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ABSTRACT

This study explored ineffability of religious experience and bilingualism: What is it like to navigate ineffability in describing religious experience with the ability to choose between two languages*?* We interviewed French/English bilinguals about their religious experiences following the administration of Hood's Mysticism Scale that presented items in English and French. We used it as means to prompt reflection on language use and self-articulation. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was used to address meaning making. A common narrative structure among participants was relating to God. Participants did so by the use of language and guarding their religious experiences. Participants mainly used English vocabulary when describing their Relating to God experiences. Exceptions to this pattern, however, illuminated the diverse strategies by which bilinguals make meaning of ineffable experiences through situationally grounded language-use. Broader implications about the efficacy of language to shape experience are discussed in contrast to language being a mode of describing pre-linguistic experience.

INTRODUCTION

The individual experience, at first thought, seems as simple as breathing -- something that just happens. An experience, however, has complex processes underlying it that often happen without a person's awareness. Defined as a "subject's conscious perception of reality," the complexity of experience comes when the "subject makes sense of, actively responds to, and undergoes [that] reality" (Vroom, 1992, p. 6). Two aspects of experience emerge in this definition: an embodied experience, as well as the interpretation of said experience. The current study will look primarily at religious and spiritual experiences (used interchangeably) and their interpretation, and will also consider the role of ineffability in such experiences. We will do so by (1) further defining religious experience according to the literature, which looks at its unique transcendent quality; (2) delving into the process of interpretation and its link to the concept of ineffability; (3) exploring the need for narrative in making meaning of such experiences; and (4) looking at the role of language and the case of bilingualism for investigating our research question. The question under exploration is the following: *how is one's ability to make meaning of his or her religious experience influenced by the ability to choose between two languages?*

Religious Experience

William James (1902), a large proponent in studying the psychology of religion, argued that religious experiences are not discreet experiential entities in and of themselves. If these religious experiences were completely different, they would consist of a unique set of interpretations that could only be learned and recognized in the living of spiritual experiences. James stated, however, that though often deep and sometimes hard to describe, these experiences involve the same emotions and processes of interpretation present in other experiences, but are associated with a religious object or concept (as seen in Taves, 2009). Whether religious or not, all experiences are connected to a person's body. A person's biology is inseparable from his or her experiences in the world and is an important perspective to consider when attempting to interpret and describe these experiences (du Toit, 2014). Even if we experience a feeling of transcendence or an out-of-body feeling, this would have no frame of reference if it was not connected to the body (Cromby, 2015).

Although religious and everyday experiences are similar in their embodied nature, what differentiates them is their content; what they are about. Religious experiences are associated with specific ideas or concepts, and James posed that religious experiences involve similar content and themes. That is, these experiences begin with discontent, and in some way, this discontent is resolved (as seen in Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). As we “respond to the divine” through our religious experiences and their meanings, James argued that this is what constitutes the resolution of discontent (Hood et al., 2009, p. 291). This general equation may work for many religious experiences, but Hay (2001) has argued that this overall conceptual formation can, in fact, be detrimental. It is important to understand that there can be multiple interpretations from a multitude of cultural communities regarding religious experiences, a point that we will discuss in a later section. Hay argued that what undergirds discontent is the element of transcendence, which is common throughout many societies when speaking to spiritual experiences. Terms such as “transcendence” and “numinous” are appropriately used when describing the general content of religious experiences, and they suggest experiencing something of a greater reality (i.e. awareness and feeling of communion with a holy being; see also Paloutzian & Park, 2005). Transcendence is gaining knowledge and experience of God through the body (Opas & Haapalainen, 2016). This is the content that distinguishes spiritual experiences from everyday experiences and what sets the stage for our exploration of how individuals navigate making sense of such experiences in light of this transcendent nature.

Interpretation

With the distinction of religious experience made, we consider the second component to the previously mentioned definition of experience: interpretation. Interpretation is inherently connected to how one makes meaning of his or her experiences, and how he or she actively responds to it (Vroom, 1992). In the case of religious experiences, however, the presence of numinous or transcendent content strains this process of interpretation (Bruner, 1990). When an individual struggles to find the words for a meaningful interpretation of a personal spiritual experience, he or she is faced with the concept of *ineffability*. This term, coined by William James, refers to mystical or religious experience that resists verbal description and poses a problem for those who wish to relay their experiences as meaningful to others (as seen in Taves, 2009; Knepper, 2009). In sum, ineffability is the feeling of insufficiency at attempting to describe one's experience, a feeling particularly present with spiritual experiences. Further, when individuals try to make sense of the ineffable, they are faced with a problem of interpretation, and often do not know how to resolve this phenomena with the language available to them (James, 1902; Bruner, 1990).

This very problem is at the centre of our research question. We hope to investigate how interpretation, or the process of meaning-making, is influenced by the language accessible to our participants. Inherent in the discussion of meaning-making, however, is the importance of narrative, especially its prevalence in the ways one understands his or her own stories, and how he or she relays those stories to others. The next section, therefore, will explore how narrative constitutes a person's ability to interpret his or her experience in a meaningful way.

Narrative

In the body of literature within psychology of religion, religious experience is almost universally studied using narrative (Wildman & McNamara, 2010). Yamane (2000) claimed that narrative is the "right tool for the job" to study religious experience because it is impossible to analyze the in-the-moment experience that commonly occurs for every person, and looking at retrospective accounts is the next best option (p. 172).

Jerome Bruner's (1987) work is foundational in explaining the concept of narrative, as he was among the first modern psychologists to attend to the comprehensive study of how an individual uses storytelling to interpret and make-meaning of his or her own lived experiences. Bruner suggested that there is no better way to capture "lived time" as in a narrative (p. 12). The reason for this claim is that both life and mind, including experience, are constructed via storytelling.

An implication of the foregoing is that stories are not just stored as historical accounts in one's mind. They are interpersonally constructed because they are shaped by an understanding which is informed in culture. A community's conventions and vocabulary will provide the possible narratives which will be "available for describing the course of a life" (Bruner, 1987, p. 15). A framework for interpreting experience, therefore, is used in a way that adheres to what a community has deemed conceivable. In effect, what seems like one's *personal* autobiography will be largely constituted by collective conscience constructed in common discourse. Influenced by what is available to him or her in the surrounding culture, an individual will construct meaning out of his or her experiences. As such, "narratives are a primary linguistic vehicle through which people grasp meaning of lived experiences in ongoing stories […] and which guide the interpretation of those experiences" (Yamane, 2000, p. 183). Yamane further argued that the meaning of a religious experience can only be established through the process of articulation in narrative. It is in the reflection and expression of an experience in a discussion context that it is made meaningful. We hope, therefore, to look at the way that our participants will narrate their religious experiences and discover the important elements which have informed their interpretations.

Moreover, Bruner (1990) suggested that meaning can only be found in culturally symbolic systems, and in an individual's participation in such systems. He termed culturally symbolic systems 'folk psychology.' It is an understanding within each specific culture about the way "human beings 'tick', what our own and other minds are like, what one can expect situated action to be like, what are possible modes of life… and so on" (p. 35). A folk psychology is practiced as people develop in the social world in order to "organize their experience in [it], knowledge about [it], and transactions with [it]" (p. 35). Ordinary experiences on their own require only this folk psychology to be understood. If people are acting in line with the culturally understood ways of life and interactions, no further explanation is needed. Once an exceptional experience surfaces in a social interaction, however, people are compelled to provide an interpretation that justifies why such a manifestation is legitimate and, thus, meaningful. It is in providing a comprehensible explanation, which Bruner explains is done by way of narrative, that a link can be made between the exceptional and the mundane.

