Language or religion: which is the greater fault line in diverse societies?

In a shopping mall in the city of Brighton, UK, a tourist was arrested on terrorism charges last week for taking a selfie video. Surely, taking selfies in a shopping mall is such a part of contemporary culture that the act itself wouldn’t raise an eyebrow? What was different in the case of this tourist and this selfie? Well, the protagonist of the selfie did not speak English. According to a Daily Mail article, this is how the selfie-taking tourist aroused suspicion:

A Sussex Police spokesman said they were called by security staff after they ‘had challenged a 38-year-old London man who was filming on his mobile phone and recording in a foreign language’. The spokesman added: ‘They were concerned about his motives and he was reported to be acting strangely.’

What “foreign language” do you guess the tourist was speaking? Are you picturing tourists from France or Germany, where the holiday season has just started? Or tourists from China or Japan, who are globally stereotyped as excessive image takers? It’s unlikely that you do, and it’s unlikely that a tourist recording a selfie in any of these languages would have attracted the suspicions of a Brighton security guard.

The suspicious language – you guessed it – was Arabic. The tourist, Nasser Al-Ansari, a 38-year-old London resident and Kuwaiti native, was recording a Snapchat message for his friends back home. The man was released after three hours, and his side of the story is described in the Daily Mail as follows:

The former banker, who has lived in London since 2013, said: ‘It was a very horrible experience and unacceptable to happen without any specific reason or suspicion.’ ‘It is absurd. It is not something I would expect when visiting somewhere in the UK.’ He added: ‘I was very understanding and I said to them “I know it was a foreign language and my race is a factor but please be fair”. I think there is a thin line between being safe and going over-the-top and this time I think they went a little over-the-top.’

According to the police, it was the “foreign language” spoken by Mr Al-Ansari that was suspicious; he himself links language and race in trying to explain why he was targeted; and some social media commentators, also
raised his religion as a factor. One blogger, for instance, went with the headline “Muslim tourist takes selfie in Brighton, arrested on terrorism offences.”

We have often discussed the relationship between linguistic and racial discrimination here on Language on the Move (e.g., ‘Race to teach English;’ ‘Linguistic discrimination at work;’ ‘Shopping while bilingual can make you sick;’ or ‘Racism without racists’). But what about the relationship between language and religion when it comes to exclusion in multicultural societies characterized by linguistic and religious pluralism? How is linguistic and religious difference related to social inequality?

A recent article by the sociologist Rogers Brubaker offers a framework for thinking systematically about the ways in which linguistic and religious difference structure inequality in contemporary liberal democracies. The author identifies four domains where difference may be turned into inequality: the political and institutional domain; the economic domain; the cultural and symbolic domain; and the domain of informal social relationships.

In the political and institutional domain language is inescapable but modern liberal states are relatively neutral vis-à-vis religion. In fact, religious discrimination is widely prohibited where linguistic discrimination is seen as perfectly legitimate. Think, for instance, of citizenship testing: many liberal democracies require a language test in the national language as a precondition of naturalization while no similar religious tests currently exist in liberal democracies; and would widely be considered abhorrent.

Furthermore, in addition to explicit linguistic discrimination in favor of the national language(s), there is the inescapable fact that institutions operate exclusively in one language (or in some cases a small set of legitimate languages): this constitutes, eo ipso, a massive advantage for speakers of the institutional language and a massive disadvantage for people who do not speak the institutional language or do not speak it well.

In the economic domain similar considerations apply: proficiency in the language in which an economic activity occurs is a precondition for participation in that economic activity in a way that religion is not. Speakers of an economically powerful language enjoy an economic advantage because they do not have to invest in learning that language. Furthermore, language learning is a complex – and hence costly – undertaking that may make it difficult to acquire the kind of linguistic proficiency that has high economic value. By contrast, membership in a powerful religion is usually not as directly economically useful as language proficiency is. Furthermore, joining a powerful religion requires a smaller investment. For instance, it is much easier for a non-Christian to convert to Christianity than it is for a non-native speaker of English to acquire high-level proficiency in English.

The cultural and symbolic domain works differently. This domain includes all the discursive and symbolic processes through which respect, prestige, honor – in short symbolic value – is conferred. Here, language is less affected than religion because the “content” of a language is much thinner than that of a religion. That means that negative stereotypes about language tend to be relatively mild in comparison to negative stereotypes about religion. While many people object to the specific tenets of a particular religion, very few people object to the specific grammatical structures or means of expression of a particular language. For instance, the widespread stigmatization of Islam in contemporary media discourses simply has no equivalent in negative stereotypes about any language.
Informal social relationships also have a significant bearing on inequality, and can work through exclusion and through inclusion. Processes of social exclusion may disadvantage members of certain religions or speakers of certain languages. Examples include differential treatment of minorities on the rental market or attacks against minorities on public transport. Both members of religious minorities and speakers of minority languages are vulnerable to such “everyday exclusions.” Of course, a language may be stereotypically associated with a particular religion – as is the case with Arabic and Islam – and in such cases it is impossible to disentangle language and religion as the immediate cause of an experience such as that of Mr Al-Ansari anyways.

Informal social relationships also mediate inequality through inclusion in that social circles tend to form around shared identities; and social networks, friendship circles or marriage opportunities are often based on shared identities. Again, religion and language work differently here. Preferences for religion-internal networks is dogma in some religions while preferences for the formation of language-internal networks tend to be much weaker.

In sum, linguistic and religious difference both translate into social inequality in diverse societies but they do so in clearly distinct ways:

The major sources of religious inequality derive from religion’s thicker cultural, normative and political content, while the major sources of linguistic inequality come from the pervasiveness of language and from the increasingly and inescapably ‘languaged’ nature of political, economic and cultural life in the modern world. (Brubaker 2014, p. 23)