Hate crimes

Kamran Khan

Published online on: 23 May 2019

How to cite: Kamran Khan. 23 May 2019, Hate crimes from: The Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict Routledge

Accessed on: 26 Sep 2023

22

Hate crimes
Language, vulnerability and conflict

Kamran Khan

22.1 Introduction

In the space of three days in 2015, two race hate crimes in London were recorded on mobile phones. Both events were uploaded online and went viral. The attacks had much in common: they both took place on London transport and both involved Muslims as victims. One other commonality in both attacks, which is of interest to this chapter, is the role of language, race and religion. The two events were race hate crimes, with highly offensive slurs and expletive-laden insults aimed in one case at a disabled pensioner and in the other at a heavily pregnant woman. Among the insults were frequent references to terrorism. Thus, wars abroad were conflated with individuals in the UK, as both wars and the victims of the race hate crimes involved Muslims. Both race hate crimes were based on prejudice towards race and religion, as well as the added dimension that both victims were highly vulnerable because of disability in one case and gender/pregnancy in the other. For this reason, vulnerability emerges as a key aspect in this chapter and this includes not only physical aspects but also linguistic practices within Islamophobic hate crimes.

With the increased hostility towards Muslims in the UK, hate crimes towards Muslims have substantially increased (Tell Mama, 2015). For example, in 2015 the number of Islamophobic hate crimes had increased by 252 percent compared with the previous year (Tell Mama, 2015). These crimes often correlate with sociopolitical incidents; following terrorist incidents, there is often a spike (Tell Mama, 2015). After the London and Manchester terrorist attacks in 2016, hate crimes towards Muslims rose five-fold (Travis, 2017). Following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in 2015, hate crimes towards Muslims rose by 300 percent (Wright, 2015). Evidently, there is an intimate link between terrorism and hate crimes in the lives of ordinary Muslims. It is worth noting that Muslim women, in particular, are targeted in the spikes of hate crimes (Tell Mama, 2015). Thus, in times of increased tension, it is some of the most vulnerable strata of the population who are most at risk due to the intersectionality of religion, race and gender.

In race hate literature, there has tended to be a focus on difference as a cause for attacks (Hall, 2013, Perry, 2001). In more recent years, Chakraborti and Garland (2012) have taken vulnerability into account in order to include the wide array of prejudices at play in
targeting a victim. They argue that rather than focusing on particular features, the concept of vulnerability permits a more situational understanding of the aggressor-victim dynamic. Vulnerability also allows an empathic approach to understanding the victim in a more holistic manner that simply matches and differentiates perpetrator and victim.

Language in relation to vulnerability draws heavily on Derrida’s work (Derrida, 1988, 1998, 2005). It is worth considering the climate of hate that conditioned his work. Derrida’s life was indelibly marked by his experience of war and language. War arrived early in his life growing up in Algeria as a Jew. The rise of the Vichy regime in France led to the loss of citizenship for Jews in Algeria in 1940, as the Jewish population was expelled from Algeria under the jurisdiction of the French government. This right to be citizens in Algeria had been bestowed on the Jewish community in 1870 through the Crémieux Decree. Derrida’s sensitivity towards exclusion and discrimination as a child, particularly from and through language based on conflict, would shape his work for years to come (Peeters, 2013).

Derrida was especially attentive to the “terror of language” (Derrida, 1998). In this view, language is not the sole possession of the speaker but also the property of the listener (Derrida, 1988, 1998). Language or language practices can determine who is a friend or enemy, and this distinction has been made based in times of war. For example, McNamara and Roever (2006) provide historical instances of how words, sounds or languages distinguished friend from foe during the Second World War. Within this space, meaning may not always be shared, and language can just as well be inverted to discriminate as it can to create belonging (Derrida, 2005). This potential threat within language means that the menace of the harmful effects of a language are always prevalent (McNamara, 2012). In the face of this terror and potential grave consequences, the individual is always potentially vulnerable to judgement being passed by someone else.

This chapter moves from concrete, visceral forms of Islamophobia before foregrounding the nature of race hate crimes and vulnerability. Derrida’s notion of vulnerability and terror provides a theoretical framework through which we can better situate the two Islamophobic race hate crimes studied here.

### 22.2 Islamophobia

In 1997, the Runnymede Trust coined the term “Islamophobia” in their ground-breaking evidence-based report (Runnymede Trust, 1997). The report identified three strands to Islamophobia. First, there was a focus on hostility towards Islam and Muslims. The second related to the tangible effects of hostility resulting in discrimination towards Muslims both on an individual level and on a collective level. The third point references the exclusion of Muslims in public participation through social and political affairs.