In order to justify an experience as meaningful, one must negotiate its meaning with other members participating in a shared folk psychology. This process of "negotiating meaning" reveals the socially interdependent quality of a person's 'intentional states' (as in beliefs, desires, and values) and the surrounding culture (Bruner, 1990, p. 47). Without the socially taught ways of describing experience (i.e. folk narratives), an individual would be lost in an array of perceived information without a structure to make sense of it all. On the other hand, without the embodiment of an individual's intentional states - continued social discourse about that which an individual experiences - these concepts would soon die out. This is seen in the renegotiating of meaning, when a cultural transition entails new communally agreed-upon meanings of exceptional experiences. As such, a person who is exposed to a cultural discourse of religious experience will be “predisposed to a particular narrativization” according to the community’s folk psychology, like the use of religious words or expressions, as well as sacred narratives (Yamane, 2000, p. 185). The evidence of such types of narratives implies that groups or communities interpret and express experience differently, as if in each their own language. The concept of varied narratives and folk psychologies in separate languages is foundational to our research question, as we will be looking at religious bilinguals and the influence that two languages (specifically French and English) has on participants’ meaning-making processes. We will first, however, establish the link between bilingualism and this notion of folk psychology.

Kinds of Language

Folk psychology entails language, and specific cultural symbols, that make experience sensible to individuals and, thus, meaningful (du Toit, 2014; Bruner, 1990). Experiences are inconceivable without a relational background to make them sensible - that is, they cannot exist without other things or people influencing them (du Toit, 2014). We see that experiences are closely linked to the concept of folk psychology, in that both are interdependent with culture and language.

People participate in different kinds of language when they communicate, which range from *national language* to *speech genres*. National language is ‘language’ as it is commonly understood; it is the dialect of a nation or people group, which is widely used to communicate with others of that nation, such as English or French (Bahktin, 1986). Speech genres, on the other hand, are subtypes of language within or across a national language, which include cultural narratives of how to describe and make meaning of experiences (Bahktin, 1986). Bakhtin continued to describe speech genres as language of which the lexicon and grammar are not learned through books or school, but rather through the everyday interactions with others, seeing the ways that words are used. As someone shifts from speech genre to speech genre, the cultural folk psychologies shift in tandem. We ask then, what occurs when an individual who attempts to make meaning can do so with two different *dialects*? In the case of bilingualism, not only does one have two different *national languages* to choose from, but also multiple folk psychological narratives available to interpret one's ineffable experience (Bruner, 1990; Bakhtin, 1986). This discussion leads to the manner in which bilingual people enact this ability to choose between languages to describe their experiences -- that is, code switching.

Code switching is a phenomenon in which those who are multilingual change and shift their language across social situations. As Benjamin Bailey (2001) suggested, switching between two dialects shifts the social roles and context of which the person is referring. Since narratives are interdependent with language, switching influences the way one goes about interpreting his or her story. Bailey (2001) stated that "alternative frameworks for interpreting experiences and constructing social reality that are associated with a code can thus be invoked by a switch into that code" (p. 239). This has implications for our research purposes in that the ability to switch between two dialects offers alternative folk psychologies with which to make meaning, influencing the way a person interprets his or her religious experience. The 'gaps' in interpretation caused by ineffability, therefore, may be diminished, and is what we wish to explore.

We see a naturally occurring case study for such an endeavor in the realm of bilingualism, where one chooses between two languages in an attempt to 'accurately' describe and interpret one's experiences. Bilingualism is what we will use to explore this phenomenon of ineffability of religious experiences as we research the following question: *What is it like to* *navigate ineffability in describing religious experience with the ability to choose between two languages?*

Methods

Participants

Our sample will be composed of French/English-speaking bilinguals who have had at least one ineffable religious experience. Our sample will include 10 to 12 bilingual individuals over the age of 18 who identify themselves as Christian, broadly conceived. We will recruit participants through convenience sampling, as the target population is scarce in the geographical area of study (French and English bilinguals living in Calgary with a Christian background). Through personal connections and advertising in relevant locations (e.g. French speaking churches; see Appendix C), we hope to find participants who fit our desired criteria. If they communicate interest, we will set up a meeting for an interview, during which we will gain their informed consent. The consent form will include (1) the time commitment required for the study (approximately one hour), (2) the topics that will be discussed in the interview, (3) the potential risks, such as sharing personal information regarding a religious experience, and benefits, such as gaining more insight and meaning into their own personal narrative through telling their story, and (4) the voluntary nature of their participation and the option to withdraw from the study at any point (see Appendix B). No incentives will be offered.

Procedure

There will be three phases to the interview process.

Phase I.

We will gain consent from participants and subsequently turn on the audio recorder. All verbal or written questions and instructions will be communicated consecutively in English and

French, alternating which comes first for every question. This strategy encourages participants to respond in the language of their choosing, providing the option for different articulation and interpretation of their answers. The first question (see Appendix A) will prompt participants to recall a religious experience and to describe it verbally to the researchers. We will also ask them to share any thoughts about their ability to describe the experience. This short-answer question intends to bring to mind a religious experience in which he or she will refer to when responding in the following phases, as well as provide us insight on the concept of ineffability in practice.

Phase II.

We will then read the instructions to a brief questionnaire, Hood's (1975) Mysticism Scale (M-Scale, see Appendix A), and proceed to read the questionnaire statements out loud, asking for the participants' responses. With each response, the researchers will record the answers. To help the participants remember the scale to use for responding, we will give them a printed sheet with the instructions of the M-Scale for reference. There will be 16 items from the M-Scale translated into French (half of the 32-item total) with two items in each language from all the eight subscales. Both languages are distributed throughout the entire questionnaire. The statements from the M-Scale offer the participants examples of ways to explain a powerful religious experience in two languages, as well as prompts for them to consider their ability to choose what language they would explain their experiences.

This questionnaire will be referred to during the semi-structured interview portion once it is completed. This questionnaire was designed to measure mystical experience, specifically a person's openness to and intensity of experience. The M-Scale, however, will be mainly used as a prompt for later questions and is not a measuring tool. We will then hold a semi-structured interview with each participant. We will have pre-written, open-ended guiding questions (see

Appendix A) as starting points for discussion. We will first ask participants whether they prefer to have the interview in French or in English and read the questions from that language. We will follow-up these questions with probes and cues to prompt further explanation or new directions of conversation which could be relevant to our research question. We will use the following probes (see Adler & Proctor, 2014 for details):

- clarification questions
- paraphrasing
- elaboration questions
- non-verbal prompts (silent nodding)

The researchers will then ask background questions (see Appendix A), which will provide demographic insight with specific interest to their religious background and language fluency. This will also be recorded on a separate sheet by the researchers.

Phase III.

Once the interview process is complete, we will debrief participants by further explaining the purpose of our study (see Appendix A). We will inform them that the short answer questions from Phase I's intend to draw attention to ineffability in their attempt to explain a religious experience. As well, we will inform them that the M-Scale intends to highlight the role of language preference in describing their religious experiences. We will then ask if they have further thoughts on the matter. We will ask once more for their consent in the study and whether we may still use the data we collected from their interviews for our study. If they approve, we will end the interview, turn off the recorder, and store the data in a locked, secure location, with consent forms separate from the data. If they do not consent, we will delete the recording and destroy any written records.

To ensure confidentiality, the researchers will not speak about the study outside of the interview process, particularly as some of the participants will be known by the researchers. Participants will be encouraged to do the same. The confidentiality of the participants is clearly laid out within the consent form of which all participants are required to sign before they participate in the study (Appendix B). They will be informed that their information will not be shared or repeated outside of the data collection process, and that the data collected from their interviews will not contain any personal identifiers. As well, all of the communicated data shared at the Ambrose Research Conference will be in aggregate form. All the information and quotes used in the presentation of the data will be confidential. The data that is collected, along with audio files on a secured USB drive, will be separate from the consent forms and securely stored as such in Dr. Cresswell's office.

