

JUNE 2020

CONVERSATIONS WITH
ARTISTS USING 'OTHER'
LANGUAGES IN THEIR
CREATIVE WORK

SLANG IN THE CREATIVE ECONOMY LANGUAGES



creative
multilingualism



BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

INTRODUCTION

The Slanguages research is being led by **Professor Rajinder Dudrah** from **Birmingham City University, UK.**

Slanguages is part of the Creative Multilingualism research project based at the University of Oxford. **Creative Multilingualism** is a four-year research programme investigating the interconnection between linguistic diversity and creativity. The Creative Multilingualism programme is funded by the AHRC's **Open World Research Initiative.**

Slanguages is exploring the creative way artists employ and take inspiration from languages such as Arabic, Hindi, Patois, Pidgin, Polish, Punjabi, Russian, Urdu, urban sign languages, and Yoruba. The project is wide-ranging and includes exhibitions, performances, and collaborations with artists, creative professionals and partners such as Punch Records; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; the Birmingham Repertory Theatre; Sputnik Theatre Company, London; Caste Away Arts, Coventry; Pesolife, London; Beatfreeks, Birmingham; Raman Mundair, Scotland; and AfroFlux Birmingham, amongst others.

The Slanguages research project is interested in the interaction between languages in the performing and visual

arts and the types of creativity this generates. Multilingual performances and visual art foster creativity that is responsive to cultural contexts and audiences and they play a valuable role in the creative industries, including in its economy.

Some of the research questions that Slanguages has been interested in, include:

- How significant is linguistic diversity for the creative aims of the performers, and what creative processes are involved in negotiating the interaction between different languages in the performance?
- How significant is linguistic diversity for the audience's response, and to what extent does their response benefit from the involvement of creativity?
- How do languages and creativity come into play in foregrounding, negotiating, and/or downplaying cultural difference and identities?
- To what extent is meaning clarified by written or aural and visual media?
- How is 'slang' understood and used by different performing and visual artists in the creative industries?

These questions have been addressed via a range of interdisciplinary methodologies and practices drawn from across music, theatre, film, media, visual illustration, cultural and performance studies.

The 'Slanguages in the Creative Economy Report' has been researched and produced in collaboration with one of

our artist collectives – **Beatfreeks** from Birmingham. It has been commissioned to offer an insight into the working lives, creativity, challenges and contributions of, and the impact made by 10 artists in Birmingham and the West Midlands, who use languages as part of their professional practices.

Professor Rajinder Dudrah
Professor of Cultural Studies and
Creative Industries

In undertaking the Slanguages research project, we have spoken to 10 artists from across Birmingham and Walsall in the West Midlands who all use 'other' languages, besides English, in their work to a variety of extents. In this report, the phrase 'other languages' is used to denote all uses of language in addition to 'traditional' or received English.

Words 'other' and 'traditional' are placed in quote marks here as an acknowledgement of their problematic context: where people are minoritised based on their use of other languages or slangs, and 'traditional' English denotes a hierarchy of language which we believe can be used as a form of oppression.

This research project sees the beauty and power in using a multitude of other languages, slang and dialect. It shows how in spite of preconceptions, xenophobia and tokenism, multilingualism - and the multiculturalism that it engenders - can be a force for good to change our creative industries and their related economy.

Throughout this report, you will see languages from across the globe, creative forms which span across genres and styles, and people from a range of different backgrounds. What unifies them here is the impact that using other languages has on their creativity.

Fabio Thomas
Project Manager At Beatfreeks

Language is the gateway into appreciating the culture.

Sipho Ndlovu
Slanguages Participant

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ALA RASI

An Arabic word: Arabic speakers say this in response to a favour, generally meaning that they would do anything for that person. However in English this means “on my head.”



INTRODUCING OUR ARTISTS

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST EXPERIENCE OF USING YOUR 'OTHER' LANGUAGE?



Siphon Ndlovu

Performance Arts
(Acting, Spoken Word, Dance)

The second language is called Ndebele. It's from Zimbabwe and it's one of the two main languages there. The first time I used it creatively was probably when I was 17 when I was in college and I was studying acting. What I remember when I was writing was struggling to express internal feelings in English, moments when I'd try and describe myself and feeling that English was limiting in what I was trying to say. So I thought I will just say it in my language and hopefully the audience will be able to receive the emotion of the text. It was the first time I saw an expression I'd go on to see a lot which is: I partly don't understand what I've seen but I really like it.



Amerah Saleh

Poetry

I definitely know that It would have been a single word [in Arabic] and not a full sentence. This was testing the water for me. When I did start writing Arabic, I had to think about like why was I doing it. Particularly when you're trying to establish yourself, I didn't want to make [speaking Arabic] my defining characteristic. I'd never seen it before, people wouldn't understand it. That wasn't poetry. It never even crossed my mind. That's not poetry, poetry is in English.



Bohdan Piasecki

Poetry, Translation

Liberating would be the word which I'd use. It may not be the first time, is when a specific poem that I knew I wanted to write and I'd written a few drafts in Polish and wasn't happy with any of them. Then I tried in English and then it wrote itself very quickly in one day. Then I translated it back into Polish and it was fine in Polish too.



Ahsen Sayeed

Photography, Film

The first time I used it was probably the second wedding I ever covered, it was a Pashto wedding so they speak a completely different language. I don't understand it at all, but the funny thing is they tend to speak Urdu also. It was difficult for me to direct the older people so I spoke to them in Urdu.



