions and that this structure is regulated by two universal processes, namely the assimilation-accommodation process and the evaluation process. The assimilation-accommodation process refers to the absorption of new information in the identity structure and of the adjustment which takes places in order for it to become part of the structure. The evaluation process confers meaning and value on the contents of identity.

Breakwell (1986, 1992) identifies four identity principles which guide these universal processes, namely continuity across time and situation, uniqueness or distinctiveness from others, feeling confident and in control of one's life and feelings of personal worth or social value. IPT refers to these, respectively, as continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy and self-esteem. Extending IPT, Vignoles and colleagues (Vignoles, Chryssochoou & Breakwell, 2002; Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Gollidge & Scabini, 2006) have proposed two additional identity 'motives', namely belonging, which refers to the need to maintain feelings of closeness to and acceptance by other people, and meaning, which refers to the need to find significance and purpose in one's life. More recently, Jaspal and Cinnirella (2009a, 2009b) have proposed the psychological coherence principle, which refers to the individual's subjective perception of compatibility and coherence between their identities. IPT suggests that when any of these identity principles are obstructed by changes in the social

context, for instance, identity is threatened and the individual will engage in coping strategies to alleviate the threat.

From the social identity tradition, optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), which proposes that individuals identify with social groups to satisfy opposing motives for distinctiveness and belonging, was identified as an additional potentially useful theoretical framework. However, recent theoretical work has highlighted the potential advantages of applying IPT to questions of language and identity (Jaspal, 2009; Jaspal & Coyle, 2009). Moreover, IPT has already been employed empirically to inform the analysis of accounts of language and ethnic identity (Jaspal & Coyle, 2009b) and that of accounts of language and religious identity (Jaspal & Coyle, in press). These studies, which have been conducted with BSA samples, highlight the need for a broader, more inclusive theory of identity threat, such as IPT, which identifies multiple identity principles and which provides scope for the exploration of intrapsychic, not just interpersonal and intergroup, processes.

The empirical objective of the present study is two-fold; (i) to explore participants' lived linguistic experiences in ethnic, religious and other social contexts, with a particular focus upon potentially threatening experiences; (ii) to explore the strategies employed by participants for coping with identity threats.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

A sample of twelve BSA was recruited in a city in the East Midlands of England. The study focused solely upon the experiences of British-born individuals of Indian and Pakistani heritage since these ethnic groups are most representative of BSA in this geographical area.

A snowball sampling strategy was employed, with the initial participants recruited through the author's social networks. Six participants were male and six were female, with a mean age of 21.6 years (SD: 1.3). Six participants were university students, one had a masters degree and the remaining five had GCSE/A-levels.

### **Procedure**

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of eleven exploratory, open-ended questions. The schedule began with questions regarding self-description and ethnic/national identification, followed by more specific questions on the values, functions and meanings of various languages; and any perceived difficulties arising from the management of one's linguistic repertoire. Furthermore, participants were invited to reflect upon specific linguistic experiences. Although a central concern in the research was to explore experiences of identity threat and the consequential development and activation of coping strategies, none of the questions in the interview schedule explicitly addressed this issue in order to avoid revealing this particular focus of the research (see appendix for the original interview schedule). However, when matters related to identity threat arose in interviews, participants were given greater freedom to discuss these matters in detail, although this often entailed departure from the interview schedule.

Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. They were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Analytic approach**

The data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was considered particularly useful since it allows the researcher to engage with theory in an *a priori* fashion in order to add more psychological depth to the data. Moreover, it allows for the generation of new theory and provides opportunities for developing models. The study also aimed to capture participants' attempts to make sense of their personal and social worlds, with a particular focus upon identity.

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

### **Analytic procedures**

Firstly, the transcripts were read repeatedly in order to become as intimate as possible with the accounts, and during each reading of the transcripts preliminary impressions and interpretations were noted in the left margin. Subsequently, the right margin was used to note emerging theme titles which captured the essential qualities of the accounts. Superordinate themes representing the 12 accounts were then developed and ordered into a logical and coherent narrative structure.

## **RESULTS**

This section reports some of the most important themes which elucidate participants' perceptions and experiences of identity threat in distinct social and linguistic contexts. Four superordinate themes are reported, namely (i) 'maintaining a sense of distinctiveness through language use'; (ii) 'exclusion of others and personal claims of belonging'; (iii) 'deriving a sense of self-esteem from the knowledge of one's threatening position; and (iv) 'two identities, two languages: searching for psychological coherence'.

### **Maintaining a sense of distinctiveness through language use**

A central concern in the present research was to explore participants' evaluative comments on languages, which formed part of their linguistic repertoires, particularly in comparative contexts. For instance, participants frequently evaluated their HL in positive terms,

although there seemed to be a tendency among some individuals to evaluate this language less positively than their dominant language English:

Kuli (male, Indian): I tell you when we're in town it pisses me right off when my mum keeps shouting out loud in Punjabi. She should speak in English outside [...] White people just look down at us and reckon that my mum don't know a word of English.

Interviewer: Really? What makes you think that?

