A mental spaces analysis of religious identity discourse

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Religious identity is often viewed as a relatively stable construct, reflecting an individual's personal worldview. However, individuals living within modern multi-cultural societies often must engage in extensive reflection to orient themselves to faith traditions in ways that are coherent and personally relevant. Although some work has examined the connection between narratives of religious experience, identity and cognition (cf. Richardson, 2012; Richardson & Nagashima, 2018; Richardson & Mueller, 2019), the relationship between thinking and speaking about this identity is still a developing area of enquiry, with important consequences for how religious faith and practice are understood. This article presents a detailed analysis of an interview with a UK-based Jewish woman based on the mental spaces (Fauconnier, 1994) and conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) frameworks. The analysis shows how mental spaces and the relationship between elements within those spaces emerge over the course of a discourse event so as to constitute a personal account of religious identity. The concluding section furthermore discusses how within- and across-space contrast links are utilized, along with general processes of compression and decompression, to develop a blend that dynamically expresses the interviewee's religious identity as an integrated and coherent position lying between competing attractor states.

Keywords: mental spaces, blending, cognition, religion, identity, discourse analysis

1. Introduction and background

Personal identity emerges through the confluence of both cognitive and social factors. For this reason, the analysis of identity construction within discourse needs to account for both the online creation and integration of conceptual content within

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working memory as well as the structuring of content by more stable (but never completely static) knowledge structures, such as frames and domains. For example, an analysis of someone with a Jewish background talking about their religious identity will draw on familiar categories with varying levels of specificity, such as "religious", "family", "Jewish", "Orthodox Judaism", and "Progressive Judaism", while also exhibiting a dynamic oscillation as the individual reflects upon their context-specific relationship with and situational understanding of those categories in real time. Rigorous analyses of this intersection between dynamic fluidity and familiar shared knowledge in authentic conversation therefore has the potential to provide insights into how people understand themselves in diverse contexts in relation to people holding their own or other religious beliefs.

Historical, situational, interactional, and cognitive factors all influence how conceptual elements are organized and presented during discourse. In both thought and speech, individuals rely on entrenched social schemas, referred to in cognitive linguistics (CL) as frames (Fillmore & Baker, 2010) or idealized cognitive models (Lakoff, 1987). However, the multifaceted and dynamic nature of discourse means that the process of selection and foregrounding of particular aspects of these frames or models is always situated and fluid.

Complex Systems Theory has represented this fluidity as constant movement between particular attractor states across a figurative landscape that restructures itself as the context changes (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). A key argument of the theory is that it is not only the context that influences the discourse participant; the participation of an interlocutor also influences the context. Attractor states often appear in the form of cultural frames or models. These are entrenched to some degree, but they can never be truly static. In particular, frames are often only partially activated for ad hoc purposes within a segment of discourse, with endless variations in terms of backgrounding, foregrounding, and combination as a particular discourse stream unfolds in real time. The dynamic movement between attractor states does not therefore just affect the initial activation of specific frames by a participant, but also alters the ways in which the frames activated by other participants are picked up, passed over, or reactivated. The result of this in language use is a process of recontextualization (Semino et al., 2013) where descriptions of terms, beliefs, and expressions of identity can be adapted to fit new contexts and situations.

Cameron's (2015) Discourse Dynamics Approach (DDA) provides a powerful framework by building on Complex Systems Theory so as to trace the interaction of the varied cognitive and social factors that determine how people position themselves within a conversation. One advantage of the approach is its flexibility. Interaction can be analyzed at different levels, from the fine-grained analysis of moment-to-moment reactions to the entire trajectory of an individual discourse

event. While primarily used in the analysis of spoken discourse, DDA research has shared some of the same interests as earlier cognitive linguistic studies, to include investigations of figurative language and thought. For example, Cameron (2008) has applied it to metaphor, and she (2012) has also used it to investigate reconciliation discourse, showing how metaphorical language emerges and develops in conversation as speakers repeat, relexicalise, explicate, and contrast figurative elements.

The current analysis focuses on discourse concerning religious identity, a central theme within many people's personal sense of self. Researchers have pointed out that the sense of self or "life story", to include readily accessible autobiographical memories and self-relevant knowledge, is critical in maintaining a sense of personal meaning and purpose. It furthermore underlies people's ability to track current goals, monitor their conformity to social expectations, plan for the future, and accumulate practical knowledge (Conway & Jobson, 2012). As exemplified in the analysis presented in this paper, the representation of the self is dynamic and mutually constituted through interactions with the sociocultural world (Wang & Conway, 2004).

The current analysis is based on the mental spaces (Fauconnier, 1994) and conceptual blending (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Turner, 2014) frameworks. Mental spaces are "constructs distinct from linguistic structures" that are "built up in any discourse according to guidelines provided by the linguistic expressions" (Fauconnier, 1994, p.16). Linguistic expressions create new spaces, elaborate them by adding elements, and establish relationships between spaces. Expressions that establish a new space or refer back to previously established spaces are called *space builders*. These include a wide array of linguistic constructions to include prepositional phrases, adverbs (e.g., *really, theoretically*), and subject-verb combinations (e.g., *I believe, I dreamed*). In diagrams, mental spaces are shown as circles.