Ayan Aden

Spoken Word

One of the first few pieces that I wrote, I delved into some Arabic / Islamic terminologies. It felt weird, because at that point I was only used to poetry in English and the whole bilingual poetry thing was not something which I'd seen before. I eased into it over time and one thing I realised is that people received it a lot better. People who grew up with heritages where Arabic terminology is used, kinda preferred it and it hit a lot closer to home.



Spoz

Poetry, Music

In terms of Brummie colloquialisms, creativity I played in bands before I did the poetry thing and I used to write the songs and lyrics. There was a band I played in called the Sordid Details, we're talking the late 80s / 90s. In some of the songs, I used certain Brummie slangs. All four of us were Brummies and really full on proper Brummies and we loved it. I would wear a t shirt with 'Bostin' written across the front.



Participant 8

YouTube, Vlogging

Well I'm actually a noob! (newbie) I've only been doing this for a month and a half, and it's mainly on Youtube, blogging about beauty and fashion. I think I learnt Arabic properly when I was about 17 years old because I come from a mixed heritage background so it was not used in my house. I decided to do my first ever vlog in Arabic. It was my first time speaking Arabic outloud ever, and I thought I would be rubbish but everyone kept messaging me saying how my Arabic was brilliant.



Namywa
Music

I don't know how to split it up, I don't know how to remove myself from it. I couldn't imagine not doing it. If you know yourself and what you're saying then you know what your position is. The more you get across what you're feeling, the better. You can manipulate this skill of using language because you can be speaking one direct message.



Shazmeen Khalid
Visual, Poetry, Blogging

I don't know if it was the first time but certainly one of the most memorable times was when I sent off one of my poems to our university anthology and it ended up getting published. I was able to perform it at our degree show and it was a poem that used words from my mother tongue language and the poem was actually called 'Tongues' and was about speaking your own language and the importance of it. I wouldn't say liberation but in a way it was freeing and knowing that the majority of my audience didn't speak that language made it exciting. I haven't previously ever been able to put it on a platform like that before.



Sharan Dhanda
Painting, Drawing

I started using Punjabi in my work during university when I was exposed to a variety of people. I realised that although my core subject interest was (and still is) the exploration of the multiple facets of the term 'conflict' in my work, my self exploration of conflict has always been about my identity as an 'other'. I was fascinated by the concept of othering different ethnicities and the continuous fatigue from a lack of cultural understanding. I decided then, that titling my work in a language (Punjabi) that was actually my first and only language for a few years of my life acted as a reclaim of my own space and highlighted the distance I have felt from society as an other. I do not translate my titles for ease of understanding, if you know, you know. If you don't, you don't.

HAFKI

A Mirpuri word: used to describe a particular sensation of anxiety whereby a person may feel overwhelmed or like they cannot breathe, or a general sense of unease. While it can be described in other languages, the word Hafki in Mirpuri covers all of those descriptions. For example "I get Hafki when I'm indoors too long".

TREND 1



SLANG WORKS IN A DIFFERENT WAY
BECAUSE I DON'T THINK I KNOW WHAT
STANDARD OR TRADITIONAL ENGLISH IS.

Amerah

Diversity in 'Other' Languages

Different approaches to using language

Perhaps predictably, all of the participants we spoke to use their languages in a hugely diverse number of ways. This is dependent on the language, the specific piece, the audience - everything right down to the specifics of a certain sentence or scene or brushstroke. Using languages, how you do it and how much you do it, is dependent on what you are trying to achieve. In short, using 'other' languages creatively is different in almost every context, however it is always in service of what you're looking to 'say' with a piece of work.

Use of languages varied in three principal ways:

- **Frequency of use**
- **How it was presented in the work**
- **How different languages and their different registers operate differently in work**

Each individual participant has experimented with their frequency of use - completing whole pieces solely in one language, pieces which mix and blend the two, and pieces which only use one word from another language perhaps. This further explains the above - that use of another language always seems to be in service of what the piece is trying to achieve.

Each participant had pieces which used other languages to differing extents. In addition, when comparing participants, the majority of some people's work contained direct use of another language, whereas some participants had only directly used other languages in 5 - 10% of their work. This shows that when artists are using other languages, it is not something that they do 100% of the time, but rather only when it is in service of the particular piece.



(Bohdan) It happens, but it's not in my default. I'd rather just give people enough context at the start so they have some sense of where it's going, then let them listen to the music of it. Or, for work which is in English and something else, you can give context clues in the English part, which is enough to get the gist. You can also keep some bits obscure on purpose and it's just another creative tool.



(Spoz) I normally read it in Italian first, and there are five stanzas, and I normally knock a couple of them out, because by the time I've gotten to the end of the second stanza, you sense if you go on too long you are going to lose the audience, and lose the point of why I'm reading it in Italian.

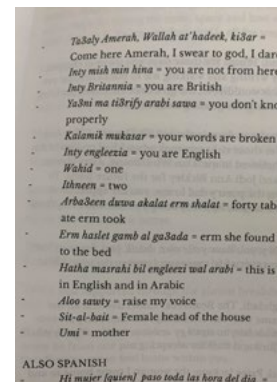


(Ahsen) [On his Peace After Christchurch Film] I spoke to quite a few people in Urdu and Punjabi and quite naturally when they saw the camera responded in English. A lot of them threw in a few Arabic words in between.



(Shazmeen) It was only actually one word that was repeated throughout.