Kuli: Well, I used to be quite naughty at school, yeah, and I remember my teacher, she wanted to speak to my mum about it and first she was like 'does your mum know English?' You see, why would she ask that? It's 'cause they all think our parents don't know English.

Interviewer: And why do you think that bothers you, if they think that, I mean?

Kuli: I don't know. It just makes me feel like a typical Asian, I guess. And I'm not. I'm not some foreigner.

Kuli was not alone in making these observations; it seemed that several participants perceived use of the HL in public space as inappropriate: 'She should speak in English outside'. Indeed, use of the HL could induce feelings of annoyance and embarrassment due to the perception that 'White people just look down at us'. Thus, in the psychological worlds of these participants, use of this language was stigmatised possibly due to the negative social representations of individuals who use this language in the public domain. For Kuli, use of the HL in the presence of the White British majority gives the impression that 'my mum don't know a word of English', which itself has ideological implications. The English language and British national identity are said to bear a close relationship (Julios, 2008), and indeed, the Britishness of immigrants who lack proficiency in English has been questioned and debated (Blunkett, 2002).

Participants seemed to demonstrate an awareness and understanding of social representations which link British national identity and the English language. This was exemplified by his assertion that 'I'm not some foreigner'. This may be tentatively interpreted as his personal representation that the Britishness of those who do not habitually speak English may be repudiated by national ingroup members (Breakwell, 1986). Furthermore, Kuli appeared to accept and personalise these social representations by allowing them to shape cognitions towards the HL and 'appropriate' linguistic behaviour: 'She should speak in English outside'. Similar psychological processes were observable in the following conversational exchange, in which Mohammed reflected upon his language use in Pakistan:

Interviewer: What about when you're in Pakistan do you always speak your HL or mainly English?

Mohammed (male, Pakistani): You know, it's embarrassing to admit it, yeah, but I speak Urdu here no problems but when we're in Pakistan I hate speaking Urdu. I'd rather speak English all the time.

Interviewer: Why's that?

Mohammed: I don't know. I guess it's because it's good to be the special one and when you talk English with an English accent over there it turns heads and people do listen out (laughs). It feels good. I mean, talking English with an English accent is pretty posh, you know?

It appears that manoeuvres between national contexts may give rise to changes in cognitions and feelings towards languages. While use of Urdu in the British context seems normative and appropriate to Mohammed, its imagined or real use in Pakistan seems to pose a potential threat to identity. Mohammed's assertion that his use of English in Pakistan 'turns heads' and that he derives a sense of self-esteem from perceiving himself as 'special' convincingly evidences the importance of language use in his search for (interpersonal) distinctiveness (Breakwell, 1986). More specifically, use of 'English with an English accent' in Pakistani provides him with a sense of distinctiveness with positive implications for self-esteem: 'it feels good'. It is noteworthy that Mohammed reproduces the social representation that the English accent is prestigious and socially desirable (Ladegaard, 1998), which is perhaps important if he is to derive a sense of *positive* distinctiveness from his language use. Accordingly, the social representation seems to be personalised in order to benefit identity.

Indeed, Breakwell (2001, p. 273) notes that 'the personalizing of social representations is part of that process of establishing and protecting an identity'. Here it is argued that the participant seeks to establish a positive identity through the enhancement of the distinctiveness principle of identity (Breakwell, 1986). In his reflections upon use of the HL in the presence of the White British majority, Kuli perceives a fairly uniform response from this outgroup: 'White people just look down at us and reckon that my mum don't know a word of English'. Moreover, he perceives a similarly uniform attitude among teachers at his former school: 'It's 'cause they all think our parents don't know English'. It is clear that Kuli does not wish to be categorised as an interchangeable member of the BSA community (who use HL); instead he wishes to be viewed as a *distinctive* individual. This desire was clearly manifested in his observation that 'it just makes me feel like a typical Asian, I guess. And I'm not'. Similarly, Mohammed seems to eschew 'de-individualisation' in the Pakistani context. Indeed, it has been observed by theorists that some form of distinctiveness is necessary in order to attain a meaningful sense of identity (Codol, 1981) and the distinctiveness principle has been implicated in *inter alia* group identification and psychological well-being (see Vignoles, Chrysochoou & Breakwell, 2000). Thus, it seems that use of the HL in public space may pose a threat to one's sense of distinctiveness with potential consequences for identification (here, it seems that both Kuli and Mohammed exhibit their disidentification from the HL, albeit in different contexts); and also psychological well-being (e.g. Kuli exhibits feelings of annoyance and embarrassment due to the perceived stigma associated with the HL).

