# Positioning in discourse about religious belief and practice in superdiverse contexts

## Stephen PIHLAJA iD
Aston University, UK

## Abstract

Religious beliefs and practices can and do shift depending on the context of the religious believer, and how they talk about those beliefs and practices may change depending on that context. This article focuses on how religious people position their religious beliefs and practices, and how the use and understanding of those religious positions can shift depending on contextual factors. It aims to present a method for analysing these shifts, using positioning theory and close discourse analysis. The conclusion argues that analysis of the dynamics of religious positioning has consequences for how religious belief is talked about and understood in contemporary society, how power is exercised in interaction about religion, and how people of different religious faiths and backgrounds come to understand one another and people of no faith in superdiverse settings.

## Keywords

belief, categorisation, discourse, positioning, practice, religion, superdiversity

## Résumé

Les croyances et pratiques religieuses peuvent évoluer en fonction du contexte dans lequel évoluent les croyants, et la manière dont ceux-ci parlent de ces croyances et pratiques peut varier en fonction de ce contexte. Cet article se concentre sur la manière dont les personnes religieuses positionnent leurs croyances et pratiques religieuses, et sur la manière dont l'utilisation et la compréhension de ces positions religieuses peuvent évoluer en fonction de facteurs contextuels. Il vise à présenter une méthode d'analyse de ces évolutions, en s'appuyant sur la théorie du positionnement

**Corresponding author:**
Stephen PIHLAJA, Aston University, Aston Triangle, Birmingham, B4 7ET, UK.
Email: S.pihlaja@aston.ac.uk

et l'analyse discursive approfondie. La conclusion montre que l'analyse de la dynamique du positionnement religieux a des conséquences sur la manière dont les croyances religieuses sont évoquées et comprises dans la société contemporaine, sur la manière dont le pouvoir est exercé dans les interactions autour de la religion, et sur la manière dont les personnes de confessions et d'origines religieuses différentes parviennent à se comprendre entre elles et à comprendre les personnes sans confession dans des contextes extrêmement diversifiés.

**Mots-clés**
catégorisation, croyance, discours, positionnement, pratique, religion, superdiversité

## Background

Religious belief is often viewed as a fixed part of who a person is, with shifts in one's belief being described in singular, life-altering narratives of conversion or reversion, where a person moves from one religious category to another. Religious belief and practice can also be difficult to see as distinguish from other parts of a person, particularly when there are cultural, ethnic, and/or national ties to one's religion. This article looks specifically at the role of positioning in talk about one's religious beliefs and practices in contexts where people of different faiths are present, especially so-called 'superdiverse' (Vertovec, 2007) contexts, where there is no majority belief.

Previous research looking at language use in superdiverse contexts has focused on the importance of language use both in differentiating and affiliating with people in these communities (Blackledge and Creese, 2020; Creese and Blackledge, 2019). While this research focused on superdiversity, religion and its role in language use, particularly in interactions between people of different faiths was limited. However, previous research has shown how religious belief and language in these contexts is especially important. Rosowsky (2008), Gregory et al. (2013), and Lytra et al. (2016) have also looked at religion, and multilingualism and its relationship with literacy, particularly in contexts where minority religious statuses and minority language use correlate. In these cases, language serves as an important mechanism that draws together different parts of a person's ethnic, religious, and national identities. Moreover, Bredvik's (2020) work on interaction between people of different faith, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds in a European context has shown how focus on linguistic features can reveal how conviviality emerges between people of different faiths.

In other previous research specific to religious belief and practice, and language use, focus has been on the use of so-called religious language, or sacred language in religious practice (Soskice, 1985, 2007; Yelle et al., 2019), showing how language can be central for religious communities in communicating about the sacred and developing group coherence and community. Observations about religious language have shown for example how certain phrases can be markers of religion like 'Allah phrases' in everyday

conversation (Clift and Helani, 2010) or how Evangelical Christians use language to index shared knowledge of sacred texts or hymns (Hobbs, 2020; van Noppen, 2012). These examples show how translanguaging (García and Li, 2014), or the use of different languages, dialects, or modality, are present in discourse and index and foreground one's religious position. Research in religious language has generally seen it as something that can be identified in talk, either in its function or its intertextual relationship to sacred or other religious texts. However, religious language to the extent that it can be identified and observed in discourse is not the only marker of a person's religious beliefs, and indications of religious belief are evident in a variety of other sites in discourse.

Religious belief can be seen as one factor within variations in language use (see Ringrow, 2021, for a full review), with particular interest in the relationships among ethnic, national, and linguistic identities (Lytra et al., 2016; Omoniyi and Fishman, 2006). Religion in many studies is often linked to other inter-related elements of a person's background like ethnicity, place, and gender. Sierra (2023), for example, shows how identities of being Jewish, a New York resident, and an actor, interact and are represented in a conversation among friends. Similarly, Ringrow (2020) shows how motherhood, religious belief, and technological affordances converge to create performances that are shaped profoundly by the discourse context.

