Speak with Caution: The Vilification of Language for Muslim Air Travelers in America

My relationship with air travel has undergone a major transformation during my nineteen years of life. At age five, I relished any trip on an airplane, from the prospect of discovering a T.V. on the seat in front of me, to the cellophane-wrapped children’s meals distributed mid-flight. Each journey, as we settled in our seats, fastened our seatbelts, and began to explore the contents of the seatback pocket, my mom would remind me and my sister to recite Ayat Al-Kursi, a Quranic verse believed to place one under God’s protection. Inshallah, God-willing, we would have a smooth and safe trip.

Boarding a recent flight to California was an entirely different experience from the carefree adventures of my childhood. Waiting in line to walk through the full-body scanner at security, my legs quaked with nerves in anticipation of being singled out. I balked under the cool gaze of the flight attendant greeting me as I entered the plane. Arriving at my seat, I quickly stowed my bag and sat up straight, waiting to comply with further instructions before takeoff. A few minutes later, my mother turned to me with an almost automatic reminder: “Don’t forget your prayers.” Momentarily, I was horrified. Did she realize the delicacy of our current position? Countless news items and stories from friends had taught me the danger of uttering even a single Arabic word in an airport or on an airplane — the danger of planting an inkling of suspicion in the minds of our fellow travelers. Even my parents’ casual Urdu conversation as we taxied the runway had me sinking in my seat.

These languages, though, are incredibly important to me. My grandmother taught me to read the Quranic Arabic beginning at age four. Five times a day, I recite my daily prayers in the
same language. Urdu is the tongue of my childhood, and my connection to family near and far. Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldúa affirms that, especially in a nation composed of individuals of myriad backgrounds, language is critical to one’s sense of self: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity,” she says. “Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (81). For Anzaldúa, our use of language is extremely personal: it is the lens through which we view the world, and drives our connections with each other. Thus, attempting to dictate people's use of language is akin to governing an individual’s identity. Such is the case with any language. However, Arabic is unique in that it spans many different cultures and countries, its role as a language of religion and spirituality granting it an added level of influence.

In a post-9/11 world, airport travel is a prolonged ordeal, especially for those the security system deems suspicious — often, travelers who present as Muslim, Arab, or South Asian. Any random trait or behavior has the potential to provoke this system that relies on human bias and fear to function (O’Connor). As a result, airports have become locations where racism and Islamophobia are acceptable: in the name of security, basic rights seem to be placed on the back burner. When considering racial profiling of Muslims in airports, we often examine the effects of religious markers such as attire, race or skin color, or facial hair on security practices and travel experiences. However, we tend to overlook the role of language as a marker of Muslim identity. Speaking Arabic or Urdu — two languages associated with Islam — are triggers for fear in airport security practices, resulting in a suppression of religious and personal identity for Muslim Americans. Ultimately, such incidences complicate America’s reputation as a nation accepting of all cultures — what John F. Kennedy called a Nation of Immigrants (Kennedy).

Often, America defines citizenship according to shared traits, rather than viewing the many differences that make up a unique, multifaceted country as central to our national identity.
We consider what is not like us to be un-American, and therefore, unacceptable. Law Professor Leti Volpp calls attention to the othering of the Middle East in particular: “Historically, Asia and the Middle East have functioned as phantasmatic sites on which the U.S. nation projects a series of anxieties regarding internal and external threats to the coherence of the national body. The national identity of the United States has been constructed in opposition to those categorized as ‘foreigners,’ ‘aliens,’ and ‘others’” (1587). Volpp mentions both “internal” and “external” threats: it seems that Western society’s desire to create a common enemy, a tactic used to promote unity, prevails regardless if ‘otherness’ is far away or right at home. The threat of terrorism, associated with difference in ethnicity and language, is one of America’s favorite common enemies. 70% of people surveyed in a 2017 U.S. Pew Research poll believed that language is “very important to being American” (Stokes). From this statistic, we can discern that the majority of Americans view commonality in language — sameness — as critical to American citizenship. So what becomes of those individuals categorized as “internal,” but still treated as an outgroup? Specifically, how are Muslim-American citizens impacted by this mindset?

Beyond statistics, we can see evidence of the policing of language in accounts of real people’s reactions to the use of Arabic. A New York high school, for example, faced intense scrutiny when it allowed students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in Arabic in order to celebrate foreign languages: BBC News reported that, “complaints were received from people who lost family in Afghanistan and from Jewish parents” as well as from students (BBC). The Pledge of Allegiance is a fundamentally American symbol — one that critics in this school system have decided discludes different languages, and thus, the people who speak them. While some may profess that America is a nation accepting of people from all backgrounds, the prevalence of English-language intimidation suggests otherwise. Further, this example draws
attention to the way language in itself — not only the specific words that we say — is a marker of citizenship or, what Volpp claims is its opposite, terrorism (1593).

Languages like Arabic and Urdu trigger a fear of terrorism in mainstream Americans, likely because of a literal lack of understanding. In 2016, a Texas town went into a frenzy when a banner displaying Arabic script was seen hanging from a building under construction. The initial reaction from citizens, who had no reason to assume anything unfavorable about the contents of the banner, was pure fear. According to The Washington Post, the town’s mayor had the following response in a community letter: “‘It has been brought to my attention that an Arabic flag has been hung from one of the upper floors of the Omni building. I am requesting that the flag be removed immediately, that we get an accurate translation of the flag.’” His tone reflects a sense of urgency: clearly, this was an incident that he felt posed a significant threat to his community, whether physical or ideological. It was later discovered that the banner was simply a Valentine’s day note reading, “Love for everyone.” The mayor’s attitude toward the incident is critical in forming public opinion about the Arabic language in this area — he possessed the power to create dialogue about jumping to conclusions or acceptance, but he chose not to.