In terms of language use as a marker of interpersonal distinctiveness, several participants exhibited considerable resourcefulness. Manjinder was particularly positive about use of the HL with other ingroup members since this appeared to provide her with a sense of positive distinctiveness. This was attributed to her incorporation of lexical items from Urdu, which is unusual among non-Muslim Indians (Jaspal & Coyle, in press):

I really like it [...] speaking in Punjabi with my family because I like to mix in a lot of classical Urdu words and it's not like I do it on purpose or anything but you know it comes across as impressive [...] I just hate being one of the crowd, speaking like all the rest of them. Urdu-Punjabi is more beautiful and it's like kind of become associated with me now (Manjinder, female, Indian)

There is convincing evidence to suggest that when identity principles are perceived as being threatened, individuals will engage in coping strategies to alleviate the threat (Breakwell, 1986; Timotijevic & Breakwell, 2000; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2009a). The data presented here demonstrate that individuals may downgrade the value of the HL in certain social contexts, such as in public space. Kuli, for instance, prescribes that the HL should not be employed in this social context, and indeed the obstruction of this coping strategy (for alleviating the threat to his sense of distinctiveness) is met with anger and hostility: 'it pisses me right off'. Nonetheless, as Brewer (1991) has convincingly argued, there must be an appropriate balance between the need for distinctiveness and the need for a sense of belonging and inclusion. The latter is discussed in the following section.

### **Exclusion of others and personal claims of belonging**

The majority of participants seemed to attach an element of importance to their HL and it was common for these individuals to justify this by emphasising a relationship between the HL and their ethnic identities (Jaspal & Coyle, 2009b). Indeed there are social representations that language and ethnic identity are closely entwined (Baker & Jones, 1998), which seemed to be accepted and reproduced by participants in their personal representations:

Knowing the language is really the first step to being Indian (Saeed, male, Pakistani)

What makes me Pakistani? Well for starters I speak the language perfectly, it's my mother tongue (Nazia, female, Pakistani)

Like Saeed and Nazia, several participants constructed an intrinsic link between knowledge of the HL and membership in the ethnic group. More specifically, the HL is constructed as a prerequisite ('the first step') for membership in the ethnic group. In Nazia's account, the HL is conceptualised as her 'mother tongue' and this is invoked as a justification for laying claim to a Pakistani ethnic identity. It was interesting to observe that participants who prioritised the role of the HL in ethnic identity unanimously claimed to be proficient HL-speakers: 'I speak the language perfectly'. Of course, these participants met these criteria, which enabled them to construct themselves as 'legitimate' members of the ethnic group in a convincing fashion. Evidently, this could have positive outcomes for the belonging principle of identity which refers to 'the need to maintain or enhance feelings of closeness to, or acceptance by, other people' (Vignoles et al., 2006, p. 310). By constructing sufficiently inclusive criteria for ingroup membership, participants are perhaps able to perceive a sense of closeness to other ingroup members who share the allegedly important self-aspect(s) associated with the group (i.e. the HL).

Given that many participants constructed the HL as an important marker of ethnic identity and, more specifically, of membership in the ethnic group, it was deemed necessary to



consider participants' cognitions towards BSA who lack proficiency in the HL (henceforth 'non-HL speakers'). Consistent with their assertions that 'knowing the language is really the first step', several participants appeared to repudiate non-HL speakers' right to self-categorisation as 'Indian' or 'Pakistani'. Instead these individuals were viewed as:

Complete coconuts, brown on the outside but white on the inside and they don't know the language [...] These people are White. They aren't true Indians [...] We are, the lot that actually know the language (Manjinder, female, Indian)

Non-HL speakers were frequently constructed as being less authentic members of the ethnic group: 'They aren't true Indians'. Thus, it seemed that knowledge of the HL could be viewed as a marker of one's ethnic authenticity (see Jaspal & Coyle, 2009b). In addition to the repudiation of non-HL speakers' ethnic group membership, several accounts indicated that these individuals could also be construed in fairly negative terms. Indeed, the above-cited account reveals one derogation which may be applied to non-HL speakers, namely 'complete coconuts, brown on the outside but white on the inside'. This is interesting since the 'inner essence' is viewed as White, in contrast to their darker outer complexion, due to their lack of proficiency in the HL. These individuals were frequently construed in racial terms: 'These people are White'. Clearly, this racial category was employed metaphorically, possibly to highlight the perceived lack of authenticity of non-HL speakers and assimilation to the White British majority.

Manjinder's final statement that 'We are [Indians], the lot that actually know the language' was particularly interesting in terms of identity. There is a body of theoretical and empirical work which postulates that identity arises from the application of systematic distinctions between the ingroup and outgroups whereby the categories 'us' and 'them' come into existence (Eriksen, 1993; Triandafyllidou, 2001). In reference to this distinction, Eriksen (1993, p. 18) observes, that 'if no such principle exists there can be no ethnicity, since ethnicity presupposes an institutionalised relationship between delineated categories whose members consider each other to be culturally distinctive'. Thus, it could be argued that the presence of non-HL speakers actually enabled several participants to construct a strong sense of ethnic identity since this allowed them to categorise themselves as more authentic members of the ethnic group *vis-à-vis* non-HL speakers who allegedly 'aren't true Indians'. To invoke the language of identity process theory, this is likely to reflect self-protection at the intrapsychic level. By re-construing what it means to be an ethnic group member and the criteria for membership in primarily linguistic terms, participants were able to emphasise their eligibility for ethnic group membership. In short, participants introduced information from the wider social context (i.e. the social representation that HL and ethnic identity are inseparable) which essentially modified the meaning, value and importance of the HL in the construction of ethnic identity (Breakwell, 1986). It seems that this method of self-protection at the intrapsychic level ensured that 'we' (HL-speakers) feel a sense of belonging in the ethnic group, while 'they' (non-HL speakers) are denied membership in the ethnic group. It was considered likely that this rhetoric of exclusion could pose considerable threat to non-HL speakers' sense of identity.

