"I'm kind of agnostic": Belief discourse by second-generation migrants in a religious classroom

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Transplanting non-Western religions to Western nations results in first-generation migrant attempts to transmit faith in vastly different contexts. Especially as adolescents, second-generation migrants tackle mediating their personal religious beliefs in a society with diverse religions and ideologies as well as negotiating membership of their ethnoreligious community. This paper draws from an ethnography in a Tamil Hindu temple in Australia. I present Sri Lankan teenage migrants' discourse from their faith classroom to elucidate processes of belief positioning. In working out their emergent, and provisional, faith identities the students deploy mainly Tamil and English linguistic features in their belief narratives. Flexible languaging complements their "syncretic acts" - the practice of drawing on diverse ideologies and experiences (outside the boundaries of a particular religion) to form personalized beliefs. Translanguaging thus facilitates the expression of circumspect, nuanced and non-traditional interpretations of their heritage religion. Understanding such processes of belief positioning can help societies and institutions to work towards migrant youth inclusion.

Keywords: belief, religion, Sri Lankan, Tamil, Hindu temple, migration, translanguaging

1   Introduction

Migration initiates much change for religions - compared to in the homelands, transplanted religions and their associated institutions generally take on a greater role for migrant devotees, offering spaces to transmit language, faith and culture (Perera, 2016), build networks, and feel a sense of belonging through the trials of settling in to a new country (Baumann, 2009). However when it comes to members of the second generation, those who are predominantly or only raised in the new country, there is a question of the extent to which they remain aligned with their heritage religion if the broader society is religiously diverse and/or increasingly atheist. This evokes issues of how children learn about their inherited faith and how they negotiate their religious identifications as they transform into young adults. Understanding how second-generation migrants engage in these processes is important for migrant destination countries of the global North in order to promote inclusivity and avoid alienation of diverse, fluid and hybridized migrant identifications.

This article aims to provide insights into second-generation migrant belief positioning through a case study of adolescent students in a Tamil-medium Sunday school classroom in a Tamil Hindu (Saivite/Saiva) temple in urban Australia. I will provide a detailed discourse analysis of how two young migrants index affiliation with, as well as uncertainty about, their ethnoreligious identities as part of working out their beliefs in this religious school setting. I will argue that, by drawing on more than one "language", or all the semiotic resources in their communicative repertoires, they undertake the critical work of discursive belief positioning. This work helps them to navigate a society where their ethnicity and religion form a minority and relegate them as the "other". Viewing the students' language use through a translanguaging lens allows a parallel to be drawn between flexible languaging and "flexible believing".

In Australia, Hinduism is now the fastest-growing non-Christian religion yet the diversity of its practice through different ethnolinguistic groups is yet to be significantly researched (Bilimoria, 2013). My study aims to fill this gap by highlighting adaptation

experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu migrants who are raised and educated in Australia. In Perera (2020b) I demonstrate how two ideologies, the strong connection between Tamil language and Saiva religion, and the need to know and use Tamil for in-group acceptance, influence the use of Tamil resources or language features by the students. This paper builds on those notions by focusing on belief - how students use language in their "belief narratives" (Day, 2009) and belief positioning, and as part of their "syncretic acts" (Gregory, Lytra, et al., 2013), or ways of working out their personalized and hybridized belief systems. The questions guiding this paper are:

1. How do the Saiva students discursively work out their religious beliefs and positions in the migrant faith classroom?

2. How do their main languages, Tamil and English, interplay in these discursive negotiations?

There exist a few studies on how children perform or negotiate their complex identities in religious settings (for example Owodally, 2016; Souza, Barradas, & Woodham, 2016) but the literature is scarce on how adolescents actually discuss their beliefs, through belief narratives and positioning work, in a migrant faith classroom. As called for by Owodally (2016, p. 173) this paper will contribute to "emerging understandings of the complex subjective experiences" of adolescents living in multi-faith contexts. Answering the above questions will help elucidate the belief-making processes of young adults and such findings can inform migrant religious institutions to create space and flexibility for the emergence of new expressions of belief within their walls. This will enable such institutions to adapt to the sociocultural changes facing their devotees and thus facilitate their long-term religious engagement, and the religion's (vis-à-vis the institution's) long-term sustainability in the new country.

