

# NEGOTIATING BELONGING: DISCOURSE ON CULTURE AND LANGUAGE FOR MIGRANTS FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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## Introduction

This article is based on a research report *Voices from the Global South*, which was compiled by the authors on behalf of the Centre for Global Education (CGE). The research involved the collection of twelve biographical narratives from individuals who have come to live in Northern Ireland from the global South. The interviewees represented three research target groups: first generation migrants; second generation migrants; and refugees/asylum seekers. These stories have helped to identify key issues in relation to the life experiences of the individuals who participated in the research. The interviewees were born in countries as diverse as China, El Salvador, India, Iraq, Kenya, Malaysia, Sudan and Zimbabwe; four individuals were also born in the United Kingdom (UK), but maintained family connections in other countries. Two individuals were of Indian heritage, one with connections to the Cape Verde islands and one with Guyana. Despite the small sample size, the narratives gathered were useful in identifying initial patterns in relation to the life experiences of first and second generation migrants living in the global North.

In this article, we focus on the interrelated issues of language and culture which participants noted as major factors affecting their sense of belonging in Northern Ireland. This was not only an issue at the individual level, but was also a major factor in shaping the nature of the relationship between migrants and their host communities as well as shaping the nature of relations within migrant groups/communities themselves. Language and culture have increasingly been viewed as major elements in these processes and have come to be identified by a number of previous studies (Holder, 2003; Bell, et al., 2004; NicCraith, et al., 2008; Odhiambo, 2008; McDermott, 2008;). The question of culture and minority languages has also been noted as a major element of the Northern Ireland peace process with both the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998) and the Shared Future policy strategy (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005) placing great emphasis on these areas as a means to promoting respect for diversity and widened participation.

## Language

For first generation migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, language barriers have often impinged on the capacity of individuals to access services, gain employment and communicate with the host communities. One first generation Chinese participant noted that language was a unifying factor within the Chinese community but the lack of English language knowledge restricted communication with the wider community. Speaking through an interpreter she said:

“When I came over at the beginning there were a lot of Chinese people together and we all spoke the same language. Sometimes local people wanted to speak to us, but we could only speak a little English....It was sometimes embarrassing and then other times you felt that you were wasting another person’s time because you couldn’t speak the language” (Rose, 2009).

This was also noted by Norjehan a first generation migrant from Malaysia:

“Some here cannot master the language, even after staying here for a long time. Malaysians here don’t mix much with the local communities...Malaysians love one another too much, they are like family. It is good and it is also bad” (Norjehan, 2009).

Even for those with a high standard of English, Northern Ireland accents have sometimes caused communication difficulties for migrants and to some extent, settled ethnic minorities. One Indian student living in Northern Ireland stated:

“When I started in the pizza place over here I used to be on the phone all of the time, but it was very difficult for me with the accent and it wasn’t my English at all, it was the accent, it was just so strong” (Shaez, 2009).

However, problems for more recently arrived groups with no English skills go much deeper than difficulties with local dialects. Some participants noted a need for services such as translation and interpretation, which are not always available. An Iraqi participant noted that the problems were not limited to spoken English, with a written command of the language also important due to the high level of bureaucracy in relation to public services and job seeking. He commented:

“Language would be the main problem. We speak Arabic in Iraq but we do have access to the translators here in Northern Ireland. Most Iraqis would need help filling out application forms” (Amin, 2009).

Another refugee noted that his English language ability had caused him difficulty in finding a job but that he was attempting to improve his chances by studying English at a local college. He stated:

“I have great limitations to working in the UK as my English is poor. However, I am studying English in Belfast Metropolitan College. Maybe soon my situation will change and maybe I can get a teaching job here, like teaching Arabic which is what I was doing before in Sudan. My employer has been very good and patient with me especially considering the fact I do not speak English very well” (Ibrahim, 2009).

This shows that English language acquisition is a voluntary and personal pursuit but with barriers such as irregular work patterns, this is not always well facilitated. If this issue is not addressed, immigrants will continue to face associated difficulties, including: access to proper healthcare, education, and unequal competition in the job markets. This particular situation could be addressed with greater appreciation of multilingualism at policy level. Northern Ireland and the UK are not monolingual societies, therefore the state should emphasise the positive aspects of a multilingual presence in our society whilst also addressing issues of acute language barriers facing immigrants or the host community. This can enrich local society and culture and potentially strengthen the economy.

For second generation participants, the issues around language were related more towards issues of connection or loss with aspects of their heritage. A number of participants commented on how second generations often did not know the language of their parents or grandparents, which in some cases caused communication problems with relatives or symbolised elements of cultural loss. A young second generation Indian woman explained that she had become very aware of this issue but that she found it difficult to learn a language that she had not been brought up speaking:

“Well I don’t speak Hindi at all...My Mum always says to my dad ‘you should have taught them Hindi when they were younger’. I think though that Hindi is a very hard language to learn. It probably now

would be even harder for because I have such a broad Strabane accent as well!” (Kamini, 2009)

Another second generation participant, whose father had come to live in the UK from Cape Verde, explained that her lack of Portuguese language skills had meant that she had little direct contact with family still living in Cape Verde:

“We have a kind of secondary contact with them through him because there are a million language barriers.... For me though the contact that I have with my father’s family is only secondary because of that language barrier, which is a real shame” (Abby, 2009).