### **Deriving a sense of self-esteem from the knowledge of one's threatening position**

It has been noted that proficiency in the HL may allow greater access to the ethnic group and thus a positive ethnic identity (Tse, 1998; You, 2005). This seems to be consistent with the data presented above since it is true that there are social representations which prescribe knowledge and use of the HL in order to be viewed as a 'genuine' member of the ethnic group (see also Jaspal & Coyle, 2009a). This called into question the psychological well-being of non-HL speakers or participants who reported lacking proficiency in the HL. These participants seemed to differ in their awareness and/ or acceptance of these social representations (Breakwell, 2001), which was reflected in several accounts:

It's [lack of proficiency in the HL] not really a problem for me [...] It's not that important to me, to be honest. I'm still a Sikh. (Kiran, female, Indian)

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

Non-HL speakers exhibited the tendency to downgrade the importance of the HL partly through the assertion that their lack of proficiency in the HL did not impede access to ethnic (or religious) identity: 'It's not that important to me, to be honest. I'm still a Sikh'. It was also interesting that Kiran 'blurred' the conceptual boundaries between religious and ethnic identity; by asserting the continuity of her *religious* identity (whereby she downplayed the question of her position within the ethnic group), she was perhaps able to minimise the threat to identity induced by her lack of proficiency in the HL. This was also observable in Neha's reference to her HL as 'not really a big factor'. Like other non-HL speakers, Neha seemed to re-construe the meaning of the HL; for her, Punjabi is a mere instrument of communication, which is redundant since 'my parents speak English'. However, Jaspal & Coyle (2009b, in press) have found that individuals may also attach symbolic and spiritual meanings to the languages which they speak. Here it appears that by conceptualising the HL as an instrument of communication, Neha downgrades its importance for ethnic identity, and is, thus, able to eschew any sense of stigma associated with her lack of proficiency.

Neha in fact appeared to construe her lack of proficiency in the HL in fairly positive terms. Rather than accepting the social representation that non-HL speakers are inauthentic or abnormal members of the ethnic group (see above), Neha appeared to construct her social situation as the norm: 'It's normal for kids my age'. This perhaps constitutes a deflection strategy since she strategically denies the pervasiveness of the HL in South Asian communities in Britain (Breakwell, 1986). Furthermore, Neha's prediction that the HL will 'completely phase out in a few generations anyway' had interesting implications for identity, since this implied that by paying less attention to the HL, and by concentrating upon the English language, she acts in anticipation of the imminent future. Accordingly, continued use of the HL would be redundant given the alleged imminence of language death.

Non-HL speakers exhibited additional strategies of averting stigma. Mohammed, for instance, downgraded the importance of the HL by attaching greater importance to his national identity, with which English, not the HL, is associated:

What's the point in Mirpuri?? This is Britain, not Mirpur and we are British, not Mirpuri (Mohammed, male, Pakistani)

Identification with the English language and with the national category 'British' was echoed by Baljit, who emphasised that his 'future is here in Britain' and not elsewhere:

Interviewer: So how important would you say it [Punjabi] is for you?

Baljit (male, Indian): Well, I don't speak it so it's not that important.

Interviewer: Because you don't speak it or is there another reason?

Baljit: Well at the end of the day my future is here in Britain and being British, yeah, I've got to like make an impression on other British people, not Punjabi people so it's kind of useless.

These extracts demonstrate the fluidity of identity. It evokes an interesting statement by Cohen (2000, p. 582), namely that 'one can be Muslim in the mosque, Asian in the street, Asian British in political hustlings and British when travelling abroad, all in a single day'. Mohammed's account is consonant with Cohen's (2000) assertion; specifically, it seems that his invocation of British national identity is a strategic one, which justifies the current state of affairs. Like Neha, Mohammed attempts to downgrade the importance of the HL and his invocation of his British national identity *vis-à-vis* his disidentification with his (Mirpuri) ethnic identity serves as a justification for his lack of proficiency in the HL. Mohammed constructs British national identity and Mirpuri ethnic identity as if they were incompatible: 'we are British, not Mirpuri'. There is a plethora of cross-cultural psychological research which demonstrates that individuals may in fact hyphenate their identities in order to accommodate their national and ethnic identities within the broader identity structure (Ghuman, 2003; Fine & Sirin, 2007), which demonstrates that this is an option available to many 'bicultural' individuals (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2007). Thus, Mohammed's construction of these identities as dichotomous and, more specifically, the salience of his Britishness could be viewed as a strategy for deflecting threats to self-esteem, and thus to his identity in general. This in turn is likely to 'maintain and enhance a positive conception of oneself' (Gecas, 1982, p. 20) since he lacks nothing which might be considered important for British national identity, an identity to which he lays claim.