Mental space configurations partition information by relativizing it to various domains (Fauconnier, 1997). A new space is always set up in relation to a *parent* space that is in focus, as indicated by a dashed line. Discourse spaces are therefore organized into a lattice. During discourse, one of the spaces serves as the Base Space and one space (often the same one) serves as the Focus. The Base Space remains accessible as a possible starting point for a new construction. Mental spaces can be internally structured by frames and domains, and elements within spaces are linked through connectors. In addition to the Base Space and Focus Space, there is a Viewpoint Space, which serves as the vantage point or perspective when a new space is established.

After its initial development, the mental space framework was further elaborated to describe how content from spaces can be blended so as to elicit novel

conceptualizations (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Turner, 2014). The blending framework posits a minimal configuration of at least four spaces: a generic space, two input spaces, and a blended space. Within the configuration, the generic space contains structures common to the input spaces. Based on the common structure provided by the generic space (which essentially serves to provide initial sanction for a blending operation), elements within the input spaces are associated by various "vital relations" (e.g., Analogy, Cause-Effect, and Identity). These related elements are then selectively projected into the blended space. In many cases, the elements coming from the input spaces may be fused or may be projected from only one input space. Projections are governed by various optimality principles so that the resulting blend achieves a "human scale". A notable feature of blends is their ability to generate *emergent* meaning: the blended space is much more than a simple combination of the inputs, and it thus affords new insights and perspectives that were not available from the individual input spaces (Turner, 2014).

Blending processes can involve both *compression* and *decompression* (Turner, 2014). The role of the former is often emphasized and tends to be the focus of most blending research; however, *decompression* is also a critical process in many blends, particularly those related to the self and identity (Dancygier, 2004, 2005). Consider the Divided Self metaphor that occurs in sentences like *I had to force myself to get up this morning*. As Lakoff (1996) has noted, there is, in this metaphor, an asymmetry between the two parts of the self. One part is the more agent-like decision-making aspect of the self that realizes that remaining in bed will lead to being late to work. The other is the more passive aspect of the self as characterized by desire and habit. Viewed through blending theory, the unified self, through processes of decompression, comes to be construed as two separate input spaces that are then united in a blended space that incorporates elements from both inputs (e.g., the goal structure of the "responsible" part of the self that acts in opposition to the unmotivated feelings and inertia of the "irresponsible" part of the self). On one level, the paired processes of decompression and compression would appear to be redundant, but the resulting blend actually yields new insights about the self, with a sense of irony and humor.

The mental spaces that are created as inputs to blends are assembled from multiple sources. While some of the material may come from entrenched frames and scripts as well as encyclopedic knowledge, other material may be gathered from previous segments of discourse, environmental cues, or interaction with "material anchors" (Hutchins, 2005), for example, use of a calendar when determining the best date for an upcoming meeting. As will be shown in the discourse analyzed in this paper, much of the knowledge base for mental space construction and blends related to identity and the self also comes from autobiographical memories involving others, especially close family. Mental space construction is also

affected by cues from the discourse context, particularly in an interview setting where the topic progression is influenced by the interviewer's questions and feedback, which reflect the overall aims of the interview.

One final aspect of mental spaces that is especially important for this paper is that they need to be understood against the background of Complex Systems Theory. What this means is that our analysis will not just focus on movement between specific attractor states in a person's expression of their identity, but also on how an individual can step back from two or more trajectories towards different attractor states to develop a coherent position that is justifiable in terms of key life events and social relationships.

2. Method

The data for this article are taken from a larger collection of interviews done over six months as a part of the "Language and Religion in the Superdiverse City" project funded by a UK Arts and Humanities Council (AHRC) Leadership Fellowship, with ethical approval and oversight from the third author's previous institution. The larger project, which was concerned with religious identity as it relates to narratives of experiences with people of different faiths, had an explicit focus on religious groups that were involved in community activism and organizing. Whilst these conversations tended to focus specifically on religious identity and communities, given the remit of the project and how participants were recruited, there was no requirement for participants to be religious themselves, and indeed, participants from a range of different communities and backgrounds were subsequently interviewed.

The interviews for the project focused on three main lines of questions: the history and identity of the participants, the participants' own community, and how they viewed their own community's interactions with other communities. The interviews themselves lasted around thirty minutes and built on previous site visits that the third author, as the principal investigator, had done in different organizations where he had spoken either with the participants themselves, or with someone who was a direct contact with the participant. The participants were made aware of the focus of the study, were provided a participant information sheet, and were asked to sign a consent form that made clear the conversation would focus on issues of religious identity and belief, as well as the participant's community. The interviewer's (the third author) identity as a white, cis-gendered man, an immigrant to the UK with a US American accent and no disclosed religious belief was either known to the participants prior to the interview or became apparent in the first minutes of interaction. Overall, the third author interviewed

twenty-five people for the project, from a variety of different backgrounds, ethnicities, faiths, and ages. The interview discussed in this paper was with "Naomi" (pseudonym), a middle-aged Jewish woman living in the UK.

