

DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF BELONGING: LINGUISTIC IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN PAKISTANI DAILY DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This study explores the language practices of religious minorities in Pakistan and how they are used to create a sense of belonging or exclusion within the broader society. Pakistan is, in fact, a Muslim-majority state, and religious minorities such as Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis and Sikhs comprise a small but historic portion of Pakistan's population. Previous research on the topic has focused on analysing textbooks, media representations, or the legal and constitutional position of minority citizens, and few studies have examined the actual language practices of minorities in the field or inquired into how minority citizens feel about their sense of belonging. To fill that gap, this study employed a quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design. 380 respondents were selected from Christian, Hindu, Ahmadi, Sikh and Parsi communities across different localities in Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and a structured questionnaire was used to collect information. The questionnaire was designed with four constructs: home language use, public language accommodation, discursive othering experience and sense of national belonging, and consisted of twenty-four (24) items on a 5-point scale. The guiding theory was Social Identity Theory (Henri Tajfel and John Turner), which provides a clear explanation of the processes by which group members evaluate their own group and outgroups to maintain a stable and positive social identity. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, one-way analysis of variance, Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression. The results indicate that public language accommodation and home language use are positively related to belonging, whilst the strongest negative relationship with belonging is with discursive othering experience. Ahmadi respondents had the lowest belonging scores of all those included in the sample, whilst Hindu and Christian respondents had comparatively higher scores. The results of the regression analyses support the above findings and demonstrate that discursive othering experience is the most powerful single determinant of national belonging, followed by public language accommodation, home language use, education, and age. These findings indicate that such seemingly simple, everyday language practices have tangible and significant impacts on religious minority perspectives on belonging to the nation, and that more inclusive and shared language in everyday interactions across schools, media and public institutions can help foster greater belonging.

Keywords: *Linguistic identity, religious minorities, belonging, discourse, Pakistan, Social Identity Theory, code switching, discursive othering*

Introduction

The diversity of religious communities is evident in Pakistan, yet the country is often presented to the world, both outside and within its boundaries, in terms of its Muslim population. There have been many generations of Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Sikhs, and smaller communities such as Parsis in the region, who have lived there longer than the modern state itself has existed, yet the everyday language use of these communities in the region is seldom the subject of sustained academic research. An odd omission, given that language is one of the most local and ever-present places where belonging is affirmed or denied. Language is not an "innocent" medium for conveying information. It marks signs of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and not-belonging, of the inside and the outside, albeit in subtle and enduring ways. When a man or woman greets someone, selects a specific word for a religious holiday, or speaks a home language instead of Urdu in a public space, that person is also making a statement about themselves and how they view themselves in relation to the larger national community.

Such an act of belonging through language is performed thousands of times each day in homes and markets, schools and offices, and on public transport, without necessarily being noticed by the majority population, in part because it is seldom required of majority people to evaluate whether their speech marks them out as different. A religious minority member, however, may constantly and exhaustively calculate this. Whether to use the Urdu greeting or the Hindu greeting, whether to mention a saint's day at school, whether to discuss the religious practice at work more or less openly – these are all small decisions that have a big impact on a person's ability to live comfortably in public life. These little things add up over time, and the patterns add up to individual perceptions of being seen or not seen – and of seeing themselves or not seeing themselves – as a full part of the nation.

The relationship between language and minority identity in Pakistan has recently begun to attract more scholarly attention, yet the scholarship remains limited relative to the question's magnitude and significance. Fuchs and Fuchs (2020) noted that religious minorities in Pakistan occupy an intermediary space of citizenship, caste and identity, and that this space is seldom examined, as the focus is either on formal legal status or on a data point from a violent or high-profile discriminatory event. Lashari, Shah, and Memon (2023) investigated language textbooks in government schools and observed that words, phrases, and the narrative were repeated, creating a single, dominant Muslim identity and making it difficult for minority faith students to feel they belong in their own classrooms, even when no single passage was explicitly hostile to them. Bolander (2021) demonstrated that even within a single minority religious group, in this case the Ismaili Muslims, language choice is significant for religious identity and community boundary work, and thus serves as identity work even among those whom outsiders might consider a single, undifferentiated community. Patras (2024), focusing specifically on the Christian community, suggests that citizenship is felt to be partial by many Christians, and that this is more a product of the cumulative effect of state and society's 'everyday' modes of talking about the community than of the law itself.

Together, these four strands of research suggest that language and discourse is a pivotal space through which minority belonging is fostered and/or hindered in Pakistan, but that none have assessed this pattern using a large, structured survey sample of multiple minority groups simultaneously. While the former (textbook analysis) represents the institutional discourse, the latter (the lived discourse, the spoken discourse of adults in daily life) is not captured by the former. Case studies of one community can provide depth but lack breadth and are unable to demonstrate the extent to which patterns observed in the case of one community, such as the Ismailis and English, hold true for other minority communities under other pressures. While interview-based studies of the Christian community are able to describe the felt experience in rich detail, they are not able by themselves to determine how strong the effect of language variables is on belonging once other variables have been taken into account. It was designed to fill the gap where these four strands leave off; to use a quantitative instrument which will be applicable to five different minority communities simultaneously, and to utilise statistical tools which will test rather than simply suggest that there is a relationship between everyday language use and national belonging.