On the whole, the same applied for participants who use multiple languages and slang in their work simultaneously. Ayan Aden (spoken word poet) for example, discusses how the different languages she uses in her work, are often for different purposes. We see further diversity therefore in how different 'other' languages work in creative contexts.



(Ayan) The words I would use in Arabic are mainly in reference to Islamic contexts. Whereas when I use Somali as a medium, it's more about Somali identity, culture, who you are, where you're heading.



(Ayan) Somali spoken orally is not the same as Somali written or in poetry. The colloquial Somali I was brought up with, is completely different to the genre of Somali poetry I write. I've had to self teach the language to use it for poetry.



(Sipho) 90% of how I am using my language is I'm being respectful and I'm using it in a formal way. It becomes very different when I begin to express artistically because that is emotions, not so formulated.



(Shazmeen) The only instance where I would say I use languages differently is sometimes in some of my journal pieces I use Urdu writing. It's a visual element, it's part of the painting.



Here we see how, even in the context of individual languages, each tone and register has a different use, meaning and intent. Other poets who use slang, also talk about similar diversity. Using slang operates differently to using non-English languages, or even 'traditional' English.



(Amerah) Slang works in a different way because I don't think I know what standard or traditional English is.

We can therefore see that creative use of languages and slang are not bound to one method or one approach. Whilst there is almost infinite diversity in the way languages are used in creative practices, there are some key ideas we see across approaches.

SZUM (NOUN)

A Polish word: A kind of sustained noise - a hum, a crash, a sough, static... The same word describes the sound made by waves, by radios, by tree branches in the wind, by distant crowds, by constant traffic.



TREND 2



The Creative Case

Creative value added by using 'other' languages

A primary reason participants gave when asked why they used 'other' languages or slang was because of the fact that it felt natural. All of our participants identified that the other languages they used were directly related to their heritage. In most instances participants actively identified using another language in their work as a way to reflect their heritage.



(Ayan) I'm British and Somali. [When I use both languages] It feels like it resonates more. It's more me.



(Spoz) I do like to sneak in silly rhymes with Brummie colloquialisms. Bostin' for example - 'I am the fortress in the forest that you long to get lost in / I'm the smile on your face, I am ace, I am bostin'. Sneak it in just to make sure people know I'm from Birmingham.



(Amerah) I went from completely not being proud of speaking Arabic to almost now of being too proud. For me, this is very positive, because I know where I was years ago with the language.



(Shazmeen) Starting my blog in the first place was an opportunity for me to: 1. Appreciate my language and 2. To be able to use it. In school there was never really the opportunity to showcase your background or your culture, unless it was a multiculturalism day and then it was tokenized.



(Namywa) I don't know how to split it up, I don't know how to remove myself from it. I couldn't imagine not doing it.

Whilst representing their heritage, a number of participants drew attention to the fact that using other languages can often draw in new audiences, who don't necessarily understand that language.



(Shazmeen) When I do make that effort to add something meaningful in another language, people do receive it differently and it's usually far more positive.



(Bohdan) I think it is mainly positive. There are often assumptions about how willing audiences are to receive stuff in different languages that are not English. I've found these assumptions by and large - at least within poetry - are completely wrong and people enjoy foreign languages.

—
She raised it inside me.
Bolo. I say to my brothers. Bolo.
Speak.
Speak your mother tongue with grace,
Do not take pride in speaking only the language of the colonisers.
Bolo. — Shazmeen



(Participant 8) I thought I would be rubbish but everyone kept messaging me saying how my Arabic was brilliant. It's given me encouragement to continue or to put more out there in Arabic.



(Ayan) Let's say I gave a spoken word piece which had both Somali and Arabic in it. Someone who wouldn't understand the language wouldn't understand the complexity of what I am saying, or it wouldn't resonate with them, but they would feel the passion with the manner it was said, the reception of the crowd, the whole aura.

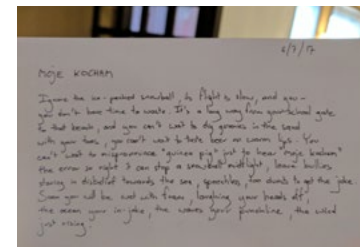


(Siphon) Some people might be looking for something a bit different and that's where [other languages] make the difference in attracting new audiences, potential partners and new employers.



(Shazmeen) For people who don't read it or understand it, it still means something, it still represents something, you look at the shape of the letters and you know when you look at the way it is set out that it is pointing to a certain culture.

Or occasionally 'other' languages are used to challenge audiences:



(Spoz) I'd swear at the audience in Italian. I also played in a Ska band and needless to say some of the venues and gigs we did a lot of skinheads would turn up and some of them were racist pigs. So every now and then I'd use the occasional 'Va fancu' over the mic.

There was a clear difference between receiving work in other languages for audiences who understood that language and those who did not. In the context of spoken word poetry for example, poets often make conscious decisions about whether or not to translate words or poems for audiences who don't understand them.



(Spoz) As a spoken word artist you need to consider your audience, and obviously not many people can speak Italian.



(Siphon) I have performed in a few English speaking plays where I would translate all of my text into my language.



(Bohdan) You can also keep some bits obscure on purpose and it's just another creative tool.

These participants spoke about the value of leaving some words, phrases or whole poems untranslated. There were many references to non-speaking audiences getting the general meaning, or deducing meaning from the sounds and feelings in the delivery or words. This is something which filmmaker Ahsen Sayeed picked up on when discussing use of Arabic by participants in his documentary films.