In 2017, the Runnymede Trust revisited the report (Runnymede Trust, 2017). This was partly to mark 20 years since the report and partly to address the changing sociopolitical landscape that has pushed Islam and Muslims to the forefront both as potential “enemies within” (Aas, 2007, Croft, 2012) and as victims of hate crimes (Awan, 2012, Tell Mama, 2015). Muslims occupy a particularly unusual position in that they can be victims of hate crimes on the one hand and are figures of suspicion on the other. It could be argued that in some cases, they are victims of hate crimes precisely because they embody a range of discursively constructed threats, from immigration to terrorism (Bigo, 2002, 2008). On a collective level, Muslims have become a “suspect community” (Awan, 2012). A suspect community has been described as:
A sub-group of the population that is singled out for state attention as being “problematic” in terms of policing. Individuals may be targeted, not necessarily as a result of suspected wrongdoing, but simply because of their presumed membership to that sub-group. Race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, language, accent, dress, political ideology or any combination of these factors may serve to delineate the sub-group. (Pantazis and Pemberton, 2009, p.649) (emphasis added)

Muslims are considered a threat due to having been deemed worthy of increased attention and surveillance, and with saturated security discourses about them. In Britain, the label of suspect community is a mantle previously held by the Irish community due to their association and stigmatisation during the height of Irish Republican Army terrorist attacks (Hickman et al., 2011).

The War on Terror has redefined the range of threats in British society (Sian, 2017). For example, the Prevent strategy, which is one element of the British Government’s wider counter-terrorism efforts, focuses on ideological issues and radicalisation and has safeguards within education and health (Home Office, 2011). Whereas once Irish Republican Army threats may have been confined to Ireland and England, the global dimension and diversity of Islam broadens the range of perceived threats and ranges from terrorism to those at risk of radicalisation (Heath-Kelly, 2017). Furthermore, the threat comes from an “enemy within” (Aas, 2007, Croft, 2012) who is adept at blending in with everyday society, yet also capable of inflicting mass casualties. This was most vividly demonstrated in 2005 with the 7/7 London bombing which involved four suicide bombers who were all born and/or who grew up in the UK. Unlike an external threat that can be explained away under normal conditions of conflict, the internal threat poses far more complex questions about who the enemy is and where it is coming from (Fortier, 2007).

It is worth noting that when wars are going on elsewhere, the diasporic community of the opposing side often bears the brunt of violence closer to home. Naber (2006) underlines how this occurred in terms of internment for Japanese people in the US during the Second World War. Similarly, the War on Terror has sparked increased surveillance on the Muslim community, as well as an increase not only in attacks on Muslims but also those perceived to be Muslims, such as the Sikh community (Sian, 2017). As mentioned above, the rise of the Irish Republican Army and military engagement in Northern Ireland led to increased suspicion and discrimination (Hickman et al., 2011, Hillyard, 1993). Thus, it is important to state at the outset that the discriminatory treatment of communities, who are both diasporic and connected to wars elsewhere, is not an anomaly but entirely consistent with history (Naber, 2006).

22.3 Hate crimes and vulnerability framework

A hate crime is defined as “any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by hostility or prejudice towards someone based on a personal characteristic” (Home Office, 2017, p.2). There is a difference between hate crimes and incidents, in that crimes are recordable and against the law, whereas incidents may not always be referred to the police (Hall, 2013). Thus, the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) and ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions for Human Rights) put forth two conditions for a hate crime: first, an act against criminal law and second, an act rooted in a form of bias (ODIHR, 2018). Hate crimes can involve race, religion, sexual orientation, disability and/or transgender identity (Home Office, 2017). Rather than
Kamran Khan

focusing on ideology and organised groups, hate crimes can occur in everyday life among individuals (Chakraborti, 2015).

It is worth drawing on a hate crime framework in order to better situate the role of language. First, difference is key in understanding hate crime. Perry (2001) argues that intimidation towards marginalised communities can function as an act of affirming social hierarchies that are perceived to have come under threat as a result of difference based on particular characteristics. This hypothesis is supported by Chakraborti and Garland, who expand it by saying:

hate crimes symbolize the “national” relations of superiority and inferiority within the confines of structural norms, and are designed to transmit a message to the victim’s community that they are “different” and they “don’t belong”.

(Chakraborti and Garland, 2012, p.502)

Thus, through this lens the hate crime is related to wider communities and the place of individuals within social structures.

Supporting the “difference” orientation, Chakraborti and Garland (2012) argue that the concept of vulnerability can allow for a richer intersectional analysis and a wider range of factors leading to hate crimes such as unfamiliarity, discomfort or even opportunism. They draw on Cops and Pleysier’s (2011, p.59) definition of vulnerability as “the perception of exposure to danger, a loss of control over the situation and a perceived inadequate capacity to resist the direct and indirect consequences of victimization”. This does not mean that vulnerable individuals are passive and lacking in agency; instead, the vulnerability approach allows us to take the perspective of the perpetrator into account in seeing the victim as “weak, defenceless, powerless or with a limited capacity to resist” (Chakraborti and Garland, 2012, p.507).

The vulnerability framework allows a more situational, personal analysis of a hate crime. Chakraborti and Garland (2012) subsume an emphasis on identity and attributes (such as religion, race and disability, for instance) with a more relational quality between the aggressor and victim. They argue that “they may become a victim because of how that aspect of their identity intersects with other aspects of their self, and with other situational factors and context, to make them vulnerable in the eyes of the perpetrator” (Chakraborti and Garland, 2012, p.507).