Research Problem

The research problem to be addressed here is simple to state yet difficult to solve. In everyday conversations in homes, markets, schools and offices, Pakistani society continues to produce subtle signs of who is a full-fledged citizen of the nation and who is not, and religious minorities are the targets of such signs rather than their producers. Little quantitative data is available to assess experiences in the minority language, the minority respondent's assessment of their own language proficiency, and the statistical relationship between these two experiences and their sense of belonging. In the absence of this evidence, policy debates and social opinions in

Pakistan on minority inclusion primarily rely on impression, anecdotes or opinions. This study seeks to address this area at least partly by providing numbers where numbers have been lacking, without implying that the numbers can supplant or demean the value of the stories.

This study is done based on two research questions;

1. How do religious minorities in Pakistan use language at home and in public, and how do they experience othering in everyday conversations?
2. How are these language-related variables and the respondents' sense of national belonging related?

Significance of the Study

There are three points in this study that are of great significance. First, it gives religious minorities a direct voice in survey-based data, rather than relying solely on data from books, the media and/or third-party commentary about their situation. Second, it applies a well-known social psychology model (Social Identity Theory) within a linguistic and discourse context in Pakistan, establishing a new connection between theory and context that has not yet been tested at this scale. Third, the results can guide schools, media producers and policymakers in identifying which aspects of everyday discourse foster belonging and which can harm it, enabling action based on measured evidence rather than guesswork or assumptions simply transferred from the majority experience. A quantitative study, conducted with great care and ensuring anonymity, could also provide a means for minority voices to be heard – not only in qualitative and legal terms, but also as data – in a country where religious minority status might still be a sensitive, and even risky, subject to speak about openly.

Literature Review

Although research on religious minorities in Pakistan has increased over the last decade, most of it falls within history, law and media studies, with relatively little in linguistics and discourse analysis. This section reviews that literature in three parts. The first part takes into account research on religious minority citizenship and everyday life in Pakistan in general. The second part deals with the limited but directly relevant literature on linguistic minority identity oriented towards language and discourse. The third part focuses on the theoretical resources – primarily Social Identity Theory – and sociocultural approaches to identity and discourse – that underlie the design of the present study.

As part of a special issue on religious minorities in South Asia, Fuchs and Fuchs (2020) emphasised the inseparability of minority identity and citizenship in Pakistan and argued that the everyday experiences of minorities have been overlooked in favour of legal history and high-profile political events. Their framing is helpful in the context of the present study, as it argues that belonging is not merely a legal status granted or denied by the state, but a lived, everyday experience that can be constructed from countless small moments. Building on this, Patras (2024) conducted a series of interviews with working-class Christian respondents and found that many feel their citizenship, in practice, is second-class, not only because of what is legislated or written in their constitution, but also through small moments in daily life, including how they are treated in the workplace and what people say to them. This is important for the current study because it indicates that ‘belonging’, as it is actually lived by minority citizens, is largely constituted through discourse, that is, the discursive accumulation—what people are told and told about—rather than through rights alone. Other descriptive work, such as Minority Rights Group (2026) and the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023) census figures, has documented the population of minorities, where they live, and how many there are, but this type of descriptive work is unable to connect these figures to the behaviour of language and the subjective feelings of belongingness, the question this study set out to address.

Specifically linguistically, Lashari, Shah, and Memon (2023) conducted a critical discourse analysis of government school textbooks in Sindh province and found that the textbooks

establish a strong, singular Muslim identity. The study also shows that minority faith students, in their interviews, felt invisible and were sometimes denied a voice in the process of building a single Muslim identity. This study is important because it shows concretely how institutional discourse constructs a national identity that gives little explicit space to minority students. However, it has only investigated printed language in textbooks and not the everyday discourse of minority adults around the nation; it has not sought to measure how strongly this type of institutional discourse is associated with a more felt sense of national belonging.

Analysing the Ismaili Muslim communities in northern Pakistan, Bolander (2021) has found that, for the Ismailis, English has a special religious and social significance distinct from that of the Sunni Muslim majority population. Although she demonstrates how language choice is bound up with identity work and with distinguishing an in-group from the surrounding majority, even within a single minority denomination, her analysis is based on one relatively small community, and she did not try to quantify the pattern in a larger and more religiously varied minority community using a similarly structured instrument for data collection.