3. Analysis

As the interview begins, the interviewer asks Naomi to tell him a little bit about her family, her background, and where she grew up. In response, Naomi establishes an Upbringing Space, which serves as the initial Base Space during the interview. In elaborating this space, information conventionally associated with personal biographies emerges, to include place of residence and socio-economic class. She says,

(1) Okay. Um, I'm a Brummie. I, I was born and bred in Birmingham. Lived here till I was 18. Um, my family, um, very, uh, typical middle class, uh, academic family in… from around the University in Birmingham.

The mention of family and upbringing in the Base Space provides a natural segue to discussion of her nuclear family and the establishment of a Mother Space, with the role of one parent in the Base Space projected to the role of mother in the newly created space. She describes her mother as "Jewish but not particularly practicing" and adds that "She, herself had been a Jewish refugee whilst very young". In parallel with the Base Space, the Mother Space begins at one time (the time of Naomi's youth) but then shifts back to an earlier time (marked by past perfect) that again focuses on formative influences.

From this newly created space, an Aunt Space is set up, introduced by saying, "Um, her sister had gone a very different way and was very much involved in Jewish communities and Jewish, um, leadership." The Aunt Space can be accessed from either the Base Space or the Mother Space. The reference to the aunt as "her sister" shows that Naomi chooses the latter, so that the Mother Space serves as viewpoint. This maintains the focus on the contrast between her aunt and her mother, which is further emphasized by "but" as she goes back to elaborating on the Mother Space by saying, "Um, but my mum, my mum wasn't so much, although she did… Certainly when I was younger, joined the progressive synagogue."

The phrase "when I was younger" shows that the new space set up to discuss her mother's earlier synagogue attendance has Naomi's Upbringing Space as vantage point, with the implication that the facts are relevant due to the effect they had on Naomi. A bit later in the interview, a Father Space emerges as Naomi continues to talk about her upbringing.

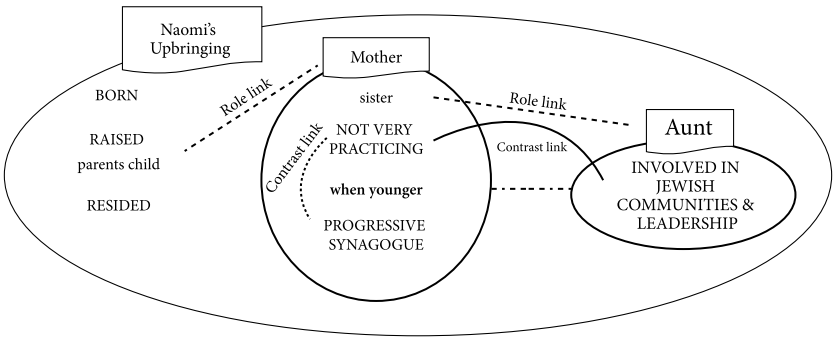

Figure 1. Naomi's Upbringing Space

(2) **N** My dad was an agnostic, but a really interested agnostic.

S Okay.

N So he was… He would learn Hebrew. He would understand the religion.

S Mhm.

N And when we started going to Sunday School at synagogue, he was the one who would usually get up and take us.

S Okay.

N Make breakfast. Um, and be there. So… And then when the… I think, with when my mum, things changed to some extent, when Rabbi Anna [pseudonym] became Rabbi when… 30 years? I can't remember.

The father is described as an agnostic who is, nevertheless, interested in religion and who would take Naomi and her family to Sunday School at the synagogue. In this sense, he challenges conventional cultural categories, a theme that reoccurs throughout the interview as a key characteristic of Naomi's conception and experience of being Jewish. Both her parents are described as expressing their Jewish identity in ways that would not be categorized as following typical norms for "practicing" Jewish people.

Naomi returns to the Mother Space at the end of the description of her father's engagement with religion and immediately builds a Later Mother Space through the space builder *when* in the phrase "when Rabbi Anna became rabbi". Naomi discusses how the rabbi was very actively engaged in helping with Naomi brother's bar mitzvah, and how this inspired her mother to become more engaged with her religious community. A little later in the interview, Naomi sets up a Grandmother and Grandfather Space, narrating key events in their lives, to include residence, marriage, work, and their reaction to the rise of the Nazis in Germany.

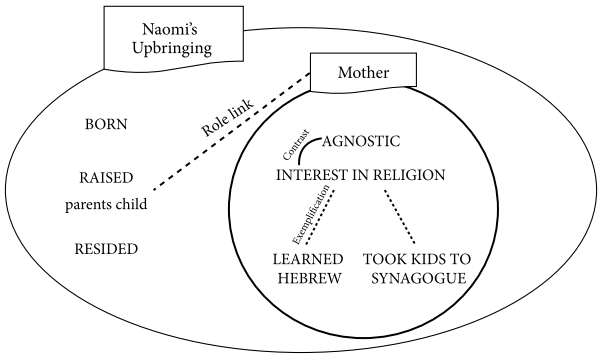

Figure 2. Naomi's Father Space

(3) **S** When you said she was a refugee, where was she? Where did she come from?