22.4 The terror and vulnerability of language

Vulnerability expands the range of factors at play while permitting a focus on the interaction within the hate crime. We can enrich this analysis further by meshing Derrida’s post-structuralist view of language. In Derrida’s work, there is an inherent vulnerability of the individual, since meaning exists in the “ear of the other” (Derrida, 1988). This may occur in an everyday context with low stakes, in someone’s attempts to make themselves understood. However, in cases where the difference between friend and enemy is dependent on the interpretation of language practices, the stakes become very high. The consequences for a lack of shared meaning or a negative judgment can be devastating (Derrida, 2005, McNamara, 2012, McNamara and Roever, 2006). McNamara and Roever (2006) provide examples of such cases in which the assessment of the language practices of a perceived enemy in perilous, (post)conflict cases leads to violent or fatal consequences.

A vivid example of the interconnection between language and war can be found in Monolingualism of the Other (Derrida, 1998). The book itself is a meditation on the
paradoxes and contradictions within language: simultaneous joy and exasperation, proximity and distance, belonging and discrimination, and homogeneity and heterogeneity within and through languages. Describing life in Algeria until his expulsion during the Second World War, Derrida explains how he suffered a triple exclusion due to the colonial history of Algeria and his own Jewish background. Chérif (2008, pp.34–5) explains:

The community to which I belonged was cut off in three ways: it was cut off first from the Arab and the Berber, actually the Maghrebi language and culture; it was also cut off from the French, indeed European, language and culture, which were viewed as distant poles, unrelated to its history; and finally, or to begin with, it was cut off from the Jewish memory, from that history and that language that one must assume to be one’s own, but which at a given moment no longer were – at least a special way, for most of its members in a sufficiently living and internal way. The arrogant specificity, the traumatizing brutality of what is called the colonial war, colonial cruelty – some, including myself, experienced it from both sides, if I may say so.

This quotation is significant because we see some of the complexities of daily life crystallised in the face of conflicts that threaten to uproot people. Furthermore, all of this was against the backdrop of violent antisemitism. More profoundly for the purposes of this chapter, the quotation illustrates three key points that are essential to setting the theoretical scene.

First, language has an intangible and slippery nature, which causes Derrida to feel a sense of both comfort and proximity, and to find language destabilising and distant (McNamara, 2012). Derrida lives between and within different languages, and at some level he feels a sense of belonging, while at the same time claiming that none of these languages is his. Derrida explains that “we only speak one language – and we do not own it […] since it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for the other, from the other, kept by the other” (Derrida, 1998, p.40). Derrida is not necessarily referring to a language in the countable sense, although that meaning is subsumed within the broader meaning. Instead, Derrida is referring to how we dwell within the languages that we speak, and to how we and others appropriate language. One of the reasons for grappling with language in such a manner is that our language is always oriented towards the other. As Derrida explains, “My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other” (Derrida, 1998, p.25). Thus, while we speak, we seek to be understood; how, or whether, this occurs is out of our hands.

Given that language is no longer the sole possession of the speaker, our language and communication is on a knife-edge (Derrida, 1998, 2005). This is the inherent fragility of language at play as meanings and subjectivities can be destabilised (McNamara, 2012). Derrida outlines the relationship with the other as a “promise”, but the “double-edge” of this promise is a “threat” – there is always the possibility of our speech being used against us (Derrida, 1998). This may also take the form of situations in which speech or language is demanded, placing our hopes in “the ear of the other” (Derrida, 1988). The lines between exclusion, inclusion, promise and threat are thin, yet also dissolve and reconstitute themselves: this is “the terrifying ambiguity” of language that separates “the sign of belonging and threat of discrimination” (Derrida, 2005, p.48).

Thirdly, by referencing French in particular, Derrida draws attention to colonialism. This functions on various levels. Colonialism links to history, structural inequalities and linguistic impositions that acknowledge brutal legacies (Derrida, 1998). On a more individual level, Derrida viewed human experience, and by extension language, as inherently colonial.
That is to say, as individuals we gain entrance to communities, identities and acquire languages, but when we do so, we become implicated in particular histories, since all experiences are colonial (Deutscher, 2006). Furthermore, not all of us may be colonised in the same way; by paying attention to the relationship between coloniser and colonised, we can remain attentive to notions of power. The point is that we are all implicated; the question then is to what extent. Aligned with the precariousness and instability inherent within language, these relations with the Other as a colonising force offer insights into how individuals face being understood and the power relations that can impose meaning within communication even against their will.

22.5 “Talk English”

On 15 October 2015, Kashif Samuels, a 25-year-old chef, caught the number 149 bus in North London with his two-year-old daughter. On the bus was a 70-year-old Turkish man with a Zimmer frame. The two men had an altercation about the older man’s Zimmer frame blocking the aisle (Evening Standard, 2015). This infuriated Samuels, and he began a vitriolic tirade against the older man. Such was the ferocity of the tirade that a fellow passenger on the bus began filming on their mobile phone. The following extract gives a sample of the intensity of the abuse. The extract is taken from early in the recording. In the first part of the video, Samuels is sitting next to a window with his daughter’s pram. He is being filmed from behind by someone further back in the bus. At this point, Samuels is making comments such as “Bad Man! I am going to fuck a Turkish girl tonight. Hopefully, it’s your daughter”. It is not clear how Samuels knows the victim is Turkish. Having made sexual comments about the man’s daughters and his wife (an assumption on the part of Samuels – it is not known if the man has children or is married), Samuels shouts:

\[(00.29–00.43)\]
A good Muslim innit?
Yeah, fuck you mate.
Fucking tosser, fucking tosser.
Fucking wanker, mate. I’ll shove a pig’s cock in your mouth.
How you feel about that?
Yep, what’s fucking Allah going to say about that when I shove a fucking pig’s cock in your mouth mate? Eh?