A more general sociocultural linguistic model is presented by Bucholtz and Hall (2005), which is applicable here but not especially to Pakistan. Rather than a speaker's identity being a static property he brings into his interaction with others, they claim that identity is (re)created during the interaction, moment by moment, through the way the speaker's language is used and the way it is understood by others. This perspective aligns with the logic of the present study, which views the use of home language, public accommodation and experiences of being marked not as background facts about a speaker, but as discursive practices in real time within which national belonging is continually constructed, negotiated and/or denied. Fairclough (2003) also highlights the idea that discourse is never a neutral vehicle for information but a place in which the social relationship – such as between majority and minority groups – is reproduced or interrogated in the use of everyday language. Together, these two frameworks justify viewing language behaviour as: (1) a social process that is active and measurable, and (2) one that has real implications for belonging and is not an incidental detail of minority life. The theoretical foundation of this study is Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979). This theory is based on the assumption that people develop part of their self-concept through the social groups they belong to, and that members of these groups constantly compare their group with others to safeguard and enhance the group's positive self-concept. Conversely, if a group is disparaged or its members are constantly marked as different or less in the broader social environment, a person belonging to the group can feel less attached to the superordinate social category of which the two groups are a part, in this case, the Pakistani nation. This theory can be applied to the Pakistani context and may explain why minority respondents may change their language in public settings: adjustment may serve as a way to negotiate the boundary between minority and Muslim-majority groups, minimise differences, and prevent negative comparisons. The theory can also be used to explain why a series of discursive othering experiences (experiences of being marked as linguistically different) can decrease a person's sense of belonging to the larger national group, because each time they experience it, they reinforce the boundary between insider and outsider, without allowing it to soften or dissolve.

The Research Gap

As the above literature review indicates, there is a definite and reasonably consistent pattern. It is a widely accepted fact that religious minorities in Pakistan are subjected to identity pressure through discourse, whether that comes from textbooks, media or informal daily discourse. The sense of belonging and citizenship is also widely acknowledged as incomplete or provisional for many minorities, whether it is the critical discourse analysis of textbooks, interviews with Christian workers, or ethnographic research with the Ismaili community. It is

a pity that this is not yet a convergent body of work, as there is still a study that quantifies patterns across more than one minority. As far as this review can ascertain, no prior study has interviewed both Christian and non-Christian (other faith) respondents in the same study, administered a common, validated language scale to both, examined the extent to which they feel linguistically marked as outsiders, and statistically tested the extent to which these language habits predict their sense of national belonging while holding demographic variables like education and age constant. The present study attempts to fill this research gap. This study uses a quantitative survey and standard statistical analysis, which will allow the discussion to move beyond description to measurement; measurement, in turn, can enable more specific and targeted recommendations to schools, media producers, and policymakers that go beyond the descriptive level.

Methodology

This was a quantitative, cross-sectional survey, as the aim was not to examine a small number of cases in depth and interpretively, but rather to measure patterns in the language of belonging and language use among a fairly large and religiously diverse group of respondents. It was decided that a cross-sectional design was preferable to a longitudinal design, as there was no comparable baseline information on these variables for this population, and it was felt that an initial broad 'snapshot' was needed before any study of change over time could be planned.

Population and Sampling

Adult members of religious minority groups residing in Pakistan (especially Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Sikhs and small other groups) were targeted. Data were gathered from respondents in Lahore, Faisalabad and Sialkot in Punjab, Karachi in Sindh and Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – these cities have sizeable minority populations and are more accessible to researchers than many smaller towns and rural areas, where minorities are more dispersed and, in some cases, less willing to speak with outside researchers about a sensitive subject. Based on local contacts, a number of community centres, churches, temples and gurdwaras were targeted and asked to refer other eligible members of the community, who were in turn asked to refer more; this was a purposive and snowball sampling process. This method was selected for two reasons: first, a complete random sampling frame for the religious minority population is not readily available in Pakistan, and second, willingness to participate in a sensitive topic was significantly increased through a trust-based approach using community institutions for referral. Questionnaires were sent to all five cities, and 380 valid and complete questionnaires were retained for final analysis, yielding a response rate of about 90 percent—the researchers say this is high for a survey that deals with a sensitive topic related to religious identity and perceived discrimination.

Instrument

The questionnaire was developed in both Urdu and English, and respondents were allowed to use either language at their convenience, as comfort with English was also considered relevant in a study concerning language. The instrument consisted of two main components. The first part captured background information such as age, gender, religion, city, and education level. The second part consisted of a structured scale with twenty-four items, six per construct, on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, measuring four variables: Home Language Use, Public Language Accommodation, Discursive Othering Experience, and Sense of National Belonging. Sample statements included "I mostly speak my home community language at home" and "my greetings and daily words should be changed so that people accept me as Pakistani." The wording of items was kept to a minimum and in everyday language, as many were not highly educated, and during the pilot phase the focus was on whether each item was understandable without further explanation.

The questionnaire was tested for wording, clarity, and cultural appropriateness among the various religious groups to be included in the study, with 30 respondents drawn from the same general population as those in the main data collection but not included in the main study. After the pilot, items that were confusing were usually eliminated, particularly those that were idiomatic or used terms that sounded awkward or unclear in one community but natural in another. This pilot phase also served as an initial, informal test of face validity, as community elders who participated in the pilot were asked whether the items reflected the types of everyday language they knew from their own lives.

