Language, identity, and belonging: Immigrant experiences in the St. Andrews taxi industry

Alabama Michaud

Abstract

Through the experiences of two immigrant taxi drivers, Malik and Pranab, this ethnography seeks to better understand the intersection between language, immigration, and identity. Using methods of participant observation and interviews, the study reveals how language operates as both a tool for connection and a source of exclusion. Both drivers face racism and xenophobia, but their responses differ based on their relationship to the language. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, the paper argues that despite legal citizenship, immigrants face a second-class status shaped by language, cultural assimilation, and public perception.

Introduction and Methods

Drunk in the back of a taxi with my bladder nearly bursting, the man driving me home kept taking wrong turns whilst spilling to me intimate details of his life. I suspected the wrong turns were tactical, so to increase the fare of the ride if only by a few pence. I'd correct him politely by saying, "I actually think you turned the wrong way," in hopes of not offending the professional, while he'd continue ranting to me about his impending divorce. This interaction was what inspired my original project: studying the relationships between taxi drivers in St Andrews, Scotland and the population that lives here. I was interested in conversation and chaos. How do taxis create an intimate setting between strangers that facilitates these vulnerable moments?

I had no hypothesis about what would come out of my fieldwork; I had no idea what to expect as I wanted to enter the field with no preconceived notions. I was open to any direction my work might take me. My methodology mainly consisted of participant observation and lengthy interviews. I'd wait at taxi depots, knock on windows and ask if I could ride along, and every time I was denied (no one let me sit in on a ride), I lowered the stakes by asking for an interview, to which only two drivers agreed – Malik and Pranab[1]. Over the course of two weeks, between Malik and Pranab, I conducted 4 interviews and spent time with them in their cars as they'd wait for a call or a customer. From these conversations, I gather that surface level similarities like skin color, immigrant status, and occupation by no means indicates similar life experience and world view. I set out to argue that the use of language, how immigration informs identity, and how both are perceived publicly are at the forefront of Pranab and Malik's individual

1 Malik and Pranab are pseudonyms used to protect the privacy of my informants.

experiences as cab drivers within St. Andrews.

The physical process I went through to conduct my fieldwork was tedious, yet crucial. My informants shared similar demeanors; they both were very curt in conversation. Each question I asked they examined like a puzzle, 'how could I answer this question in as few words as possible.' Anthropology prides itself on its approach to research. This is my first ethnography, so I took 'participant observation' to mean in practice, making friends. And in theory, anthropologists claim the method produces data that reflects the perspective of your subjects (Tedlock 1991:69). Amidst conducting interviews, I grappled with balancing my responses. It was essential to maintain an agreeable personality so my informants could speak freely, especially when sensitive political topics came up: at some points when I would disagree on some perspectives, I had to keep my mouth shut.

During the interviews, especially the first one, my nerves were on display. I was constantly tapping my foot, tucking my hair, and clicking my pen. Speaking to Malik and Pranab about very personal moments was daunting. Luckily, Pranab and Malik did not seem to share the same anxiety. Despite my position as the anthropologist leading the interviews, I found myself not needing to rely on pre-prepared questions and instead gave them each a space with which to discuss any elements or aspects they felt relevant. However, due to my positionality as a younger white woman, I imagine that these conversations were likely tailored to what they expected I wanted to hear, in addition to what they felt was socially appropriate. While I was studying them and their occupations, it is evident to me that "the observer and the observed are not entirely sperate categories" (Tedlock 1991:81). As I take in every detail I can about these men, it would be almost hypocritical not to expect them to analyze me in return. During my conversations with Pranab, I felt almost like his student, as he lectured me about his experiences more than he told me about them. His assumptions of me were made and displayed by the way he interacted with me. During my field work often, I was reminded of the question 'Who was I for them?' especially considering the fact that I was in a way a representative of one of their client bases as a student (Dumont 1978: 200). Positionality in anthropology, while contextualizing the author within the genre of ethnography, can diminish the author's identity and assume that both the reader and subject react only to the author's spelled-out facts (Robertson 2002: 789). In other words, the relationship between me and the interviewees cannot simply be broken down into simple facts of identity, such as male vs female, though these aspects of identity undoubtedly play a role in perceptions. As Malik and Pranab have revealed to me, who you are and what defines you is much more complicated than what meets the eye.

Language as a Tool and a Barrier

"In taxi driving, knowing the language of what people speak, and being a people person is the most important thing."