Moving beyond focusing exclusively on language and linguistic features, the connection between religious belief and practice, and narrative is linking to other notions of positioning in narratology (Bamberg, 1997; De Fina et al., 2006) or sociology (Somers, 1994). Schwab (2013), for example, describes how narratives can be used to negotiate 'identity dilemmas' (p. 221) and resolve apparent differences in their belief system through stories. Narrative has been used in similar way in recent studies to look at the notion of religious identity construction around 'spiritual journeys' (Baldwin et al., 2023) or how narrative can contribute to group identities (Moon, 2012) or account for political protest (Peterson, 1996), among many others.

Positioning Theory (Harré and van Lagenhove, 1998), as Schwab shows, is particularly useful for considering the emergence of positionings within interaction, and looks at how positioning is context dependent, with different social positionings being more or less salient depending on the context and how they fit into larger structures called 'storylines' or 'master narratives' (Bamberg, 1997). Positionings can occur without explicit mention of categories, so analysis of positioning allows for discussion of implicit positionings that may be occurring as the result of the interaction of different contexts, actions, or people. It also allows for analysts to orient towards and be informed by potential storylines about belief embedded in the cultural context that might be present beyond a particular conversation or discourse event.

Talk about religious belief is particularly important to the achievement of that belief as part of how one positions oneself and how one is positioned by others. Whereas non-linguistic cues and semiotic markers are of course often associated with different religious beliefs, identifying yourself as a religious believer is often achieved through discourse. What categories of belief are available and what those categories mean does, however, shift depending on with whom one is speaking and in which context. Different topics and features of a belief can become more or less salient, with, for example, Muslims orienting talk about their faith to Christian theology in contexts where

Christianity is dominant (Pihlaja, 2021). Although the basic tenets of a particular faith system may be stable, what they mean and how they are performed may change when conditions change.

This article, therefore, will focus on how people position their own religious beliefs and practices in relation to people of other faiths in superdiverse contexts, in the case of this article, in Birmingham in the United Kingdom. The analysis will seek to answer the following question: How can positioning analysis be used to investigate three specific issues: (1) the effects of superdiversity in talk about one's beliefs, and particularly, (2) the significance of the social context on one's own positioning of their religious belief and practice, and (3) how potential conflict around religious belief and practice might be resolved in dynamic positioning. The data for the analysis is taken from a larger project looking at how people of different faiths work together in community contexts and for this article, attention will be paid to where and when participants in the project spoke about interaction with people of different faiths. How the actions and perceived beliefs of others' impact on the participants own positioning, and how those actions and perceived beliefs contribute to larger narratives about different religious faith categories will be analysed using principles of Positioning Theory.

## Method

The data for this article are taken from a larger collection of interviews done over 6 months as a part of the 'Language and Religion in the Superdiverse City' project funded by a UK Arts and Humanities Council (AHRC) leadership fellowship (AH/V00980X/1) with ethical approval and oversight from the author's institution. The larger project was concerned with narratives of experiences within contexts where one regularly interacted with people of different faiths, with an explicit focus on religious groups that were involved in community activism and organising. While these conversations tended to focus specifically on religious communities, given the remit of the project and how participants were recruited, there was no requirement for participants to be religious themselves, and indeed, participants from a range of different communities and backgrounds were subsequently interviewed.

The interviews for the project focused on three main lines of questions: the history and identity of the participant, the participant's own community, and how the participants saw their own community interacting with other communities. The interviews themselves lasted around 30 minutes and built on previous site visits I as the principal investigator had done in different organisations where I had spoken either with the participants themselves, or someone who was a direct contact with the participant. The participants were made aware of the focus of the study and given a participant information sheet and asked to sign a consent form that made clear the conversation would focus on issues of religious belief and practice, as well as the participant's community. My own identity as a White, cis-gendered man, an immigrant to the United Kingdom with a US American accent and no disclosed religious belief was either known to the participants prior to the interview or became apparent in the first several minutes of our interaction.

This article focuses on three interviews taken from people who grew up in different faith traditions and discuss how their own lives were shaped by those experiences but

have the shared characteristic of having grown up in Birmingham as cisgender women in families with distinct religious identities in the late-80s and 90s. The focus on three similar participants allows the analysis to give close, worked out examples of how to investigate the mechanisms of positioning by looking at how participants with some shared characteristics describe similar experiences, and provide a model for investigating how religious positionings might operate in dynamic ways in discourse, depending on the immediate and larger social context.

The three participants were as follows (with pseudonyms):

- Michaela is a Black cisgender woman, raised in a Rastafarian household.
- Esther is a White cisgender woman, raised in a Catholic household.
- Aisha is cisgender woman of Pakistani descent, raised in a Muslim household.