Individuals did not appear to accept and reproduce social representations which emphasise a link between ethnic identity and the HL, which was unsurprising given the potentially negative impact of these social representations, coupled with participants' knowledge of their lack of proficiency in the HL, upon identity (Breakwell, 2001). Indeed, to accept these social representations could compromise individuals' sense of belonging in the ethnic group, which may in turn have negative outcomes for their sense of self-esteem (see Leary & Baumeister, 2000). However, while this section discusses 'competition' between the HL and English, the dominant language, the following section explores the search for psychological coherence between languages associated with ethnic and religious identities (HL and LL respectively).

---

<sup>2</sup> Mirpuri is a dialect of Punjabi which is spoken in the Mirpur district of Azad Kashmir, Pakistan. It may therefore be considered the HL of individuals whose parents emigrated from that geographical region.

## Two identities, two languages: Searching for psychological coherence

It is argued that the complex linguistic repertoire of BSA may be conducive to threats to identity. For instance, the lack of proficiency in any one of these languages, associated with bi-/multilingualism, may in turn have negative outcomes for social cohesion or membership in a given social group (see Blunkett, 2002). However, individuals may develop effective strategies for coping with the potential difficulties associated with multilingualism, such as compartmentalisation, whereby languages are assigned and confined to specific social contexts (Jaspal & Coyle, 2009b). However, this strategy is unlikely to be universally endorsed. For instance, here participants reflected upon linguistic experiences in their place of worship, a social context in which their HL and LL could not be compartmentalised as described above. Fatima, a Muslim, who identified Mirpuri as her HL, highlighted some of the difficulties entailed by contact between these languages in religious classes:

No, I never contributed in religious classes because of the language barrier [...] My family's from Mirpur, yeah so we speak Mirpuri and all the others are from Lahore, Karachi and they speak Urdu. The priest spoke Urdu, they spoke it back to him, but there was me trying to explain in Mirpuri [...] I mean, they understood me and I do like my language but I just felt so embarrassed in class.

Mirpuri, which is Fatima's HL, and Urdu, which has been conceptualised by some Muslims as an additional LL alongside Arabic, are mutually intelligible (see Jaspal & Coyle, in press). Thus, if conceptualised as instruments of communication, these languages pose few difficulties: 'I mean, they understood me'. Nonetheless, in terms of identity the situation appears to be somewhat problematic since Mirpuri is associated, both socially and psychologically, with ethnic identity and thus seems less compatible with religious identity. This is evidenced by Fatima's feelings of embarrassment upon use of her HL in a religious context. Furthermore, it is likely that this situation was fairly dilemmatic for the participant given that, on the one hand, she constructs the HL in positive terms and perceives a sense of attachment to the language: 'I do like my language'. However, on the other hand, there is a cogent feeling of discomfort associated with use of this language in religious classes. Thus, psychologically, the language is perceived as appropriate for an ethnic context and inappropriate for a religious context. This is perhaps a result of the strong psychological association between a given language and the identity which it represents (Jaspal & Coyle, 2009b). This notion was echoed by other participants, many of whom sought to develop a sense of coherence in their evaluations of these languages.

Mirpuri is a crap language, I'll tell you that. I don't speak it much myself. I mainly talk in Urdu if I can help it (laughs) (Mohammed, male, Pakistani)

Indeed, it has been found that when faced with two or more potentially incompatible identities individuals may seek to downgrade the importance of one of the identities in order to safeguard the psychological coherence principle (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2009b). In Ahmed's talk this seemed to constitute a rhetorical strategy, which was perhaps employed in order to construct his self-concept as coherent:

Ahmed (male, Pakistani): Arabic is a Muslim language so all the other languages are obviously not going to measure up to it [...] We're Muslims, we're not Pakistanis or Bangladeshis or whatever, we're Muslims first

Interviewer: But does Pakistan mean something to you as well?

Ahmed: Look, Islam is basically like a family with its citizens and basically our faith is our citizenship, yeah, and our language that makes us all one is Arabic so yeah.

The Arabic language, which is associated with Muslim identity, is constructed as a superior language, possibly due to the importance of religious identity in Ahmed's psychological world and among many Muslims in general (Jaspal & Coyle, in press). Interestingly, when Ahmed is invited to reflect upon the meanings of 'being Pakistani', he seems to construct his religious identity in terms of national identity. The discourse of nationhood/citizenship is observable in the simile that 'Islam is basically like a family with its citizens'; the notion of faith is constructed as comparable to citizenship. Moreover, language, which is frequently invoked as a marker of national unity (Jaspal, 2009), 'makes us all one'; that is, it constitutes a source of social unity. Close attention to the language employed in Ahmed's response to the interviewer's question reveals a possible rhetorical strategy of maintaining psychological coherence. His religious identity is constructed as fulfilling the functions of national identity since Islam too provides him with a feeling of unity, analogous to a nation's citizens bound together by a common language. Thus, this enables him to downgrade the importance of his ethno-national identity in favour of his religious identity.