For those who do understand the language in the work there is an opportunity to forge deeper connection with the work and the artist.



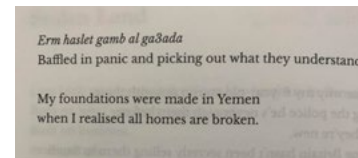
(Shazmeen) [When using Urdu] you invite that community to be a part of your article.



(Ayan) I eased into it over time and one thing I realised is that people received it a lot better. People who grew up with heritages where Arabic terminology is used, kinda preferred it and it hit a lot closer to home.



(Ayan) When you speak to someone's native tongue, it touches a core within them that is untapped by a language they had to learn I think. Especially since us as humans we associate emotions through the medium our parents used, what we grew up around. When I speak Somali, people who are Somali, it will touch them, but people who are not Somali or who don't understand Somali, see that it touches other people but might not be touched in the same way.



(Namywa) People from other cultures it makes it more accessible to them.



(Participant 8) It actually opened up another audience.

Aside from the value use of 'other languages' adds in the inclusion of non-English words in a work, many participants spoke about the value multilingualism adds to all of their work, whether it includes actual words from that language or not.



(Amerah) It's like how if I was a musician, my beat to everybody else's would be completely off.



(Sipho) Because I think in another language it means I think differently to English [speaking] audiences. Not only do other languages play a role on the surface of the culture sector, but it points to a whole other way of thinking, a different approach which people who have access to these languages hold. Beyond any value added in terms of immediate reception, knowledge of other languages adds theoretical differences and diverse approaches to creativity.

More specifically, translation plays a role in the creative process. This could be how language is unpacked in the process of translating it to one language then back again, or how the form of the language can influence how we write it in another. You can also make linguistic references via the act of translation.



(Bohdan) If you swap language I find it makes you think differently and can unlock some things.



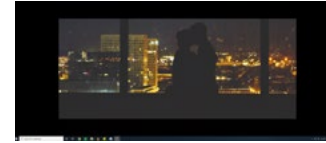
(Amerah) There is a line in there [her poem] which goes 'she's like a paintbrush breastfeeding two babies at once'. When people first saw it they were like woah, it's such a weird image, because that's a saying in Arabic. Sometimes what I've found in my creative practice is that the literal translation could sound so fucking bizarre, but also if you were Arab and you read it you'd be like oh yeah, I know exactly where that came from.



(Ayan) In Somali poetry, you take a letter for example 'D' - your stanza has to start with 'D' in every line, have 'D' in the middle of the line and end with a word with 'D' at the end of the line and then rhyme as well. It's very tricky.

Using other languages impacts creativity through its inclusion in pieces of work, and this in turn impacts the creative process. Some participants, particularly in photography and film, and also in workshop facilitation, found how the use of other languages can impact organisations in their everyday work practises or cultures of thinking more openly. Here we see that value and importance of other languages as used by the artists in the creative economy.

Documentary Filmmaker **Ahsen Sayeed** talks at length about how multilingualism allows him to work with subjects who may be difficult to communicate with, if you only spoke English.



(Ahsen) From making my films, it's alienation. Loads of people feel a little alienated when you speak to them in English. They feel a little bit more at home, if a complete stranger approaches them with a camera in their hand and they are asking for x y and z.



(Ahsen) I don't think it's about making work for film or making work for whatever, it's about catering the language to make the other person feel a bit more comfortable.



(Ahsen) I have made films which don't even have the subject speaking, but it still requires me speaking to them [in their language]. For me the forefront is always making them feel at home.

In addition, spoken word poet Spoz - who does a good deal of work facilitating in schools - spoke at length about the role other languages can have in helping young people open up to creative practice. Bohdan Piasecki - poet and translator - also showed how use of other languages can influence workshop facilitation in monolingual settings.



(Spoz) On the odd occasion where I've bumped into kids who are from Italy, it's brilliant because I just go off on one with them. It's great - I've got another line of communication here.



(Bohdan) I've run workshops in translation for monolingual groups, in using translation as a creative tool.

Through these trends we can see the multifaceted impact using 'other' languages has. Not only does it open a multitude of doors for practitioners and audiences alike, it actually plays a role in winning new work, working with different partners and helping others become creative - regardless of whether the final output is multilingual or not.

SIKHULELE E-AFRIKA

An Ndebele word: We Grew Up In Africa.



TREND 3



Creative Everyday Use

Use of Language outside creativity

80% of participants said that they used 'other' languages creatively and also in everyday life. For them, there is a clear relationship between how their everyday use of languages develop into their creative use of them. When discussing why they used other languages, many respondents argued that it is natural for them to do so. This felt particularly pertinent when discussing the use of colloquial slang. With particular reference to English slang, some participants referred to the fact that this is the way they talked everyday, so why would they talk any differently creatively.

When use of a non-English language is added to the mix, the reasons for its use differs. Some artists use it to express words and feelings which would lack specificity in English, others use it as a creative device, others use it for deeper artistic ingenuity. Again, it is used in service of the aims of the piece. This is perhaps not seen to the same extent with the use of English slang.

Many of our participants referred to how using languages creatively can also help you in other aspects of your life. In this manner, using languages creatively can impact the lives of everyday people in the wider world.



(Siphiso) The arts have been so instrumental in my life, that I don't know how I would have been communicating with people if it wasn't for my experience experimenting with my language. What it allowed me to do was be present in a situation and not be afraid to improvise. Whereas before I would have to plan out what I am saying. For me it's partly to do with my speech impediment, but it has totally changed everything for me.