Both Pranab and Malik are immigrants whose first language is not English. The language barrier is one of many aspects of identities they had to overcome as they assimilated to Scottish culture. As Pranab has identified, language is a monumental aspect of his profession. As seen in my own experiences in a cab, the physical proximity in a cab "blurs the lines between private and public space" (Luedke 2010: 6). In other words, the liminal aspect of this space allows people to be more receptive to vulnerable conversations with strangers. Both Pranab and Malik

referenced having to take on various personas: a therapist, a friend, a confidant, even a parent. To take on these personas established within the liminal space of a cab, they rely on language.

Language is arguably the most valuable tool a taxi driver has to create and maintain a customer base. Ironically, language is also a damning force, as it often is used violently against foreign taxi drivers as Malik accounted to me.

During our interview, no more than ten minutes could pass without Malik getting a call. At one point, Malik got a call from an anonymous number.

Looking up at me, he tells me to "Record this, it'll be good for your project."

He explained to me that he gets these anonymous calls a few times a day. Prank calls, where strangers would scream at the top of their lung's racist profanities, telling Malik to go back to his country among other xenophobic and racist insults. Despite immigrating to Scotland from Pakistan in 2013, and since then owning multiple successful businesses, Malik is met with hostile language daily.

Language has been theorized as a "tool that allows individuals imagine themselves as a group"; therefore, difference in language may result in ostracization (Bucholtz M. and Hall, K 2004: 369). In anthropological circles, notions of authenticity are often juxtaposed with language. Shared language is a powerful force which helps create national identities that nation-states use to unify their citizens for the sake of juxtaposing them against other nation-states; language is a means of state control and exclusion (Anderson 2020: 287; Bucholtz M. and Hall, K 2004: 385). Within Scottish geographical borders, speaking English with a Scottish accent implies authenticity. The 'inauthenticity' of language implied by Malik's Pakistani accent makes him susceptible to xenophobic attacks. In Malik's experience with immigrating, the society in St. Andrews values a certain form of expression of English above his own, thereby harming his social identity despite his efforts to assimilate and contribute to Scottish culture (Philips 2004:489).

The adversity Malik has faced in his profession has not pushed him away. As an owner of a taxi company, he says he is more than fulfilled by his profession. He claims that as a people person, 8/10 people will be pleased by and interested in his recommendations and receptive to his conversation. He describes himself as witty, and as able to "deal with" all sorts of people.

Interestingly, Pranab has a completely different experience with language in St Andrews. Pranab immigrated from India to Dundee thirty years ago and started his own taxi company in St Andrews in 2016. Being here for so long, he's developed a local Fife accent and experiences less xenophobic comments than Malik. His personal response to xenophobic comments is to brush them off.

"It's the way it is here, foreigners have to expect it and move on, being called chocolate isn't the end of the world, it's all in your mentality."

Pranab upholds his ability to wield and react to language as his money maker. By moving through spaces where he might experience adversity and choosing to "brush off" these comments allow him to keep his business successful. He argues that the comradeship that results by ignoring these comments in the business is helpful because he gets tips from taxi drivers from other companies on where the crowds are on a certain night, that he wouldn't get otherwise. For Pranab, the pros of comradeship within the industry are worth

withstanding the cons of ignorant language.

For both these taxi drivers, language is a primary tool for assimilating into Scottish culture. Despite having similar social identities, as immigrants in Scotland working as business owners in the taxi industry, their experiences and opinions manifested differently. I argue that immigration and assimilation is transformative of the individual, but the way it manifests cannot be attributed to a profession as seen in Malik and Pranab's experiences. Despite their different interpretations of the racism, they experience and their process of language, both Pranab and Malik are viewed as having the same experiences as seen through an exploration of imagined communities and second-class citizenship.

Navigating Second-Class Citizenship

Second-class citizenship denotes the status of individuals or groups in a society who are not granted the same privileges, rights, and opportunities compared to 'first-class' citizens. In Pranab and Malik's case, despite being full citizens in Scotland, they are attributed second-class citizenship by the way they are treated socially and by institutions. Their status as immigrants and their ethnicities are targets of this second-class citizenship. So, while they are both citizens of the state, the state and its other citizens still treat them as non-citizens.