All three women were selected as participants in the study through a snowball recruitment process wherein contacts introduced me to others in their communities. I had met two of the participants (Esther and Michaela) during site visits at different times and had one previous longer discussion with a group that included Michaela, although that conversation was not recorded and took place before she had formally agreed to take part in the study. The three interviews were conducted via Zoom, with an audio only recording. The transcripts were then produced using a full-verbatim, whole-word transcription that noted pauses, repetition, and vocalisations.

The participants represent their own individual lived experiences within specific communities and chose to highlight different parts of those experiences within their interviews, guided by the interview questions. Although the questions focused on how religious life and community was important to these experiences, the participants spoke about a variety of different factors. The participants were aware that they had been chosen to be interviewed for a project on religious people in superdiverse contexts and there was consequentially frequent discussion about how their own experiences were indicative of experiences of many people in their community or whether they were unique to the individual themselves. The nature of the project, however, did appear to create, in some interviews, a pressure to speak on behalf of the group the participant was implicitly representing. Although this pressure did not come up specifically in these three interviews, recognising the conditions of the interview and how the participants were selected is relevant to how different responses were produced in the conversations.

The analysis and findings are similarly limited by the time, context, and other situational factors that an interview methodology affords, an affordance long recognised in social psychology and conversation analysis research (see, for example, Potter and Hepburn, 2005). In the case of these particular examples, any number of elements of my own identity could be viewed as relevant in analysis of the interaction: age, gender, race and ethnicity, nationality, academic status, among many other factors. The context of the interview as well, as a formal academic conversation, digitally mediated, with a specific goal, are all also factors in the discourse that was produced. At the same time, the interview is still an interactional setting in which positioning occurs, albeit potentially in a different way than in might occur in other contexts, but other contexts would produce discourse activity oriented to the affordances of that different context. To that end, the

analysis will focus on the limited aims of tracing religious positioning and considering how those shifts are inevitably influenced by the interview context and the different elements of my own positioning, but implicitly in my own positioning and explicitly in how the conversation is limited by the interview schedule.

The participants are not intended to give a representative sample from the data set, neither of prototypical discourse about religious belief and experience, nor of how individuals from particular religious traditions view themselves in comparison to others (see Pihlaja, 2024 for a fuller discussion of the data set). The analysis is intended to show the similarities and differences in the process of positioning oneself within a set of religious beliefs and practices in a superdiverse context. These cases are chosen to who how positioning emerges in discourse and is integrated with the discourse context. This method of analysis can, of course, be used for the purposes of empirical evidence about how religious belief and practice is experienced in similar ways in particular communities, but whether the individuals in this analysis are representative is not my focus.

The analysis here will focus on sites in the discourse activity where participants were talking explicitly about their own religion and when they spoke specifically about their own belief in relation to people of different religious beliefs, or no religious belief, using principles of Positioning Theory. The process of segmenting and identifying positioning in discourse activity followed Pihlaja (2021: 36):

1. Transcribe discourse event (i.e. a conversation, presentation, interview).
2. Segment discourse event (following Cameron, 2010).
3. Identify all explicit positionings in each segment.
4. Consider potential implicit positionings, including of the speaker and audience, searching for further evidence of these positionings elsewhere in the event.
5. Identify the explicit narrative or storyline, or implicit narrative the positionings constitute.
6. For each positioning, describe its trajectory in the discourse event.
7. Compare positionings of speakers within discourse event and across discourse events.

A key development of this method is a focus on the discourse dynamics notion of trajectories (Cameron, 2015) to Positioning Theory. In a discourse dynamics approach to positioning, each positioning is a part of a larger trajectory, which develops and changes over the course of a discourse event. To be understood in the context of the discourse event, each positioning needs to be understood not as a static moment of taking a particular stance, but emerging and changing over the course of the event. Therefore, first segmenting the discourse event allows for the analyst to first understand the macro development of the interaction and understanding how each positioning is emerging, from a single word or phrase to a conversation turn to a section of a conversation to a whole interaction.

Explicit positionings are most easily identifiable in the use of categories, such as a participant saying of themselves, 'As a Muslim' compared to other categories of belief also stated in the event, such as 'Christian'. Positionings might also occur in relation to explicit categories, such as a participant saying, 'I'm not a Catholic', wherein a position

is taken, but it's meaning must be understood in the trajectory of interaction, with its meaning requiring an understanding of what precedes and follows that positioning. Understanding how these positionings operate within storylines with actions and contexts then reveals how a participants sees themselves and others in the world, and potentially revealing implicit positionings in relation to explicit ones, for example, a participant positioning someone as a 'white, British Christian' might emphasise their own position as a 'black, non-British Christian'.