Analysis

We, the Principle Investigators (PIs), plan to carry out an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) on the transcribed interviews (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). We propose IPA is the best way to explore participants’ ability to make meaning of their ineffable experiences, as influenced by bilingualism, because it is concerned with taking a detailed look at each participant’s experience. Although each of our participants will interpret and make meaning of their ineffable experiences in various ways, the process of IPA seeks to find common themes and concepts that emerge and, therefore, will provide the foundation for our final presentation of the data (Smith et al., 2009). Using IPA affirms the goal of our research - that is, looking at individual experience in-depth to see how one makes meaning through one’s speech.

Further, Smith et al. (2009) state that snowballing is a very effective method of recruitment, as the number of participants needed is less in IPA than in other forms of analysis.

The process of snowballing occurs when previous participants recommend other possible participants to the researchers, and more participants join the study. Our goal is to have 10-12 participants in total, and there are a few reasons for this small sample size. Firstly, IPA is focused on individual experience, and is about quality over quantity. Rather than gathering great amounts of data from many participants for quantitative data, we wish to gather small amounts of rich data in order to find common themes and concepts throughout each individual's narrative as well as across narratives. Secondly, as this is a research project for an undergraduate course (PS 495: Research in Psychology), we must have the study completed before the end of April 2019, thus we are limited on time to carry out the research project. Overall, the participants will be chosen based on their ability to "grant us [researchers] access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 49). As such, English and French speaking Christians who have religious experience narratives will be chosen for this study through the snowballing recruitment method.

The first step of the analysis process in IPA is transcription, since IPA requires that all interviews are transcribed (Smith et al., 2009). The answers from the M-Scale questionnaire will be entered into a secure excel document corresponding with the participant's coded number, and will only be accessible to the PIs. For the interview, the voice recordings of the participants will be transcribed and will be labeled with the same codes given to each participant.

After the transcription is done, we will begin to read over and listen to the interviews, orienting ourselves with the content of each interview and transcript. Open coding of the transcripts will be the next step. We will note words, phrases, or concepts of importance in each of the participants' narratives as we transcribe the interviews, and explore the ways they may (or may not) speak to our research question (Smith et al., 2009). Further, we will note how the participants speak about their religious experiences, and how they switch between French and English (Smith et al., 2009). Next, we will write down comments in each transcription based on three different lenses: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual (Smith et al., 2009).

Descriptive comments are based on the content found within the transcript. It is the first step, as it requires us to take everything at “face-value” within each participant’s transcript, and further understand what the main defining factors are that are found within each person’s experience (Smith et al., 2009, p. 84). We will go through the transcripts and highlight specific words or phrases that may add more meaning to the story than originally thought. Linguistic comments will involve making notes about the specific language that is used by each participant. This includes commenting on which language the participant uses in each case, and will help us recognize patterns of the influence of bilingualism. Finally, conceptual comments will be made as we begin to move from the participant’s explicit meaning of things spoken (e.g. words spoken in English versus French) and look at the larger theme the participant speaks to in his or her transcript (e.g. *when* they decide to switch from French to English or vice versa; Smith et al., 2009).

After we do the initial open coding, the thematic coding will take place (Smith et al., 2009). Open coding is only concerned with content of a transcript, whereas thematic coding looks at overarching themes and ideas that present themselves multiple times within each participant’s interview, which requires the researchers’ interpretation. Themes that emerge will then be compared with themes from other transcripts to see if there is any overlap or similarities among the experiences of the participants (e.g. French vs. English Interviews). We will use the information we gather in the open coding and notation processes to explore further these overarching themes (Smith et al., 2009). For example, we will look for common narratives or common ways of making meaning between the participants that was not obvious in the initial open coding process. We will ask questions such as:

- Do we see specific folk psychologies used?
- How many different folk psychologies does each participant seem to use?
- When do they switch dialects?

In thematic coding, we will interpret the experiences of the participants, while also respecting the participants' experiences at face-value. For example, a study done by Williamson, Pollio and Hood (2000) conducted this type of analysis on people who participate in religious serpent handling. The researchers went through the interviews and conducted the thematic analysis. They found five main themes that emerged through all of the narratives. These themes were the researchers' interpretation of key elements in the participants' experiences. Similarly, we see IPA used in many other cases to find main themes that inform the psychological domain (as seen in Hinds, 2011; Connerty, Roberts, & Sved Williams, 2016). We will bring common themes out of the text to help inform our research question.

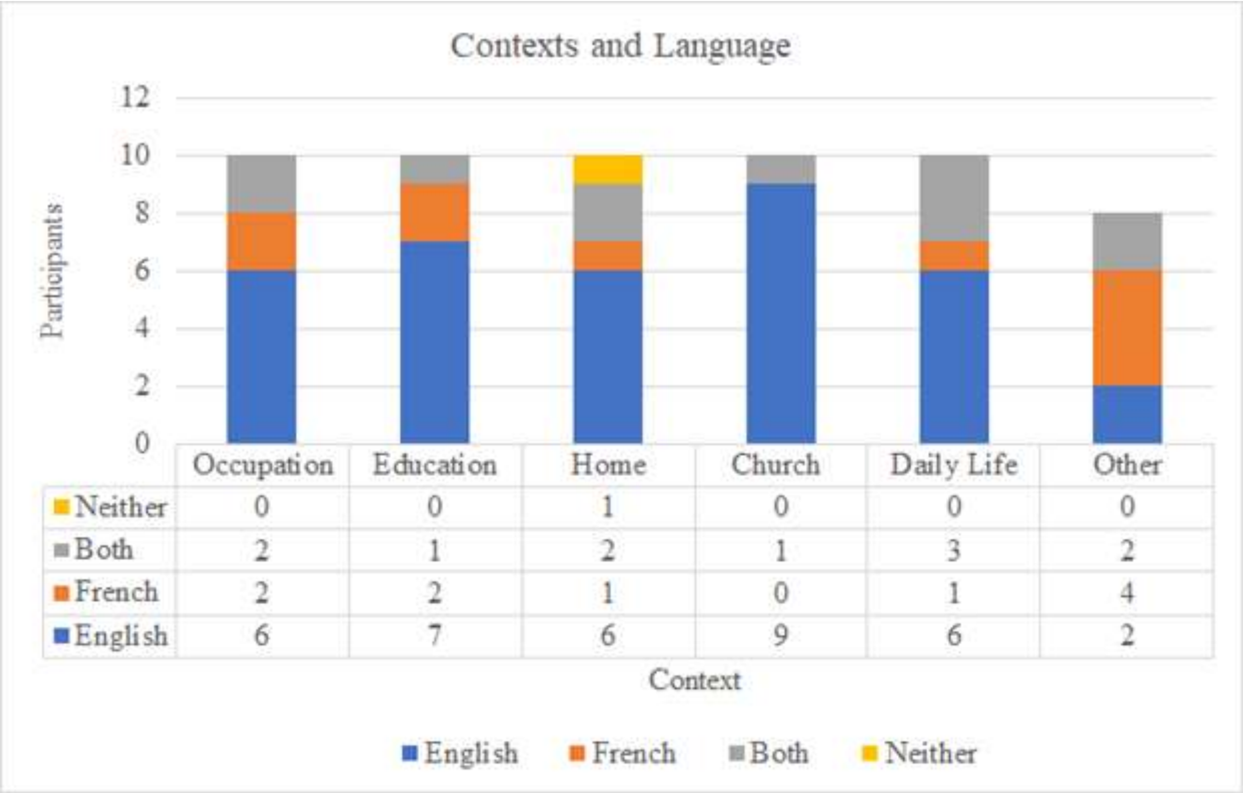
Further, the participants' background information will be used to shed light on potential reasons for their experiences and responses. We hope to use specific examples and key themes seen in the interviews to inform us of the role of bilingualism in the way participants relay religious experiences in this sample. All of the information given to us by the participants is important. We plan to use both the answers of the M-Scale and the interview questions in a comparative way to see how, together, they inform our research question. We will look to the French and English scores to see if there are any patterns among the questionnaire and the participants' verbal interviews. This is important to observe, as it will inform how each participant seems to make meaning of his or her experience with both languages available and will inform the rest of the analysis process.

