

**Multilingual identities in higher education: negotiating the ‘mother tongue’,  
‘posh’ and ‘slang’**

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*Introduction*

This paper examines the negotiation of multilingual identities among minority ethnic students undergoing the transition into higher education at Millennium University, a pseudonym for a post-1992<sup>1</sup> higher education institution in London. My aims are to build on studies of multilingual learners in educational settings, which in the UK have largely been in compulsory and complementary schooling (cf Conteh et al., 2007, Creese et al., 2006, Creese et al., 2008, Harris, 2006, Martin et al., 2006, Rampton, 2005, 2006), to encourage an imagining of higher education as a multilingual space in which linguistic diversity is viewed as a resource (Ruiz, 1984), and to counter the perception of 'remedial' language learners in the sector.

I start by giving an overview of the context and the data on which this paper draws. Following this, I look at the students' perceptions of their linguistic repertoires. To do this, I consider how the students position the heritage language(s) of their community in relation to English. In this paper, heritage is used to describe languages that have become part of the fabric of London life through the settlement of minority ethnic communities in the capital. In this part of the paper, three key positions are examined: heritage languages in orbit around English, heritage language as equal to English and heritage language as mother tongue. I suggest that these positions can be thought of along a continuum of weaker to stronger affiliation to heritage language that enables the students to adopt particular identity positions with their peers and in the academic community. Following this, I turn to the students as bidialectal users of English, discussing how the students position the local variety of vernacular English in use among their peers in relation to the standard English preferred in academic settings.

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1992, Millennium was a polytechnic. Along with other former polytechnics in the UK, it became a university in 1992. Post-1992 universities are also commonly referred to as ‘new’ universities.

Similarly to studies of their school-aged counterparts (Harris, 1997, 2006, Leung et al., 1997, Rampton, 2005), the students display a strong affiliation to the local vernacular, in this case London English (Harris, 2006), which they consistently refer to as ‘slang’. They construct a ‘slang/ posh’ dichotomy to contrast the language practices of their peers with those of the academic community. They make frequent use of this dichotomy, which seems likely to have become habituated during schooling, to make sense of their experiences in higher education. This is followed by a discussion exploring the identity positions that the students adopt in relation to their linguistic repertoires.

### *Context*

The research took place at Millennium University in London. London has been defined as a ‘global city’ (Block, 2006), partly because of large scale migration of people from around the globe over several millennia. The 2001 Census, for example, recorded that out of seven million inhabitants in the capital, nearly three million were from minority ethnic communities (Block, 2006, p. 56). As Peter Martin (this volume) points out, the growth in the minority ethnic population in the UK has resulted in significant shifts in the ‘linguistic ecology’ (p. 1) of the country; this is particularly the case in London and other major urban centres across Britain. Philip Baker and John Eversley (2000) document over 350 languages in use across the homes of London’s schoolchildren. As Millennium recruits more than 70 percent of its students from the London area, it attracts many students from minority ethnic communities, with these students comprising well over 50 per cent of the student body. Many of these students have grown up and continue to live in households in which English and heritage languages are in everyday use.

At the time of my study, Millennium was actively pursuing UK government policies on widening participation (WP). As discussed in the Introduction to this volume, WP involves measures to increase the number of students in higher education from groups that have historically been under-represented in the sector. In efforts to improve the retention of students from WP backgrounds, Millennium had introduced a number of WP initiatives, including an academic writing programme for home students. First-

year undergraduate students are referred to the programme following an assessment of their academic language expertise during first-year induction; very few attend out of choice. Research into the student profile on the programme (Preece and Godfrey, 2004) suggests that it is catering primarily for students categorised as working class, from ethnic minorities, particularly British of South Asian descent, young (aged between 18-21), from non-selective schools in London and with non-traditional entry qualifications<sup>2</sup> or traditional qualifications<sup>3</sup> with low grades. Most are also first generation university students, in that there is no history of higher education among their parents and elders.

The academic writing programme undoubtedly provides these students with explicit support in academic language and literacy practices that they are unlikely to receive in their departments. However, as the dominant approach to the linguistic diversity of the student population is problem-based, the programme has become associated with ‘remedial’ English and ‘fixing’ students who are perceived as in need of English language remediation. At the level of the institution, there is little, if any, sense of the ‘multilingual capital’ (Baker and Eversley, 2000) that minority ethnic home students embody, or how this linguistic diversity might be used as a ‘resource’ (Ruiz, 1984). While many of the students on the academic writing programme are multilingual, using English and one or more of the ‘top 40’ languages recorded by Baker and Eversley (2000, p. 5)<sup>4</sup>, their ‘linguistic journey’ (Martin, this volume) is to all intents and purposes invisible in the institution.

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<sup>2</sup> These entrants had generally obtained vocational qualifications or had taken an Access course in colleges of further education prior to entering Millennium.

<sup>3</sup> In the UK, universities have traditionally stipulated Advanced-level examinations (A-levels) with high grades as entry requirements for prospective UK-domiciled entrants.

<sup>4</sup> The main heritage languages included Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati, Urdu, Hindi, Tamil, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Arabic and Farsi.

## *Data*

The data were collected on the academic writing programme, on which I was a lecturer at the time, as part of a study into issues related to undergraduate identity in higher education (Preece, 2006b, 2009b). There were 93 participants in the study, who were Business and Administration first-year undergraduate students (45 women and 48 men) from working-class minority ethnic families. The majority of the participants were British-born and aged between 18-21. Prior to entering higher education, they had attended non-selective schools and/ or further education colleges, mainly in London. Many still lived at home and were combining full-time studies with part-time jobs. Some had responsibilities for caring for family members while a few of the female students were undergoing major life events, particularly those related to marriage and motherhood. All the students could be regarded as multilingual, in that their linguistic repertoires embraced English and one of the community languages common in urban areas of Britain (Martin-Jones and Jones, 2000). They were also bidialectal English speakers, routinely using vernacular English among peers and standard English in academic settings.