(YouTube, 2015a)

The references to Islam are self-evident, with a particular use of pigs and sexual acts as a way to degrade the victim. Having insulted the man’s family and religion, Samuels moves his attention towards the man’s language. The victim is not always visible, but it is possible to see Samuels directing his words in the victim’s direction. He makes references to having sex with the victim’s daughter and wife. Then, at 1.00, Samuels stands up and walks over to the victim menacingly and shouts “Do something, do something about it!” The physical act of standing up and confronting the seated victim draws noises from fellow passengers as if to tell Samuels to calm down. He continues to rain down insults over the man about sexual acts with the man’s family. The victim is not audible, but it seems that he tries to speak back to Samuels, although it is not clear whether this is an attempt to disengage, since the camera’s focus is solely on Samuels the entire time. It is not clear what is said or in what languages, but Samuels immediately mocks his attempts at communication as he returns to his original seat. He still remains standing and mocks the man.
by saying “Blah, blah, blah, blah” repeatedly. Then, still standing, Samuels unleashes the following:

(1.17–1.51)
F*ck you.
F*ck you mate.
Ah, yeah you.
Talk, talking a different language.
No one can understand you.
No one knows what you’re saying.
Nobody knows.
Go back to Turkey and talk that shit.
Oh no you can’t.
Because shit gets blown up in Turkey.
F*cking wanker.
F*cking wanker, that’s why you’re here fucking free benefits and a walker.
Your walker’s going to go flying when the bus stops mate.
F*cking tosser.

(YouTube, 2015a)

Samuels goes back to his seat visibly angry and mocks the victim. Samuels’ anger is reignited when they get to Tottenham and he walks over to the victim and dares him to call the police. Here the person recording the video has changed the angle, and for the first time we have a better perspective of the victim, who appears to be seated near the front of the bus where the elderly and people with children would normally be. The view is still obscured by people in the way, and now Samuels is standing over the victim with just centimetres separating them, again goading the victim by saying “Put your hand on me, mate” repeatedly. He returns back to the pram, then to the victim, who is along the path to leave the bus but still in the same seat when Samuels demands of him to “Move your shit”. Samuels readies himself to take himself and his daughter off the bus, saying ‘What are you going to do? You’re a fucking tosser’.

As he is positioning himself to move down the aisle, moving backwards with his back to the front of the bus and the pushchair facing away from the front, Samuels switches attention to positioning the victim as an outsider through the use of English. By now he is about to leave the bus and is remarkably calm, having been so dramatic previously:

(2.32–2.58)
Yeah, talk English [very calmly].
Talk English.
Sorry about that folks [addressing the other passengers].
That’s a full loving reason to vote for UKIP.
Yeah close the borders.
Get rid of these fucking scumbags, bruv.
F*cking scumbag.
Why are you here? Why don’t you go to Turkey? Why don’t you go back to Turkey?
Because you can’t, you can’t, bruv.
You’re probably wanted for fiddling kids.
Yeah you like little kids’ buttholes.

(YouTube, 2015a)
Now Samuels is off the bus with his two-year-old daughter in her pushchair. Another altercation occurs as it seems the victim is at the door and seemingly ready to come off the bus. Samuels tells him to “Sit back down” and “Get back down or I’ll beat the shit out of you”, but as he does so, Samuels takes the Zimmer frame off the pensioner and throws it into the street. Samuels is off the bus and walks away with his daughter.

The disposal of the walking frame that the victim was dependent on had repercussions for the subsequent trial. Samuels was eventually sentenced to 16 weeks in jail. The original sentence was 12 weeks, but the additional aggravation around attacking a disabled pensioner and throwing away his walker led to an extension to the sentence of an additional four weeks.

22.6 “ISIS bitches”

On 13 October 2015, two days before the incident involving Samuels, Hanane Yakoubi and Simone Joseph, a mother of three, were on the number 206 bus in Brent, London. At the time, Yakoubi was 34 weeks pregnant. Like Samuels, Joseph was also travelling with her child. The attack appears to be unprovoked (University of Leicester, 2017). The video pertaining to the incident is around five minutes long and begins with the two women arguing across the aisle. They are on opposite sides of the bus with just the aisle separating them. The argument is already in full swing, with Joseph saying “Make me shut up” and Yakoubi seemingly pleading with her. Only Joseph is clear in the recording.