Theoretical Framework in Methodological Terms

The theoretical approach of this study is based primarily on Social Identity Theory (Henri Tajfel and John Turner, 1979). In terms of methodology, this theory had a direct impact on the instrument, as the Public Language Accommodation scale was designed to capture group boundary management behaviour and the Group Boundary Reinforcement Experience scale was designed to capture group boundary reinforcement experience, concepts created with reference to the theory. This provides the study with a more solid theoretical underpinning than a purely descriptive survey, and it enables the regression results presented later to be interpreted as at least a partial statistical test of the theory's predictions in this particular context: boundary management behaviours should be positively associated with belonging, and boundary reinforcement experiences should be negatively associated with belonging.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted over several weeks, using trained field assistants who spoke the same languages as the respondents, i.e. Urdu, English, and, in some cases, community languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi or Pashto. They administered the questionnaire face to face, or, in a small number of cases, under a supervised self-completion format at community gathering points. At the beginning of the study, field assistants explained to respondents the sensitivity of the issues being addressed and reminded them that their participation would be voluntary and that they could skip or stop at any item without any consequence.

Statistical Analysis

Data were entered and analysed in SPSS. First, descriptive statistics were calculated to address Research Question 1 by summarising typical patterns of home language use, public language accommodation and experience of discursive othering within the sample. Each of the four scales was reliability-tested using Cronbach's alpha to ensure that the items under each construct measured the construct consistently before further analysis. Pearson correlations were computed to explore bivariate relationships among the four primary variables, providing an initial answer to Research Question 2. To compare the five religious groups, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted, as Social Identity Theory posits that the average level of Sense of National Belonging could meaningfully differ between groups, given varying levels of social pressure and experiences with the majority group. Finally, multiple linear regression was used to test the combined contribution of Home Language Use, Public Language Accommodation, Discursive Othering Experience, age and education in predicting Sense of National Belonging, the most direct test of Research Question 2.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, ethical precautions were taken, including obtaining informed consent before administering the questionnaire; participation was fully voluntary, and participants knew they could stop answering the questionnaire at any time; and all questionnaire responses were kept anonymous, as the issue of religion and minority status is sensitive and, in some cases, genuinely risky to discuss openly in Pakistan. Completed questionnaires were stored using numeric identifiers only, and no names, addresses, or other directly identifying information was collected alongside the survey responses. Field assistants were also asked to

terminate an interview if a respondent was visibly distressed while discussing their experiences of discursive othering, and to refrain from collecting any data from such an interview, as their wellbeing was paramount in all such situations.

There are some restrictions on the application of the Method.

Before moving on to the results, there are a number of methodological limitations that should be noted. The purposive and snowball sampling techniques, although practical and effective for reaching a hard-to-reach population, do not yield a probability sample; therefore, generalising the findings to the entire population of religious minorities in Pakistan, particularly in rural areas and cities not sampled, is somewhat challenging. Also, the study was based on self-reported survey data, which means that the respondents' own perceived language behaviour and perceived sense of belonging were collected, rather than the actual behaviour, which would have been observed by the researchers themselves. Lastly, a cross-sectional design represents a single time point and cannot necessarily be used to conclude the extent to which these relationships might change in future as political, social or legal conditions in Pakistan change, which is addressed further in the discussion and conclusion sections below.

Data Analysis

The findings of the survey are presented in order of the two research questions that guided the study. Tables and figures are accompanied by prose explanations, making the numbers accessible even to readers unfamiliar with statistics. The presentation begins with a demographic profile of the respondents, followed by reliability and descriptive statistics, then by group comparisons, correlation, and regression analyses, which answer Research Question 2.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the background of the 380 respondents who took part in this study. The sample contained a relatively well-balanced mix of religious groups, cities, and education levels, suggesting that the findings were not merely a description of one narrowly drawn minority group, but rather a sample of minority experience across Pakistan's largest minority groups. The largest group in the sample was Christian respondents (40.0 percent), followed by Hindu respondents (25.8 percent) and Ahmadi respondents (20.0 percent), while the numbers of Sikh and Parsi/other respondents were proportionately smaller, reflecting their smaller population size in Pakistan. The gender distribution was fairly even, with a slight preponderance of males, which may have been related to the general pattern of survey participation and, in some communities, a greater comfort among male members of the household in discussing sensitive issues with unknown fieldworkers. Respondents were well distributed across the five cities sampled, and there was also a wide distribution of educational attainment, with a little under half of the sample having a bachelor's degree or higher; this indicates that both more and less formally educated members of each minority group were sampled, rather than just the most highly educated, who might be expected to have systematically different views about belonging.