The HL was frequently viewed as being incompatible with religious contexts which is also of psychological importance, given that religious identity is said to be prioritised by many Muslims (Jacobson, 1997). This constituted a potential dilemma. More specifically, it could be argued that the perceived incompatibility between their ethnic and religious identities/languages violated the psychological coherence principle and thus posed a potential threat to identity (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2009a). The above-cited accounts feature an interesting strategy for coping with the potential threat to identity, namely the denigration of the HL *vis-à-vis* the positive evaluation of the LL, as well as the denigration of ethno-national identity *vis-à-vis* the positive evaluation of religious identity. Mohammed describes Mirpuri as 'a crap language' which he allegedly avoids speaking. Conversely, Urdu, the language associated with his religious identity, appears to seep into other domains of identity; it is no longer constructed in terms of a solely liturgical language but rather one which supersedes Mirpuri, his HL. Thus, it could be argued that in order to restore psychological coherence between two identities (or languages which represent identities), the value of one identity may be downgraded in favour of another identity, which is subjectively prioritised (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2009a, 2009b). This strategy is convincingly manifested in Mohammed's denial of his habitual use of the HL (see Breakwell, 1986 for more on denial as a coping strategy).

## OVERVIEW

This paper exhibits some of the potential threats to identity which may arise from the management of complex linguistic repertoires as well as the diversity of coping strategies manifested by participants. Due to the small sample size, the findings are not generalisable,

although this need not necessarily be viewed as a shortcoming, as its theoretical and practical implications may be considerable.

### **Language and perceptions of identity threat**

Identity process theory (IPT) provides a particularly useful framework for interpreting identity threat as experienced by participants and for exploring the strategies employed to cope with these threats. In line with the findings of previous psychological research on language and identity among BSA (Jaspal & Coyle, 2009b, in press), language was frequently conceptualised as a symbolic marker of identity. Consequently, language-related situations could induce perceptions of identity threat. Use of a given language could, for instance, violate the distinctiveness principle of identity since it was viewed by some participants as having the potential to emit negative social representations to outgroups. Given the universal need for a sense of distinctiveness in order to have a meaningful identity (Codol, 1981), this situation was particularly threatening for participants who viewed their sense of distinctiveness as being under jeopardy.

On the other hand, a sense of belonging and inclusion is also said to be important for human beings (Brewer, 1991; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which may explain why many non-HL speakers seemed to view social representations, which emphasised the relationship between the HL and ethnic identity, as threatening. Moreover, social representations of the 'appropriate' linguistic code for a given social context could also problematise some individuals' sense of belonging. This was demonstrated by accounts of the use of HL in religious contexts. These social contexts could call into question the value of allegedly 'inappropriate' languages. This and the knowledge of non-HL speakers' lack of proficiency in the HL, coupled with their awareness of the aforementioned social representations, could potentially jeopardise their sense of self-esteem, given that these representations were perhaps conducive to feelings of inferiority and inauthenticity. Thus, it was fairly evident that language, a symbolic marker of identity, could possibly violate identity principles resulting in threats to participants' general sense of identity.

### **Coping with real and potential threats to identity**

Participants' awareness of the real and potential threats to identity naturally gave rise to a variety of coping strategies, which may be defined as 'any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity' (Breakwell, 1986, p. 78). Individuals made strategic decisions in order to optimise identity processes. For instance, it was observed that individuals might embrace or denigrate languages in order to enhance identity principles. Individuals seemed to develop ideas regarding the meanings of specific languages from pervasive social representations, which they had personalised. It was interesting that these individuals seemed to accept and reproduce 'negative' social representations despite their potential threat to identity. For instance, participants frequently acknowledged that their parents employed the HL in 'inappropriate' social contexts. Breakwell (2001) states that individuals will accept and use particular social representations in order to enhance identity principles. However, here it seems that some social representations may be perceived as being too pervasive for individuals to simply 'reject' or to re-construe, and that in these cases, individuals will reproduce these

representations but simultaneously develop coping strategies in order to minimise the ensuing threat to identity. This was observable in individuals' acknowledgement of the 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' languages, their re-construal of the value of particular languages and the allocation of these languages to specific social contexts. This of course demonstrated individuals' awareness and acceptance of social representations regarding the appropriateness of language use in certain social contexts.

Thus, a language such as English, which was perceived as facilitating a sense of distinctiveness, was likely to be embraced. Conversely, the HL could be rejected by individuals if it was seen as posing a threat to distinctiveness. Moreover, several individuals sought to reconcile identities, which emitted distinct social representations of specific languages. For instance, while one's ethnic group might positively evaluate a given language, conversely, it was quite possible for one's religious group to belittle the same language. Both languages could be viewed as constituting important parts of individuals' identities. Thus, it was argued that this could pose difficulties for psychological coherence, which in turn gave rise to the employment of coping strategies, such as the denigration of the language which was viewed as being particularly beneficial for the identity principles. This may, for instance, be a language which ensured a sense of self-esteem or continuity.