Space constraints inhibit a fuller analysis but the video is highly offensive. Joseph threatens to “Donkey kick” the heavily pregnant Yakoubi in the stomach: “You’re lucky I don’t kick you in the uterus so that you’ll never have a child again”. Joseph uses language such as “ISIS bitches” frequently and, like Samuels, references polygamy: “Do you have the same husband? Are you sleeping with the same man? Is that how it works?” Joseph regularly complains that the woman should not be in the country. Another Muslim woman tries to defuse the situation but is called “ISIS bitch” and “devil”.

Given the location within a multicultural part of London, which of course is highly diverse, the bus has people of different colours and origins. There are several identifiable Muslims, both men and women, in the video. There are at least five hijab-wearing Muslim women in the front part of the bus. However, of all the Muslims on the bus, it is Yakoubi and a family member who are targeted. At the beginning of the recording, Yakoubi and a family member speak in Arabic, triggering Joseph to say:

(0.11–0.35)

Talk your fucking language.
Hahahaha ISIS bitches [sarcastically].

Carry on laughing, carry on laughing with your bombs under your hidden under your fucking clothes.

That’s why people don’t like you people because you’re fucking rude.

You come to England and you have no fucking manners go back to your fucking country where there is bombing every day and go there.

Don’t come here where we are free and try to bring your fuck me, do you understand me?

Shut your mouth, know who you’re talking to.

(YouTube, 2015b)

Laughing and speaking in Arabic appears to rile Joseph. Joseph interprets this conversation as rudeness and a failure to adapt to the ‘manners’ of England by speaking English. This is linked to a failure to assimilate, that in turn justifies prejudice. At this point, Joseph
Hate crimes conflates refuge from bombing with language use. The presence of these women, according to Joseph, contaminates the values and freedom of the country. Joseph then asks Yakoubi to stop speaking altogether and thereby ends their interaction in Arabic.

Joseph then goes through a wide set of insults. They include references to Yakoubi’s dental care, at which point the bus driver stops the bus, turns around and motions to Joseph to calm down. However, Joseph continues calling Yakoubi “Sandbag bitches” and “ISIS bitches” and makes reference to “making a bomb”. The bus driver again opens his door to tell Joseph to calm down, which she acknowledges. Joseph lowers her voice and talks (it is not clear to whom) about how ISIS has entered the country and that Yakoubi is a “dirty whore”. Joseph continues insulting the two women (Yakoubi and her relative) and asking if they share the same husband and “2,000” wives. At one point, Yakoubi and her relative speak to each other and Joseph threatens to “donkey kick” her. Yakoubi is talking to another woman in Arabic, when Joseph spitefully remarks “Keep talking to each other, ISIS bitches”. Here, the visibility of two Arabic-speaking women with hijabs incites a vitriolic comment from Joseph. Her insult is to link these women to ISIS, thereby bringing a conflict abroad into a London bus. The use of “bitches” also indicates a very specific gendered insult, particularly used between two females.

At this point, Yakobi pleads with her hands and with her palms showing and says “Finish, finish, stop it”, to which Joseph menacingly invites a further confrontation by stating “Make me stop, make … me … stop. Make [deliberate pause] me [deliberate pause] stop”. The repetition of “make me stop” becomes more sinister with each utterance. By the end, each word is deliberately spaced out to both challenge Yakoubi and assert Joseph’s authority over her victim, and also perhaps imply that she does not understand English. The bus driver stops the bus and, for the first time, approaches the women and tells Joseph to “relax”. Joseph continues to say that she will “fly kick” Yakoubi, clasping her hands as if promising to stop. The bus driver returns to his seat while Joseph continues to menacingly glare at Yakoubi. After waiting a few seconds, Joseph says “They should never be here. They shouldn’t be in this country”. The driver, who had stopped in the aisle, tries to calm other passengers down as they seem to be imploring him to take action. Like with Joseph, he asks them to “relax”. Joseph then insults another woman and calls her “devil” and “ISIS bitch”. She continues to mock the woman by singing, in a childlike manner, “ISIS”. A stand-off ensues, with the bus not moving and the bus driver refusing to move until they “relax”. Now Yakoubi has found a seat and sits down while Joseph remains and begins using her mobile phone. She points her phone at the seated Yakoubi and appears to be filming her and her relative, who has remained standing. The relative turns away, and is on her phone and smiling, while Joseph is now focusing on Yakoubi.

The second time the confrontation intensifies the altercation, as Joseph leaves her child and walks down the bus aisle to film Yakoubi on her phone. Yakoubi immediately stands up and follows Joseph, who is walking down the aisle and requests that Joseph stop filming. An exasperated Yakoubi pushes Joseph and they begin shouting at each other. Yakoubi walks back to her seat, and this is the first time we see her face clearly and that she is heavily pregnant. As she returns, Joseph follows her and shouts:

(4.20–4.27)
Touch me again I’ll punch you in your head.
Touch me again and I’ll punch you in the head.
Dirty sandbags.
Dirty sandbags.