N Oh, okay. So, my mum's… I mean, I, I use my grandparents' refugee story quite a lot. It's, um… It fuels my campaigning. Um, so, my grandmother was from Lithuanian stock that settled in Sweden. My grandfather was, again, Eastern European stock, but had settled in Berlin. Um, they met. My grandmother moved to, to Berlin and so they were, um, working. They were, they were in Berlin before the war. And it was probably in 30… So my grandad was a doctor running his private practice with his own surgery, um, just outside of Berlin. And when the, um… When there was the Jewish boycott of businesses in 1933, they saw the writing on the wall.

Naomi describes how the rise of Nazism led to her grandparents' immigration to the UK and how the traumatic experience led to their dissociation from their former national identities saying, "They would not speak German, um, because they didn't want to be singled out" and "They were scared of, of that. How they thought they would disguise their Germanic…Swedish background with the accents they had kept till their deaths." Later in the conversation, Naomi is more equivocal, acknowledging that her own construal of her mother's sense of identity may not be completely accurate, saying "Um, you know, I am not entirely sure. So, I described my mother as a refugee, but I'm not sure she ever used that term… I described her as, um, Swedish. And she did, um, she did, you know, have a bit of a thing for Bjorn Borg, and, and such like. But I'm not sure how much it was something we put upon her." This description of their identity shows that Naomi's understanding of who they were and how they understood themselves may have been different and that, in some sense, her mother's identity was the result of it being "put upon her".

After this, the Grandfather Space is further elaborated, initially in describing her grandfather as someone who "had been very much an assimilated Berliner". However, she then discusses practices and affiliations that would appear to be incongruent with this construal.

(4) **N** Thinking that, you know, he was, you… I don't know. I think he did, as far as I, as far as I recall, he did, you know… He had a bar mitzvah and such like. It wasn't they were totally estranged from the Jewish religion, but I don't think he was particularly practicing. Although, I think, maybe we layer on what that means now…

S Hm.

N Compared to what it might have been then. Um, and I know, uh, my [inaudible], they were members of a synagogue in North London.

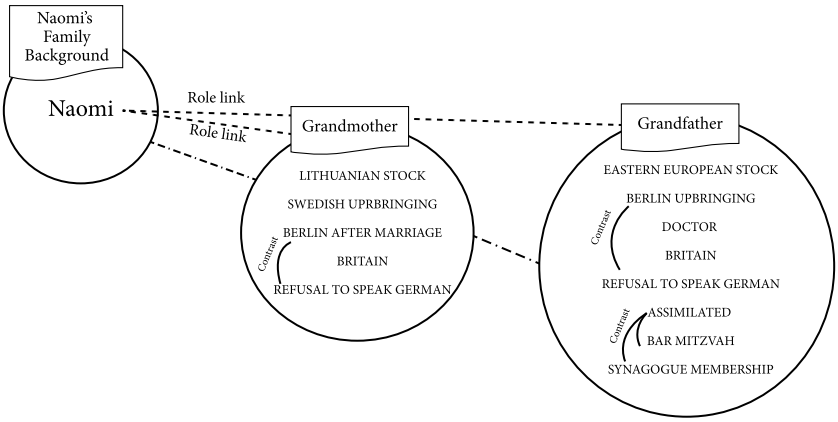

Figure 3. Naomi's Grandparents' Space

In all these cases where Naomi describes her family's background, prompted by the interviewer's questions, the trajectory of her talk continues to follow a similar path, drawing connections across past experiences, national identities, and religiosity, as these themes relate explicitly to the focus of the interview. With each new space that emerges in the talk, connections are drawn between the earlier and newly-created spaces. In this way, biographical facts relating to family members play a key role in the discourse as Naomi highlights contrast links between mental spaces. These often serve to highlight differences between family members or contrasts and changes related to each individual family member during various points in their life. The contrasts all serve the larger focus of the interview: clarification of Naomi's religious identity as it has formed within the context of diversity.

A Mother's Memories Space then emerges when Naomi says, "My mum didn't really talk about going to synagogue or learning in that way. She talked… Her principal memories was about doing Passover…" She does this by establishing Contrast links (established by the conjunction *whereas*) with corresponding points in the Aunt Space.

(5) **N** She, she talked a lot about doing Passover with this family, um, but, but less about other things. Whereas, my aunty very much talked about… I wanted to be a rabbi…

S Hm.

N At one point when there were no female rabbis.

S Hm.

N Um, and, and it was, sort of… For her, there was some rabbi that sparked off an interest that is lasting to this day. She is doing her bat mitzvah at the age of 83 which is, sort of, a tradition…

S Wow.

N In five weeks' time.

S Hm. Wow. Wow, that's amazing. And, so then what?

N She is. She's amazing.

In Naomi's remark about her aunt being "amazing", the tense shifts from past to present, marking the comment as an evaluation. These remarks show how her identity is being constructed throughout the discourse via evaluative comments, in this case, her aunt's efforts to maintain traditional Jewish practices. Naomi is then prompted to further elaborate the Upbringing Space (her own biography). Since the Aunt Space was recently activated, she does this by setting up points of contrast with her own nuclear family, who focused on education, and her aunt's family, who integrated more traditional religious practices into their daily lives.

(6) **S** What about then, uh, your relationship with, uh, with your, your Jewishness when… From, from, from your parents to, uh, to, to you? How was it?

N It was educational like many things in, in my academic household. There was, uh, the importance of education around Judaism rather than practice…

S Hm.