This example of immediately associating Arabic with villainous intent showcases the power of one class of people to determine the reputation of an entire language. In an article in The Guardian, New York University Professor Sinan Antoon posits that, “Arabic, the language of Islam’s scripture and the one used by the terrorists, is deemed a language of forensic interest, if not outright criminalized” (Antoon). The juxtaposition of the terms “Islam’s scripture” and “terrorists” in this sentence is jarring, especially since I was raised to understand Arabic as a beautiful language representative of peace and understanding. This line is structured this way purposefully: a gap exists between Western society’s understanding of Arabic and Islam, and
Muslims’ understanding of the same thing. It seems ludicrous to “criminalize” entire languages — systems to represent the world, each one unique in its methods, yet equal in its ability to do so.

This “criminalization” of language is best exemplified in the airport security system, which perpetuates the fear associated with languages like Arabic and legitimizes discrimination against speakers of these languages. Volpp contends that, in today’s society, “One may formally be a U.S. citizen and formally entitled to various legal guarantees, but one will stand outside of the membership of kinship/solidarity that structures the U.S. nation” (1594). Once the U.S. discovers an excuse to push some group to the outskirts of adequacy, they remain there, with minimized rights. Airports, because they are an environment of all-around heightened stress and fear, provide a sort of ‘anything-goes’ zone. In 2016, YouTube personality Adam Saleh documented the moments following his removal from a Delta flight after he spoke in Arabic with his friend. In a recount of the event, Saleh described how he asked a passenger who claimed to fear for her safety, “Haven’t you heard a different language?” A man then insisted that Saleh and his friend be “chucked off the effing plane,” in Saleh’s words. In a video documenting the last moments of the altercation, fellow passengers are seen waving away Saleh and his friend as they are escorted off the flight. “This is 2016 … I cannot believe my eyes,” Saleh informs them. “I spoke a word in a different language, and you said you feel uncomfortable?” (Adam Saleh Vlogs). This account, as well as countless others, emphasize the casual nature of the Arabic conversations that cause removals from aircrafts. Naturally, we cannot blame people for what they do not understand. Not knowing makes people feel vulnerable, and feelings of vulnerability are heightened on planes, especially after 9/11. However, why must the default reaction to the unknown be anger and suspicion? Why not curiosity instead? Interestingly enough, airports and
airplanes are international hubs, where people should be coming from all different backgrounds. Yet, we expect everyone to speak English.

Some might argue that racial profiling in airports and even removals from airplanes are necessary to guard against terrorism — that public safety is more important than the comfort of certain travelers. However, the effect of racial profiling in airports is far more drastic than just inconvenience. Muslim or Muslim-presenting travelers suppress language, a key part of their identity, in order to assimilate in airport settings. In an Al-Jazeera article, Law Professor Khaled Beydoun says, “[There is a] process of negotiating an expression of personal identity for Arabs and Muslims before boarding a plane. Namely, which identity markers to conceal or cover up, and an intentional decision to avoid speaking Arabic - or any language resembling Arabic - while on a flight. [This] accommodates the irrational fears of passengers,” (Beydoun). The intentionality of language ‘passing’ (a term usually associated with people of color’s efforts to project white racial identities in public) is critical: not only does American society expect people to speak English, but this expectation seeps into the minds of foreign-language-speaking Americans, making them feel as though ‘erasing’ non-English languages should be common practice. Airports provide a specific location for such pressure to build.

Other languages vaguely similar to Arabic, or spoken by Muslims, are also subject to criminalization. Rafia Zakaria, a Pakistani American Muslim, describes her flying process as a process of assimilation: “A tote bag that has Urdu lettering and in which I usually carry my computer is a no. The keyboard overlay with Urdu letters that I use if I want to type in Urdu is also a no. I go through the call and message log on my cell phone and erase all the text messages that are in Urdu” (Zakaria). Zakaria’s personal account draws attention to the similarities between the experiences of Arabic speakers and Urdu speakers (many phrases — specifically
religious ones — are shared between the two languages). Further, Zakaria highlights the pressure she feels to hide certain pieces of her life and identity in order to quell others’ fears and ensure a smooth travel experience.

American society’s ‘criminalization’ of language, specifically in airports and airplanes, has considerable repercussions on identity retention. In a Huffington Post blog, Hasheemah Afaneh describes her experience with Arabic-speaking friends who told her, “‘Don’t speak Arabic here’” after she returned to the U.S. after time abroad (Afaneh). She learned the danger language could pose if she chose to express herself freely, saying, “However, I also felt like someone was trying to lock up part of my identity. I felt like the person who warned me to not speak Arabic in America was telling me to betray my Arabic tongue and everyone who taught me it” (Afaneh). For Afaneh, like for Anzaldúa, language and identity are intertwined. Nobody wants to be stripped of their identity: the experience of realizing that language identity is not compatible with life in the U.S. is extremely distressing. Eventually, this complicates America’s global position: in America, acceptance and diversity are easily thrown away in the name of ‘safety.’
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