In the next section, I discuss the concepts of belief positioning, religious identification by youth, syncretic acts, and translanguaging to foreground the main

frameworks that inform my analytical approach. This will be followed by some background on the Saiva Temple school and the ethnographic methods applied in the research project. In the Findings, I present two transcripts from the classroom as illustrations to examine the ways in which teenage students try to make sense of their religious beliefs and how English and Tamil features interplay in helping achieve this. Lastly, I will summarize the main ways in which the students construct discourse for the purpose of belief positioning.

2   Belief positioning, religious identification, syncretic acts and translanguaging

Recently, in the field of study known as the sociology of language and religion (see Omoniyi & Fishman, 2006), research (for example Baquedano - Lopez, 2008; Gregory, Choudhury, Ilankuberan, Kwapong, & Woodham, 2013) has focused on the various ways in which young migrants acquire and develop faith literacy - that is, "the reading of written texts (scripts), the use of oral texts (discussions about the faith, interaction with a deity or other members of the faith community), the performance of faith through actions (silent or not), and knowledge (including theological, geographical and historical information about the faith)" (Souza, 2016, p. 200). A study in a London Tamil Saivite temple found that part of religious education occurs through a kind of osmosis, by children watching adults during ceremonies to learn the appropriate "embodied and emotional stances" (Lytra, Gregory, & Ilankuberan, 2016, p. 154). For the children in that study (aged four to 12), mimicking adults without necessarily understanding the meaning of what they are doing is part of their socialisation, learning acceptable behavior in the ethnoreligious community (see also Ganapathy-Coleman, 2014). However, as children move into the teenage years they seek to build on their foundational childhood learning and explore meaning and complexity in their religion. If they cannot find relatable meanings there is a danger of spiritual disconnection (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000, p. 429). Such an explorative process involves developing a religious identity which, especially for migrants, can mean "a system of religious beliefs and … religious/spiritual experience" as well as a form of cultural identity (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010, p. 19). In this process, not only is the question of faith at stake but also the question of one's

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membership of a migrant ethnoreligious community. Therefore in forming their belief systems, migrant teenagers potentially face very complex identity-related decisions.

Belief positioning entails locating the self in regards to others and, in particular, young people negotiate positions on their inherited religion which align or contrast to that of their parents to varying degrees (Hopkins, Olson, Pain, & Vincett, 2011). Peek (2005) conceptualizes the adolescent phase as moving from an ascribed identity (one given by their parents) to a chosen identity (a conscious choice to identify with their heritage religion). This will likely not entail a total rejection of the religion but perhaps a "gradual reworking" of beliefs in order to suit contemporary existences (Ahmad, 2017, p. 6). A degree of improvisation is involved as young people contend with new conditions and circumstances in the country of settlement that their parents did not have to face in the homeland (Peñalva, 2017). My paper aims to add to such studies by exploring the discourse of migrant adolescents as they engage in this belief positioning. In this teenage phase, second-generation migrants exercise their agency in forming new or reworked beliefs.

Day (2009) presents the concept of "belief narratives" to understand how adolescent migrants engage in belief positioning. In her study of young people (of various religious backgrounds) in England she found that most participants contextualize their belief positions through referencing other people; that "their beliefs were both informed and reproduced through human interaction, particularly the emotions that such interaction produces" (Day, 2009, p. 269). Similarly Davies and Harré see positioning as a socially constructed, discursive and interactive process "whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (1990, p. 48). Sandhu (2016, pp. 21–26), in analyzing the professional identity of women in India, applied a multi-level framework to her discussion of discursive positioning. She argued that, in the act of positioning, interactants can situate themselves in relation to their interactants, in relation to the characters in a story they are recounting, or in relation to dominant discourses and social

structures. All these perspectives on positioning inform the analysis in this paper as they account for the social, emotional and interactional aspects of constructing beliefs.