Researchers who use IPA are likely to have their study deviate from the original research question and are encouraged to have an open research question (Smith et al., 2009). In light of this, it is crucial that we list our biases as researchers and acknowledge the ways in which these may influence the research process. We, the PIs, are Caucasian females in our early 20s and both are practicing protestant Christians. With this in mind, we may discover that our concept of religious experience may differ from those who are of another Christian background (e.g. Catholic). However, we wish to encourage as many people from different areas of the Christian tradition to inform this research project, as we believe this will provide greater insight and a less biased view. We will present the results at the Ambrose Research Conference (ARC) and will receive feedback from many people from diverse backgrounds. This feedback will help point out where our biases may have shown through in our research and give us information on how to change these biases in future research. We may find that our research question takes a different form throughout our study, which will be an important aspect to note in the presentation of our results. Overall, the narratives of the participants' religious or spiritual experiences inform how they make meaning of these experiences, and IPA allows us, the PIs, to take this meaning-making and observe it through an interpretive lens by finding important themes (Yamane, 2000; Smith et al., 2009).

RESULTS

Participants

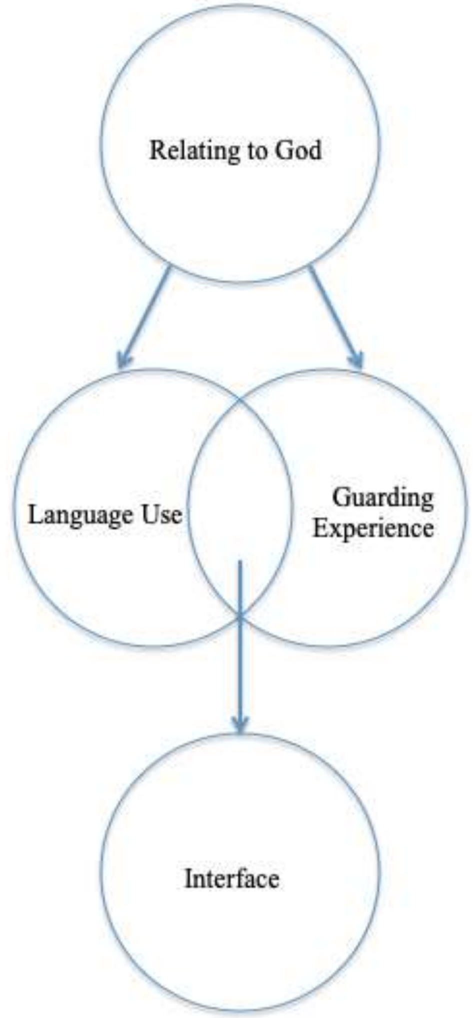
Our results came from 10 participants whose ages ranged from 19 - 60 (M= 28). However, seven out of ten participants were undergraduate students age 19-23. We recruited most of our participants through personal connections, and received two participants through the snowballing recruitment method. Out of the ten participants, seven were female and three were male, and all participants came from a Protestant background. After the large portion of the interview was completed, we asked participants to rate their 'religiosity' on a scale of one through ten - ten being extremely religious, and one being not at all religious. The average score from our participants was 7.6, with one participant not answering the question. The one participant chose not to answer because he did not wish to define himself as religious. Looking at occupation, education, home life, church, daily life and other contexts, we recorded whether the participants used French, English, both or other in these contexts. We saw a range of answers, but the majority of our participants stated that English was their main language. Therefore, this seemed to impact the bilingual adeptness of our participants, as nine out ten participants said that they attended church in English. The language use of each participant in each context is shown below in Figure 1.



	Occupation	Education	Home	Church	Daily Life	Other
Neither	0	0	1	0	0	0
Both	2	1	2	1	3	2
French	2	2	1	0	1	4
English	6	7	6	9	6	2

Figure 1. Language contexts exhibited by each participant. The "other" column indicating people answering if they have other contexts in which they use French or English.

When it came to the questionnaire, then, these language contexts also impacted their ability to understand and answer the questions asked in French. We will further explore how this was exhibited as well as how language influenced the meaning-making process in the following results. As IPA addresses how individuals structure their experience, we outline the common narrative structure our participants used to tell and interpret their experiences and organize the rest of this paper in the following manner:



As represented in the diagram, the ultimate goal or *telos* of participants' experiences was Relating to God (RTG), a concept we will firstly define in the following section. RTG prompted discussions about Language Use (LU) in interpreting experience, as well as the need to Guard Experience (GE) in the retelling process, two themes we will subsequently present in our results. Lastly, we will discuss the implications of these results, which entails how LU and GE interface, particularly in light of participants' bilingualism

Relating to God

As discussed in our review of the literature, the use of narrative is one of the best ways to create meaning of one's religious experience (Yamane, 2000). The use of narrative allows for a structured account of experience as a means to make sense of that experience. Further, in accounting for oneself, an individual justifies the meaning and sanctity of his or her story.

As pertains to this study, our participants were asked to give an account of their religious experiences and, accordingly, each provided a narrative structure of experience. Interestingly, however, all of the participants attempted to achieve a common *telos* in the sharing of their stories. While meaning different things for each person, the narrative structure used to interpret experience collectively relied on the idea that God is a relatable being. As a commonly held Christian narrative, the idea of a 'relational God' was thoroughly present in the ways participants spoke about their faith and their religious experiences. For example, one participant claimed that her sense of connection with God was a key element of her story, which was missing from the questionnaire:

> "I don't think any of the questions actually spoke about like, the higher power reaching down (...) I can't remember any questions where it was like: 'have you ever felt like there was something bigger than you that cared about you or reached down to you' (…) I think that would be very central to my experiences" (IE004).

As well, many participants spoke to spiritual practices, such as prayer and reading the Bible, as means of relating to God. Such practices reflect this common narrative that God hears us and that we can connect to God through Scripture, which are qualities of a relational being. For some participants, prayer was a particularly key component to their religious experience. One participant stated that "the prayer was answered… in such a tangible, immediate way," (IE004) and another participant experienced a sense of deep peace after she knew that everyone was "praying at the same time" for protection (IE008). Others told of times when they asked things of God, implying that they expected a response: "I prayed for [your presence] God, (…) these people didn’t even pray for it, [but] they got your presence (…) I want your presence!” (IE002); “Why God? Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?” (IE005). We see through these examples that prayer in and of itself is a way that people relate to God. It is a way of response, petition, and thanksgiving that many of our participants saw as crucial to their deepest religious experiences.

In light of the *telos* to participants stories being RTG, it influenced every theme which surfaced in our interviews. Due to the relational nature of connecting to the Divine, participants sought to preserve the meaning of these especially sentimental experiences (GE). Moreover, participants’ attempts to interpret their stories prompted resourceful language use that was either successful or lacking (LU). Therefore, not only did RTG prompt participants’ felt need to communicate their experiences in a meaningful way, as mediated by their religious folk psychologies, but the transcendent nature of religious experiences also elicited the problem of ineffability for participants.