(Bohdan) A lot of problems with use of language comes from confidence and issues of self-perception. If you manage to get yourself to use a language creatively and overcome the hangups that come with that, then it will be easier to go and call the council about your tax.



(Ahsen) My Urdu wasn't where it should be at so using it in workplaces really started developing it really fast.

For the artists, the value of using other languages creatively can be summed up as having the following five impacts for them:

- That it can work as a principle method to express your culture and heritage
- That it can be a way to engage audiences both who understand the language as well as those who do not
- That it can impact creative methods even when the other language is not present in the final product of the work
- That it can aid the facilitation or organisation of work coming to fruition
- That using languages creatively is a skill and this can impact life both within and outside the realm of professional work



EV-EY

A Punjabi word: whatever, nonsense, willy nilly, just-for-the-sake-of-it, because-I-can.



TREND 4



The Creative Economy

Commissions, finance and 'other' languages

All participants for the project were recruited based on the fact that they had a range of professional experiences within the creative economy. The majority of participants engage in their creative practice semi-professionally, with a number just starting their professional journey and a number using it as their main source of income.

Throughout all of the conversations we had with the participants, most recognised that while using other languages added to the creative value of their work, most did not feel that their work was considered more financially valuable - i.e. that they were paid more - because of their use of other languages. In terms of monetary contributions to the creative economy, many participants found it difficult to put a specific number on the economic contribution they had made based on their use of another language.

What was discussed, however, was how using other languages may attract new partners, collaborators, commissioners or employers for some of the participants. In this respect, and through the many values of using 'other' languages creatively, we can see the huge contribution using language has in the creative economy.



(Siphoniso) Some people might be looking for something a bit different and that's where [other languages] make the difference in attracting [...] potential partners and new employers.



(Ayan) I've gotten a lot of commissions [from Somali institutions] because of my ability to speak Somali, use Somali themes in my work. At the same time, institutions which don't tailor towards ethnic groups or languages, it's more based upon portfolio and talent.

Participants were relatively split as to whether their use of another language in particular brought them more paid commissions. When we take into account the impact that using 'other' languages can have on artistic practice, the often visible or undocumented role it plays in the creative economy, and the general impact it has for doing good for the cultural well-being of people, it is suggested that the creative sector could play a more active role in encouraging the use of other languages in new work.



KAD DAA

A Somali word: It doesn't have a literal translation but it is used when someone is 'exclaiming'. Somalis colloquially use it in a sense of 'stop it' when someone is either looking fly or just excelling in what they're doing.

TREND 5



Representation, Diversity & Tokenism

Representation, diversity and tokenism in the creative economy

Whilst participants were relatively split as to whether they gained more commissions because they speak another language, a few felt strongly about how their ethnicity, heritage or the colour of their skin impacted them getting work.

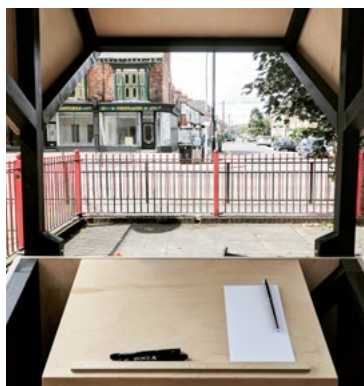
Some artists felt that whilst the use of another language itself may not be inherently valued, being from certain cultural backgrounds, and the drive for diversity in commissioning or programming, may gain them more work.



(Amerah) I think this is really confusing, particularly for Muslims. Do I think I add more value being Muslim [for an organisation], 100%. Do I think it's specifically because I speak Arabic, not really.



(Ayan) A lot of the time the work that I do I have never felt like I was commissioned because of my skin colour. But I definitely have spoken to artists who because of BAME inclusivity they don't feel like the content of their work is appreciated.



(Siphoniso) Unfortunately, sometimes it's not about the art, maybe it's never been about the art, it's never been about the poetry and then you can start to feel used. So from a mental health standpoint having to realise where you are going to say yes and where you are going to say no just to protect yourself. It makes it not fun anymore, people are just using me now to show me off to their friends, show me off to their audiences, it becomes less fun.



(Bohdan) Specifically there aren't that many of us [Polish people] with huge visibility in the arts and most specifically in language based arts, so I am grateful for the opportunity to be there. At the same time, by the fourth or fifth Brexit themed commission I kind of felt that I'd said what I had to say.

'Tokenism' was identified as being prevalent in the creative sector and for these artists it wasn't directly related to speaking another language. However, the ability to speak and perform in another language could mean that artists were often hired superficially by some clients. With tokenism operating in such a way, many of our participants spoke about how it may put them off using another language in such instances as they did not want to play the role defined for them. In cases like these, speaking in 'another' language creates the possibility for the artists to be defined by their use of another language per se, and not by its inherent quality, or other important factors.



(Bohdan) The problem comes when you are just flattened to that [using other languages] being the only dimension. The other trap is that people will praise it because they feel they have to. Because they feel if they don't then they are xenophobic or they are closed minded etc.



CULTURE
UNIVERSITY SURVIVAL GUIDE:
THE HALAL EDITION
October 30, 2015 / No Comments



(Amerah) When I'm on stage, I think people, visually I confuse them even more because I'm wearing scarf to the back, hat, bow-tie, menswear and I stand on stage and I speak English and then all of a sudden I slip in some Arabic and they're like 'ah, yeah'. It reassures them that what they first thought of me was right. That's really hard. Again, I think I have to be really careful when I speak Arabic, because you don't want that experience.