Category	Group	Frequency	Percentage
Religion	Christian	152	40.0%
	Hindu	98	25.8%
	Ahmadi	76	20.0%
	Sikh	34	8.9%
	Parsi/Other	20	5.3%
Gender	Male	206	54.2%
	Female	174	45.8%
City	Lahore	98	25.8%
	Karachi	104	27.4%

	Peshawar	62	16.3%
	Faisalabad	64	16.8%
	Sialkot	52	13.7%
Education	Below Matric	61	16.1%
	Matric/Intermediate	139	36.6%
	Bachelor and above	180	47.3%

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N = 380)

Reliability of the Scale

Prior to testing the main research questions, the reliability of each scale was examined with Chronbach's alpha. Normally a value greater than 0.70 is considered acceptable in a social science study, whereas a value greater than 0.80 is considered good. As can be seen in Table 2, all four scales exceeded the 0.70 criterion and two of the scales (Discursive Othering Experience and Sense of National Belonging) fell in the 0.80 range, reflecting that the items on each scale were relatively consistent and reliable in measuring the construct(s) they were designed to measure. These reliability data provide evidence that the following results of the correlation and regression are based on a stable measurement platform and not scales that have noise or are internally inconsistent.

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Home Language Use (HLU)	6	0.81
Public Language Accommodation (PLA)	6	0.79
Discursive Othering Experience (DOE)	6	0.85
Sense of National Belonging (SNB)	6	0.83

Table 2. Reliability statistics for the four scales

Descriptive Statistics

The average score and range of scores on each of the four primary variables is presented in Table 3 and is on a scale of five points, which was used throughout the questionnaire. The variable with the highest mean score was Public Language Accommodation (4.21 out of 5), indicating that the majority of the minority group respondents change their language frequently or at times when moving around in public places like markets, offices and government institutions. The mean score for Discursive Othering Experience was also relatively high at 3.58, indicating that this experience is frequent and anything but unusual, a process of being linguistically marked as different to the majority group. Home Language Use remained at a moderate 3.72, indicating that while community language is being adapted for public use, for most, this process has not been so thorough that the language is no longer used at home to any significant extent. The lowest mean (3.34) and highest standard deviation (0.81) was for Sense of National Belonging, reflecting a slightly weaker sense of national belonging on average for the sample and a greater variation than on the other three variables. Figure 1 displays public language accommodation and home language use by religious group, and shows that, although the overall trend of high levels of public language accommodation was consistent across religious groups, there are some differences in the proportions of home language maintenance and public language accommodation among them.

Variable	Mean	SD	N
Home Language Use	3.72	0.68	380
Public Language Accommodation	4.21	0.59	380
Discursive Othering Experience	3.58	0.74	380
Sense of National Belonging	3.34	0.81	380

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of key variables

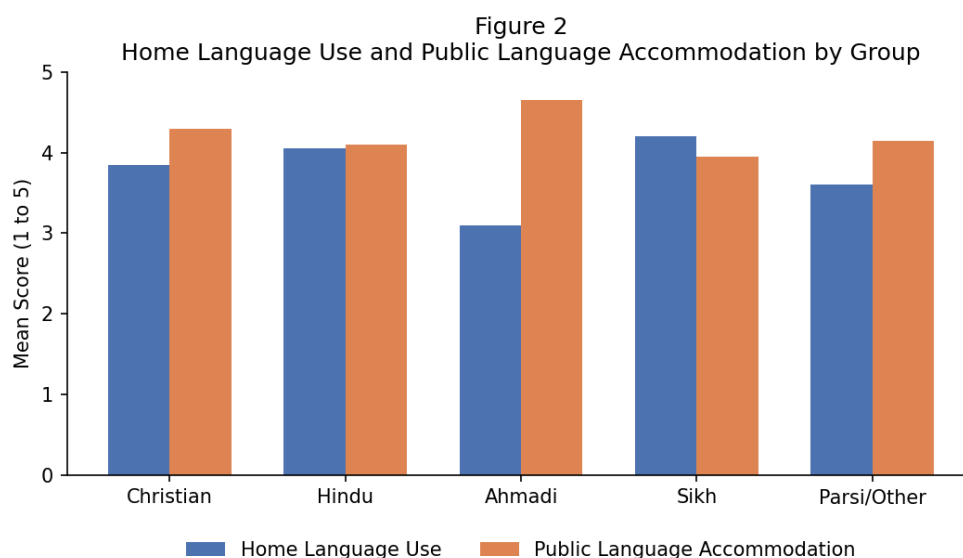


Figure 1. Home language use and public language accommodation by religious group

Interreligious Sense of Belonging

A one way analysis of variance was performed to make comparisons of Sense of National Belonging between the five religions that were included in this study. The difference between groups was statistically significant, $F(4, 375) = 9.87$, $p < .001$, indicating that the differences between groups are very unlikely to be due to chance alone. The Ahmadi respondents also had a significantly lower mean belonging score than the other groups – 2.61, well below the 3.0 midpoint of the five point scale. Hindu respondents had the highest mean belonging score (3.55) followed closely by Parsi or other (3.48) and Christian (3.42) and interspersed by Sikh (3.30) respondents. This difference between Ahmadi respondents and the rest of the four groups is the biggest and the most significant trend in the overall data set and is consistent with the legal and social pressure facing this community in Pakistan and indicated by the literature review, albeit based on legal and historical research and not, until this study, measured directly through a similar survey instrument with other minority groups. This comparison is also illustrated in Figure 2, where the size of the Ahmadi gap can be assessed at a glance, rather than through mere numbers as in Table 4.