To reiterate the literature, ineffability (the inability to describe) strains the process of interpretation of spiritual experiences, leaving one at a loss for words in his or her attempt to make meaning. Participants clearly spoke to their encounters with ineffability, often depicted as lacking the words to describe experience. “I have had so many experiences where I’m like ‘I can’t describe this,’ or ‘I don’t know how to say it’” one participant said (IE001). Another said that “human language is so limiting to try and tap into [the mystical] and describe it. It's like you can't really put God in a box and try and describe him in words” (IE002). One person tried to make sense of ineffability and echoed the limits of language:

> “it’s that you're stuck with words, and words are just [what] we know (…) so when we go to describe – like, even when I say ‘it was this presence’ - what does that mean to you? Right? So, you can describe it, but you can’t” (IE005).

There were also moments which subtly highlighted the paradoxical nature of explaining ineffable experiences, such as one participant joking offhandedly: “Do you wanna know my experience that I can't express in words? I can't put it into words, obviously” (IE006). Such examples represent the inexplicable nature of the kinds of spiritual experiences discussed in our interviews, the kind of things that some participants “still haven’t completely wrapped [their] heads around” (IE007).

Further, another type of ineffability which surfaced was in the difficulty participants encountered with the questionnaire statements. Some statements, the examples of religious experiences, were quite challenging for participants to make sense of or identify elements as akin to their own experiences. Numerous times, there were participants who asked researchers to define the statements or certain words from the statements, to explain “what that [means] exactly,” or to give examples (IE003). There were complaints that the statements were “too vague” and “open to interpretation”, making it difficult for some participants to relate or to make sense of concepts in light of their own experiences (IE005). Participants asking researchers to repeat or clarify words demonstrates the intentional process they went through to make-meaning of their experiences in answering the questionnaire.

We note that participants’ resistant responses to certain questionnaire statements supports our use of the M-Scale solely as a prompt and its results as complimentary data rather than as a measurement tool. The limitations for meaning-making would not serve our research question well and the problem of ineffability seems to magnify with pre-written statements rather than the use of narratives by participants themselves.

All such considered, it appears that the need for participants to account for ineffable content prompted two major themes in our interviews. First, there was an identification of and engagement in language use (LU) – recognizing ineffability and using resources to overcome it. Second, there was the identification of and engagement in a felt need to guard or protect the sanctity of one’s experience (GE). The next sections will discuss these themes respectively.

Language Use

As seen in Figure 1 above, participants used language as one of the ways they related to God. For some, this was using both languages, but for others, one language meant more than the other when it came to items of faith. Here, we will discuss these dynamic occurrences. Language, as the main vessel for interpretation in the meaning-making process, underlaid many of the forms used by participants in explaining their experiences. Firstly, national language is language as it is commonly understood, what people engage in to communicate with others from their nation (Bahktin, 1986). It is the common lexicon of words of those who, in this case, speak English or French. As participants experienced relating to God, either in English or French contexts, it influenced the way they described their experiences to researchers.

Most participants spoke to the ‘language of their faith’. For one participant, her experience from childhood up until university was almost completely in a French context. Yet, at the start of our interview, she prefaced her story of a spiritual experience with an explanation of why she would be sharing it in English:

> “When I moved here, (…) I began to discover my spirituality and my faith *as I was learning a language*. I was attending church here in English and (…) the English language became more prevalent in my life (…) my church gave me an English bible, (…) so my spirituality began (…) in English” (IE002).

She continued to explain that French is still her language for "unconscious thinking," such as for counting, "but [her] whole spirituality is in English" (IE002). Her rationale for this being the case was:

> "if you [have a religious] community that speaks your [first] language, then I think a lot of your spirituality will be developed in that language. (…) For me, I've only ever attended church in English and a lot of my community, like going to prayer groups and stuff like that, it'll all be in English, so it's just something that I've developed in the English language" (IE002).

Many participants echoed her experience, resounding that "it is [in] English that I got the majority of my faith" (IE003). One participant highlighted how certain contexts were associated with his use of a certain language:

> "the last two years of my life, I've been studying things, especially to do with the faith, in English. (…) a lot of my French is much more practical French and a French that is much more relational. (…) [But] for the topic and the subject matter [of spiritual experience], English seems to be more relevant" (IE007).

This theme of having a language context for one's faith bled into our questions about the impact of language on answering the questionnaire. "I think it [has an impact], because I don't know how to answer these questions in French actually, I never thought of them," said one participant (IE003). Similarly, another participant prefaced our interview questions with "if I feel like I'm capable in answering in French, [I will]," but recognized that "there are some topics that I just I don't know the words," such as religious experience (IE006). She continued, "I don't know if I can talk about my religion in french" (IE006).

While most participants shared English as their ‘faith language’, one participant had to *learn* how to relate to God in English and became “bilingual” in her faith (IE009). It was a difficult journey, as she stated that a notable part of her experience was *“the language difficulties (...) like, to learn a new language and to pray or to read the Bible in a new language (...) yes, [there were] certain challenges to do with that”* (IE009).[1] She highlighted the importance for her to learn a new ‘faith language’ as a means of connecting with God through her new English Christian community after moving from a French context to a primarily English one. She recalls that, at first, “it was very hard to have that emotional piece [with English] and to pray in English because I felt very robotic. Cause I was looking for words and there wasn’t a flow with my heart connection. It wasn’t until I got English experiences with my faith (…) [that] there’s this heart piece as well” (IE009**).** She still holds that French is “the language of [her] heart” and that there is a greater excitement associated with practicing her faith in French, but that both languages can more holistically represent her experience with relating to God (IE009). She attempts to make sense of such duality by noting that “some things speak more to my heart in the different language” (IE009). She elaborated:

> “there are different things or different [Bible] passages that I’ve studied more in depth in English (…) But there are times where my brain will still choose to reflect [in French], so I think it’s maybe a piece that I’ve studied when I was younger (…) my personal [time with God], it’s still mainly French right now, but like the worship songs [I listen to] are in English” (IE009).

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[1] Quotes in Italics are translated from French to English.

This language context and the language people use for their faith greatly influences the ways they relate to God and the way they choose to relate to God. But, how does one develop a dominant language for relating to God?

Participants answered this question through discussions about their spiritual practices, such as Bible reading and prayer, but more specifically, about the language they used to engage in these practices. Since these individual and communal practices are common narratives for how people relate to God, it follows that one would begin to associate things of faith in this language and grow in familiarity with the language used for these practices. Therefore, eventually becoming their dominant and most meaningful language in the context of religion. As one participant said, “When I pray, when I talk to God, or think about [or] meditate on verses and stuff like that, it'll often be in English” (IE002). She also compared the experience of reading her Bible in French:

> “I find it harder to read the French Bible, because they use a language that's a little bit far from the modern French language, or the common, like everyday [language] (...) and, in English, [some translations] make it very like storytelling” (IE002**)**.

In a similar way, another participant said that,

> “when I read the bible in French, I find it a little more complicated than when I read it in English. So sometimes, if I read something in French, I have to open the bible in English to make sense out of it. Or if I need definitions, [I’ll think] ‘oh maybe I’ll get this word better in English, or in French’, so I just read both” (IE001**)**.