The data were collected over a period of two years, in which I adopted the role of lecturer and participant observer. The data consist of audio-recordings of spoken interaction of group work in class sessions, observations of the sessions, a questionnaire and two rounds of interviews, conducted after the conclusion of the academic writing programme at the beginning and end of the students' second year of studies. To aid readability in this paper, I have represented spoken interaction using turn-taking conventions when the speakers are speaking one at a time (Sacks et al., 1974), reserving the conventions of staves (Cameron, 1997, Coates, 1996, 2003) for extracts in which there is more substantial overlap. When representing the interview data, I have also used standardised spelling and punctuation, adding words and providing commentary (indicated by the use of square brackets) and omitting words (indicated by suspension points). The transcription conventions can be found in the Appendix.

In the analysis, I have treated the spoken interaction as discourse (Foucault, 1974). My approach is rooted in poststructural discourses, particularly Foucault's (1974, p. 49) notion of discourse as:

‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak ...  
Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them and in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention’.

When considering the notion of identity, I have drawn on Bucholtz and Hall's claim that identity is both ‘contextually situated’ and ‘ideologically informed’ (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 605). This involves considering how the setting and the relationship between the participants in the study are shaping the interaction at the local level. It also involves exploring the perspectives and positions that emerge from interaction with others at the local level and how these evoke broader dimensions of identity at the macro and discursive level. I have also attempted to avoid placing students into fixed identity categories (although some broad categories, such as ‘student’, ‘multilingual’, ‘minority ethnic’, ‘non-traditional’ have been necessary to provide the bigger picture), preferring instead to treat identity as fluid and negotiated.

I found the community of practice framework helpful for developing an account of the ways in which multilingual identities emerge in the setting. Defined as a ‘set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98), a community of practice is viewed at the local level and within a particular social and historical context. Its established members, referred to as ‘old-timers’, are regarded as experts in the practices of the community. New members, referred to as ‘newcomers’, learn community practices by ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, which Lave and Wenger define as ‘engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent’ (p. 35). This engagement may eventually lead to ‘full participation’ within the community although this is by no means assured. While Lave and Wenger (1991) focus on the individual's identity inside a CofP, Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (2003) discuss the way in which identity is constituted both within and across communities. As they argue:

some of these (CofP) may be more central to her construction of a self, some more peripheral, and she forges an identity in the process of balancing the self she is constructing across these communities of practice. This identity is inseparable from her participation in communities of practice, and each of these communities of practice can be defined only in terms of the interplay of the identities being constructed within it (p. 58).

The notion of ‘balancing the self’ across communities of practice facilitated a holistic examination of the students’ linguistic repertoires. Three key communities to emerge in the data in relation to language and literacy practices were: the academic community (in the students’ departments and the academic writing programme), their undergraduate peers and their families. In the following sections, I explore the negotiation of multilingual identities by first examining how the students position the heritage languages of their families in relation to English and then considering how they relate the local variety of vernacular English, routinely used by their peers, to standard English, as the variety required by the academic community.

### *Positioning heritage languages in relation to English*

In this section, I look at three ways in which the students position their heritage languages in relation to English. These can be thought of along a continuum of weaker affiliation to heritage languages/ stronger affiliation to English and stronger affiliation to heritage languages/ weaker affiliation to English. At mid point on the continuum, there is a representation of equality and balance in which the students position their heritage language(s) and English as equal. Many of the British-born students gravitate towards the weaker affiliation to heritage languages/ stronger affiliation to English end of the continuum in which they construct their heritage languages in orbit around English and reserved for family affairs, such as trips to ancestral homelands and communication with parents and elders.

## Heritage languages in orbit around English

A typical example of this position comes from one of the male participants, Tahir (aged 21). Born in London, Tahir is the second of nine children of an Urdu and Punjabi-speaking Pakistani family, who use Arabic to practise Islam. Tahir has six younger sisters, one elder and one younger brother. They all live in the parental home in London and have regular contact with members of the extended family in London and Pakistan. Tahir characterises the use of language at home as ‘mixed’:

Me and the little ones, my sisters and brother, we [speak] mixed innit? ... [My mum and dad] can speak Punjabi [and] Urdu and read it whereas we can't. We just pick up a little bit here, pick up a little bit there [and] just speak as we go along (Tahir, Interview 1).

Tahir and his siblings routinely juxtapose English, Urdu and Punjabi at home, particularly when speaking to their parents. Tahir goes on to explain that while his mother addresses them in Punjabi, they routinely reply in English or in a ‘mixture’ of English and heritage languages. Despite parental disapproval and criticism from his elders, particularly on family visits to Pakistan, Tahir does not seem overly concerned about language ‘mixing’ and presents English as the ‘natural’ language for him to use:

Our parents ... they don't like it you know you should speak either Urdu or speak Punjabi- but our parents when they come back [to England from Pakistan] they go ‘OH I think he's just come back from Pakistan they speak BEAUTIFUL Urdu’ and it's like we speak English that's the problem. We don't see it as a really big thing to tell you the truth, we speak English we're in England. It causes problems when we go back home [to Pakistan] it really DOES cause you a lot of problems.