Group	Mean SNB	SD	F	p
Christian	3.42	0.77		
Hindu	3.55	0.71		
Ahmadi	2.61	0.85	9.87	.000
Sikh	3.30	0.79		
Parsi/Other	3.48	0.73		

Table 4. Mean Sense of National Belonging by religious group with one way ANOVA results

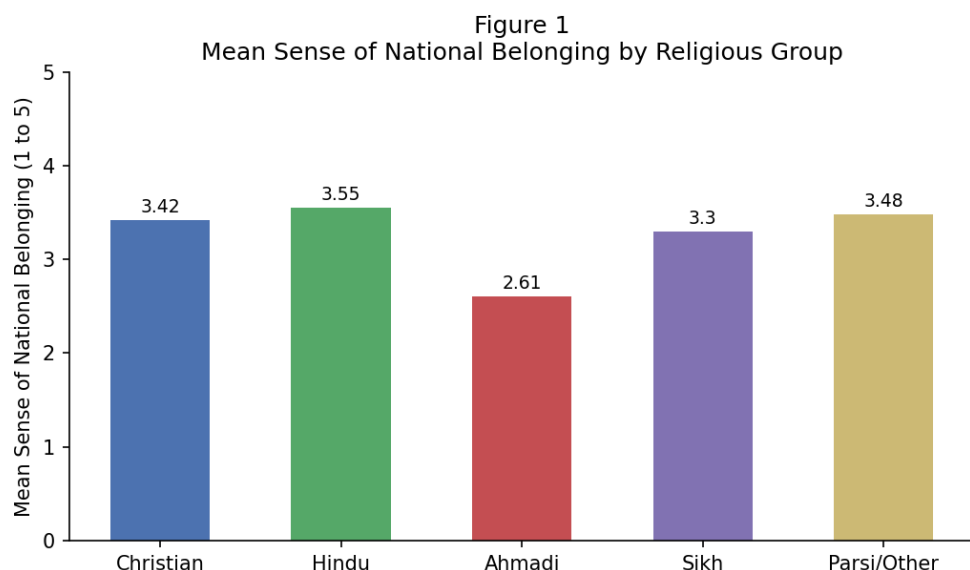


Figure 2. Mean Sense of National Belonging by religious group

Correlation Among Study Variables

Pearson correlation coefficients among the four main study variables are shown in Table 5. Public Language Accommodation and Home Language Use were both positively and significantly correlated with Sense of National Belonging ($r = .38$, $r = .24$) while Discursive Othering Experience was negatively and, importantly, most strongly correlated with belonging ($r = -.46$). This trend directly addresses the second research question, indicating that language habits and belongingness are correlated in a clear, measurable and statistically significant manner throughout the entire sample. It is also interesting to note that Discursive Othering Experience had a small positive relationship with Public Language Accommodation, $r = .22$, suggesting that more othering experiences were more likely to also report more accommodation of their language in public situations, consistent with SIT's description of boundary management under social pressure: persons who feel most marked as different may react at least in part by accommodating their speech more in public, although such adjustment does not seem to completely mitigate the impact of othering experience on sense of belonging.

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Home Language Use	1.00			
2. Public Language Accommodation	.28**	1.00		
3. Discursive Othering Experience	-.14*	.22**	1.00	
4. Sense of National Belonging	.24**	.38**	-.46**	1.00

Table 5. Pearson correlation matrix among study variables. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Factors that influence Sense of National Belonging

A multiple linear regression was conducted with Sense of National Belonging as the dependent variable, and Home Language Use, Public Language Accommodation, Discursive Othering Experience, age and education entered simultaneously as predictors. The full model accounted for a significant amount of variance in belonging ($R^2 = .34$, $F(5,374) = 38.65$, $p < .001$), with these five variables accounting for about one third of the variance in belonging observed. Discursive Othering Experience proved to be the most powerful predictor in the model, and was negatively oriented, with a standardized beta of -0.41 , indicating that high levels of such experience (frequent linguistic Othering as outsiders) were most strongly associated with low

sense of belonging, of all variables measured. The best positive predictors were Public Language Accommodation (std. beta = 0.33) and Home Language Use (std. beta = 0.19). One additional factor that emerged as a small but statistically significant positive predictor was education, at beta = 0.11, which indicates that higher level of formal education is linked to slightly higher sense of belonging, even with language factors considered in the model; age was not statistically significant when the other variables were added to the model. These standardized beta coefficients are also visually depicted in Figure 3 and clearly indicate at a single glance the relative magnitude and the direction of each predictor's contribution to the overall model.