Using these principles, the following analysis considers how positionings can be traced through the duration of the interview and what these positioning might reveal about larger conceptions of religious identities and how particular faiths are viewed within a participant's given context. The analysis in this article will focus on three elements of these positionings: first, the relationship between the different elements of the participants own positioning, as they disclosed them, with their understanding of their own religious positioning; second, the relationship between the participant and members of their own community; and third, the relationship of their own community to other communities. The analysis will also draw on tacit knowledge developed during the project as well, including how other participants answered similar questions and other positionings and storylines that emerged during those interviews.

## Analysis

The relationship between ethnicity and nationality, and religion was a key issue in many of the conversations I had as a part of the project, and in the three interviews focused on in this project, the ethnicity comes up both in Michaela and Aisha's answers. In discussing her own background, Aisha speaks at length about being the only Muslim in many settings when she was going up. She says,

> 1. Um, and I went to school in North, er, Birmingham. I actually went to the Catholic school, as a Muslim, which was really interesting because there weren't any Muslims in my Catholic school. And then I went to a grammar school in Sutton, um, but also, Muslims were a minority at the time. Like, there weren't very many of us.

In this extract, Aisha speaks of herself as attending a Catholic school using an explicit positioning 'as a Muslim' and with 'there weren't many of us' implicitly positioning another group as a majority, establishing a baseline understanding of herself early in the interview. The positioning of her and her family does, however, change slightly when she begins to talk about her family's history before coming to the United Kingdom and their religiosity. Aisha, responding to a question about her reflections on her family's nationality as immigrants coming from Pakistan and the relationship of this national identity to being Muslim, says,

> 2. So, being Muslim is very, like, integrated in being Pakistani. Of course, there are, like, Christians and Jews and Sikhs there as well, but the majority religion is Pakistani. Sorry, [laughs], is, um, Islam. So, yes, in my family as well, they're quite a conservative family, I would say. A lot of my uncles, they have, like, memorised the Quran. My, my granddad has memorised the Quran as well, so they're very, very, like, religious in that sense.

The relationship between being Muslim and being Pakistani is a key part to how Aisha talks about her relationship with her family and her own cultural and national heritage. She says her family as being 'conservative' because family members memorised the Quran, which leads to a positioning of the family as 'religious'. In speaking about the family, and her uncles and grandad, she uses 'they' rather than 'we', marking a potentially important distinction between how her family is positioned and how she positions herself. Indeed, in following up on a point of how she sees herself, after she has differentiated between friends who are of a Pakistani heritage and 'have, like, more of a cultural element to them' and her own family which is 'very proud to be religiously Muslim', she says,

> 3. Um, but yes. I don't know. I, I'm still in a bit of a, of a muddle between my identity. I wouldn't say it's as clear-cut as my parents or my grandparents are. Um, but then I would also say that people of my generation, or some of my friends, their identities are a bit more clear-cut than mine is. I think, having experienced, like, a lot of diversity and friendships and stuff, I don't really think it's that important either. Like, I would never introduce myself being, like, oh, I'm, I'm a, I'm Muslim.

This extract comes after Aisha has positioned two other groups in different storylines: Asian families for whom 'culture' is the key component of their identity and her 'religiously Muslim' family. With these two positionings and storylines, Aisha describes her own identity as 'a bit of a muddle' and one that is not 'as clear-cut'. She's careful to also qualify that her own positioning is not generational, suggesting the presence of a storyline that younger people are less likely to be religious as she says that some of her friends have identities that are 'a bit clearer cut than mine is'. Her own positioning then emerges in a storyline of diversity, where she says she's 'experienced a lot' and has friends who are implied to be from different backgrounds. This doesn't lead to a rejection of herself as a Muslim, but one that she would not necessarily 'introduce [herself] being'.

This self-positioning in the context of differing storylines, as Aisha perceives and understands them, shows how religious categories are employed in *trajectories* of interaction, an important concept in approaching discourse as a dynamic system where shifts in how people present themselves can be seen as moving between different stable states (Cameron, 2015; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008). In the different context of the same conversation, Aisha's own self-positioning in relation to the religious category of Muslim shifts. This positioning, given the context of her own history which she has recounted, and the orientation of the interview towards the complexity of her self-positioning, leads to a resistance to foregrounding her position as a Muslim at this point, even when she has already done so previously in the interview. Following a recounting of conflicting and differing storylines, a different positioning emerges. Nothing has changed in the material conditions of who she is between these two points, simply the imagined context of where she might be introducing herself.

The complex interaction across personal history and storylines plays an important role in how religious categories are used in positioning throughout the data set. Esther also recounts a background where she was raised in a particular religious belief, but coming to a different conclusion:

4. So, I was raised Catholic, because my mum's Catholic. My dad wasn't really religious. And so it was like regular kind of churchgoing and things, erm and all of that, until I was probably in my mid-teens. Then sort of stopped going to church as much, and then I just like, and then I feel like now I'm just sort of at the point I'm like, I don't really know where I'm at. Like, I'm definitely not, a practicing Catholic anymore, and I feel like I've, you've gone ... I'm just like, I don't know. I don't really put a label on it like. I wouldn't really say like I'm agnostic, or atheist or anything, I'm just like, I'm not a, I'm def-, I'm not a Catholic, I'm not anything else.