N And integration into life. And I've never thought about it in that way but I think it is absolutely, absolutely the case. So, whereas in my auntie's family, they did the education, but also it was integrated. So, you went there on… And there was always Friday nights. There was always prayers after meals.

Naomi then suggests that the lack of integrated religious practices within the context of family life led to her failure to establish a coherent identity when she was young, saying, "It was… That was very much integrated and I felt very out of place… In those spaces because I didn't feel I had enough of the education. And I certainly didn't have enough of the practice to feel… Totally comfortable, um, in those spaces, although I liked them. Um, so, in terms of, in terms of what it was like at home, to be honest, it was, it was Sunday School, um, was where my Judaism came from…" To illustrate this point, Naomi sets up a new space using the space builder "at 11".

(7) **N** Um, and I, you know, I remember, I remember at 11, Year 6, the head teacher or the teacher must have been going through the list of, of, of pupils to pass on to secondary schools or something. And he was going down and checking religion.

S Hm.

N And he came to me. And I can't remember if I denied being Jewish.

S Hm.

N But I certainly didn't like it being called out. And that was because I didn't feel that I knew enough to be able to be different.

S Okay.

N I didn't know what that meant enough to be able to withstand any questioning or whatever.

In this vignette about her childhood, Naomi attributes her own reluctance to identify as being Jewish when asked about her religious identity to the fact that she "didn't know enough". By doing so, she suggests a close relationship between religious practice and explicit knowledge of a religious tradition. Her concern that she might not "be able to withstand any questioning" suggests an understanding of religious identity that requires, in addition to identification with a particular religious community, the ability to articulate that identity to those outside of the community. In other words, religious identity is regarded as something that one must be able to account for when pressed to do so.

The Upbringing Space opens up a contrast between what she implies are inadequate features of her own religious upbringing with her attempts to inculcate positive attitudes and a more robust sense of Jewish identity in her children. The comparison is facilitated by the establishment of corresponding elements (e.g., age, school, synagogue attendance, the religious studies teacher) in her description of her daughter's upbringing.

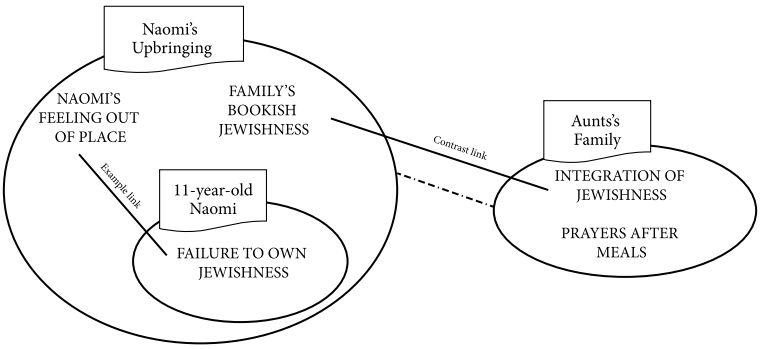

Figure 4. Cross-space contrasts between Naomi's nuclear family and her aunt's family

(8) **N** And so, and, and so, sort of, to some extent that meant with my kids, I'm more why are you… I did ensure that they knew they were Jewish. We talked about being Jewish. We did festivals, not, not systematically, but they, they, they knew, you know. And, and their grandparents, other grandparents were quite… Are quite, again, connected to synagogue. Um, so, there was, there was a, a level of wanting to make sure at least they knew what they were. But it was only when Jessie, my daughter, was 11 or something, she was, like, mum, I want to go to Sunday School.

S Hm.

N Which is now Saturday School. I want to… I, you know, I need to know. I need to know more. And I think it might have been because she was the only Jew in her class at school. And her religious, religious studies teacher started asking her questions, although I haven't verified that.

Evaluation is not explicit in the excerpt but is evident based on cultural schema that the interlocutors presumably activate during the conversation. For example, the idea that early formative experiences have a powerful influence on people during adulthood has been an important idea within Western psychology, as in Freud's thought and Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory, and has become a pervasive theme within popular media discourse. An entailment of this is that responsible parents reflect on the shortcomings of their upbringing so as to avoid making the same mistakes when raising their own children.

The discussion of the daughter provides a natural segue for discussion of her son, both in their twenties, and the development of contrasts between them. She says:

(9) They both, they both view themselves as Jewish, but they are, they, they are different, um, again. So, my son, Jacob, he's in Morocco this year. He talked about going and meeting the Jewish community, going to synagogue, getting involved in the festivals. None of that's actually happened. Um, he's, you know, he's talked about it. He's really interested, you know, to go to Jewish museums and such like, but… He certainly hasn't rejected it, but it's not something that is part of his every day.

The description of her son, while short, involves the establishment of multiple mental spaces. The Son's Intention Space contrasts with the account of what actually happened in the Moroccan Trip Reality Space. The son's somewhat irresolute devotion to his Jewishness is then contrasted with her daughter's more active involvement:

(10) Whereas my daughter…Has somehow, you know, managed to reach beyond the community. So, she's reached much further than the progressive community that I'm part of. I'm… I don't know the rest of the community in Birmingham, and I've, I've been mulling that over this week. But, um, Jess has reached out and has got friendships across a much broader range of, of Jewish organizations. Her Judaism is very much part of what she does every day.