Tahir goes on to explain that his elders view his use of language as a sign that he is ‘forgetting his roots’, a charge which Tahir does not refute. Instead, he goes on to claim that his relatives do not understand his life in the UK, implying that it is natural

for him to regard English as central to his everyday life as a young man in London (see Preece, 2006a). Tahir reinforces the centrality of English when telling me what he thinks about the languages in his life:

When I speak Urdu I think of my parents ... when I speak Punjabi for some reason I think of Sikh people, the language belongs to them ... When I speak English, I don't think of English people, I think of me. I think of me in England. When I think of Arabic, I think of religion because that's what I was there for. I went [to] Saudi Arabia and MAN it's ... just like 24-7 religion out there ... they're really mean people. Boy they're aggressive out there man! They go mad!

Tahir positions English as the central and dominant language in his life. He styles himself as an English native speaker in which it is natural for him to use English. He also constructs English as the language in which he thinks of himself as an individual, suggesting that he associates English with the freedom to act as a young man unfettered by family relationships and responsibilities. This is in contrast to his heritage languages, which Tahir links to other people. Tahir places his heritage languages 'in orbit' around English, with Urdu the closest, followed by Punjabi and with Arabic at the outer extremes. Tahir's association of Urdu with his parents is suggestive of a parent-son positioning, in which Urdu is the preferred language of his parents and family community, with Tahir using it to conform to family practices. Despite the use of Punjabi and Arabic by his family, Tahir associates the former with Sikhs, rather than any closer emotional affiliation, and the latter with Muslim pilgrims on Hadj in Saudi Arabia. His depiction of these pilgrims as 'really mean', 'aggressive' and 'going mad' suggests that he would prefer to distance himself from his family's religious practices, at least within the context of higher education.

Tahir routinely displays weaker affiliation to his heritage languages and stronger affiliation to English. This was a common position adopted by the second generation, British-born minority ethnic students in the study. When depicting the relationship between English and his heritage languages, many of the students present English as central to their lives as young men and women in London and place their heritage



languages in orbit around English. However, there are some variations to this position, which allow the students to display stronger affiliations to their heritage languages. One of the alternative positions is to present heritage languages and English in an equal relationship, as will be discussed in the next section.

## **Heritage languages as equal to English**

Midway along the continuum of weaker affiliation to heritage languages/ stronger affiliation to English and stronger affiliation to heritage languages/ weaker affiliation to English is a representation of equality and balance between the languages in the students' lives. In this midway position, the students present themselves as having equal expertise and affiliation to English and to their parental languages and heritage culture. When adopting this position, the students make no distinction regarding expertise.

A typical example of a student who routinely adopts this position when discussing her heritage languages in the interview setting is Aisha (aged 19). In common with Tahir, Aisha was born and educated in London and is the oldest of three children of an Urdu and Punjabi-speaking Pakistani family. She lives at home with her parents, two younger sisters and an uncle and maintains regular contact with her relatives in Pakistan through visits and letters. Aisha reports using Urdu with her mother, who she presents as speaking very little English, and mixing English and Urdu in conversations with her father. When I asked her about the languages that she used at home, she comments:

English I would say is my everyday language, I think in English as well ... it's part of my everyday. Urdu is ... part of my everyday as well ... I communicate with my parents in Urdu [and] the rest of my family. So English and Urdu are both equal in my mind ... And Punjabi I hear everyday anyway because my parents talk it at home. (Aisha, Interview 1)

Unlike Tahir, Aisha represents English and Urdu in an equal relationship. She presents herself as operating equally effectively in English and Urdu and equally

affiliated to both. Punjabi, her other heritage language, appears added as an afterthought, as a language that she routinely hears but chooses not to use. Aisha describes the way that she learned Urdu at home with her mother as a small child:

When I was really really young my mom used to read to me in Urdu she used to speak to me in Urdu she used to you know show me Urdu books and everything that is why I picked it up as I went along

Aisha goes on to discuss how she studied Urdu at school, taking it as a subject for both GCSE and A-level examinations, and how she still views her mother as having a key role in helping her improve her Urdu. In several places in the data, Aisha relates Urdu to her mother in ways that suggest that Urdu facilitates a close mother-daughter relationship that Aisha is keen to maintain. Aisha also relates her language affiliations to the desire to feel included in social gatherings of family and friends:

A: Because everyone else is speaking Urdu as well so you don't want to feel left out as well but you want to be a part of it as well so you know more Urdu

SP: Right okay ... what about with your friends?

A: all the time all the time English it is the same thing as my sisters so it is just in the environment like in uni it is English everyone speaks English so you wanna be part of it so you speak English

While Tahir presents himself as infrequently participating in spoken interaction in family gatherings, Aisha reports making frequent contributions in Urdu at family events. Her desire to 'be part of it', whether with friends or her family, also appears to have acted as a motivating factor for her to maintain and develop her expertise in Urdu and to display equal affiliation to both Urdu and English. While she presents Urdu and English in balance, Aisha distances herself from Punjabi, which she describes as sounding as if 'you're fighting' and 'rude'. When discussing visits to Pakistan, she also associates Punjabi with her elders and Urdu with her contemporaries, suggesting that this is indicative of a 'generation gap':

But mostly all my cousins communicate in Urdu it is just maybe once or twice that their parents say to speak Punjabi but it is like ... maybe a generation gap, the older generation speak Punjabi and the younger generation speak Urdu. I don't know why that is but I think they just prefer Urdu.

Perhaps Aisha relates Urdu to a younger and more cosmopolitan generation in Pakistan with whom she can identify, while Punjabi may represent more traditional views and outlooks that seem remote from her life as a young woman in London.