For Esther, the positioning of 'Catholic' requires some additional information to clarify what she means. Her mother is a Catholic without qualification or explication of what that means, but Esther then positions her father as 'not very religious' and herself as a young person as 'regular kind of churchgoing', positioning herself in relation to her parents and avoiding the same positionings that she applied to both of them. Describing herself as 'churchgoing' in relation to these two positionings then adds further meaning to her statement that she stopped going to church 'as much', marking a shift in her own positioning, where churchgoing is implicitly positioned in relation to being religious and being Catholic. She then says, 'I don't know where I'm at' and clarifies this positioning by saying that she isn't a 'practising Catholic anymore', but that she also wouldn't describe herself as 'agnostic' or 'atheist' or 'anything', before further saying, 'I'm not a Catholic, I'm not anything else'.

The trajectory of this positioning, however, reveals that it is not a simple categorical shift from being Catholic to not being Catholic. The process of coming to a positioning of 'not a Catholic' is the result of positionings of others (her mother and her father), her own past actions (churchgoing and stopping church attendance), and other potential positionings (agnostic, atheist, or anything). The positioning of 'not a Catholic' is built on her own personal story about herself, but also in relation to the stories of, in this extract, her parents, whose positionings emerge within storylines about how people can and do interact with Catholicism. She says,

5. Also, I guess culturally, you still feel it cause like, it's one of those things like, I do feel like I kind of explain sometimes, or you feel the need to explain. It's like you know You'll say something, people look at you strange and you go, I was raised Catholic.

This 'cultural' connection to Catholicism shows the inadequacy of categorical description in her experiences in social life. Being 'raised Catholic' is an important fact about herself for others to know when interacting with her, something that she feels she needs to 'explain' at times to others. The experience of being raised Catholic and having a particular perspective is important for her in positioning herself, even if she is categorically not Catholic, as she stated earlier in the interview. The positioning of herself, when given the opportunity to discuss it freely, encompasses the complexity of her experience and resists a simple categorical label that might be more easily used (like agnostic). Catholicism, even if it is not a label she would apply to herself, does inform who she is in important ways.

Michaela, in contrast to Aisha and Esther, describes herself as growing up in a mixed extended family, with her immediate family being Rastafarian, but both Christian and Rastafarian family members in her parents' families. Reflecting on her family's religious background, she says,

6. My mum and dad would probably would be very involved, in erm in-in the way of Rastafari. So, I had dreadlocks when I was growing up. Erm My brothers still have them. Me and my sister have had them several times throughout our lifetime, and I've literally just cut-taken my second set off.

In her first description of herself and her family, Michaela avoids the use of categorical labels to describe her family and instead describes what they did (*probably would be very involved*) and how they looked (*I had dreadlocks*). In contrast to Aisha's positioning of her family as religious through doing explicitly religious actions like memorising the Qur'an, Michaela talks about her father's political ideology and how he taught her and her siblings to be critical thinkers and question people in authority. Then describing how her family's religion became more problematic for her in Secondary School, she describes her father as being 'strict' and says, 'So, it wasn't a case of, you know we're just Rastas. No, we're doing this properly'.

The cutting of dreadlocks comes to be an important action in the trajectory of the story, which marks a break with a past positioning in trajectory. Still, she says, 'I don't think, spiritually, I've ever really left it. Do you get what I mean? It's not like I've ever been on a search for a way of cultivating my spirit'. Reflecting on her own beliefs as an adult, having grown up in this environment, and how she sees herself now she says,

7. In terms of Rasta, it's not sort of maybe like the philosophical side of it that I kind of took on, but much more the political activism, resistance, do you get what I mean. Stuff like that, probably is more what I would say is Rastafari to me. The-the religious aspect in regards to that, no I don't-I don't see it that way. I don't see, I see these things as labels. So, you could call Him, Allah. You can call Him, God. You can call Him, And it's just a different name for the same energy. So, you get me, I don't feel the need to get involved in, you know what I mean, back and forths about, you know what I mean, this future and what this ... Okay, that's what it means to you, brilliant. And what are you going to birth out of that? Is it beautiful? Wonderful. Do you get what I mean, What are you going to birth out the way that you see? Is it beautiful? Wonderful.

Michaela's positioning also comes after a description of her own history and how different elements of her parents' religious beliefs and her father's political ideology, helped her develop a particular worldview. In her own positioning, 'Rasta' continues to be a part of how she views herself, in that she 'took on' elements of resistance that she sees as embedded in Rastafarian belief and culture. In clarifying her own positioning, having spoken about different identities within the Black community (especially the Rastafarian and Christian communities), she positions all believers as essentially holding the same belief, one in a higher power, a belief that she herself also holds. The positioning takes different and conflicting storylines, embedded in different religious and cultural traditions, and merges them in the same storyline, one that is abstracted to highlight the similarities in the belief. By abstracting the concept of 'God' or 'Allah' to 'the same

energy', she positions those as 'birthing out' something 'beautiful' as doing essentially the same thing.