Apart from the push of parents and members of the migrant faith community towards the inherited religion, language and culture, the influence of globalisation and secularisation in many Western migrant destination societies can pull young migrants away, no longer seeing these aspects of heritage as relevant to their modern lives. One way for youth to stay connected to their heritage is by ensuring they have agency to navigate their own belief systems and to create new ways of interpreting and making religion relevant. The practices which facilitate these new interpretations are labelled "acts of syncretism" (Gregory, Lytra, et al., 2013). Volk defines syncretism as "the process of social, cultural, and cognitive transformation as people blend resources from distinct contexts and create new forms and practices" (2016, p. 22). Thus, through the syncretic act, young migrants "make sense of narratives from their different worlds" and form unique, personal interpretations which come from their exposure to and experience of different languages, narratives, rituals and activities resulting from the membership of their migrant faith community and from their lives outside of that community (Gregory, Lytra, et al., 2013, p. 323). Hemming and Madge (2012) emphasise the agency of young people in selecting those aspects of the religion that they maintain and state that even one's imagination can be drawn on to .create their personal frameworks of meaning. In doing so adolescents can influence the belief positions of others and thus contribute to the evolution of their religion in the diaspora.

Gregory, Lytra, et al. (2013) posit that translanguaging complements discursive acts of syncretism, as both are concerned with flexibly drawing on features and ideas from diverse sources to represent oneself, through language and/or faith. Translanguaging describes the practice of "accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential" (García 2009, p. 140). This differs to code-switching which focuses on the juxtaposition of distinct languages in the same utterance, and not so much on the speaker and their repertoire of language resources

(see Auer, 1998). Code-switching tends to treat languages as delimitable – however, we know that these limits can be unstable and based on abstractions rather than reality. Translanguaging takes a more holistic view by focusing on the individual who is performing the languaging act as well as what is uttered. Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015) point out that translanguaging encompasses an individual's use of their full idiolect – which contains all the lexical and structural features known to them, deriving from any number of "languages". For multilingual individuals, these idiolects include "a more complex socio-cultural marking of which features to use when and where" (p. 292). Therefore translanguaging can be seen as a skillful act of communication because it requires a certain level of symbolic competence (see Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008) in deploying these different linguistic features to convey meaning.

Past research on translanguaging has highlighted the role it plays in discursive identification work – most commonly in studies on migrant youth in English-dominant settings (for example, Canagarajah, 2011; Creese & Blackledge, 2015; Li Wei, 2011) but also in contexts for ethnic minority youth where English is not the dominant language (for example, Dovchin et al., 2018). This paper aims to extend on such research to demonstrate how translanguaging applies in acts of syncretism and belief positioning as part of migrant youth ethnoreligious identity work. The analysis will reveal how these flexible language practices are useful for conveying fluid belief positions, religious identity affiliations and expressing the "new social realities" (García & Leiva, 2014, p. 204) experienced by second-generation migrants whose heritage cultures, languages and religious practices are significantly different to those of the majority society.

3   Methodology

The setting of this study is the Saiva School,[1] a Tamil-medium faith school for children, organized by the Saiva Temple and founded by Sri Lankan Tamil migrants in a city of Australia. Saivism is a branch of Hinduism, popular in South India, which views Lord Shiva

as the preeminent god. Most Sri Lankan Tamils follow Saivism – in fact, a study in Jaffna, the main Tamil in northern Sri Lanka, found that the Tamil language is inextricably linked with the practice of Saivism such that the language is seen as sacred itself (Suseendirarajah, 1980). This connection between the language and religion has been transferred to the Australian context, and while not as strong as in the homeland, it remains as an influence on language use in the temple (Perera, 2016).

The Saiva School is a small volunteer-run weekend religious school with approximately 60 students ranging from five to 15 years of age. Its aim is to impart the teachings of Saivism through the Tamil language. Between 2014 and 2016 I conducted a sociolinguistic ethnography to look at the interaction between language and religion for migrants in the temple. I investigated the language practices that occurred in various temple spaces, from the institutional language policy, to the language of rituals and ceremonies, to the second-generation's discourse in the education arm of the temple. In 2014 and 2015 I regularly visited the school and the bulk of my data collection occurred in the highest grade, the Year 9 class.[2]

In this article I draw from data collected in 22 Year 9 lessons – I video-recorded 12 lessons and wrote detailed field notes for all lessons. With the assistance of a Tamil interpreter [3] I created transcripts of the classroom videos. Other data from the ethnography include fieldwork diary entries, information from temple texts, questionnaires from the students and approximately six hours of interviews with students, parents, teachers and other key players in the school – these sources provided triangulation for the linguistic analysis of classroom transcripts.