(YouTube, 2015b)
Joseph returns to her original standing position next to her child’s pushchair and takes her phone back out. By now the passengers shout while Joseph remains calm on her phone. One passenger is asking to get off. The driver stops and again leaves his seat. One Muslim, a veiled woman, is now standing and shouting and pointing at Joseph, causing the driver to shout “Calm down and stop pushing, otherwise everyone off my fucking bus”. This is the most chaotic moment, as a number of passengers are shouting over each other. The video ends with a passenger, who is not visible and may well be Yakoubi, remonstrating with the driver while Joseph seems relaxed.

Joseph, like Samuel, turned herself into the police following the viral spread of the recorded video. She was charged with racially aggravated intentional harassment. In the end, Joseph was given a 16-week sentence that was suspended for a year. Although found guilty, Joseph walked free and avoided jail. The judge erred on the side of leniency, possibly due to Joseph having handed herself in and repented.

The trauma for Yakoubi was significant. Already heavily pregnant, she endured a difficult time and sent a statement to court during Joseph’s prosecution. She stated that

I find it difficult to sleep and cannot take medication because I’m pregnant … Every time I go out I’m afraid I might find myself in this situation as something similar has happened on a bus on another occasion because I am Muslim.

The Crown Prosecution Service stated that “One of the victims was heavily pregnant and Joseph threatened to kick her in the stomach, leaving her fearful for her unborn baby. Nearby passengers were understandably shocked and distressed by what they had witnessed” (BBC, 2015).

22.7 Discussion

There are many parallels between the two events. First, both took place in London on public transport. Second, both involved references to speaking other languages. Thirdly, both involved victims who suffered heightened forms of discrimination due to the intersectional dimension of their profiles. Neither victim was white, and both appeared to have origins outside the UK. One victim was disabled and the other was a woman who was easily identifiable as a Muslim. Thus, the issue of vulnerability is highly significant.

Vulnerability plays out on two crucial levels. First, in both cases the victims were physically vulnerable by virtue of being disabled and pregnant, while also representing an ‘enemy’ by appearing Muslim. The first victim was identifiable as a disabled individual due to his Zimmer frame. Kashif Samuels was aware of this, as he threw it off the bus as he left. The second victim, Hanane Yakoubi, was not only a Muslim woman, but she was just a few weeks short of giving birth and visibly pregnant. Like Samuels, Joseph was aware of Yakoubi’s condition as she threatened to “donkey kick” Yakoubi so that she would never have any more children. Clearly, the threat of violence is highly traumatising. One of the effects of race hate crimes is to shake the victim’s sense of security and belonging (Zempi and Awan, 2016).

Second, vulnerability exists in terms of language. There are two dimensions to vulnerability within language. First, the victims have language used against them. Samuels mocks his victim’s attempts to speak and scornfully tells him that “no one can understand you … Go back to Turkey and talk that shit, oh no you can’t, shit gets blown up”. In the case of Yakoubi, Joseph remarks how she and her friend are “Talking your language, ISIS bitches”.

426
In both cases, we see that a reference to language is immediately linked to violence in relation to conflict. Also, the languages of both victims are positioned as ‘foreign’, rather than a legitimate part of a multilingual landscape in one of the world’s most diverse cities, London.

In contrast to the insults concerning ‘their’ languages, both perpetrators see language practices that do not involve English as worthy of ridicule. Samuels even states “Talk English”. Whereas he linked speaking Turkish to terrorism in Turkey, he links English to voting UKIP and “closing the borders”. Joseph uses Yakoubi’s lack of use of English as justification for her vitriol, stating that “You come to England and you have no fucking manners, go back to your fucking country where there is bombing every day and go there”. This “rudeness” is because Joseph considers it rude that Yakoubi is not speaking English.

At some point in both encounters, Samuels and Joseph became aware that the victims are speaking a language other than English. In a sense, both victims had given themselves away by speaking, and their speech is interpreted as not conforming with national values and norms. The consequences of these interpretations are highly traumatic, and the victims could not possibly have known what was to transpire. Even if the contact between perpetrator and victim was unwanted, communication and meaning are beyond the control of the victims, and in this sense the lines between discrimination and belonging are clearly laid, marking the possibilities for discrimination.

Due to the asymmetric power relations based on domination of discourse, vulnerability and physical and verbal intimidation, the interaction becomes a “colonising cruelty” of experience (Derrida, 1998). Derrida explains that

The monolingualism of the other operates by relying upon a foundation, here, through a sovereignty whose essence is always colonial, which tends, repressively and irremediably, to reduce the language to the One, that is, to the hegemony of the homogenous.

(Derrida, 1998, pp.39–40)

Both perpetrators insult the language practices of their victims by ridiculing them, either demanding that they speak English or lambasting them for not speaking it. The implication is that they should be speaking in English. The imposition of a language that is necessary for security, whether to protect the victims or to evade allusions with ISIS and bombing, means that English provides safe passage (Derrida, 2005). The authority of English, of course, rests on its power, which was spread via colonialism. This historical reference reminds us of the “originary violence” (Derrida, 1990) located in the founding and establishing of authority.

Another dimension of colonisation is through the colonisation of human experience and interaction (Derrida, 1998, Deutscher, 2006). The colonisation of the interaction means that the victims barely gain any space or legitimacy, and it is left to the perpetrator to appropriate the words of their victims in order to humiliate them and undermine their significance as speakers. Thus, the victims have victimhood thrust on them by the sheer overwhelming power of the perpetrators, or colonisers. The brutality of this colonising experience renders the victims powerless, and the ordeals only end when Samuels and Joseph finish them.