Despite her ambivalence towards Punjabi, Aisha routinely presents an equal affiliation to Urdu, as her heritage language, and English. While this was a less common position than heritage languages 'in orbit' around English, several of the British-born students adopt this midway position, suggesting that it is important for them to display a positive disposition to their heritage languages in the context of the University. A more radical positioning among the British-born students was to display weaker affiliation to English and stronger affiliation to their heritage languages, presenting the heritage language both as the mother tongue and the language of choice, to which I shall now turn.

### **Heritage language as mother tongue**

While many of the students born overseas who arrived in the UK as young adults display a weaker affiliation to English/ stronger affiliation to heritage languages, there are also a small number of British-born students who routinely adopt positions at this end of the continuum. In common with their counterparts born overseas, they construct their heritage language as their mother tongue and the most meaningful language in life; this appears to be regardless of their level of expertise in their heritage language in relation to English. In the case of British-born students, the adoption of this position seems primarily associated with political discourses related to Diaspora communities, particularly those communities that have been forced to flee and seek asylum, and interrelated with an expressed desire to return to an 'imagined homeland' (Anderson, 2006).

One student who routinely adopts the position of heritage language as mother tongue is Sita. In common with Tahir and Aisha, Sita (aged 20) was born in London. As the oldest of two children of a Sri Lankan Tamil family, Sita lives at home with her parents and younger sister. Like Aisha, Sita represents her mother as fostering her use of her heritage language from infancy. It also seems likely that Tamil has helped Sita to maintain a close relationship with her mother, particularly as her mother has taught her traditional Tamil music and she spends time with her mother watching Tamil films and listening to Tamil songs. When asked about this, Sita responds with:

Tamil is our mother tongue language. When we watch films and listen to songs, and because I learnt [Tamil] music with my mum, I tend to use more Tamil ... When [my mum] describes things to me ... she tends to speak in Tamil and I have to reply in Tamil [because] there are things we can't talk [about] in English... Like dance ... when I have to express my feelings for a certain character, the teacher always explains it ... in Tamil rather than in English because it's more easier to follow (Sita, Interview 1).

Besides representing Tamil as her 'mother tongue', Sita suggests that the world she inhabits with her mother is constructed primarily in Tamil and that English cannot sustain this relationship. Sita also represents Tamil as embodied, as a language in which she can express feelings. Some of these have been learned in dance classes that Sita has taken since early childhood. Sita goes on to explain the use of movement and facial expressions in Tamil dance, suggesting that she has come to associate particular movements and expressions, as well as language, with Tamil identity.

Unlike Tahir and Aisha's parents, Sita's family came to the UK as refugees from the civil war in Sri Lanka. Sita makes frequent reference to the political situation in Sri Lanka and this seems to be a powerful influence on her affiliation with Tamil and her adopting the position of Tamil as her mother tongue. Additionally, Sita has attended a Tamil complementary school since she was an infant, where she studies Tamil language and culture and teaches traditional Tamil dancing. Commenting on the role of this school, she explains its importance in maintaining the community in exile:

We have so many different festivals [when] each comes ... you learn more things ... and you find out more stories ... why [these customs are] still going on ... it's something different and you ... keep it between yourselves, you ... keep your culture ... I have to still keep my part of the world, keep my part of the language, my part of the culture. I can't actually lose that because if I don't learn, if I don't know my culture, eventually it's going to disappear ... so we have to carry it forward, keep it with us.

Throughout the data, Sita appears keen to explain the Tamil cause and associate this with her desire to maintain her Tamil identity. Sita suggests that the civil war has dislocated her from Sri Lanka, as her 'imagined homeland' (Anderson, 2006). In the circumstances, Sita regards it as her duty to maintain Tamil as her 'mother tongue', not only to maintain Tamil identity, but also to ensure that she can teach the children that she imagines she will have:

At the moment there's a war going on in Sri Lanka ... if the war wasn't going on, people wouldn't be coming ... to this country and I may have been born in Sri Lanka. All our people live there ... but we've moved to ... a first world country [where] people tend to mix ... westerners [and people from] different ... parts of the world. Eventually when I have children ... if I don't learn my own language, how [are] my children going to carry [the language] forward? ... If I don't learn my own language or my culture, you can't live together later on ... we need to carry on ... we need to carry this language (i.e. Tamil) through our life ... if we don't, we can't identify ourselves can we?

Sita routinely displays stronger affiliation to her heritage language and weaker affiliation to English. For some of the British-born students, this seems to be a political stance, as a method of fulfilling a duty to maintain the Diaspora in exile. In Sita's case, it also appears to be associated with a traditional gendered role, in which women are positioned as "guardians of the home language" (Pavlenko and Piller, 2001, 27) with, as Aneta Pavlenko and Ingrid Piller comment, primary responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the community through transmitting heritage practices.

While the students were discussing language use in their families, they made little, if any, reference to different varieties of English. When the focus was on the language of the academic community, however, all presented themselves as bidialectal, making a sharp differentiation between ‘slang’, which referred to the local variety of vernacular English, and ‘posh’, the standard English in use in higher education. This bidialectal relationship will be discussed in the following section.