(Ahsen) That's one thing I always struggled with. Part of me wants to not show that I speak another language - which is why I often don't include my voice in my films. But the other half of me is like, my people and myself have been oppressed for generations, so why not use this as an opportunity of reparation, and use this to our advantage.

These artists are therefore faced with a dilemma. Using 'other' languages, as outlined above, is hugely beneficial to their creative practice and through the work they are contributing to the creative economy. However, in using other languages, some feel like they are playing the role defined for them by the sector. As a result - their work is flattened to just being about using another language.

Thus even when the artists use languages in a diverse number of ways, not least in the service of the specific piece in question, they still face challenges and social obstacles that they need to navigate in the choice of their work.

Whilst these artists are conscious of the above dilemma, they still do use other languages in their work. Many do so to challenge preconceptions in society through their work.



(Sipho) It challenges a lot of people's preconceptions. There is a huge benefit, as we know people attribute knowing a second language as something which is academic. But the irony is that most people think that if you are foreign to a western country, you will be less economically as well as educationally, which I think is something interesting to play with.



(Ahsen) The activist in me hopes that they [the audience] feel a little bit alienated as well. [When they hear languages they don't know in a film]. When *Peace After Christchurch* reached the United Nations, I realised this is going to be so important especially for white people to understand that these people exist, these languages exist, that this lingo exists and how people throw it in so easily into their everyday sentences. It drives away a little bit of phobia. Me putting that into work highlights it a little bit.



(Sharan) To those that understand a certain language, it can become a comfort and a community that you suddenly belong to. To those that don't understand that same language, it can leave people feeling isolated, rejected, and afraid of that unknown. Rather than trying to form an understanding of that language, people expect a translation to their own (especially English), centering themselves, and othering people that speak something else. For me, this is a representation of the racial mechanisms that exist in society.

We can see therefore that using other languages throws up some difficulties with regard to how it relates to issues of tokenism in the arts and culture sector. Many of the artists combat this directly through their work. Participants also felt that their use of another language in their work could also combat tokenism by encouraging other people to use their mother tongue in creative ways, by normalising the act, and convincing others to explore their own languages further.



(Bohdan) Increasing visibility of any kind of characteristic in certain contexts makes it more likely that people who share that characteristic will want to experience art in that context.



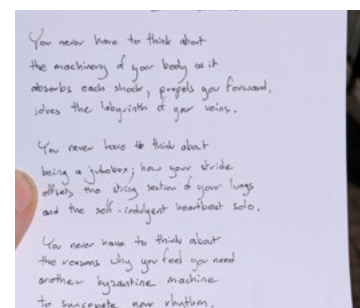
(Bohdan) The solution is normalising it, so it stops being a rare occurrence. You'll reach a point where it [using another language] becomes creative choices rather than museum exhibits.



Furthermore, a number of the participants spoke about the value of working in this way can have on young people in school, education, or just entering creative careers. Shazmeen Khalid in particular spoke about how in certain educational settings, expression in other languages was perhaps not an option.



(Shazmeen) For me the really big thing was I have grown up in a white, middle class town and I grew up being one of the only Asian students in my school and for me that always felt quite ostracising and quite like I didn't have the opportunity to use my language or for it to be appreciated.





(Shazmeen) Especially for young people when you don't see yourself or hear yourself, it's incredibly difficult to be yourself.

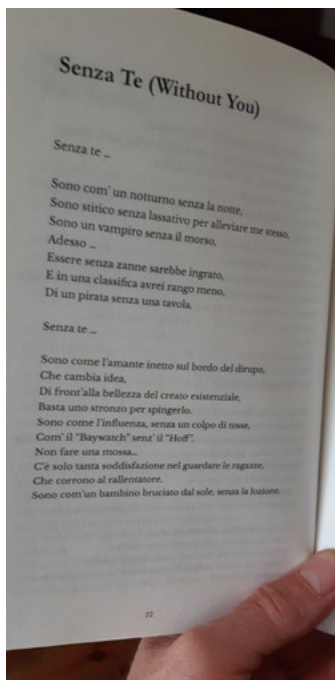
More established artists, see their work as direct and indirect ways of combating this. Using other languages in the public sphere, within the creative sector, can further empower young people who have similar backgrounds, and use similar languages, to do the same.



(Amerah) I'm gonna work hard and I am gonna do things that I'm not well paid for, but I'm gonna do it because in 20 years time, someone can look and think yes, 'I'm going to step into that theatre and see that show, I am going to apply for that job' - because they see that representation. Had I seen representation when I was 15, I think I would be in a very different place in my life right now.



(Spoz) I was working with this lad who is Polish and he hadn't been in the country long, and he was looking at me with this glazed expression on his face - going 'what is he talking about'. He didn't want to write in Polish, but when they did their performance, he spoke in Polish and then his friend explained what he had said. It was brilliant.



9NITE

A Patwa Word: A Caribbean celebration of life traditionally held for 9 days at the house of the person who has died. To celebrate and set free their soul.

SUMMARY

As has been argued in this report 'other' languages in addition to English (and sometimes in replacement of it) play a huge role in the creative economy. Artists and creatives, spanning a range of genres, all use languages in different ways and to varying extents. This is not just limited to language-based or spoken word arts, this also works across the performing and visual arts too.