In all three interviews, the participant's self-positioning was the result of interaction between different storylines that interacted with their own individual experiences and emerged as different positionings at different times in the discourse. Although categories were used the descriptions of belief, what those categories meant for each of the participants required explication, including the use of the negation of other categories (i.e. 'I'm not Catholic'). Importantly, in each case, how someone positioned themselves shifted in the discourse event, depending on how they were relating themselves to different individuals and contexts in which they were describing themselves. Who they were and how they positioned themselves was always related in some way to the beliefs and positionings of others.

Building on the importance of others within their self-positioning, how the three participants discussed their relationship with communities of faith, in terms of belief, and in terms of ethnic and national identities, was a key part of the trajectory of positionings. In some cases, these others were individuals, like parents or family members, but in other cases, institutions and larger communities were relevant in describing themselves and how they related to others in the social world, both those they perceived as being in their community and those outside that community.

Esther expands the notion of a Catholic community to include those who were raised Catholic, but no longer view themselves as Catholic. She says,

> 8. I think like with people who are like, who are still practicing, it's, it's more like shared community. I think there's also just like the community people who were raised Catholic but don't really see themselves as Catholic anymore. And a lot of that is just like of like swapping stories, and just being like, oh yeah, you did this, yeah, we did, and just like that kind of thing. And just like, and often like it's just talking about the shared frustrations, or things like that. Erm I think it's, it's like, There is a, I remember someone saying that there is actually a thing that like, being a Catholic you can't quit.

In this extract, Esther builds on the point she made about the shared language and further explains what she means by linking her experience to people who were 'raised Catholic but don't really see themselves as Catholic anymore' and as a member of the community she earlier alluded to. Here the 'things' that are shared include not only neutral 'stories', but also negative ones like 'shared frustrations'. The positioning of being 'raised Catholic' shifts to simply 'being Catholic' and takes on a negative valence when it becomes something 'you can't quit'. Again, the trajectory and the positioning are developed within the context of stories about the similar experiences of those Esther perceives as like herself and evidenced in Esther voicing other former and current Catholics as having the same experience that she has had. The result is the emergence of a storyline that explains these experiences, one of 'shared community' with features like shared language and practices which cannot be forgotten, and which are a part of how she comes to understand and affiliate with others within that community.

In this process, Esther explains her own experience through her own story and supports that experience and develops her own positioning by relating to the experiences

of others. The positioning of a 'shared community' is supported through developing a larger storyline using the experiences of others. In the case of the interview, the positioning and storyline helps answer the question of what sort of community she experiences in her life, but also reveals a way of thinking about herself and people like her who have experienced the same thing. The storyline acts as a heuristic device to explain why people who are 'raised Catholic' view themselves the way they do.

The complex nature of that positioning and how it works out in her day-to-day life is further made clear in her reflections on how the position of Muslims in British society has changed over the course of her life. Reflecting on her own experiences in the community throughout her life and her parent's lives, Aisha says,

> 9. I think it's changed a lot. Um, so like, when my mum came to this country, I don't think Muslim was like the first marker that people saw. It was always, like, Pakistani. But then, like, post-9/11 and post, like, all of the other things that have happened, Muslims are like the first thing that people then saw. And then, I think a lot of my family, the women wear a hijab. And I actually wore a hijab for a while as well, and when I did wear one, then people obviously immediately know that you're Muslim. I don't think they treat you any differently, necessarily, but I feel like, when you wear a hijab, you're, you're like representing the entire Muslim population essentially, and there's a lot of pressure. So, you have to, like, dress a certain way, act a certain way. Can't be seen in like a group of, I don't know, all boys, or seen with like one boy out in town. Even if it's a friend. Like, things like that really put sort of pressure on. Um, and then even in the same thing, like, when I didn't wear a hijab, if you're out and you see someone you know, or you see, like someone from a similar community background, there's always like, oh, the judgement is there.

In this vignette, Aisha sees a difference between herself and her mother marked by a change she refers to as 'post-9/11 and post, like, all of the other things that happened'. This abstraction of 'all the other things that happened' suggested that her positioning of herself, and indeed her mom's positioning of herself, was embedded in the socio-cultural context. Her mother, rather than being positioned as a 'Muslim' was rather positioned as a 'Pakistani'. This view, as other Muslims in my study confirm, was common among an older generation of immigrants, particularly from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, often by way of West Africa. The positioning changed from national categories to a religious category following the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001. The consequence of that change was not only an increased awareness of certain immigrant communities as Muslims, but a change in how those immigrant communities came to see themselves.