### *Positioning vernacular English in relation to standard English*

Research into British South Asians pathways into secondary education in the UK (Abbas, 2007) suggests that children from working class Asian families experience similar problems in accessing high performing schools as their Anglo counterparts. According to Tahir Abbas (2007), a divide has arisen between British Asian children from professional, middle-class backgrounds and those from working-class and poorer families. Abbas contrasts the ‘hot knowledge’ gained in social networks of professional middle-class South Asian parents in the UK about elite schools and how to increase their children’s chances of admission to these schools. He argues that working-class South Asian parents lack the finances and cultural capital to work the British educational system in the same way. As one of his participants, an unemployed Pakistani father with children in a non-selective secondary school, points out:

Not every child can go to a grammar school. This is a concern for all parents. For that you need to have tutors visit your home. I am uneducated myself. I have no money to pay for tutors because I’m unemployed. Those that enter grammar school are children with parents who are educated, who can support, who can provide tuition themselves, some are doctors, some are engineers, some are managers, some are whatever. It is the children of these parents that get tuition in the home and it is they who go to grammar school. For [third class] people like us, we are happy if our children make it to college.  
(Translated from Urdu; [] indicates original use of English) (Abbas, 2007: 85).

According to Abbas, this is creating a divide in the British South Asian community in which British Asian children attending non-selective schools feel less able to ‘speak the language’ of institutions than their selective school counterparts (Abbas, 2007, p. 82). This impression of not being able to ‘speak the language’ of higher education pervades my data and is illustrated in Tahir’s comments about the language demands of one of his first year undergraduate subjects:

That [subject] is probably the one that we did the most reading on and ... it was really good quality English ... they ain't using slang, they use proper English so we had to write in [proper] English ... so we used to spend most of our time trying to revise the way they've written it and what they've written ... but it was hard, that was proper hard (Tahir, Interview 2).

In common with his British-born peers on the academic writing programme, Tahir makes a distinction between the vernacular variety of English he prefers, referring to this as ‘slang’ and the standard English preferred by the institution. For the majority of the British-born students, ‘slang’ refers to London English, as the dialect they use among peers. This dialect has been characterised by Roxy Harris (2006) as denoting ‘Londonness’ among adolescents (see Harris, 2006 for detailed discussion of the features of London English). The students seem to have much in common with the British bilingual school pupils described by Constant Leung and Charlotte Franson (2001) as ‘fluent in vernacular spoken English for everyday spoken purposes and familiar with the local culture ..., but ... (less) conversant with academic uses of English’.

Tahir illustrates the way in which he and his peers construct ‘slang’ in opposition to the language practices of the academic community. His referral to the language of the institution as ‘proper English’ or ‘good quality’ conforms to dominant institutional norms regulating English and highlights the marginalised status of vernacular varieties of English and its negative connotations within educational settings. His use of a ‘we/ they’ binary indicates the distance that Tahir feels between the preferred English language practices of his fellow undergraduate peers and those of the

academic community and highlights power relations in that students are required to conform to the norms of academics, as the dominant group.

Another example of this binary comes from an interaction among three female students during a class session, concerning the appropriate way of talking at work, university and with friends. The interaction is between Leela (aged 19), from a Gujarati-speaking family, Biba (aged 22) from an Arabic-speaking Moroccan family and Awino (aged 32), a mature Kenyan student from a Swahili-speaking family. Leela and Biba were both British-born and educated whereas Awino had been born and educated in Kenya. She came to Britain in her early twenties and worked for over ten years before entering higher education.

L=Leela, B=Biba, A=Awino

(1)

B: at WORK/ I tend not to speak like that/ or at uni in lectures or seminars/ I

(2)

L: [meaning-

B: try not to speak like that/ [like this (.)

A: what do you mean (.) like that?

(3)

L: [<laughs>

B: “d’you know what I mean?” <exaggerated Cockney voice> [“know what

A:

(4)

L:

B: I [mean?” (.) yeah/ [speak properly (.) erm (.) BUT with

A: [oh/ you try to speak properly/ [of course/

(5)



- L: [yeah/  
 B: your FRIENDS MAINly/ [I speak slang/ it just comes out  
 A: [yeah (.) [yeah/  
 (6)  
 L:  
 B: naturally/ I try to prevent it but it's very difficult in that sense  
 A: yeah/

In the opening utterance, Biba reveals that she attempts to prevent herself from using London English when she is at university and work. Her use of 'I tend not to speak like that' indicates an assumption on her part that both Biba and Awino will understand her covert reference to the local vernacular. Awino, however, does not immediately recognise this reference and seeks clarification (stave 2). In an overlapping turn, both Biba and Leela start to explain with Biba adopting a stylised Cockney accent (Rampton, 2006) to make her point and emphasise the transgressive nature of this variety of English in institutional settings. Awino's interjection ('you try to speak properly') before the end of Biba's turn (stave 4) indicates her awareness of the negative connotations associated with the vernacular. Biba's repetition of Awino's utterance (stave 5) reproduces standard English as the norm. Her juxtaposition of speaking 'properly' with 'slang' (staves 5-6) highlights the contrasting practices of peers and the institution. Her depiction of 'slang' as 'coming out naturally' (stave 6) suggests that standard English feels alien and unnatural and requires a conscious effort to use. The way in which Biba constructs slang as 'natural' also indicates affiliation to vernacular as an embodied practice, as a marker of her membership of her peer group and important to her identity.

This interaction is typical among the female participants, who often expressed the view that they censored their linguistic behaviour in formal settings and with 'posh' people, suggesting attention to social class and status. According to Janet Holmes (1998), individuals tend to gravitate towards more standard ways of speaking in formal contexts and when they wish to be sensitive towards the face of an interlocutor

representing authority. As it is likely that the participants viewed lectures and seminars as formal events and their lecturers as figures of institutional authority, it suggests that these female students were orienting to the language norms of the more powerful group, against which their academic performance would be assessed.