Often, whilst 'other' languages may not be present in the finished iteration of work, their use has been irreplaceable in the creative process, whether through communicating with subjects in filmmaking, using 'other' languages' poetic forms to influence writing in English, or purely in a different way of thinking and communicating.

Generally, use of 'other languages' in creative contexts are well received from audiences who both do and don't understand the language in question. For each party, different value is drawn, but value, enjoyment and importance resides nonetheless. In many instances, use of 'other' languages creatively has also helped develop skills outside of artistic practice.

Whilst participants on the whole didn't feel that using other languages meant they got paid more for their work, many stated how it attracted more

commissioners, partners or audiences. Whilst this was the case, the tokenism so closely associated with being from non-English heritages often impacted participants' use of other languages. Many felt that they did not want to play the tokenistic role sometimes set out for them in commissions or programmes.

In spite of this, a large number of participants still used 'other' languages in their work, stating that it can play an important social role towards positive action. This could be by audiences from similar backgrounds noticing better representation within the creative economy; challenging stereotypes around non-English heritages; or actively alienating or othering audiences to replicate the effect of being othered due to the language you speak.

On the whole, this research has found the huge contribution use' languages play in the creative economy, whether that be present in non-English words in a finished piece, or in the work which has gone into the creative process. The challenge now is to create more spaces and programmes where the use of diverse languages are championed and demonstrated as an important method through which artists and their audiences can express themselves creatively.





SLANGUAGES

MEET THE CONTRIBUTORS



SIPHO NDLOVU

Languages	Artform
English, Ndebele	Performance Arts (Acting, Spoken Word, Dance)

Sipho is a performance artist and writer who incorporates spoken word poetry, dance & acting to tell stories. Influenced by experience and interest in disability arts, education, hip-hop & theatre, Sipho enjoys a shared inclusive space as much as he enjoys entertaining through performance and moments captured in words!

CHECK OUT SIPHO'S WORK HERE:
What It Had To Mean - Sipho Eric Dube



AMERAH SALEH

Languages	Artform
English, Arabic, Yemeni	Poetry

Amerah Saleh is a spoken word artist born and bred in Birmingham. Her Muslim Yemeni roots give her space to get lost and found on multiple occasions between identity. She is the co-founder of Verve Poetry Press. Amerah has performed all around Europe and has released her first collection called *I Am Not From Here* in 2018. Her work touches on identity, womanhood, religion and the obscure idea of belonging only to one place.

CHECK OUT AMERAH'S WORK HERE:
Yemen: Our Yemen - Amerah Saleh



BOHDAN PIASECKI

Languages	Artform
English, Polish, French	Poetry

Bohdan Piasecki is a poet from Poland based in Birmingham. A committed performer, he has taken his poems from the upstairs room in an Eastbourne pub to the main stage of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, from underground Tokyo clubs to tramways in Paris, from a bookshop in Beijing to an airfield in Germany, from niche podcasts to BBC Radio. In the UK, he regularly features at the country's most exciting spoken word nights, festivals, and readings. He enjoys the creative chaos of big field festivals just as much as the composed concentration of literary events.

Bohdan founded the first poetry slam in Poland before moving to the UK to get a doctorate in translation studies. He has worked as Director of Education on the Spoken Word in Education MA course at Goldsmiths University, and was the Midlands Producer for Apples and Snakes between 2010 and 2017. Since 2012, he has been a regular Visiting Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Birmingham.

CHECK OUT BOHDAN'S WORK HERE:
bohdanpiasecki.com



SHAZMEEN KHALID

Languages	Artform
English, Mirpuri, Punjabi, Urdu, Arabic	Visual, Poetry, Blogging

Born in rural Worcestershire in an immigrant family, Shazmeen grew up in a middle class town. While school wasn't socially inviting and she experienced racism throughout, Shazmeen turned to writing as a way of coping and exploring her cultural identity without feeling ostracised. Now a creative outlet, Shazmeen has turned her writing and journalism into her online presence as "Shazmeeny."

After running her own blog (formerly Culturally Inappropriate) for several years, Shazmeen now regularly writes opinion articles and interview pieces for her blog on Muslim identity in media. She has written for various platforms such as MEND and HuffPost and is a frequent writer and illustrator with Twentyhood Mag. Shazmeen has had her poetry published in the Birmingham City university anthologies and hopes to publish her own collection in the future.

CHECK OUT SHAZMEEN'S WORK HERE:
Kas Kalyaal - Shazmeeny



SHARAN DHANDA

Languages

English, Punjabi

Artform

Painting & Drawing

Sharan's work always explores a facet of the term 'conflict' - in the past this has ranged from an inner conflict (themes of mental health), physical conflict and violence, political conflict, the physical conflict and capabilities of the body, and the conflicts fueled by the differences in people (especially race). Sharan has completed a series of works or projects that focus on visually communicating/questioning a concept connected to conflict. The choice of medium for her work is affected by what is appropriate for the concept and the dialogue she wants created around my work. Based in Birmingham.