This reflects the general human tendency to seek to establish a positive identity (Tajfel, 1982; Breakwell, 1986; Simon, 2004). It has been observed that one strategy of achieving this positive self-conception is the denigration of outgroups (Crocker, Thompson, McGraw & Ingerman, 1987) and, more specifically, the use of 'downward comparisons', that is, the positive evaluation of the self *vis-à-vis* the negative evaluation of significant others (Wills, 1981). This form of self-enhancement was observable in participants' denigration of ethnic group members who lacked proficiency in the HL since these individuals were constructed as being illegitimate, inauthentic members of the ethnic group. It is argued that, conversely, individuals were thereby empowered to feel better about themselves, since the implication was that they, as speakers of the HL, were more authentic ethnic group members. This could be interpreted as a strategy for enhancing their sense of belonging in the ethnic ingroup, which has been said to have positive outcomes for self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

This paper contributes to the social psychological literature on language and identity by highlighting some of the potential threats to identity which may result from a complex linguistic repertoire consisting of several languages. It presents a preliminary snapshot of language and perceptions of identity threat among a small sample of BSA. Furthermore, the relationship between social representations and identity threat is said to be fluid and multidimensional; social representations may indeed be invoked strategically in order to enhance the identity principles, but conversely they may be viewed as being too pervasive to ignore, in which case other coping strategies are activated. Thus, the role of social representations in the construction and protection of identity is likely to be an important one. Furthermore, this research demonstrates that, while identity principles (e.g. the need for self-esteem, distinctiveness) may be cross-culturally universal (Codol, 1981), the coping strategies employed to safeguard them are fluid and dynamic. Participants act strategically

to minimise threat to identity. At a practical level, language clearly plays an important role in some individuals' meaning-making *vis-à-vis* their ethnic, national and religious identities and thus real or imagined threats to these languages and/ or identities may have negative outcomes for psychological well-being. It is hoped that future social psychological research will dedicate more time and effort to the exploration of these issues among Britain's ethnic minorities. At a more general level, it is hoped that future research will seek to extend and validate the theoretical developments reported here through the use of other methodologies and in other cultural contexts.

## References

- Baker, C. & Jones, S.P. (1998). Bilingualism in communities. In C. Baker & S.P. Jones (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education*. Philadelphia: Clevedon.
- Baumeister, R.F. & Leary, M.R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 497-529.
- Blunkett, D. (2002). Integration with diversity: Globalisation and the renewal of democracy and civil society. In M. Leonard & P. Griffith (eds.), *Reclaiming Britishness*. London: The Foreign Policy Centre.
- Braun, V. & Clark, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Breakwell, G.M. (1986). *Coping with Threatened Identities*. London: Methuen.
- Breakwell, G.M. (1988) Strategies adopted when identity is threatened. *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale*, 1, 189-204.
- Breakwell, G.M. (1992). Processes of Self-Evaluation: Efficacy and Estrangement. In: Breakwell, G.M. (ed.), *Social Psychology of Identity and the Self Concept*. London: Academic Press/Surrey University Press.
- Breakwell, G.M. (1993). Social Representations and Social Identity. *Papers on Social Representations*, 2, 198-217.
- Breakwell, G.M. (2001). Social representational constraints upon identity processes. In K. Deaux & G. Philogene (eds.), *Representations of the Social: Bridging Theoretical Traditions*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Casciani, D. (2003). Bilingual Asian children 'do better'. Retrieved 2 April 2008 from BBC News Online website: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/3236188.stm>
- Coates, J. (2002). *Men Talk: Stories in the Making of Masculinities*. London: Blackwell.
- Coates, J. (2003). *Women, Men and Language* (Third edition). London: Longman.
- Codol, J. P. (1981). Une approche cognitive du sentiment d'identité [A cognitive approach to the feeling of identity]. *Social Science Information*, 20, 111-136.
- Cohen, R. (2000). The incredible vagueness of being British/English (review article). *International Affairs*, 76(3), 575-582.
- Crocker, J., Thompson, L.L., McGraw, K.M. & Ingerman, C. (1987). Downward comparison, prejudice and evaluations of others: Effects of self-esteem and threat. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(5), 907-16.
- Eriksen, T.H. (1993). *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. London: Pluto Press.
- Fine, M. & Sirin, S. R. (2007). Theorizing hyphenated selves: Researching youth