As well, in exploring the language in which participants chose to read the Bible, we saw a few different practices take place. Some participants ventured to reading the Bible in the language they were not most comfortable in. As they began reading the Bible this way, many participants showed that they either compared some words from both languages (IE001), forewent the use of the unfamiliar language altogether (IE002), or co-read the texts in both languages (IE001 & IE009). In using a bilingual Bible, for example, one participant who was previously mentioned was able to develop her faith in English as much as it had been developed in French. The entire transition happened by associating her French meaning of religious practices, which held sentimental value, to the English ‘translation’. “I could still feel the emotion,” she said about relaying her spiritual experience to us in English, “because I knew what it was in French. So I could relate in that sense” (IE009). Reading Bible passages in both languages, therefore, allowed for new English connections to be made to the “heart foundation” she had built in French (IE009). By this new association, she was able to develop her faith as well as relate to God in a new way.

Another way that our participants described their language use in to relating to God was through their mention of prayer throughout their narratives. Tied to the theme “faith language”, it was shown that participants used their prayer life as an example to show how choosing vocabulary that has sentimental value in one language can further their relation to God. In speaking about his prayer life, one subject said:

> “the word Lord for me (...) has become such a Christian phrase, and the word Seigneur has so much more (…) reverence. (...) I also use 'Father' and I find that the combination of the two is kind of like, (...) I’m coming before God as his serf and peasant of his kingdom, (...) just acknowledging his glory, and his eminence, but then coming to him as his son, and being like ‘you, you're the Father’” (IE007).

The use of one word in another language for this participant deepened his understanding of God’s character in a tangible way. It also helped him

> “break out of any kind of cycles that I create in my prayer life, (...) [as] a way of making sure I want to enter into the presence of God in a genuine and meaningful way, and not in a way that is (...) for habits' sake” (IE007).

In addition to the words that have sentimental value when referring to God, this subject also brought up certain words that better describe his “floundering a little better than other things when [he’s] praying in [his] prayer life” (IE007). He stated that

> “‘merde total’ for me is like a combination of words for me that in my head describes a lot of what I experience... and I don’t find that there's words in the english language that express frustration the same way that it does, where its not like harsh, like my world is over, but it’s kind of like a, it’s like a (…) it just describes it as ‘this is bullshit’ while also adding on this element of like ‘I just don’t get it’” (IE007).

This participant became more familiar with certain words in French and then attached sentiment to them in a way that helped him relate to God and his own experience. Although this participant gave a few examples of certain *words* in French that had sentimental value for him, he said the following about articulating his whole religious experience in French:

> “I wouldn’t be able to like, find 12 different ways in which I could describe [this word]... Whilst in english, I could talk about it being this or that, and it comes quicker. And I find especially with spiritual [experiences, they are] difficult already for language to grasp, I don’t think I want to, in a sense, handicap myself by not being able to use different words in order to try and help paint a better picture of what happened” (IE007)**.**

Here, the participant does not consider French adequate in offering the resources needed to describe his experience, since his vocabulary in French is not as strong as it is in English. Therefore, it is key to note that even if some have sentimental value attached to certain *words*, it does not mean that their “faith language”, or the language in which they choose to explain their faith, will remain the same.

There were other instances of participants mentioning words that held “a bit of a different sentimental value to [them]” than others (IE002). In this, words, phrases, and whether they used French or English made an impact on sentiment. In referring to the meaning associated with words in each language, one participant said that

> “I think it’s interesting how one word in english will have more of like a depth to it or an intensity than the one in french… which still means the same thing, but because I have associated some sort of emotion or feeling to that word, like I know that it’s just like a, a more, a deeper word... it changes the whole meaning of what you're asking, and like essentially could even change to what extent I've experienced it” (IE002).

Along with this concept of sentimental value, we see that using certain words influence one’s ability and perception of relating to God. One participant states that,

> “when i think of like my identity in God, and God being my Father, it seems more like (..) yea, I dunno, I feel like Father sounds closer to me than Père... Père seems very distant... it just seems like it’s not a close relationship... like I would have to say Papa, which is daddy...like call God your daddy (laughter) you know? It sounds weird in English…” (IE002).

In comparing two words from each language, the participant exhibited an understanding of which word held a sentimental value for her, and chose to use that word. She also went on to say “that's kind of an example for words that… they actually like, play a role in like how you relate to things in your spirituality” (IE002). In connection to this aspect of choosing vocabulary in French or English, another participant stated that she deeply believed in learning multiple languages because she sees that words “can change your lived experience, especially in a religious context I think that would be amazing to look at because I am such a huge believer that if you have words you can feel different things” (IE008). *Sentimental value that is attached to certain words or phrases for our participants held deep meaning for them in relating to God.*

Language choice in describing experience and the sentimental value may not solely be structured around an associated emotion. It may also be built around a memory, as one participant describes: “like it’s the experience and the memory and the connection that I hold to, is going to come out in the language that it was initially made in, you know what I mean?” (IE006). And another participant, when telling of her religious experience, stated that “I feel like the language would affect what experience I chose…the experiences that I've have had when I speak french, like when I'm in a francophone country… when I would speak french, I would think of those religious experiences… versus when I'm speaking english I would think of the religious experiences I've had in english” (IE004). Similarly, for when participants could associate a word or phrase with an experience they have had, it was easier for them to answer the question, specifically in the questionnaire. One participant in response to which questions were easier to answer than others, said

> “things that I could just make connections to (…) like I could relate more to it when I had it in my mind... compared to when I was just trying to make a connection then I had nothing coming back” (IE006).

The language and words used by participants seemed to be meaningful and have sentimental value for them in ways that they attempted to express to us researchers. This ties into the common theme of familiarity with language. When participants were familiar with the language used with regards to spiritual concepts, it was more likely that they would use them to describe their own experience.

Vocabulary that the participants used in relating to God and relaying their experiences also was often used in a way that added *further* or *new* meaning to their experience. In one scenario, the following interaction occurred as one of the researchers offered, “one of the things that I remember you mentioning was just (...) [this] humbling experience,” and the participant replied:

> “Yes. Oh, it was so *humbling,* it was so humbling, it was so humbling... it wasn't shame though. (...) It wasn't shame at all. It was just divine, and you just automatically see your position, and its realizing your position” (IE005).

Here, the participant adopted a word that was said by one of the researchers. But she did not end there. She began to expand on the definition of the word in a way that made it more meaningful to her and her experience. She was able to find new vocabulary that helped her make meaning of her experience, but also to articulate it in a way that others would understand her experience. Another example of word adoption or acceptance was at one researcher’s suggestion that “using the French word for Lord seems to give it like a freshness almost,” to which the participant replied, “exactly, exactly, yea” (IE007). He then continued to clarify the reason he uses the words he does in his prayer life, ensuring he has the last word on his story. This shows the motivation - that is, the narrative accomplishment - of participants to create a story that is meaningful to them, not just to others. To expand on the ways our participants related to God and used meaningful vocabulary to do so, we found that many participants used illustrations. In the majority of cases, subjects used these illustrations in attempts to explain the ineffable. One participant stated,

> "And then God appeared, and I cannot even really describe how he appeared; you know a dream? It's a dream, you wake up and you see everything in your mind, but it wasn't concrete, you know? It's not like you could see and ocean in your dream and you know you saw it, but you can't say it was this colour or that colour, maybe it had no colour" (IE005).

As the participant began with a statement that clearly attests to the ineffability of her experience, she then goes on to compare it to the idea of a dream. This seemed to be her way of making meaning for herself but also was an attempt to make meaning for us researchers in understanding her experience. Another case was when one subject described her experience as "if i was to visualize it, it was almost like a darkness, and then it just [left], out the backdoor" (IE006). By utilizing this illustration, it allowed us researchers to imagine her experience in a different way and a way that she wanted to portray. For our participants, however, the use of illustrations were not solely limited to explaining their religious experiences. One subject goes into her experience with her faith in French and how that language holds such a deep part in her heart. She says

> "I have a friend that jokingly asks like what do you still speak french? like canada is an english country. And I was like, it's like asking me why I still have two arms! (laughter) Like I can't get rid of it... like it would be very uncomfortable to get rid of that part of myself" (IE009).