AYAN ADEN

Languages

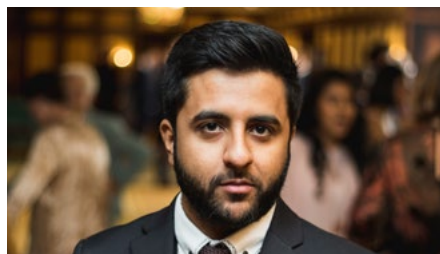
Somali, Arabic

Artform

Spoken Word

Ayan is an avid community activist that is keen on ensuring that leadership and governance is more inclusive and reflective of the West Midlands that we see today. Ayan has been an advocate for harnessing the voice and power of the youth as she sits as Vice President of Somali Youth For Integrity Midlands, Board Member of the YCA and Vice President of Aston Somali Society. When not in lectures or meetings, Ayan is often seen on the stage showcasing her spoken word art centred on empowerment. Notable performances include opening up Somali Week Festival 2019, Brum Youth Trends 2019 and performing in front of HS2 Stakeholders.

[CHECK OUT AYAN'S TED TALK HERE](#)



AHSEN SAYEED

Languages

English, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, Arabic

Artform

Photography and Film

Ahsen is a 24 year old Birmingham based photographer and filmmaker who specialises in documenting misrepresented communities. He has worked with the likes of Channel 4, Tedx, Beatfreeks, Selfridges and UOB.

[CHECK OUT AHSEN'S WORK HERE:](#)

Peace After Christchurch - Ahsen Sayeed



SPOZ

Languages

English, Italian, Brummie

Artform

Poetry, Music

Spoz (real name Giovanni Esposito) is an award winning performance poet, singer / songwriter, film maker, playwright and is the poet-in-residence at Birmingham City FC. Spoz has been seen on BBC Television, has been heard on BBC Radio Four, Radio Five Live, Radio West Midlands, Radio Coventry & Warwickshire, Radio Hereford & Worcester, Capital Gold and on the toilet.

Spoz has performed at Glastonbury, Shambala, Cheltenham Lit Fest, Larmer Tree, Wychwood and other festivals, as well as in front of his mom. Spoz was Birmingham's Poet Laureate in 2006/7 which was nice. He works a lot with young people in schools, though likes to rough it a little with adults too.

Spoz manages and facilitates many school poetry slam projects, including The West Midlands, Worcestershire, Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and other regions nationwide.

[CHECK OUT SPOZ'S WORK HERE:](#)

The Castle up the Beacon - Spoz



NAMYWA

Languages

English, Patwa

Artform

Music

Hailing from Birmingham, Namywa is an international recording artist, performer and songwriter speaking truth to power, with a fearless lyrical approach to subjects that mean a lot to her. Whether singing with just a guitar accompaniment or a full band, her unique singing style is leaving music lovers feeling that once again, the world may see another great voice emerge from the region that, amongst others, gave the world Joan Armatrading and Laura Mvula.

[CLICK HERE FOR UPCOMING RELEASES FROM NAMYWA](#)

PARTICIPANT 8

Languages

English, Arabic

Artform

Youtube, Vlogging

[Participant 8 opted to remain anonymous]

METHODOLOGY

Beatfrees worked with Professor Rajinder Dudrah from Creative Multilingualism in order to establish a research framework for the project. We discussed and settled on the role that slanguages play in terms of the creativity and impact of the work of the participants.

Following recruitment and signing of participant agreements, all participants filled out a 40 question long survey, which introduced some of the topics of the project. Following the completion of the survey, the sample then took part in one-to-one interviews with the researcher via the phone or video calling software.

Questions and interview direction was primarily informed by participants' answers to the survey. The interviewer then took the direction of the answers participants gave in the session. All interviews lasted in the region of 25 - 40 minutes.

Participants were offered a £50 bursary for their time.

SAMPLE

Participants were recruited based on the diversity of their experiences using languages within the creative economy. In order to gain a broad understanding of how languages work in this field, we selected participants who spoke a wide range of languages, were familiar with their languages to different extents, were at a range of levels in their creative careers, and who used their languages creatively in their artistic practices.

Participants were selected according to sampling a range of genders, ages, and ethnicities. All participants resided in the West Midlands at the time the project took place (March - June 2020).

Participants were given the option to have their data anonymised for the purposes of reporting. One participant chose to anonymise their identity. Where this has happened, all data which would compromise the identity of the participant has been redacted. Their name has been replaced with a participant number - Participant 8.

See further information on our sample in the table on following page:

Name	Age	Gender	Faith	Ethnicity	Do you consider yourself to have a disability?	Location
Bohdan	39	Male	No religious affiliation	White Eastern European	No	Birmingham
Amerah	27	Female	Muslim	Arab	No	Birmingham
Ayan	20	Female	Muslim	Somali	No	Birmingham
Ahsen	24	Male	Muslim	Pakistani	No	Birmingham
Sipho	25	Male	Christian	Black/African	Yes	Birmingham
Sharan	24	Female	PNTS	Indian	No	Walsall
Shazmeen	22	Female	Muslim	Kashmiri Pakistani	No	Birmingham
Namywa	26	Female	Universal	Black Caribbean British	Yes	Birmingham
Spoz	55	Male	Born Catholic Now lapsed.	White British / European	No	Birmingham
Participant 8	27	Female	Muslim	Mixed origin	No	[Redacted]

ABOUT BEATFREES



This research and report has been created by Beatfrees, an engagement and insight agency with a growing community of young creatives.

We work with brands, government and funders who see value in sharing power with young people.

Our model is simple: the more young people exercise their influence through their creativity, the more relevant institutions become and the more they can shape the world together.

You can find out more about Beatfrees here.

You can read more research from Beatfrees here.

ABOUT THE PARTNERS

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RAJINDER
DUDRAH



THANK YOU FOR READING

THANK YOU