Abby has attempted to learn Portuguese, which she sees as a very important way of improving her ability to communicate with her father’s family, as well as reconnecting with an important aspect of her own heritage. Her desire was also driven by Northern Ireland’s increasingly multilingual and multicultural environment:

“I have actually met a couple of people here in Northern Ireland from Cape Verde. I was shocked to bits when I first met them...It did spark something and made me realise the importance of starting to research that part of my own history, because I would like to get to know some of these people more” (Abby, 2009).

## Culture

The celebration of cultural events, whether in private or public, was commonplace among many of the interviewees and similarly important in creating relationships both within communities and with the wider society. One participant noted that the simple freedom to express one’s culture and way of life openly is a very positive aspect of life in Northern Ireland:

“The culture is different here; I dress the way I like, the food we eat here, the freedom the government affords me as a resident. Also, religion here is much of a personal choice than everybody’s way of life” (Amin, 2009).

For some migrant groups various organisations were set up which have been vital in creating a sense of community built around a shared culture. For instance, Ibrahim commented:

“We do have an organisation of the Sudanese in Northern Ireland, we meet, talk, organise events and celebrate our national days, like independence days together. We are a strong community here” (Ibrahim, 2009).

Other participants noted the role that community groups have played in helping them to celebrate their culture through festivals and events. These events were viewed as hugely important by a number of participants as they offered a space where members of migrant communities and the host community could come together and share their stories and their culture. One participant said:

“As people hear personal stories they become less and less alien to people. I think that we tend to imagine if somebody comes from a completely different culture we think that there is a huge gulf and you wouldn’t be able to understand each other, but if you get a chance to listen to personal stories you see them more as a human being” (Abby, 2009).

Another woman noted that many festivals and events are attempting to develop a similar intercultural approach:

“In Belfast we have a lot of Latin American events that we try to do things and keep in touch with them. We are also really trying to branch out and get more of the community involved so that it’s not just us. We are also planning a festival that everyone will be welcome to” (Rhina, 2009).

However, others who have been settled in Northern Ireland for a longer period of time can be caught ‘between’ cultures. Questions around language, religion, cultural traditions and values become issues of contestation and negotiation, particularly for members of the second generation and beyond. As one man of Indian heritage noted:

“I personally have a mixture of Indian culture and Western heritage in our household. The only thing I regret very much now is the little or no exposure in detail to my Indian culture. For example when I go to

England and meet my friends of cultural identity as Indians, I find that they know more culture-wise, so they talk about Indian films and music and so on” (Sharjesh, 2009).

This exposure to multiple cultural backgrounds was viewed by some as a generally positive influence on life, particularly when none of these cultures was given prominence in the family environment. One man whose parents came to Northern Ireland from Guyana in the 1960s stated:

“Well...I feel that I relate more to the Northern Irish culture. I look different to your typical person from here because of the colour of my skin and stuff, but I have a Northern Irish mentality. I have to say my mother and father didn't push religion down our throats, they didn't mentally manipulate us into following a particular religion or a particular fashion or way of living. They gave us choice and I am very grateful for that because it opens your minds to others” (Peter, 2009).

Many first and second generation migrants commented that they also shared aspects of their heritage and culture with local friends who are often very curious as to their cultural backgrounds. One woman said that she was frequently asked about her background:

“I try always to promote culture and awareness. I like it when people ask me about El Salvador, that it is not just a dot on the map” (Rhina, 2009).

Another participant of Indian heritage commented that she also tries to inform her inquisitive friends on aspects of her culture:

“They would ask me about the languages spoken there and stuff like that. They would ask me can you speak those languages. They definitely do take interest because they know that I am from a different culture” (Kamini, 2009).

## Conclusion

The case studies discussed in this article were part of a qualitative study involving a small sample size of interviewees. Clearly, the issues discussed above in regard to culture and language identified through our study can not necessarily be applied to the migrant sector as a whole. Nonetheless, the study

has pointed to issues worthy of further investigation involving a larger sample group that could certainly probe these issues more fully. However, the research has shown that language and culture have been identified as important elements to those who have come to live in Northern Ireland both in shaping interaction within their communities as well as their wider relations with the host community.

Research studies on multiculturalism often focus primarily on immigration policies and procedures. While these are undoubtedly important, they can often detract from or overlook the many realities confronting incoming communities in their daily lives. As the participants to this study have attested, negotiating senses of identity and belonging are important to many migrants and should be addressed more fully in future research studies of this nature.

**Note:** This article is based on a research study commissioned by the Centre for Global Education. To access the research report, please e-mail [info@centreforglobaleducation.com](mailto:info@centreforglobaleducation.com) or visit the Centre's web site: <http://www.centreforglobaleducation.com>

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