Even in cases where the participants are talking about other parts of their lives that are meaningful to them, the use of illustrations helped them to articulate the meaning of these things to us researchers.

In other instances, subjects brought up Biblical narratives in order to explain their experience. One subject compares her story to the life of Job by saying "and God shows up and kinda like Job, like ‘where were you when I formed the earth, and like where were you?’”(IE005). Directly after this illustration, the participant had a revelatory moment that was impactful for her as well as us researchers. She said:

> “I've never thought about it that way until now… Just like that. oh wow, so that's very helpful!.... I guess that exactly what he did to Job, like ‘where were you?’ and then Job, oh wow. Oh, I might cry” (IE005)!

The use of this Biblical narrative spurred on an in-vivo meaning-making moment for the participant. This is an interesting connection to the use of narrative and folk psychology, of which we will speak to in the discussion section. Further, we saw another participant use a Biblical example to explain his reasons behind not sharing his deeply spiritual experiences with just anyone. He said,

> “Paul talking about uh, 'yeah, and then when you experience something like that, that's when you know God exists!'...I think Paul is much more like a 'well jesus' work in your life isn’t, for the most part, going to be crazy supernatural experiences, they are going to be day to day, kind of mundane experiences, but it’s like the fact that Jesus comes into the mundane, that's really cool” (IE007).

This reference to Paul and illustrating his own experience through this was a way for this participant to justify to us researchers his desire to selectively share his experience.

Through choosing national language, faith language, words, phrases and illustrations, the participants articulated their religious experiences in ways that were meaningful to them. They used these devices to relate to God, sometimes in new ways. With the use of language, however, often comes a problem of interpretation in other’s minds. Many of our participants spoke to their desire to guard their religious experience from being misunderstood or misused.

Guarding Experience

Another theme that surfaced in participants' interviews and in their attempts to provide an account for their experience with RTG was that of guarding the sanctity of experience. Since each participant's experience with connecting to God is meaningful and sentimental to them personally, there was an identification of the potential risks of sharing one's experience with others. The ultimate risk – that which was at the root of what participants addressed in the interviews – is the rejection or negation of meaning of the shared experience. One way that participants spoke to this theme was in the negative voices or stereotypes, which exist in society that can stigmatize religious experiences and affect how, or whether, one shares their experience. One participant often brought up her struggle to share her experience due to these negative voices. She says,

> "I didn't talk about [my experience] for a very long time, because I just thought it sounded weird. I didn't want to de-value what I knew to be something that other people--like, if other people would say this [to me] I'd think, 'oh my gosh, one of *those'*, and I didn't want to be one of those, so I kept it to myself for a very long time" (IE005).

Another participant included the negative voices that have come up in sharing his story. He had a powerful encounter with God which he "sometimes [explains] to other people, and they say, 'oh you just woke up'" (IE010). He was able to rise above the rejecting statements, however, and hold onto the power and meaning of his story: "I think it's very important [to share spiritual experiences], because people don't believe in this kind of thing. So, the more you [share] stories, the more people will open their eyes" (IE010). He holds onto the hope that his experience can make a difference in the lives of others, as he recognized that "I need to share [my experience] (…) Lots of people are lost like I was. I just explain [my experience] and it helps them a bit"

(IE010). This is one example of a motivation some may have to share their stories despite the risks of rejection that come with spiritual experiences.

An additional aspect that seemed to increase participants' willingness to share their experience was if the person with whom they told their story shared a similar experience or understanding of relating to God. One person identified how, for him, there "are experiences that I can talk to if there is a reference point in the mind of the person I am talking to" (IE007). Another participant said that sharing her story in the interview was easy since "I'm explaining it to Christians, [so] it makes total sense. But to explain that to a non-Christian, they would be like 'what?', they just don't understand that" (IE006). The tension of sharing comes when there is a gap in each other's understanding or belief system, as identifies this participant: "talking to people who don't believe in the spiritual or who don't believe in a kind of-- another dimension, or another kind of-- whatever it is for them. Yeah, that's when I find difficulty" (IE007).

As such, most all participants mentioned some criteria of selection for whom to share their meaningful experiences with, to minimize the risk of rejection or devaluation of their story. One person said, "these things aren't easy to talk about because you don't want to diminish it, (…) you can't just say these things off of a side-line" (IE005). In other words, one cannot tell of one's experience with God to just anyone. Otherwise, it may "take away from [God], (…) take away from his reality-- my position, his position" (IE005).

Another's process of selective sharing is to "just keep it to myself, or [to] just tell someone that I think would understand what happened" (IE001). This participant identified her dad as someone who "would understand better than anyone else," because "he is spiritual as well", "he thinks in that way" (IE001). It was a common theme among participants to only share with those who are close to them, such as family or close friends. Having someone who knows them seemed to give participants confidence that their story would come across as sensible, as stated by one participant: “it wouldn't have made sense to me, if I had somebody describe that, unless it was somebody that I know” (IE005).

Moreover, not only did the risk of one’s experience being rejected surface in our interviews, but also the risk of one’s experience being misinterpreted. One participant said,

> “I’m still wrestling with the implications of [sharing my experience.] (…) I've seen stuff where I [wonder], 'how do I justify that?'. Overall, very cool for me to experience, but [they] aren't things that I necessarily share. Just because, when I do share them, there's the huge chance of it being lost in translation, it being misused” (IE007).

The awareness of such a risk for this participant seemed to be from having seen it happen before, where someone would “talk about [another person’s] healing story. And it was something where (…) it did more harm than good, the way in which he shared it” (IE007). It seems, then, the process of selective sharing can also stem from a desire to preserve the meaning of the experience for the individual who feels that he or she connected with God. Demonstrating the private nature of some experiences, this participant feels that “[my experience] is something that (…) God did for *me*, (…) and edifies *my own* faith and is something that lifts me up, but isn’t something that I should use, or share lightly” (IE007).

Taken together, there was an overall theme of participants being selective with their sharing, but they ultimately shared as a part of the meaning-making process. While participants commonly reserved their stories for trusted persons, there were exceptions of participants opening up to strangers because they had similar experiences. The validation received from another person’s kindred narrative was worth the risk of sharing one’s experience with someone outside one’s normal circle. For example, one participant spoke about the relief of hearing another's story of encountering God. She approached him, saying: "'Can I speak to you? I had an experience of God too, and I wouldn't really speak about it, same thing like you'" (IE005). She was drawn to this person's experience of relating to God, since it fought against the question she would ask sometimes: "is it all in your head?" (IE005). In this participant's case, her experience was validated and given meaning because she was not the only one. The very act of sharing one's experience came across this way from participants, that while there was an ultimate risk of sharing, there was also the ultimate benefit of constructing meaning through storytelling.

Interface

This brings us to our interface: how do language use and guarding experience interact? As participants attempted to justify their accounts of RTG, they were faced with ineffability - which influenced both the interpretive process and the ways they guarded the meaning and sacredness of their experiences.

Ineffability influenced the interpretive process in that participants could best talk about their religious experiences in the language they had it in. To reiterate "faith language", those who experienced most of their faith in an english context - as we saw in the graph earlier - chose to use mainly english words and vocabulary to describe it. Interestingly, we had one participant share two stories: one in French and one in English, according to the language context she experienced them in. For those who had an English 'faith language', the French M-Scale statements prompted a justification of their struggle to use this language by saying that they were not familiar with spiritual concepts in a French context - thereby protecting their experience.