In terms of their undergraduate peers, Biba, Leela and Awino suggest that the ‘posh/slang’ binary plays an important role in helping students to fit in and form social networks:

1. L: when we came ‘ere <to Millennium> (.) I mean/ if I saw a posh person I actually spoke posh with them/ but if I saw somebody who was (.) happy with their slang/ I spoke slang with them/ and I think that’s how you socialise with them/
2. A: yeah/
3. B: it’s how you adapt to different people [that’s what adapting is about/
4. A: [yeah/ you’ve got to adapt/ yeah/
5. L: yeah/
6. B: adapting to different people an’ their cultures (.) y’know/ an’ their backgrounds

First-year undergraduates need to establish new social relationships with others in their year group during the process of transition into higher education. Within literature on student retention, this is frequently discussed in terms of ‘social integration’ in which a major preoccupation for first-year undergraduate students is forming new social relations with peers (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 2003). Leela’s narrative is illustrative of the desire of many undergraduates to establish social networks with their fellow students. In order to do this, some of the female students adopt a strategy of being flexible and adaptable that results in speaking ‘posh’ with one group of potential friends and ‘slang’ with another. Leela, Biba and Awino appear to share a common understanding of how they identify a person as posh as none of them question the meaning of this. It seems likely that they categorise students based partly on social class norms for appearance, language and behaviour. It suggests that the students pay attention to the ‘soundscape’ (Harris, 2006), accommodating to the

accents and conversational styles of their fellow peers as a way of fitting in and making friends. The adaptability appears to be one-sided in that they do not expect 'posh' students to use 'slang', the onus is on them to adapt. Being able to present different selves, constituted through using different languages and language varieties, does not seem to be viewed as contradictory, or disingenuous. Instead, these female participants seem to consider this as a practical way of navigating life and social relationships, outside the familiar settings of the family and adolescent friends, and as part of adult life.

The 'slang/ posh' binary is also alluded to in classroom talk in which the students are attempting to make sense of academic language and literacy practices. In many cases, the students contrast the language and literacy practices of their peers with those of the academic community, as the following interaction between Lalit (aged 19), Darvesh (aged 20) and Salman (aged 25) illustrates:

L=Lalit, S=Salman, Darvesh

1. D: there's a totally different type of um (.) writing that you have to do/  
when you're writing up (.) um assignments/ compared to/
2. L: yeah/ exactly/
3. D: writing out informal letters to your friends/ or emails or whatever (.)  
you're not bothered about [spellin:gs/ or about grammar:/ an' so on (.)
4. L: [that's it
5. D: jus' writing it/
6. L: yeah/
7. D: you're very COMfortable/ when you're writing letters innit? (.) you're  
not pressured [(.) under pressure like (.) that's it/
8. L: [yeah/ (.) you write like (.) messages as well like=  
=whatever you're thinking (.) whatever you just write it straight out/  
innit?
10. L: yeah/

11. D: an' (.) the spelling mistakes you did (.) the short hand y'know/ what I mean/ they don't bother you for the simple reason (.) doesn't matter to you=  
12. L: =your friend's probably made the same mistakes [ANYway (.)  
13. D: [exactly  
14. L: they're on your (.) they're on your mentality (.) yeah=  
15. D: =cos when you're/ when you're writing essays (.) it's like you: (.) you have to do [(.) you have to DRAFTS man/ you have to do DRAFTS=  
16. S: [%drafts%  
17. L: =yeah/  
18. D: and then you fucking read over what you wrote  
19. All [<hilarious laughter for 8 seconds>

In this interaction, the language and literacy practices of the peer group are constructed in opposition to those of higher education. Darvesh, Lalit and Salman start by focusing on what they find positive about their peer group practices. This enables them to discuss academic literacy practices indirectly, by comparing them to peer group practices. Darvesh's construction of writing in the peer group as 'comfortable' and 'not pressured' (turn 7) suggests that he finds writing in higher education a cause of discomfort and pressure, while his assertions about spelling mistakes and 'short hand' (turn 11) suggests that the practices common among peers have not found favour with their lecturers. Lalit's reference to sharing the same 'mentality' as their peers (turn 14) implies that there are misunderstandings and miscommunication with members of the academic community. The mood is lightened by a joke about the common academic practice of writing drafts. The joke is signalled through Darvesh's intonation (turn 15) while the 'punch line' (turn 18) is understood as a cue for extended laughter and signals a move to a humorous section of talk. The laughter seems to lighten the potentially face-threatening position of being categorised as in need of English language remediation by the institution.

The 'posh/ slang' binary is also used to link life stage and linguistic behaviour, particularly by the female students:

B=Biba, L=Leela, A=Awino

1. B: well I DO feel (.) sometimes I'm- I'm sitting there/ and I'm just speaking SLANG with my friends/ and I think (1) this just doesn't (.) you're PAST that stage of life/
2. L: yeah/
3. B: un- until you [get over it (.) COME on GIRL (.) know what I mean?
4. L: [*<laughs>*]

Here Biba associates speaking slang with friendship and a youthful life stage, suggested through the naming of herself as 'girl'. The tone of 'girl' and the accompanying laughter is also suggestive of girl power discourses that encourage young women to emulate a sassy, glamorous ladette femininity oriented to celebrity, behaving badly and avoiding seriousness (Whelehan, 2000). The claim to be 'past that stage of life' suggests that the transition into higher education involves demonstrating that they are young adults; 'posh' appears to signify a readiness to take on adult life. Speaking 'slang', on the other hand, appears to refer to the private world of peers outside the university, a time of late adolescence and a relatively carefree existence.