As in earlier excerpts, this comparison provides an implicit positive evaluation of the daughter's greater interest in her Jewish identity. The contrast between the son and daughter is made more transparent through similar phrasing (i.e., "not something that is part of his every day" versus "very much part of what she does every day").

Toward the end of the interview, the interviewer urges Naomi to expand her discussion of herself by shifting to the present and asking, "How, how did that progression then, then, then happen over, over time to seeing yourself as, as religious or non-religious or…?" Naomi responds, "I think, possibly it's Jewish and non, non-Jewish rather than particularly religious. I would never say I'm a particularly religious person." In this response, she distances herself from identifying as religious by setting up two contrasting input spaces related to rejecting *and* (in place of the interviewer's use of *or*) embracing her Jewish identity. These input spaces are then filled out with contrasting descriptions of cultural elements related to the Jewish calendar and food, complete with overtly religious elements, such as synagogue attendance and adherence to religious prohibitions. In a more extended explanation, she says:

(11) **N** And I think there's a, there's a, there's a lot of Judaism that's about culture and about the, the course of the year, the… Was a very much repeating cycle of the year. It isn't… I think there is in all religion really.

S Right.

N Um, but how, how much of that you, you, sort of, recognize that. And how much you celebrate that and so on. So.. And also, with food.

S Hm.

N You can never get away from the concepts of food. Um, you know, we have cheesecake festival, you know.

S Right.

N Um, so, so I think there's, there's much you can… You can feel very strongly Jewish without necessarily being religious. And if we mean by religious, fervently believing, going to synagogue, following the rules, whatever those rules may be, um, you know, I'm not, not so good at that bit of it always.

S Hm.

N You know, I am on the synagogue committee. I am the link with [name of community charity] there. It doesn't mean I'm there all the time.

S Hm.

N Um, or, particularly a good Jew in terms of going along every, every Saturday, lighting the candles every Friday night and, and so on.

Naomi's references to being connected to the "concepts of food", feeling "very strongly Jewish without necessarily being religious", and not being so good at traditional expressions of belief all reinforce the (culturally) Jewish and (religiously) non-Jewish input spaces. However, the non-Jewish input space is also carefully hedged with the use of *possibly* above to qualify "non-Jewish", the use of *always* in "not so good at that bit of it always", and the addition of *particularly* in "it doesn't mean I'm … particularly a good Jew".

After setting up these contrasting mental spaces, Naomi then proceeds to integrate them as a single, coherent worldview. She begins by describing herself as a "cultural Jew", and then connects that through intensified PLANT (through the use of *deep root*) and CHAIN metaphors to the notion of Progressive Judaism, saying, "So, very much, a cultural Jew with a deep root, deep link to Progressive Judaism … is probably how you might describe me." The reference to Progressive Judaism reinforces the contrast with more traditional forms of being Jewish, while the preceding use of "cultural Jew" is crucial in highlighting a particular aspect of being a progressive Jew. Naomi then highlights another key aspect, *equality*, by deftly integrating one element of her daughter's way of being Jewish with her own.

(12) **N** But yes, I mean, she will… She'll… You know, she will lead… She'll lead services on a Friday night quite regularly…

S Okay.

N With a friend and so on. And she's got a… She's got incredibly strong principles about what her Judaism is.

S Mhm.

N And they're based upon… The youth movements…

S Mhm.

N That she's part of have a set of principles around quality, um, and so on.

S Yeah.

N And she's… She and… So, for her, the egalitarian nature…

S Hm.

N Of Progressive Judaism, it is so strong within her…

S Right.

N Um, which is very much at odds with some of the Orthodox synagogues.

N And one of the reasons, you know, I… We are integrated as a community into the Jewish community in Birmingham. But I said many times, that for us, equality is more important than following the strict 613 rules…

After highlighting some differences, Naomi ends the discussion of her daughter by highlighting similarities, especially their progressive egalitarian values (e.g., concern for animal rights, women's equality, and so on). The shift from Contrast to Similarity links between the Base Space and Daughter Space appears in the conversational repair in which Naomi replaces "I" with "we".

The interviewer then asks about Naomi's experiences with antisemitism. At this point, Naomi points out how she has started to do things that overtly make her recognizable as a Jew (and by implication susceptible to antisemitism). She says, "I don't, on the whole, particularly experience antisemitism. I mean, I've started, after a long time of not doing so, I started wearing a, a Star of David. Partly just to stop passing, um, and, and to be a bit more visible." The comment about "passing" (i.e., passing as someone who is not Jewish) and the fact that Naomi has recently made her Jewish identity more visible suggest an evaluation of "passing" as negative. This resonates with Naomi's previous discussion of her 11-year-old self (who did not publicly acknowledge her Jewish identity) and the contrasting example of how she raised her children to take pride in their Jewish identity.

Her statement that she typically does not experience prejudice is immediately followed by a counter-example, which is introduced by the space builder "I was remembering".