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* is helpful in understanding this concept. He argues that nations are arbitrary, imagined communities contained within certain physical geographies (Anderson 2020: 283). Nation-states use devices like language (as I spoke about earlier), art, media, any form of expression, to market itself, to create an identity which its citizens can relate to. Physical geography is important because it limits a nation-state. In Scotland, 96% of the population is white (Scottish Census 2020). While Scotland is becoming more and more cosmopolitan, a lot of the way Scotland represents itself and recreates itself comes from white people. On billboards, in commercials, on live Scottish TV, white people are the standard. Malik, Pranab, and all non-white citizens in Scotland are thus excluded from the national identity Scotland creates, explaining in a small way the xenophobia and racism that they then experience.

A specific institutional example of exclusion and second-class citizenship comes from Malik. He told me of petty competition between Scottish-born taxi companies and his own, where in instances of over-reporting and flat out lying by the Scottish to Fife Council occurs. One particularly violent experience Malik had involved the police. A customer asked Malik for a ride from St Andrews to Kirkaldy, telling Malik upfront that he had only 20 pounds on him (the fare is usually 30). Malik didn't mind taking the customer if he paid upfront. After telling him this, the customer got very violent very quickly, yelling at him obscenities and pulling on Malik's seat belt, choking him. In the chaos Malik managed to contact the police while trying to get the violent man out of his car. In the end, once the man was aware that police were on the way, he spat on Malik and ran out of the car into the night. When the police got to the scene, despite seeing Malik in distress, they made almost no effort to look for the suspect and told Malik to brush off the experience. Between the little concern for Malik by the Scottish police and the willingness of Fife Council to inconvenience his business in a way obvious enough to Malik and Pranab that they're favoring Scottish-born business, we see the institutions perpetuating this second-class citizenship.

Pranab did not specifically reference any times

he felt like a victim of second-class citizenship; however, he did reference a change in the taxi industry in recent years. Since he started his business, he noticed that as the years have gone on more and more foreigners are joining the industry in St Andrews, and that as this is happening the community and comradery has diminished. The division in the industry is indicative of the imagined communities Anderson coined.

"The Scotts stick to themselves, as do the 'foreigners."

It is not all grim though. While there are a lot of identifiable injustices both Malik and Pranab face, they both mentioned the constant communication between companies regardless. Facebook links are sent between drivers of events happening, so they know where the crowds will be that night. Pranab is a devout Hindu and spoke a lot about Karma. He said the energy must always be exchanged positively, you must always treat your competition with respect, or no positive energy will come your way, nor will respect. Pranab said he contributes to the culture in St Andrews by welcoming first year students every year, giving tips to parents and kids on where to get the cheapest pint and where to buy bedding, and that this is what makes his company competitive.

Based on my observations and their views on immigration and citizenship, I argue that neither Malik nor Pranab views themselves as second-class citizens. Despite others viewing their status differently, Malik and Pranab view their citizenship as equal within society and larger culture. They argue that what makes a citizen is his legal status, his contribution to society, and his interaction with local culture.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to explore the dynamics between language, immigration, and identity among taxi drivers in St Andrews. Through the lens of taxi drivers Malik and Pranab, language is shown to be a tool used to bridge together communities while simultaneously used to abuse and discriminate. Malik and Pranab, despite facing xenophobia and racism with regularity, have love enough for their profession and the people they meet daily to continue with it.

The concept of second-class citizenship explored using Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, helped shed light on the inequalities immigrant taxi drivers face in Scotland. Anderson's concepts around what exactly nationhood is and how its perpetuated explain why Malik and Pranab experience second-class citizenship despite being full citizens in the eyes of the law. By examining Malik and Pranab's experiences, it becomes clear that citizenship is more than a legal status. Citizenship to Malik and Pranab is about the role one embodies in their community. Despite the adversity, even within the taxi industry, they find solidarity and actively engage in shaping the culture in the industry and in the larger St Andrews community.

Moving forward, it is important to identify and correct systems of oppression that sustain second-class citizenship. By giving voice to marginalized communities we can strive towards a society where all individuals are valued and respected, regardless of background or immigration status.

Due to scheduling conflicts, I could not spend as much time with the drivers as I wanted. With more time, I would dive into the reasons they came to St Andrews, why they stayed, and I would have asked how the process of immigration affected their views on Scotland, identity and nationality. The pro-

cess of conducting this ethnography was extremely informational, and if given the opportunity I'd like to continue documenting and collaborating with taxi drivers in St Andrews.

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