### *Discussion*

The students adopted a variety of multilingual and bidialectal identity positions. It seems likely that these were shaped by the context of the study, particularly the experience of being categorised as in need of English language remediation and being required to take a discrete academic writing programme. While the students experience linguistic diversity as commonplace in their everyday lives, often discussing this as matter of fact, institutional norms and practices construct this diversity primarily as a problem. This focuses attention on the students' linguistic repertoires at an atomistic, rather than holistic, level. Rather than focusing on 'language as resource' (Ruiz, 1984), by considering what linguistic resources the students brought into the University and how these might be used, the attention is primarily on 'language as problem' (ibid), in which students are categorised as in need of English language remediation or not. This ensured that the academic writing

programme carried the stigma of ‘remedial’ English. At institutional level, there was also a lack of awareness of the monolingual norms and values that underpinned these practices.

In relation to heritage languages, these circumstances may well have encouraged the British-born students to downplay their heritage languages and present themselves as weakly affiliated to heritage languages/ strongly affiliated to English. Heritage languages carried little value within the institution; very few lecturers accorded opportunities for the students to use these (see Preece, 2009b for further discussion) and students were expected to keep the languages and language varieties in their repertoires compartmentalised. This is at odds with the linguistic practices in their family settings, in which all the British-born students reported that it was commonplace for them to juxtapose English with heritage language(s) (see Creese et al., 2006, Creese et al., 2008, Martin et al., 2006 for a discussion of this phenomenon in complementary schooling).

For Muslim students, displaying weaker affiliation to heritage languages may also have been encouraged by the post 9/11 political climate. In Britain, there has not only been increasing moral panic about young Muslim men, but also an increasing focus on British universities as potential sites for Islamic fundamentalism. Young British-born Muslim students, such as Tahir, may have thought it politic to distance themselves from family practices in the context of higher education, particularly those associated with Islam, in order to appear unthreatening in the institution. Finally, as I have discussed elsewhere, popular cultural discourses also shape the students’ affiliation to heritage languages. It is likely that displays of affiliation to heritage languages are constrained by the attractiveness of popular cultural discourses among peers, particularly those related to laddishness (see Preece, 2006a, 2009a, b). For the British-born students, the practices of the peer group and academic community do not afford much space for displays of affiliation to heritage languages.

Nonetheless, there were some British-born students who presented themselves as positively disposed to their heritage languages. For those who adopted a midway position on the continuum, in which they positioned their heritage languages and

English as equal, this enabled them to style themselves as positively disposed to and knowledgeable about their heritage culture. In cases where students were in regular contact with friends and family members in ancestral homelands, this was suggestive of transnational identity positions. As Block (2006) comments, transnationalism involves migrants in maintaining ‘simultaneous, social, political and economic ties with two or more nation-states’.

In several cases, a positive disposition to heritage languages was also suggestive of multicultural discourses. Within compulsory education, multiculturalism has been used to recognise and celebrate the ethnic diversity of schools, particularly in cities such as London. Some of the students discussed ways in which their schools had attended to the multicultural composition of their student population through offering heritage languages, such as Urdu, as part of the mainstream curriculum. In Aisha’s case, her multilingualism was recognised to some degree in her compulsory schooling. Perhaps her presentation of heritage languages as equal to English was shaped by her school’s more positive attitude to multilingualism and an assumption that she would find the same attitude at Millennium.

For those British-born students who positioned their heritage language as mother tongue, this facilitated an authoritative voice in which they could inform others about the situation in their heritage culture. Within the interview context, this also allowed for some subversion of the asymmetrical lecturer/student relationship. In Sita’s case, for example, she took the opportunity to educate me about the political situation in Sri Lanka. In this respect, the interview created a space for Sita to talk and be heard as a ‘legitimate speaker’ (Bourdieu, 1977) on this subject, an opportunity that she had not previously been given in the institution. Within the context of the academic writing programme, portraying heritage languages and cultures in a more positive light may also have been a method of maintaining self-esteem in the light of the stigma associated with being labelled as in need of English language remediation.

In relation to English, all the students constructed themselves as bidialectal. They made frequent use of the ‘posh/ slang’ binary to make sense of their experiences in higher education. This binary appears to help the students to go about the business of

forming new social networks with their fellow peers. It enables them to categorise their peers as ‘posh’ or not and identify who may share the ‘same mentality’. It may also facilitate the establishment of networks of more homogeneous groups of similar age and social class background who self identify as Londoners and/ or are attracted to laddish activities, particularly through practices that involve having a laugh, effortless appearing cool and/ or acting tough (Jackson, 2006, Whelehan, 2000).

Some of the students, particularly the women, depict themselves as prepared to switch between ‘posh’ and ‘slang’ in an effort to make friends with students from different backgrounds from themselves. In these cases, despite seeming alien and an effort to use, standard English is perceived as useful insofar as it facilitates new social relationships and entry into the institutional world. While discussing their views of their fellow peers, the students did not make reference to ‘mixing’ or juxtaposing ‘slang’ and ‘posh’; these varieties appear strictly separated in their minds and associated with different identity positions. ‘Slang’ appears reserved for qualities that are attractive for the students, primarily with enacting cool, youthful, laddish and streetwise identities. ‘Posh’, on the other hand, is frequently portrayed as unattractive and used to ascribe individuals as uncool, mature, reserved, snobbish and lacking in streetwise credentials.