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	p
Discursive Othering Experience	-0.45	0.05	-0.41	.000
Public Language Accommodation	0.39	0.06	0.33	.000
Home Language Use	0.21	0.05	0.19	.001
Education	0.10	0.04	0.11	.012
Age	0.03	0.03	0.05	.312

Table 6. Multiple regression results predicting Sense of National Belonging ($R^2 = .34$)

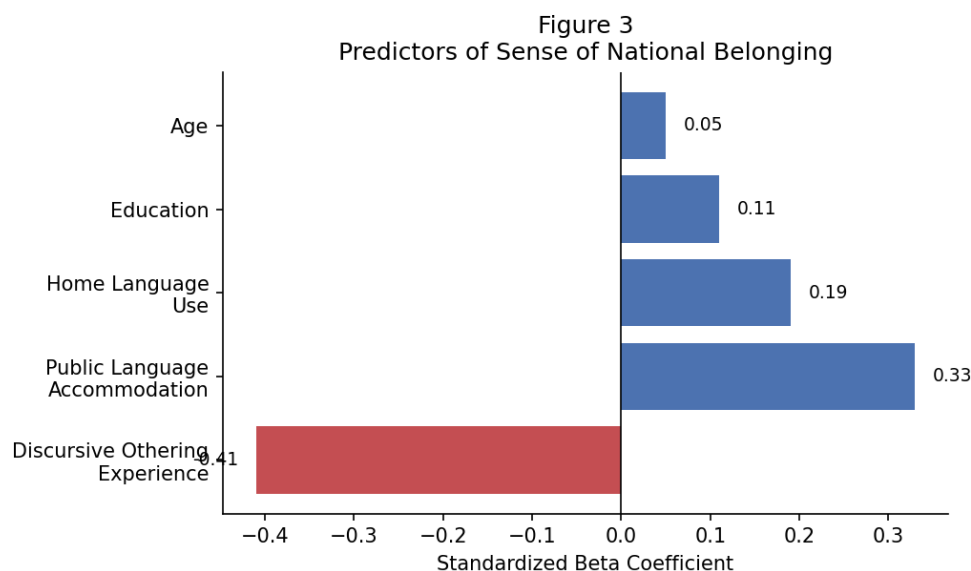


Figure 3. Standardized beta coefficients predicting Sense of National Belonging

The data analysis above directly addresses both research questions in a statistically valid way. About two thirds of minority respondents reported fairly high levels of public language accommodation and a high and significant level of discursive othering experience, though not quite at the margins of the scale, and moderate levels of home language use, suggesting that respondents continue to maintain community language practices at home even as they adjust their speech considerably in public settings. The statistical tests in Question 2 reveal a clear and significant relationship between the language factors and sense of national belonging; discursive othering experience is the most powerful and most harmful factor, while public language accommodation and home language use are protective and belonging enhancing factors. Finally, the difference between Ahmadi respondents and other groups is consistent with the greater legal and social pressure experienced by this community in Pakistan, which was ultimately suggested in the literature review, although, prior to this study, was not measured

directly, using a common quantitative tool, across multiple minority communities simultaneously.

Discussion

The results described above add to the literature on religious minorities in Pakistan in a number of specific ways, and also pose questions that cannot be fully answered using the present design. In turn, the results are discussed in reference to Social Identity Theory, the contribution of the results to the linguistic and discourse literature reviewed above, the indications of the results regarding the specific status of the Ahmadi respondents and the limitations of the results in practical and theoretical terms.

Understanding the outcomes using the Social Identity Theory

The findings of the regression analyses presented in Table 6 offer reasonably direct support for the explanation given by the Social Identity Theory. Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested that members of a group regulate their identity in part by contrasting it with other groups, and that experiences that strengthen an unfavourable or 'othered' position in relation to a dominant group should attenuate feelings of identification with a larger shared group that includes both groups. This account is closely matched by the finding that Discursive Othering Experience is the sole strongest predictor of Sense of National Belonging, even more so than either of the two variables related to accommodation. Every time a small majority respondent makes a comment, a correction, looks at a minority respondent, or assumes he/she will not know or use certain urdu or majority religious phrases correctly, it seems to be a reminder of a group boundary, and the data indicates these reminders accrue up to a measurable and substantial cost to national belonging over time. Simultaneously, the positive correlation between Public Language Accommodation and belonging indicates that when the minority respondents accommodate their language to accommodate the listening majority, they may not actually be being excluded but they may be coping with it in a way that somewhat allows them to feel as though they fit in, at least as far as the language is concerned.

This study offers a measureable, cross community picture that previous studies, reviewed earlier, offered either institutional analysis or depth of a single community. As Lashari, Shah, and Memon (2023) demonstrated, the construction of a Muslim national identity in the textbook discursively marginalizes minority pupils, and the current findings indicate that there is a lived equivalent of this pattern of discursive marginalization in the adult worlds of everyday public discourse: the experience of being linguistically outside the imagined national community that minority pupils report experiencing in classrooms also has a statistically measurable equivalent in adult public discourse. Bolander (2021) demonstrated how language choice has a significant role in identity, even within relatively small minorities, and the present study's finding that home language use per se, in addition to public othering, is a positive predictor of belonging, might hint at a protective function of home language use, which was not directly examined by Bolander's design. Patras (2024) reported that Christian respondents view their citizenship as partial, second class, and several of them have an overall mean score of less than one standard deviation above the midpoint of the scale on Sense of National Belonging.