Two transcripts will be analysed as examples of how the students work out their belief positions in the Saiva classroom. While analysis is limited to two extracts, they are representative of wider processes observed within the Saiva school and provide a model of how translanguaging and syncretic acts can work together to facilitate adolescents' ongoing

engagement with the religion and membership of the faith community. The discourse analysis of these extracts incorporates elements of Conversation Analysis (CA) - to explore the sequential order of talk and the interactional devices in use; and Interactional Sociolinguistics (see Gumperz, 1999) - to incorporate the wider non-linguistic social structures which impact on the interaction. I use CA (Sidnell, 2010; ten Have, 2007) to identify how prosodic and discourse markers, for example, mitigations, hesitations, pauses and hedges, indicate what is going on in the interaction and what might suggest uncertainty or the formulation of provisional positionings. I also use CA to inspect the points in speech where the interplay of linguistic features, from what are viewed as autonomous languages, assist in acts of syncretism. The analysis will explain the use of particular language features in the belief narratives and posit that the choice of features is, at times, strategic and serves identification and positioning purposes. I argue that linguistic features (mainly attributed to Tamil and English) are used in complementarity to show dynamic, complex and provisional positions as part of a belief narrative.

4   Findings

The Year 9 class comprised five regular adolescent students (female: Jeya and Meena; male: Chitran, Raja and Thiran) aged between 13 and 15 years and a first-generation teacher named Mrs Chandran. All the students were raised with Tamil as their first language (even though English became more dominant once they began school), attended a separate Saturday Tamil language school in the local area, and were highly involved in other Tamil cultural practices such as music and dance (see Perera, 2020a). As a result, the students had a strong Tamil identification exemplified in the words of Jeya: "whenever I talk about it to my friends, I'm like, 'you know I'm a Tamil dude', like you know and I just go on about it" (Interview, 19 September 2015).

The Year 9 lessons were largely unstructured and informal in style. As was regularly the case, class commenced with the teacher and students reading a particular section of the

Tamil textbook but discussion deviated into questions raised by the students. Mrs Chandran's flexible pedagogical approach was paramount in encouraging students to raise any issues. She saw the class as a forum for students to discuss faith and Tamil culture, topics such as arranged marriages and the ways of the first generation. She understood that children growing up in Australia were dealing with a very different context to her generation. In her interview (6 September 2015) she spoke about how she endorsed such discussions in her class: "I tell them don't be shy, when your age I don't know much, you are learning more. Don't be shy, come out, learn, ask, talk. Doesn't matter anything, learn, improve." As mentioned earlier, the class was by policy, a Tamil-medium religious class. However, my findings (see Perera, 2020b) demonstrate how the teacher was relaxed about this policy and was more interested in maintaining students' engagement in what she saw as cultural values (enmeshing religious, cultural and moral values (Ganapathy-Coleman, 2014)) rather than specific religious or linguistic practices. Her approach opened up the space for belief narratives, syncretic acts and translanguaging to occur.

Both of the extracts that follow are taken from a lesson (on 17 May 2015) where only two of the five students were present, Chitran and Jeya. The extracts concern a question that was regularly raised by the students in my time at the school – whether Saivism is essentially polytheistic or monotheistic and which god, in particular, they should worship. In the first extract titled "Kind of agnostic", Jeya presents a dilemma she faced with a first-generation member about how to worship multiple gods. In "Bhagavad Geeta", the second extract, Chitran tries to reconcile popular interpretations of worshipping God with his own.

The transcripts are presented in English and transliterated Tamil, and speech is divided into one intonation unit per line. Features categorised as Tamil are in bold and an English translation is supplied underneath. I use a transliteration system based on the work of grammarian Harold Schiffman (1999) where long forms of vowels are represented as a sequence of two same vowels (e.g. அ is a and ஆ is aa) and similar sounds are differentiated

without diacritics (e.g. the alveolar nasals: ந is n and ன is n2, and the velar nasal: ண is N).
See Perera (2017) for further details.

4.1   Kind of agnostic

In Extract 1, Jeya tries to reconcile her own beliefs about Saivism with those of a first-generation member, her aunt in France. She refers to what inside members of the ethnoreligious community say about authentic worship and how it made her feel – this emotional aspect being one of the features of a belief narrative (Day, 2009).