The ‘posh/ slang’ binary also enables the students to characterise academic practices as ‘Other’ and alien while representing ‘slang’ as ‘natural’ and embodied. It seems likely that presenting themselves as expert users of ‘slang’ and as highly affiliated to it was a way of countering an institutional positioning as ‘remedial’ English language users. While there was evidence of both resistance and conformity to the notion that they were in need of English language remediation, there are many more instances of resistance among the young men and more instances of conformity among the women and some of the more mature males. A compelling claim in much research into masculinities in compulsory education (cf Frosh et al., 2002, Jackson, 2006, Mac an Ghail, 1994, Willis, 1977) is that the social positioning of young men in groups designated as low ability encourages the construction of an anti-establishment masculinity in response to feelings of ‘domination, alienation and infantilism’ (Mac an Ghail, 1994, 57). Young men in higher education do not appear immune from



these feelings when placed in groups categorised as educationally deficient. In the case of Darvesh, Lalit and Salman, they were able to laugh their way out of the difficult institutional ascription with which they were obliged to contend. As Jennifer Coates (2003, 56) points out, laughter in all-male talk can act as a way of managing vulnerability ‘in a rather tangential way’ while Paul Willis (1977, 29) describes the lads’ “laff” as a ‘multi-faceted implement’ used ‘as a way out of almost anything’, including situations generating anxieties. The female participants appear to accept the need to accommodate, to some extent, to the language practices of the more powerful community of practice if they are to succeed within it. In these circumstances, they construct ‘posh’ English as a means to an end. It may be that this identification is less threatening to social relations among young British-born female peers than their male counterparts.

### *Conclusion*

In this article, I have looked at ways in which British-born minority ethnic undergraduate students from WP backgrounds negotiate multilingual identities within the context of higher education. While all present themselves as multilingual, they negotiate this dimension of their identity by adopting a variety of positions in relation to their linguistic repertoires. For some, the heritage language is an important marker of their identity in higher education. Regardless of expertise, these students position their heritage language as their mother tongue or at least as having equal status to English. These positions allow the students to speak with an authoritative voice on their heritage culture and to educate others, including their lecturers, about the situation in their ancestral homeland and their family community of practice. This can be seen as a way of subverting asymmetrical lecturer/ student relationships and of coping with, or countering, an institutional positioning as ‘remedial’ and in need of English language remediation. For many, however, a dominant positioning is to present heritage languages ‘in orbit’ around English and to construct English as the most significant, and most ‘natural’, language in their lives. It seems likely that this position is encouraged by two key factors: the institutional setting, in which monolingualism is the norm and in which the ‘multilingual capital’ (Baker and Eversley, 2000) that the students bring into the university is barely recognised, and

the attractiveness of a youthful 'low-key Britishness' (Harris, 2006) that is attuned to discourses of popular and laddish culture.

When relating the language and literacy practices of the peer group to those of the institution, like their school counterparts, the students use a 'posh/slang' binary. This binary appears highly salient and is a way in which young British-born minority ethnic students from WP backgrounds navigate their transition from schooling into higher education. In accordance with studies of adolescents (Harris, 2006, Leung et al., 1997, Rampton, 2006), 'slang' is presented as the variety of English with which they are most comfortable and that is the most 'natural' to use. This facilitates the negotiation of youthful and streetwise identities that are oriented to laddishness. Within the context of transition into higher education, the local vernacular enables students, such as the ones discussed here, to identify peers from the local area with similar educational and social class backgrounds with whom they can establish friendships. In my study, this seemed particularly important for the young British males but it may also have curtailed their efforts to make friends with students from a wider variety of backgrounds. Representing the self as a competent user of 'slang' is also a way of resisting a positioning in the institution as in need of English language remediation and the stigma of being viewed as 'remedial'. It is also suggestive of alienation and trepidation about the posh 'Other' that higher education invites students from WP backgrounds to become. While some of the female students in my study appeared ready to balance their 'slang' and 'posh' selves, most of the students seemed reluctant to embrace the 'posh' language and literacy practices of the academic community and to display academic knowledge. This may well be a hangover from schooling, in which students learn to balance (or not) popularity and high academic achievement to avoid the risk of being ostracized (Francis, forthcoming, Frosh et al., 2002, Jackson, 2006); as such, it seems related to life stage, gender and popular culture.

As students from WP backgrounds are more vulnerable to drop out and exclusion than their more traditional counterparts, it seems to me that universities have a particular duty of care to helping these students settle into academic life. Given the attraction of higher education for minority ethnic communities in the UK (Modood, 2004), policies

and practices are required that are sensitive to the ‘linguistic journey’ that these students undertake while at university. As a first step, I propose a move away from approaches to English language and academic literacy in the sector that treat the language practices of home students as a problem that needs to be fixed. While not wishing to over romanticise the linguistic repertoires of home students (Block, 2008, Harris, 1997, 2006), there is a need to discuss ways of imagining higher education as a multilingual space and how the linguistic diversity of the student body can be used as an asset. It is my contention that efforts in this direction will contribute to more effective and rewarding educational experiences for minority ethnic students in the sector.

## *Appendix*

### **Transcription Conventions**

Following Cameron (1997) and Coates (1996; 2003), conventions are as follows:

Staves are numbered: reading the transcription in each staff shows the interplay of the voices at that part of the conversation (like the instruments in a musical score).

- / indicates the end of a chunk of talk.
- illustrates an incomplete word or utterance.
- ? indicates question intonation.
- : indicates elongation of a vowel sound.
- “ ” indicates the speaker is adopting the voice of another person or a stylised accent.
- (.) indicates pauses of less than one second.
- (3) indicates pauses of one second and longer timed to the nearest second and the number of seconds put in brackets.
- [ indicates the point where speakers overlap.
- [ indicates the point where speakers overlap.
- = indicates no audible gap between utterances.
- (( )) around a word or phrase indicate some doubt about accuracy of transcription.
- ((xx)) indicates part of utterance is indecipherable.
- < > indicates additional comment by myself as the transcriber on what is happening at the time or the way in which something is said.
- CAPITALS indicate raised volume.
- % indicates lowered volume.

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