This positioning, Aisha goes on to clarify, had consequences in how she felt others viewed her: not only the non-Muslim population, but also by other Muslims, for whom wearing or not wearing a hijab might be seen as a symbol of religiosity. In both cases, she was aware of being positioned in storylines that attributed a certain meaning to her. She speaks of the consequences for that choice in how she would subsequently be viewed, but absent in that positioning was her own agency and her personal reasons for wearing or not wearing the hijab. The positioning of a Muslim woman fit into consistent storylines that understood her choice in a particular way.

This understanding that storylines about Muslims negatively positioned Islam, was a recurring theme in other interviews in the project, but it was not limited to views about Muslims. Michaela expressed some opinion that suggested positioning oneself in terms of a religious category could be problematic, given either a person's own negative view of religion or a perception that others did not approve of religion in their own social context. Michaela says,

> 10. But when these things are used to wage war against innocent people and people can be killed in the name of Allah, God, Jesus, duh-duh-duh [vocalising many more things], then we understand, from a sociological point of view, the benefits of religion, but also the very, you know what I mean, the-the negative aspects of religion when a political, agenda is used alongside this religious brief.

The positioning in this discussion of the violent use of religions starts with as a passive construction without an agent: 'these things are used to wage war' and 'people can be killed in the name of Allah, God, Jesus'. This is contrasted with a positioning of 'we', a collective understanding about the complicated nature of religion, both in terms of bringing benefits and 'negative aspects' into the world. The positioning of religion includes both a sense of respect and caution, which is present in Michaela's own positioning of herself as having a religious upbringing but coming to hold a more expansive view of herself and not necessarily positioning herself in terms of her family's religious beliefs.

This storyline about religion more generally is also important to take into account, particularly in a diverse context where different religious identities are present and people understand themselves and others in relation to one another. Birmingham, like much of the United Kingdom, has also seen an increase in people either no longer identifying as religious or never having identified as religious at all. Indeed, all three of the participants in this study expressed varying degrees of comfort with being positioned as a member of a named religion. A consequence of religious diversity may be the emergence of storylines that position religious believers together and with less care to differentiate among what specific beliefs one may hold.

## Conclusion

This article has shown how positioning analysis can be used to map positioning and categorisation in talk about religious belief and practice, particularly in contexts where others do not share the same religious beliefs and practices. In the interviews analysed, positioning analysis allowed a rich description of all three participants discussion of their own and others religious beliefs and practices, in a way that accounted for the complexities of superdiverse settings. While the experience of religious belief may at any one time be presented as or regarded as fixed, the analysis has shown in the experience of the world, how one talks about one's place in the social world can be, like any other part of who a person understands themselves to be, aligned through the positionings and storylines that have emerged within that individual context.

The analysis has shown particularly that attention to storylines about religious positionings is fundamentally to how discourse about religious belief and practice is presented and draws on common sense understandings about those religious categories, enacted in specific instances of interaction. At the same time, how participants co-opted and challenged those storylines in recounting their own experiences of religious faith and through positioning themselves in comparison and contrast to others within their own religious community and those outside of their community could establish novel ways of talking about their own belief and practices that did not neatly comport to known storylines about faith and religion. Positioning in the discourse activity could address potential conflicts through a balance between knowing and understanding how they were positioned in society, and challenging those positionings with their own unique experiences and stories.

The analysis also highlighted how important one's individual and familial histories are to how they come to position themselves in relation to religious categories and their incumbent communities in the superdiverse context of Birmingham. Positioning analysis provides a richer description of religious belief and practice, beyond simple categorisations, by providing empirical evidence of how people experience and understand themselves as it relates to their own histories, their communities, those outside their communities, and storylines about them in the larger social world, including in media and politics. This form of analysis would be useful not only for talk in superdiverse contexts, but also in less diverse contexts, because positioning of oneself and one's community reveals underlying beliefs about the social world and how moral judgements about that world are constituted. Religious positioning in this setting is achieved through the complex interaction of these different elements of context and will shift depending on where, when, and to whom one is talking. Positionings and storylines are often tacitly understood within communities, and therefore, positioning analysis working to make them explicit and showing how they interact can be especially revealing.

Finally, the analysis showed how individual religious positioning might emerge in relation to dominant storylines about those religions and those have material effects on how one understands themselves in a particular context. Particularly for members of minority religions, events like 9/11 create a context where one's positioning in relation to a particular set of religious beliefs and practices can shift when storylines shift. This can lead to one's religious beliefs to becoming foregrounded in a way that it hasn't been in the past and leading to how one understands and talks about oneself. Members of religious minorities can also be positioned within storylines that emerge from majority religions. Self-positioning must then first consider those storylines and produce discourse that actively counters those assumptions before a person can speak to the features or elements of their faith that are most important to themselves.