Extract 1. Kind of agnostic.

17 May 15	Timecode: 00:49:34.020 – 00:50:05.030

1	Jeya:	is it- is i↑t wr↓o:ng
2		okay ah if- if I don't
3	Mrs Chandran:	**oo**
		"yes"
4	Jeya:	see like **cila aakkaL**
		"see like some people"
5		like I think >**en2Ta um maami oral**< when I went to France
		"like I think one of my um aunts when I went to France"
6		**ava keeTTava**,

"she asked"

7   **niingka entha kaTavuLa kumbuTuRiingka** <u>right</u>?

"which god are you worshipping right"

8   and so um

9   (0.3) I f↑elt weird because I don't really pray like >**intha piLLaiyaar, murukan2** thing<

"I felt weird because I don't really pray like this Ganesh, Murugan thing"

10   I just serve <u>God</u> r↑ight?

11   >all like all and then **ava colluvaa**<

"all like all and then she would say"

12   >**niingka inthak kaTavuLa kumbiTu inthak kaTavuLa kumbiTooNum en2Tu colli**< [and I'm just like]

"worship this god or you should worship this god she said and I'm just like"

13 Mrs   [heh heh]

    Chandran:

14 Jeya: is it <u>wrong</u> that you don't believe in like

15   <u>each</u> <u>god</u>

16	Mrs Chandran:	okay
17		**naan2 oru kathai colluRan2**
		"I'll tell you a story"
18		**en2akku-**
		"for me"
19	Jeya:	<I'm kind of <u>agn↑ostic</u> in a wa:y?
20	Mrs Chandran:	[**en2akku-**]
		"for me"
21	Jeya:	[∘a little bit∘]

Jeya begins with a question in English in Lines 1 and 2 and there is evidence of discomfort and hesitation from the repetition of *is it* in the first line and *ah if- if* in the second. After some encouragement from the teacher in Line 3, Jeya provides a presequence to her question, an embedded narrative (Jeya's encounter with her aunt) to situate her personal dilemma. For this belief narrative, she deploys Tamil features.

In Line 4, she adopts Tamil for the phrase, "some people" but then uses English for the filler and hedge, *like I think* in Line 5. As she then deploys Tamil for "one of my aunts", the speech is rushed. This high frequency of alternation between Tamil and English features points to Jeya's apprehension about what she wants to relay.

In Lines 6 and 7 Jeya uses Tamil to report the speech of her aunt who asks her, "which god are you worshipping?" It is likely that the aunt posed the question in Tamil, so Jeya reports it so, but she ends the statement with the English question tag, *right?* (an understanding check), and this feature serves as a reminder that the prior utterance was not Jeya's speech but her aunt's. In Line 8, Jeya then uses some English discourse fillers and her continued use of English in Line 9 serves a particular function. Firstly, "feeling weird", where the verb *feel* is a copula, is commonly used by adolescents in Australian English and *I don't really pray* sounds less serious if delivered in English rather than Tamil. The short pause before this declaration, and the sharp rise in pitch indicate that Jeya may be uncertain about admitting this. Since she is exposing truths about her religious practice that may not be seen as the ideal, and may signal outgroup membership, the adoption of English features is a way of distancing herself from the strong Tamil language-Saiva religion connection and softens the impact of her declaration.

Still in Line 9, when it comes to naming significant Saiva gods, the strong connection between religion and language is at work. Jeya adopts the Tamil names for Ganesh (the elephant-headed deity) and Murugan (known as the Tamil god). Again, this speech is rushed and to end the utterance she deploys the nonspecific English *thing*. This is curious since she is not calling them gods but using a nondescript word to reference them. This indicates a level of irreverence or ambivalence and hints at her disinterest in these Hindu deities. In Line 10, her utterance has more certainty and force with her stress of words and the understanding check, *right,* which has a confrontational element to it. Adopting the English feature for "God" appears strategic. She is not using a Tamil equivalent for "God" (*kaTavuL* being the most common) nor is she naming a particular Hindu god such as Shiva. Her inference is a general god that encompasses all religions, and this is confirmed in her English mitigation in Line 11, *all like all*.