(13) **N** And it's not always visible, but, um… So, on, on the whole, I don't experience antisemitism, although there've been the odd… Hm, yeah, there's been the odd moment while we were talking. We were talking about, um, like, progressions at work. And we had a good session on it this week. And I was remembering, uh, the Christmas do where a black colleague was just like, when are you going home? Why are you here? When are you going home? What do you mean home? Israel.

S Wow.

N Um, and he wouldn't drop it. He wouldn't drop it. Um…

In this extract, Naomi's statements that she does not generally experience antisemitism opens up a space to then talk about an experience of antisemitism, which is presented as an "odd moment". Her experience in this case provides an example of something that could regularly happen, and the general absence of similar experiences in her life is proof that, on the whole, she views herself as not discriminated against.

The analysis shows how someone's online understanding and presentation of religious identity can emerge from a rich series of connections across one's personal biography to include family and close personal connections. Within the discourse, the construction and presentation of religious identity is largely achieved through the creation of spaces corresponding to various key individuals and memorable events. By drawing links within and across these spaces, Naomi subtly provides tentative evaluations of possible approaches to being Jewish, and by doing so, provides justification for her own choices regarding personal identity.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the interview revealed four features that are of particular interest. First, comparisons often served as implicit evaluations that reflected Naomi's values and identity. These were often realized through Similarity and Contrast links (usually the latter) across mental spaces associated with various members of Naomi's extended family, while also involving Contrast and Change links across mental spaces featuring the same person at different times. One interesting feature of the interview was the *sequencing* of mental spaces: Naomi showed a tendency to discuss female family members prior to their male counterparts (e.g., her mother before her father, her grandmother before her grandfather, and her daughter before her son).

The second notable feature is that the discourse featured highly patterned and consistent thematic elements that were not overtly mentioned within the discourse. The most salient theme was difference. As mental spaces were constructed, Naomi elaborated the spaces by highlighting incompatible elements within spaces or by pointing to Contrast links with elements from other spaces (often across time). Since the concept of personal identity implies some degree of coherence and integration, the disparate and conflicting elements of individual identities can be viewed as the outcome of *decompression*, a process often used to highlight conflicting aspects of the self or personal change (Dancygier, 2004, 2005; Lakoff, 1996). Some of the contrasts are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Opposing contrasts related to theme of difference in Naomi's discourse

Person/entity	Contrast
Naomi	Initially hiding Jewishness, later showing it Raised with bookish form of Judaism, but raised children differently "Jewish but not Jewish"
Mother	Initially lax in Jewish practices, later more involved
Father	Agnostic but learned Hebrew and brought kids to synagogue
Grandfather	Initially assimilated and German, later denied his German identity
Grandmother	Ambiguous national identities, e.g., Lithuanian, Swedish, British, etc.
Son	Intentions to be involved with Jews on trip, little actual involvement
Community	Declining in numbers, yet persevering

Difference appears to have emerged as a theme with all the family members (and even in relation to the local Jewish community) with expressions ranging from "agnostic" to Naomi's aunt and daughter, whose approach to Jewishness was described (albeit indirectly) as especially exemplary.

A third notable feature was that many of the patterned reoccurrences of themes within the discourse were not marked explicitly. As an example, consider the segments of the discourse that dealt with the theme of inauthenticity. Naomi discusses her inability to publicly acknowledge and explain her Jewish heritage when young. The same theme then reoccurs as she compares how she has encouraged her own children to be proud of their Jewish heritage and when she justifies her decision to wear the Star of David so as to not just be "passing". The layering of common thematic elements within discourse vividly demonstrates how any analysis must consider meaning as constructed throughout the entire discourse context. When considering highly coherent thematic elements within discourse on identity and the self, there are two possible interpretations. One is that speakers

are able to develop highly consistent thematic patterns as a conscious discourse strategy in spite of the time pressure of real-time conversations. Another possible explanation, derived from theoretical research on autobiographical memory, is that self-relevant memories are accessed and constructed in a highly strategic manner. In other words, just as our memories and experiences determine our sense of self, our sense of self also determines *what* is remembered and *how* we remember it (cf. Conway, 2005). In Naomi's case, her personal sense of her Jewish identity as an attempt to strike a balance between opposing possibilities has likely influenced the salience of past memories of family members that evoke that theme.

The fourth feature was that construction of identity within discourse took the form of a blend. As Dancygier (2005) points out, each "person's sense of a unique identity is…a result of various types of blends" with conceptual integration underlying "a coherent sense of self" (p. 102). In the dialogue, Naomi's discourse constructs such a coherent sense of self through processes of selection and evaluation. One feature of this process is that she is inevitably influenced by the categories, frames, and domains available in her culture, especially as these have shaped the identity of family and community members. Her discussion thus makes frequent reference to orthodox and progressive strands of Judaism, and to the possibilities of diluting, maintaining, or intensifying cultural and religious aspects of Jewish identity and the consequent experience of lesser or greater degrees of social visibility.

In her discourse, two distinct practices can be separated out that result in reduced visibility. The first relates to a reduction in levels of adherence to those traditional religious practices that may mark a person as belonging to a particular religious group. The second consists of an active embracing of ideas, such as equality, that may coincidentally exist in tension with the traditional religious worldview. In contrast to this, practices that increase her visibility include the embracing of cultural aspects of Judaism in the form of, for example, attending food festivals, participating in temple committees, and wearing the star of David. The blending operation in Naomi's construction of her identity is then an integration of particular aspects of an Assimilation Space, involving an intended or unintended reduction in social visibility, and an Adherence Space that may increase visibility.