This article has shown the importance of investigation of religious positioning in discourse and describing trajectories of positionings and storylines as they emerge in interaction, particularly in superdiverse contexts. Understanding the relationship between language and religion as individuals experience it requires moving beyond narrow investigations of religious language, and how positionings emerge in relation to other parts of a person's individual history and how they are and want to be perceived in a particular context. Tracking these relationships and understanding how they affect the

ways people see themselves and others has the potential to inform and influence interaction between people of different faith and defuse antagonism between people from different communities. As the analysis here has shown, there is often more shared experience between people of different religious identities than categorical labels reveal.

## Funding

## ORCID iD

Stephen PIHLAJA  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7506-2906

## References

Baldwin C, Furlotte C and Liu Q (2023) Spirituality and narrative identity: Three case studies. *Religions* 14(10): 1287.

Bamberg M (1997) Positioning between structure and performance. *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7(1–4): 335–342.

Blackledge A and Creese A (2020) Interaction ritual and the body in a city meat market. *Social Semiotics* 30(1): 1–24.

Bredvik LS (2020) *Discussing the Faith: Multilingual and Metalinguistic Conversations about Religion*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Cameron L (2010) Metaphors and discourse activity. In: Cameron L and Maslen R (eds) *Metaphor Analysis: Research Practice in Applied Linguistics, Social Sciences and the Humanities*. London: Equinox, pp.147–169.

Cameron L (2015) Embracing connectedness and change: A complex dynamic systems perspective for applied linguistic research. *AILA Review* 28(1): 28–48.

Clift R and Helani F (2010) Inshallah: Religious invocations in Arabic topic transition. *Language in Society* 39(03): 357–382.

Creese A and Blackledge A (2019) Translanguaging and public service encounters: Language learning in the library. *The Modern Language Journal* 103(4): 800–814.

De Fina A, Schiffrin D and Bamberg MGW (2006) *Discourse and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

García O and Li W (2014) *Translanguaging and Education. Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. London: Springer.

Gregory E, Choudhury H, Ilankuberan A, Kwapong A and Woodham M (2013) Practice, performance and perfection: Learning sacred texts in four faith communities in London. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2013(220): 27–48.

Harré R and van Lagenhove L (1998) *Positioning Theory: Moral Contexts of Intentional Action*. Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishers.

Hobbs V (2020) *An Introduction to Religious Language: Exploring Theolinguistics in Contemporary Contexts*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Larsen-Freeman D and Cameron L (2008) *Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lytra V, Volk D and Gregory E (2016) *Navigating Languages, Literacies and Identities: Religion in Young Lives*. London: Routledge.

Moon D (2012) Who am I and who are we? Conflicting narratives of collective selfhood in stigmatized groups. *American Journal of Sociology* 117(5): 1336–1379.

Omoniyi T and Fishman JA (2006) *Explorations in the Sociology of Language and Religion*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Peterson AL (1996) Religious narratives and political protest. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64(1): 27–44.

Pihlaja S (2021) *Talk about Faith: How Conversation Shapes Belief*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pihlaja S (2024) *Narrative and Religion in the Superdiverse City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Potter J and Hepburn A (2005) Qualitative interviews in psychology: Problems and possibilities. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 2(4): 281–307.

Ringrow H (2020) 'I can feel myself being squeezed and stretched, moulded and grown, and expanded in my capacity to love loudly and profoundly': Metaphor and religion in motherhood blogs. *Discourse, Context & Media* 37: 100429.

Ringrow H (2021) Identity. In: Pihlaja S (ed) *Analysing Religious Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.276–291.

Rosowsky A (2008) *Heavenly Readings: Liturgical Literacy in a Multilingual Context*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Schwab JR (2013) Religious meaning making: Positioning identities through stories. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5(3): 219–226.

Sierra S (2023) The epistemics of authentication and denaturalization in the construction of identities in social interaction. *Language in Society* 52(4): 571–594.

Somers MR (1994) The narrative constitution of identity: A relational and network approach. *Theory and Society* 23(5): 605–649.

Soskice JM (1985) *Metaphor and Religious Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Soskice JM (2007) *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

van Noppen J-P (2012) God in George W. Bush's rhetoric. Available at: http://www.o-re-la.org/index.php/analyses/item/175-god-in-george-w-bush%E2%80%99s-rhetoric

Vertovec S (2007) Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30(6): 1024–1054.

Yelle R, Handman C and Lehrich C (eds) (2019) *Language and Religion*. Berlin: De Gruyter. Available at: https://www.degruyter.com/view/product/210959 (accessed 1 May 2019).

## Author biography

Stephen PIHLAJA is Senior Lecturer in Stylistics at Aston University. His research and teaching are focused on discourse dynamics in talk about religious identity, particularly in diverse contexts. His latest book, *Language and Narrative in the Superdiverse City* (CUP, 2024) looks at how people of different religious faiths interact in contexts where there is no religious majority.

Address: Aston University, Aston Triangle, Birmingham B4 7ET

Email: S.pihlaja@aston.ac.uk