In Line 11, Jeya once again deploys Tamil, and speech is rushed, as she returns to the embedded narrative and for the reported speech in Line 12, where the aunt advises her to

worship particular gods. At the end of Line 12 Jeya moves out of the narrative with the quotative "like", indexing her teenager identity, to lead into her question. Mrs Chandran laughs in Line 13 to indicate she is familiar with the kind of opinion expressed by Jeya's aunt. In Lines 14 and 15 Jeya returns to address the English question she began in Line 1, with stress on *wrong* and *each god.* The use of English as opposed to Tamil signals a softening of the potentially risky message.

Mrs Chandran acknowledges Jeya's question in Line 16 and announces that she will tell Jeya a story, in relation to this problem, in Line 17. She attempts to start the story in Line 18 (with the Tamil "for me") but Jeya interjects with a declaration in Line 19. The interruption, the stress on *agnostic,* the mitigators *kind of* and *in a way,* the elongation of *way,* and the changes in pitch and intonation, all signal her discomfort to identify as an agnostic and to make a statement which challenges her loyalty to Saivism. But Mrs Chandran does not acknowledge the utterance and restarts her story in Line 20. In Line 21 Jeya adds a further mitigation, *a little bit,* in low volume. Ironically, the teacher does not react and continues to tell her own story.

4.2   Bhagavad Geeta

In Extract 2, occurring some six minutes after Extract 1, Chitran raises a question, in the form of a declaration, about a principle in the Bhagavad Geeta, the canonical Hindu scripture written in Sanskrit. He tries to reconcile what he has been told by others in the community with his own interpretation of what it means to worship God.

Extract 2. Bhagavad Geeta

17 May 15   Timecode: 00:56:27.556 - 00:57:03.912

1   Chitran: **antha bhagavath geethala**,

"in that Bhagavad Geeta"

2   **oru** (0.5) thing **colluthu**

"there's a thing which says"

3   (0.8) **antha kaTavuL**

"that God"

4   **naangkaL vazhipaTuRa civan2, cakthi, piLLaiyaar**

"whom we worship Shiva Shakthi Ganesh"

5   **avangkaLellaam** form

"all of them form"

6   **kaTavuLuTaiya** form.

"God's form"

7   **avangkaLaiyellaam vazhipaTa kuuTaathu en2Tu**

"it's said that you shouldn't worship them"*

8   **colliyirukkuthu antha**

9   (0.5) **uNmaiyaan2a** like

"you should worship the true like the God God that doesn't have
any form"*

10   (.) the God

| 11 | | (.) **uruvamillaatha** God **thaan2 vazhipaTa veeNTum en2Tu** |

| 12 | | **bhagavath geetha colluthu athu** |

"that's what the Bhagavad Geeta is saying that"

| 13 | | **antha** form**a vazhipaTTaa** |

"if you worship that form"

| 14 | | **paavam en2Tu colluthu** |

"it said that is a sin"

| 15 | Jeya: | r↑<u>eally</u>¿ |

| 16 | | **p<u>aa</u>vam**. |

"sin"

* due to SOV word order, the English translation also corresponds to the Tamil uttered in the subsequent line/s (Lines 8 and 11).

In Line 1, Chitran begins his belief narrative in Tamil and in Line 2, after a pause likely to be caused by a mental search for the apt Tamil feature (a word meaning "commandment" or the like), he adopts the nonspecific English *thing*. In Lines 3, after a long pause, he uses Tamil to refer to "that god" that we worship. This pause hints at some uncertainty of what to call "that god". He then lists three Tamil names of gods in Line 4: Shiva, Shakthi (a goddess and the manifestation of female creative power) and Ganesh. In Line 5 he deploys English to stress the word, *form*. In Line 6 he repeats this pattern, by using Tamil to refer to God (the suffix, *–uTaiya,* affixed to *kaTavuL* "God", denotes possession to mean "God's") but then adopting the English, *form*. This marked use of *form* suggests Chitran is emphasising the point that the three named gods are all forms of his God. In Lines 7 and 8

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he declares, in Tamil, that the holy text states that those forms of God should not be worshipped over the singular God.