According to Complex Systems Theory (see Richardson et al., 2021), engagement with these strands can be viewed as *attractor states* since they provide coherent construals of identity that have become embedded within the culture. The previously mentioned theme of difference reflects Naomi's struggle to articulate a singular religious identity that reflects her own experiences, values, and sense of self, developed through social interaction. At the same time, she resists

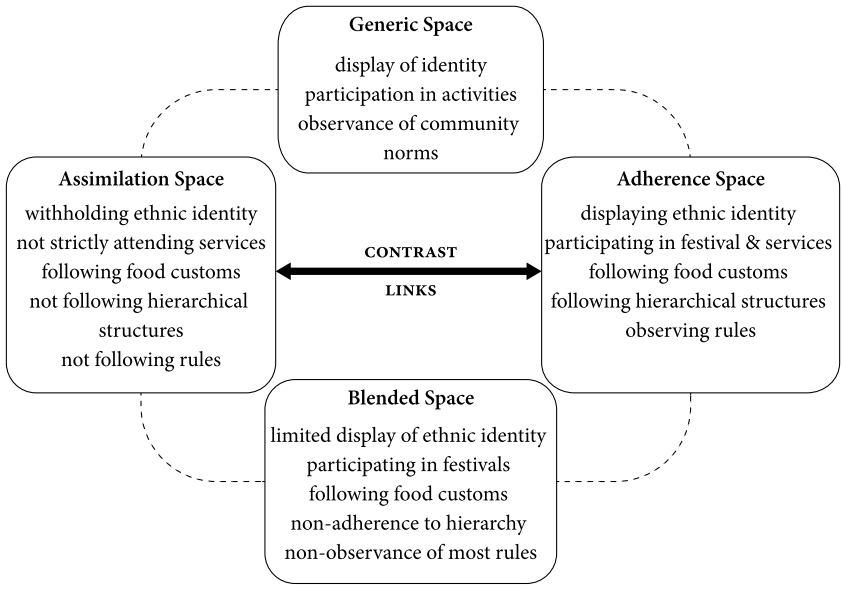

Figure 5. Naomi's religious identity as a blend between attractor states

being completely pulled into these attractor states as she maintains her own sense of agency when accounting for her identity. The description of blending as a discourse-related phenomenon put forth here thus fits in well with Hougaard's (2008) contention that "blending is something that *people do* in interaction" that "is accomplished *socially*", and is "*recognizable* to the *participants themselves*" (p. 250, italics in the original). From a discourse dynamics perspective, these blends emerge as a part of the discourse activity as people speak and think about themselves in relation to their histories, the topic of conversation, the physical time and context of the interaction, and their interlocutors. The result is a relatively stable description of an identity that is always emerging and developing.

By applying a mental spaces and blending approach to discourse on identity, analysts can avoid the fallacy of viewing linguistic expression as directly representing the world (e.g., the view characteristic of truth-conditional theories of meaning). In the mental spaces approach, language expressions merely have "meaning potential" and are used to evoke cognitive constructions, which then relate to the real world (Fauconnier, 1997, p. 36). As shown in the current analysis, mental spaces are built up and elaborated dynamically as discourse unfolds. The construction of Naomi's religious identity within the dialogue can be viewed as culminating in a loosely constructed blended space with the inputs coming from both entrenched cultural models (e.g., ICMs as orthodox, progressive, or assimilated Jew) and characteristics from her autobiographical memory, which includes knowledge of the lives of family members.

The view of identity construction within discourse described here is analogous in some ways to the distinction made in narratological research between the *text* (or *discourse*) and the *story* (Chatman, 1990). Whereas stories typically involve events that are sequenced both temporally and causally, fictional texts will deviate from this sequence in order to highlight and elaborate certain aspects of a story and establish specific viewpoints and construals of events. The same sorts of shifts can be seen in the dialogue with Naomi as she goes back and forth between mental spaces, further elaborating them as the need arises, and creating cross-space mappings, often for purposes of comparison and evaluation. These result in the dynamic construction of her Jewish identity, which resists, in many ways, the constant pull of the ready-made attractor states entrenched in the culture. Identity here is therefore not viewed as a fixed construct that is merely reported or described, but is, instead, seen as a dynamic construction that is often problematic, transient, and subject to constant negotiation as individuals seek to render their lives intelligible to themselves and to other members of their society.

There is considerable scope for future work in this area. In particular, future researchers should explore possible links, as well as differences, between the narratives that individuals construct as they form and express their identity and the narratives that appear in fiction. Numerous researchers (MacIntyre, 2007; Schechtman, 1996) have argued that the self is constituted as a narrative, whereas others (e.g., Strawson, 2004) have argued that there are fundamental differences between self-concepts and fictional narratives. The mental spaces and blending frameworks may provide useful input in this debate by drawing attention to common and differing features between spoken discourse related to identity and self, and similar content that appears in fictional narratives to include both novels and film.

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