At the heart of the interactions lies a tension: meaning is constructed beyond the control of the individual who utters the words. With Chambers and his victim, even when the victim tries to communicate, his attempts are met with a volley of insults, as well as physical intimidation. Likewise, with Yakoubi, the use of Arabic is linked with terrorism and an unwillingness to integrate. Meaning also lies in the “ear of the other” (Derrida, 1988), and this is central to the vulnerability that exists within language (Derrida, 1998, 2005, Khan and McNamara, 2017, McNamara, 2012). Derrida (1998, p.22) explains that:
As soon as I speak, before even formulating a promise, an expectation, or a desire as such, and when I still do not know what will happen to me or what awaits me at the end of the sentence, neither who nor what awaits whom or what, I am within this promise or this threat – which, from then on, gathers the language together, the promised or threatened language, promising all the way to the point of threatening and vice versa, thus gathered together in its very dissemination.

The reception of how our words are understood surrounds our communication. We can never be fully in control of how our words are interpreted, or by whom they are interpreted. Thus, there is an inherent ‘promise or threat’ that pervades human interaction. At the heart of this tension lies a vulnerability in the individual who is speaking, as meaning is co-constructed by the other. While not always having harmful consequences, the potential for harm exists.

The individuals are unable to gain sufficient power within the encounter, or to impose themselves on the interaction. The victim in the first incident tries to say something, but his accent is mocked and he is shouted down to the extent that his utterance becomes a minor interruption within the full tirade. In the second, Yakoubi even asks Joseph to stop. As in the first case, she is shouted over and remains powerless in the face of the torrent of abuse and intimidation. For the victims of the hate crimes, they often have no idea that the indexical qualities of speaking Arabic and Turkish would result in an attack against them. For example, Yakoubi was laughing and sharing a joke in Arabic, and yet that same language was inverted and turned against her. This is the ‘double-edged’ nature of language itself (Derrida, 1998, 2005, McNamara, 2012). By no longer possessing the power to control meaning, the other now has space to impose meaning in interpreting the victim’s language in ways that had not been intended. The consequences of such interpretations can be highly damaging (McNamara, 2012, McNamara and Roever, 2006).

22.8 Conflict

In both cases, ISIS are specifically mentioned in relation to the victims. Samuels asserts that the victim has things blown up in Turkey. Joseph frequently refers to Yakoubi as an “ISIS bitch”. In the lives of the victims, they cannot be further away from a conflict situation. They are going about their daily lives, travelling on a bus in London. However, it is Samuels and Joseph who bring ISIS and conflict into their lives.

One aspect of evolving concepts of security is the way in which immigrants have come to embody a whole range of threats. These threats range along “a semantic continuum” from ‘petty thief’ to ‘murderous terrorist’ (Bigo, 2008). Perhaps of all immigrant groups, it is Muslims who evoke most suspicion and fear, due to the overwhelmingly negative and repetitive coverage that links them to sharia law and terrorism. Thus, the figure of the Muslim becomes a catch-all for anxieties, risk and even hatred.

In the cases of Samuels and Joseph, the victims become symbols of all manner of threats. These threats range from making bombs to paedophilia to making babies, the last of which is often a demographic threat constructed by far-right extremists. Whether these threats are true is irrelevant (Bigo, 2002). It cannot be expected that a disabled pensioner and heavily pregnant woman on a London bus pose much of a threat; on the contrary, these individuals are highly vulnerable. In both cases, the perpetrators create a chain of negative depictions that stem from the language spoken by the victims. Samuels linked “talk that shit” (Turkish) to “shit gets blown up” and then “that’s why you’re here fucking free benefits and a walker”. In the space of a few seconds, Chambers conflates language with terrorism and benefits.
Similarly, Joseph goes from being rude due to not speaking English – which is linked to hiding bombs under her clothes – to being an illegitimate claimant of benefits: “You fucking come here and take money”.

There is a juxtaposition between vulnerability and threat, as the victims are both defenceless, yet symbolic of a threat. One way in which they are constructed as a threat is through the distribution of risk. Through the discursive construction of a suspect community and enemy within, individuals are associated with particular profiles of danger (Lyon, 2003, Patel, 2012, Saulnier, 2015). In so doing, risk is distributed towards figures that represent danger (Huysmans, 2014). By distributing risk towards individuals in London using tropes and events from elsewhere, conflicts from far afield are redistributed into everyday interactions, in this case on London buses. Perhaps one result of this redistribution of risk and insertion of conflict is that the victims have no choice but to absorb the imposition of a set of tropes.