In Line 9 there is a pause and a shift from Tamil to English to use the filler, *like.* Following another micropause in Line 10, Chitran uses English to name *the God,* and a similar pattern is evident in Line 11 which contains a micropause, a shift from Tamil to use the English *God*, and then a shift back to Tamil. Note that he uses the Tamil equivalent of "form" to make *uruvamillaatha* (the suffix, *–illaatha,* denoting negative possession to mean "has no form").

In Lines 12 to 14, Chitran utters a concluding statement to say the Bhagavad Geeta sees worshipping a material form of God rather than the formless God as a sin. In Line 13, he deploys a "Tanglish" word - *form* is suffixed with the Tamil vowel *-a* - to phonologically integrate the English feature to Tamil. In Line 14, he continues with Tamil features, including the equivalent for sin, *paavam.* Jeya reacts with the newsmark, *really,* combined with pitch and intonation to indicate surprise in Line 15. She adopts the Tamil *paavam* (with stress) in Line 16 to ask if such a practice is deemed sinful. The idea that this kind of polytheistic worship could be a sin has piqued her interest as it goes against what her aunt advised her (in the previous extract) and potentially reinforces her own position.

5   Discussion

Extracts 1 and 2 are examples of how the students in the Year 9 class attempted to position their beliefs in aspects of their inherited religion. Through belief narratives and positioning their ideas and experiences in relation to other members, and to dominant discourses, in their faith community, the students negotiate what God means to them as they grow up in Australia. The analysis of prosody and translanguaging indicates the students' uncertainty about their ethnoreligious identity, but also their meta-awareness of the socio- and religio- cultural indexicality of language features which help them to perform acts of syncretism.

Jeya's belief narrative, building a story to end with an unconventional declaration, *I'm kind of agnostic*, could be the result of "introducing a piece of information and testing out whether it will be acceptable" (Sacks, 1995, p. 47). She uses the story of her aunt in France to lead into the topic, quoting her aunt's speech as a way of testing the waters and thereby distancing herself from the assertion that you should pray to individual gods. At this point she introduces the fact that she does not really pray to a particular god which then opens the space for Jeya to announce her position of being somewhat agnostic (both uttered in English). The use of English mitigations, *kind of*, *in a way, a little bit* (Lines 19 and 21), help to present what appears to be a provisional rather than a definite identity and to softer alternative interpretation of religious practice. This process is what Benwell and Stokoe (2006, p. 67) refer to as inoculating oneself from the "interactional consequences of overt categorisation". English also plays the role of expressing Jeya's tentativeness over the matter, such as *is it wrong* (Line 1), *I don't really pray like* (Line 9), and the use of *right?* as a check for understanding or reassurance in Lines 7 and 10.

The use of Tamil to name the Saiva gods and to report her aunt's speech are a nod to Jeya's Tamil identity and a way to index her affiliation with the community. In all, Jeya's translanguaging assists her to perform an act of syncretism, drawing from her knowledge within and outside of her faith community, to work out who God is to her. Jeya also exhibits agency in creating a personal framework of meaning that is flexible. While she positions herself as agnostic in Extract 1, the ethnography revealed her ongoing interest in Saivism, her frequent attendance at the Saiva School and her adherence to certain religious practices (observance of festivals and vegetarianism to name a few). This is evidence of her choosing which aspects of the inherited religion she upholds.

In both cases, the students consider the received wisdom dealt to them by members of the first generation and then reflect on that in light of their own knowledge and beliefs. While Chitran's belief narrative does not involve an embedded story about other people, he is trying to reconcile a dominant community view about the holy book with his own interpretation of

God, and this is evidence of his syncretic act. Tamil dominates Chitran's speech but there are marked, strategic uses of English to help position his faith. In Lines 3 and 6 he uses Tamil to refer to God. In Tamil, *kaTavuL* can act as a generic word for God but is often used to refer to Shiva, since he is seen as the supreme god for Saivites. Based on observations of Chitran during the ethnography, he generally used *kaTavuL* to refer to Shiva as this indexed a more personal connection for him. However in Lines 10 and 11 there are two occurrences of the English feature, *God*, as opposed to *kaTavuL*. In this context Chitran is referring to the god that is supposedly the true god, the god that does not have any form, and the one that the Bhagavad Geeta says to worship. His use of English to refer to this god suggests a shift in relationship. This is a version of "God" that he is uncertain about as he is trying to grasp whether this god is Shiva or a god by another name. He strategically deploys Tamil and English features to distinguish these respective familiar and unfamiliar relationships. In contrast, Jeya's tendency towards agnosticism prompts her to use the English *God* as a multifaith version of the supreme being and, unlike Chitran, she only uses *kaTavuL* when quoting her aunt's speech.