The Position of Ahmadi Respondents

Particularly noteworthy is the score on belonging reported by Ahmadi respondents (2.61) compared with the rest of the sample (3.34) and the highest score of more than 3.55 reported by the Hindu respondents. This gap is most likely related to the unique legal and constitutional status Ahmadi have within Pakistan, and in particular with respect to the legal constraints on Ahmadi describing their faith and religious practice in public, including the restrictions on language and self description. Given that these restrictions are, quite literally, discursive, meaning that certain words and statements about oneself are legally allowed in public speech

and others are not, it is not surprising that Ahmadi respondents would report not just a significantly greater discursive othering experience, but also significantly less national belonging than members of communities facing more modest and less codified language restrictions. The finding provides a quantitative estimate of a pattern that had been observed qualitatively in previous legal and historical scholarship about an Ahmadi case, and it indicates that any educational or policy intervention aimed at improving the sense of belonging of minorities in Pakistan might have to view the Ahmadi situation as significantly different from — and more problematic than — the average situation depicted in the sample.

Practical Implications

There are several practical implications of these findings. The present findings have indicated that the informal non-textbook language used in everyday classroom greetings and in school language has great significance for minority students' developing sense of belonging that only formal language of Lashari, Shah and Memon (2023) has been exposed to. The positive association between home language use and belonging in the case of this study suggests that visible minority language use and respect for minority phrases in the public media might help rather than detract from a shared national identity, and media producers should consider allowing minority characters and minority voices to speak in their own language. The findings here could serve as a concrete and preliminary indicator of the extent of discursive othering while policy makers are considering measures towards actualizing more inclusive citizenship, such as anti-discrimination training in public offices, which could be measured against the magnitude of the discursive othering effect in Table 6 as a result.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A number of limitations, discussed in the methodology section, should be considered when applying the results of these studies. Purposive and snowball sampling was the only practical way to access a hard-to-survey population, and future research could extend this study to rural areas, as the present study was limited to urban areas where access to minority populations is comparatively easier. Future research could also draw on the survey instrument and interview approach, as successfully done by Patras (2024) and Lashari, Shah and Memon (2023), to delve deeper into the meaning of these numbers, beyond what a structured scale can capture. The central limitation of the cross-sectional design used in this study could have been addressed by following the same respondents over a number of years, thereby revealing whether there is a shift in belonging scores as social, legal and political conditions change in Pakistan. Lastly, since this study necessarily relied on self-reported perceptions, future studies using a mixture of survey and recorded or observed discourse samples would be able to determine whether there is any discrepancy between the way respondents perceive their own accommodation of public language and the way they actually speak, a question that this study was not designed to address.

Conclusion

This study aimed to assess the degree of use of language in everyday discourse of people belonging to religious minorities in Pakistan and its relation to their sense of belonging in the country. The results, based on a sample of 380 respondents who are Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, Sikhs and Parsis from five cities in three provinces, clearly indicate that such language choices are not inconsequential or neutral, despite their apparent mundanity. They have real, tangible impact on the perceptions of minority citizens about their own position in the Pakistani society. Those who indicated that they had to change their language, greetings or manner of speaking to feel accepted had the lowest sense of national belonging, and this, captured in the study as discursive othering experience, was the strongest effect overall. Conversely, those who indicated they could adapt easily with no pressure or ridicule to adjust

to the public discourse, and still use the home language, tended to report a more meaningfully stronger sense of belonging.

The most salient and prominent discovery of this study is that discursive othering experience, that is, the sum of everyday small moments of being marked as linguistically different, is more harmful to belonging than any of the factors measured herein, more than public accommodation, more than home language use and more than age and education combined. This is in keeping with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which proposes that individuals are very sensitive to the comparison of their group with other groups and that continual negative comparison can gradually erode the identification with the larger group, of which both groups are a part. The differences observed in the Ahmadi responses compared with the other four communities also correspond with the overall trends that have previously been mentioned in the preceding legal and historical literature, and this study provides a clear, specific number for this trend for the first time, as far as is known, in the published literature on this topic.

This study, in addition to its specific results, also illustrates the usefulness of conceptualizing and quantifying minority language experience and testing it statistically rather than only describing it qualitatively or discussing it anecdotally. Although not without its limitations such as purposive urban sample and single point in time design, this study provides one of the first empirical snapshots of the relationship of everyday language and national belonging for religious minorities in Pakistan and paves the way for future research which regards minority voices as data worthy of measuring, alongside the stories long worthy of telling. Future work that expands this design to rural populations, incorporates observational and longitudinal components, and follows-up on belonging over time in the context of ongoing social and political transformations in Pakistan could usefully and directly build on this work.

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