The distribution of risk is central to understanding contemporary concepts of security, which in this case permeate references to conflict. One aspect of security that is significant is how security has become far more dispersed and diffuse in everyday life (Bigo, 2008, Huysmans, 2014). Security shapes how we see the world and those who inhabit it. Security can spread unease and anxieties (Bigo, 2002), but by the same token, individuals can come to embody those anxieties (Patel, 2012, 2017, Sian, 2015, 2017). The extreme of this embodiment of anxiety and insecurity can lead to violence towards those individuals. This may have direct implications for how interpersonal relations are handled. Huysmans (2014, p.3) explains that:

[Security] is a practice with a political content. It enacts our world as if it is a dangerous world, a world saturated by insecurities. It invests fear and enmity in relations between humans and polities rather than simply defending or protecting political units and people from enemies and fear.

Following the attack, Samuels was interviewed for a Muslim YouTube channel (YouTube, 2016). In the interview, Samuels claimed that he did not know why he had attacked the man, but that his view of Muslims had been shaped by the incessantly negative coverage of Muslims in the press. He also admitted that he had no negative personal experiences with Muslims. However, the discursive and sociopolitical climate had proven to be sufficiently combustible for Samuels to feel he could attack his victim.

It is perhaps worthwhile considering some of the corollaries of such attacks, not only on the victims but also on those who may be fearful of similar events in the future. Some Muslims have begun self-disciplining as a response to unwanted attention in the face of racial profiling (Saulnier, 2015, 2017). Responses have included modifying behaviour in order to absorb the impact of potential surveillance and profiling (Blackwood, et al., 2013, Saulnier, 2015). By engaging with the potential for victimisation, potential future victims are faced with taking measures to hide their identity, or to evade being profiled. One conceivable response is to change linguistic practices; for example, by avoiding speaking languages other than English in public.

Changing languages can have profound consequences. The victims, and potential victims, enter into a kind of exchange of languages in which they remain open to interpretation and judgment. Thus, within this exchange they carry “linguistic signs” (McNamara, 2012) that may lead to their own mistreatment. As such, they have become part of a “Tragic Economy” (Derrida, 1998, p.30) in which languages compete against each other, but because of the potentially nefarious consequences of one language, the dominant language will inevitably
win out. In the case of hate crimes, changing linguistic practices to avoid assault and to conform to a prevailing climate that demands the visibility of their communication means that English and the “monolingualism of the other” (Derrida, 1998) overpower the multilingual practices of the (potential) victims.

22.9 Conclusion

The increasingly anti-immigration and xenophobic discourse that has resulted from the Brexit vote in the UK, the Trump administration in the US and the political success of the far right in countries such as Hungary and Austria, means that immigrants are likely to face hostility in their everyday lives. The race hate incidents studied here are particularly connected to prevailing discourses that position Muslims as threats in a wide variety of ways. That race hate crime figures increased towards those unconnected to terrorist attacks shows the link between Islamophobic race hate and politics (Tell Mama, 2015). The hostility is unlikely to end any time soon, as Brexit gathers pace at the time of writing and political discourses and actors become more emboldened within their populist appeal.

The role of language in defining security and insecurity as well as distributing risk needs to be taken into consideration within race hate crimes. There are some groups who are more likely to face more hostility than others based on religion, race and language. Within this, there are further intersections that render some individuals more vulnerable than others. We have seen two Muslims – a disabled pensioner and a heavily-pregnant hijab-wearing mother – subjected to vicious verbal abuse and physical intimidation in a space that could be considered to be generally safe: the bus.

Falling outside established characteristics that constitute legally-binding race hate crimes (BBC, 2015), language can play a vital role in exposing individuals to danger. Language also indicates how intolerant others may be and how perpetrators find ways to rationalise and justify irrational crimes. Language plays a role not only in inciting hatred, but also in explicit and implicit demands for a common language to be spoken. Thus, victims are in a highly difficult situation.

Derrida’s work offers us an insight into power relations and the vulnerability of certain speakers. The concept of vulnerability within applied linguistics is worth far more scope than this chapter has been able to explore. This chapter has demonstrated how vulnerability exists in language and hate crimes. Understanding the dialectic relationship between victim and perpetrator through the nodal point of language and hate crime can permit us to examine the way in which language can be harmful to the most vulnerable.

The link between security and hate crimes is worthy of greater analysis. Security relies on the distribution of risk and assigning of certain groups identities that construct people as threats (Bigo, 2002, 2008, Huysmans, 2014). The problem with this distribution is when groups and individuals are unfairly positioned as threats. When these discourses of security translate to race hate and criminal intent against marginalised groups, then we must pay attention and challenge the hatred that can be created.

This chapter has focused on Muslims and the very specific ways in which language, race and religion come together. This must always be considered in addition to other intersectional oppressions. However, Muslims are not the only group to be victims of language-based race hate. Whether it is Europeans in the UK or Spanish speakers in the US, there are other groups who find themselves vulnerable to the “monolingualism of the other” (Derrida, 1998). Research into their experiences would be highly valuable to the field of applied linguistics and to wider society.
Notes

1  This is not clear in the video but emerged in the news around the criminal proceedings.
2  It is inferred that the victim is speaking in Turkish based on Chambers’ reaction and words. The victim is out of range of visibility and hearing.

References

Awan, I. 2012. ‘I am Muslim not an extremist’: how the Prevent strategy has constructed a ‘suspect community’. Politics & Policy. 40(6), pp.1158–85.
Kamran Khan