For Chitran, there is also marked alternation between the use of the Tamil and English equivalents, *uruvam* and *form.* In Lines 5 and 6, he adopts the English *form* to make his point rather than the Tamil, *uruvam,* a word that was used frequently in class and would be known by Chitran. The use of the English equivalent appears to be for the sake of emphasis, drawing the listeners' attention to the concept of "form" (uttered with stress) in his statement. In Line 11 he uses the Tamil equivalent to make *uruvamillaatha* "no form", and then in Line 13 he uses the English-Tamil (Tanglish) integration of *forma*. Other than for emphasis, it is difficult to ascertain why Chitran adopts these different forms of "form", but they do point to the salience of, and his uncertainty over, the concepts of "form" and "formless" in his question. This kind of deployment of features from Chitran's idiolect demonstrates the complex ways in which different language resources perform a range of subject positions (Creese & Blackledge, 2015).

In both extracts, the close link between the Tamil language and Saiva religion is evident in how the students use Tamil for specific Saiva concepts, for narratives and reported speech of the first generation and to express a spiritual or cultural closeness to the topic of discussion. Being able to draw on Tamil language features for belief positioning thus enables the students to index their affiliation to Tamil Saivism and their belonging in the migrant faith community. In contrast, English is connected with provisional ideas and identifications. Thus, it is the interplay of Tamil and English features that help to convey a more complex message about tentative belief positions; Tamil and English work complementarily to express more nuanced meaning. By encoding their voices in the narratives, through translanguaging, the adolescents are relating their faith to other community members' contradictory and conflicting ideas of faith (Sultana et al., 2015, p. 95). Translanguaging then complements the youth's transgressive acts of pushing the boundaries of the religion. While I do not claim that all translanguaging in these extracts can be explained as strategic, the patterns show evidence of conscious deployment of language features for positioning purposes.

6   Conclusion

Gregory, Lytra, et al. make the point that "Faith practices offer children the opportunity to extend the limits of both their language and their world. This is especially so for children whose faith practices rely on languages different from the official language of the mainstream society in which they live" (2013, p. 323). The analysis in this article has demonstrated how the use and combination of different language resources from one's repertoire can help migrant youth to relay more nuanced and non-traditional beliefs and ethnoreligious identities as part of their discursive belief positioning.

It is recommended that migrant religious institutions support the initiatives of teachers like Mrs Chandran and the Year 9 Saiva students to foster flexible adolescent belief positioning. For multicultural and religiously diverse societies like Australia, understanding

second-generation migrants' critical discursive identification and belief practices, as they move into adulthood, is an important action against the social exclusion of minorities.

In applied linguistics, studies such as these, which interrogate flexible languaging practices at the interaction level, demonstrate the applicability of such a translanguaging lens to understand how semiotic acts are changing in the world – how people identify and relate to one another in rapidly shifting sociocultural, environmental, economic and political conditions. It is important for us to understand then that translanguaging is not a fixed concept and the way it manifests will vary according to each context and set of conditions in which it emerges.

Acknowledgements

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8   Appendix

Transcription symbols

  [ ]   overlapping talk

  -          cut-off or self-interruption

  <   jump started talk

  > <   talk between symbols is compressed or rushed

º º	talk between symbols is soft or quiet
(0.5)	pause, timed
(.)	micropause
:	prolonged sound
<u>word</u>	stress or emphasis
,	continuing intonation
.	final intonation
?	rising intonation
¿	between rising and continuing intonation
↑	sharp rise in pitch
↓	sharp fall in pitch
heh	laughing word

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[1] Pseudonyms are used for research sites and participants. Permission to conduct the research was granted by the temple board and the Monash University ethics committee.

[2] In the Australian school system, Year 9 is the third year of secondary school and students are 14 to 15 years old.

[3] I identify as a second-generation Sri Lankan migrant, of Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Malay ethnicity, with basic Tamil language skills. For further discussion of my positionality in the research project, see Perera (2017).

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