- development in and across contentious political contexts. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 1(1), 16-38.
- Fishman, J.A. (1972). The sociology of language. In P.P. Giglioli (ed.), *Language and Social Context*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gecas, V. (1982). The self-concept. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 8, 1-33.
- Ghuman, P.A.S. (2003). *Double Loyalties: South Asian Adolescents in the West*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Harris, R. (2006). *New Ethnicities and Language Use*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jacobson, J. (1997). Religion and ethnicity: Dual and alternative sources of identity among young British Pakistanis. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 20, 238-56.
- Jaspal, R. (2009). Language and social identity: A psychosocial approach. *Psych-Talk*, 64, 17-20.
- Jaspal, R. & Cinnirella, M. (2009a). Coping with potentially incompatible identities: Accounts of religious, ethnic and sexual identities from British Pakistani men who identify as Muslim and gay. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Jaspal, R. & Cinnirella, M. (2009b). À la recherche de la cohérence psychologique : Vers un nouveau principe identitaire. [Searching for psychological coherence : Towards an additional identity principle]. Paper presented at the Communication and Intergroup Relations Laboratory, Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada, 20th August 2009.
- Jaspal, R. & Coyle, A. (in press). "Arabic if the language of the Muslims – that's how it was supposed to be": Exploring language and religious identity through reflective accounts from young British-born South Asians. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*.
- Jaspal, R. & Coyle, A. (2009a). Reconciling social psychology and sociolinguistics can have some benefits: Language and identity among second generation British Asians. *Social Psychological Review*, 11(2), 3-14.
- Jaspal, R. & Coyle, A. (2009b). "My language, my people": Language and ethnic identity among young second generation British South Asians. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Julios, C. (2008). *Contemporary British Identity: English Language, Migrants and Public Discourse*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Ladegaard, H.J. (1998). National stereotypes and language attitudes: The perception of British, American and Australian language and culture in Denmark. *Language and Communication*, 18(4), 251-74.
- Leary, M.R., & Baumeister, R.F. (2000). The nature and function of self-esteem: Sociometer theory. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 32, 1-62.
- Nguyen, A. D. & Benet-Martinez, V. (2007). Biculturalism Unpacked: Components, Measurement, Individual Differences, and Outcomes. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 1(1), 101-114
- Omoniyi, T. & Fishman, J. (2006). *Explorations in the Sociology of Language and Religion*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Omoniyi, T. & White, G. (2006). *Sociolinguistics of Identity*. London: Continuum Books
- Rampton, B. (1995). *Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents*. London: Longman.
- Rosowsky, A. (2007). Qur'anic literacy: Its central role in the life of UK Muslim communities. *NALDIC Quarterly*, 5(2), 44.

- Simon, B. (2004). *Identity in Modern Society: A Social Psychology Perspective*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Tajfel, H. (1982). Social psychology of intergroup relations. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 33, 1-39.
- Timotijevic, L. & Breakwell, G.M. (2000). Migration and threat to identity. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 10, 355-72.
- Triandafyllidou, A. (2001). *Immigrants and National Identity in Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Tse, L. (1998) Ethnic Identity Formation and its Implications for Heritage Language Development. In S.D. Krashen, L. Tse & J. McQuillan (eds.), *Heritage Language Development*. Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates.
- Vignoles, V.L., Chrysoschoou, X., & Breakwell, G.M. (2000). The distinctiveness principle: Identity, meaning and the bounds of cultural relativity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4, 337-354.
- Vignoles, V. L., Chrysoschoou, X., & Breakwell, G. M. (2002). Evaluating models of identity motivation: Self-esteem is not the whole story. *Self and Identity*, 1, 201-218.
- Vignoles, V.L., Regalia, C., Manzi, C., Golledge, J. & Scabini, E. (2006). Beyond self-esteem: Influence of multiple motives on identity construction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90, 308-333.
- Willig, C. (2007). Reflections on the use of a phenomenological method. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 4, 209-225.
- Wills, T.A. (1981). Downward comparison principles in social psychology. *Psychological Bulletin*, 90(2), 245-271.
- You, B. (2005) Children negotiating Korean American ethnic identity through their heritage language. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 29, 711-721.

## APPENDIX

### Interview schedule

1. I want to ask you something about who you are and what makes you *you*. The way I want to explore that is by getting you to answer the question 'who am I' in as many ways as you can think of.
2. Could you tell me a little bit about your (ethnic) culture?
3. Could you tell me a little about life at home and how it compares to life outside of the home?
4. If I were to ask you what the word 'mother tongue' means to you, what would be your response? - e.g. which language is your mother tongue and why do you feel it is?
5. Which languages do you speak and with whom?
6. How would it feel to address (somebody) in Urdu/Punjabi as opposed to the language that you usually speak to them in?
7. Can you think of any topics that you might discuss in one language but never in the other?
8. Can you think of any instances where you mix Punjabi/ Urdu with English? Can you give an example of this?
9. From your perspective, what would it be like if you did not know (heritage language)?
10. How do you feel about the languages that you speak?

11. How would you describe the kind of language that you use with your friends in comparison with the kind that you use with teachers?

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

Rusi Jaspal is a doctoral candidate in Social Psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London. Rusi researches the psychological processes involved in the construction of national, ethnic and linguistic identities. He is particularly interested in experiences of identity threat and the development and activation of coping strategies. Rusi has published in journals such as *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* and *Social Psychological Review*.

E-mail [rusi.jaspal@gmail.com](mailto:rusi.jaspal@gmail.com)

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

[a.coyle@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:a.coyle@surrey.ac.uk)