There are a few examples wherein participants justified their struggles with language. Specifically in the questionnaire section of the interview, many participants stated that they had trouble with the switch between French & English, or that they did not understand the broadly-conceived questions regarding mysticism. One participant, as he had struggled to understand certain words in French, said “because I'm very tired right now, and it's kinda hard to switch from language to language when I’m tired, so…” (IE003). Again, this participant also stated that he was not familiar with the wording of the questions in the questionnaire: “my first language... (Chinese) we actually don't answer questions that way, so we don't really have like three negatives, and it’s actually something that I brought to french and to english” (IE003). Another participant stated that, because of her personality, she did not understand the questions that were being asked in the questionnaire, saying “I just don’t know what you mean by the question… it’s too vague for someone as anal as me” (IE005)! In these cases of justifying their inability to communicate or understand a certain language, they protected their experience and the meaning attached to it. But, since the questionnaire used both French and English questions, it got participants with interact with their non-faith language, magnifying this ineffability.

This leads to another theme that occurred: bilingualism is reliant on the fluency one has within a language. That is, one is more on a spectrum of fluency than simply being “bilingual or not bilingual.” An example of this came up as one participant stated that “english is very much primarily right, cuz I’m primarily, like I’d say I’m 90 percent of the time english, right? Like I am capable in french, I just dont use it, and where could I use it?” (IE006). For this participant, although she knew French and was able to speak in French with the researchers, she also said that her vocabulary and knowledge of French was not as expansive as it was in English when it came to her faith. Another participant said that the only context she really used French in was in school and work, stating that her French thinking “is very like ‘this is the way we do it’…” than her vocabulary in English (IE008). For this same participant, she said “I think a lot of what I’ve experienced is that when you come across a concept in French sometimes you don’t have the same words to think about it in english, which can change the way you describe it and even the way you experience- I do think it really does change the way you experience things" (IE008). This fluency issue impacted the ways participants guarded their experience - they withheld sharing their experience in a language with less resources with which to make meaning.

We found, however, that if participants had experiences in both languages, they had *equal access* to words from both languages to describe their experiences. Occurring for our participant who experienced her faith in both English and French contexts, she was able to explain her experience meaningfully in either language. She said,

> "they are both as meaningful to me. And I think it's different too because there are different things or different passages that I've studied more in depth in English, so that information might come to me in a different way. But now, if something is happening in English, I will mainly write in English, but there are times where my brain will still choose to reflect [in French] so I think it's maybe a piece that I've studied when I was younger, so maybe that's why the thoughts come [in that language]" (IE009).

While we hypothesised that bilingualism would diminish ineffability, there was still much talk of the reality of ineffability for these participants. There seemed to be a distinct awareness of words in a different language meaning more or less than the same or similar words in the other language - as seen within the section regarding sentiment. The ability to compare words and meanings gave participants a more tangible experience of the ineffable, rather than a monolingual person who would theoretically either have the words or not, with no frame of reference for what words could possibly mean. Therefore, having more than one language available to participants gave them the ability to compare the levels of resources they had in each language when describing their RTG experience. However, having more than one language available to them *did not help* with overall ineffability of their experiences. In fact, one participant said that he did not want to “handicap” himself by attempting to describe his religious experience in his non-faith language (IE007). This exhibits our participants need to use the language with the most resources for meaningful articulation of their experience.

DISCUSSION

In light of the findings, there were many themes which corresponded with the existing literature, yet a few surprising twists that contradicted our initial assumptions. Firstly, the differentiation of religious experiences from other types of experiences found in the literature was also true in our participants’ stories. The distinguishing quality of transcendence – that is, awareness of a greater reality or holy being – corresponded to the central element of participants’ accounts of religious experience, which was relating to God. All they spoke about was connected to the narrative structure of communion with or experience of God. Moreover, William James’ (1902) term for hard-to-describe experiences – ineffability – was, surely enough, inextricably linked to our participants’ transcendent experiences. With no exception, every participant included an element of their difficulty in finding the words to describe their encounters with the Divine.

Secondly, the role of language in participants’ interpretations of their spiritual experiences yielded rich results, which supported and contradicted our earliest assumptions. The part community played in participants’ storytelling was subtle in the interviews, often only briefly mentioned in their religious experiences. While important relationships from their faith contexts were details to the main plot of participants experiences, according to the literature and researchers’ analysis of the data, religious communities are the *source* of meaningful religious narratives. How participants neglected to see the influential role communities played in their stories is explained by the taken-for-granted nature of narratives -- they are constructed without us noticing. That is, we participate in creating and adopting narratives according to our lived experiences and the culture we are surrounded with (Bruner, 1999). For our participants then, as they belong to a larger group that create religious narratives, they will also adopt these narratives.

Existing works on narratives speak to stories' constructed nature – that they are told through a culturally informed lens. As mentioned, participants spoke to their experiences of relating to God, but we asked: how did participants know what it was to relate to God? We found that they discovered it in the narratives from the cultural communities which informed them about spiritual experiences. Many participants spoke to the importance of their church, bible studies, prayer groups, and other 'Christian communities' or significant relationships with other Christians in their stories of relating to God. The instances which made it quite clear that communities shaped the language participants used for their stories were those when the religious communities spoke a *national language* that was different from participants' first language. In a similar way, the community also played a large role in portraying this telos of God as a relational being and that one may be in relation to God. One participant said that,

> *"when I went to [an English] Bible study I often cried after because I understood very little and I could express myself very little. Or, if I understood, I did not have the words to express myself, and it was a challenge to not be able to share my faith with people"* (IE009).

The emotions she experienced because of the language barrier demonstrates the significant role that language plays in being able to connect to God by way of communal spiritual practices. She later states that it was not until she understood and could articulate the narratives of English Christian communities that English became a meaningful language for her faith.

In kind, we found a common theme of participants having learned a dominant national language for faith through their religious communities. This was contradictory to what we originally hypothesized regarding bilinguals' ability to switch and expand their resources for interpreting ineffable experiences. We found that participants did not switch as we expected might happen. It seems that, with experiences as sacred as spiritual ones, participants did not venture into code-switching so as to remain in the language that would best equip them to interpret their story – their dominant 'faith language'. In other words, we understand that the 'other' language is not as much of a resource for describing a religious experience as we originally thought, since it is less familiar and less meaningful than the dominant language. It follows, then, that a switch into the 'other' language would abandon the narratives associated with that national language, and would leave the individual unable to interpret experiences with meaningful language.

Another important theme was connected to this idea of meaningful language, whether that be in association with a national language or, interestingly enough, with certain religious words, phrases, or expressions across different languages. The exception to the above finding of a dominant faith language was when certain words could have the meaning transferred to the 'other' language. Some sacred words, such as names for God like 'Father' and 'Lord', were emphasized by some participants and were translated in the interview or referred to in their stories. The importance of such words seems to have been 'worth' venturing into the non-dominant language to discover a potential resource for meaning-making. Demonstrated throughout our data as regards the use of language is the reality that religious experience is entwined with language, so experience itself is restricted with language.

Thirdly, we discovered the interesting role that guarding experienced played for participants which affirmed the existing literature regarding meaning-making and folk psychology. As stated in our review of the literature, one must participate in the culturally symbolic systems of his or her surrounding community to communicate meaningfully – that is, to participate in the community's folk psychology. Narratives that contradict the folk psychology of a given community will prompt a process of negotiating the meaning of an experience. The initial rejection of narratives at face value, however, were found to be a source of reluctance for participants to share their story in some communities. This reluctance lead to the practices of guarding experiences which were presented in the results. One of such practices was only sharing with those who would understand the narrative of religious experience, particularly those who are close to the person sharing. Such means for protecting sanctity of experience goes hand in hand with work in the area of narrative and meaning-making. Narrative is necessary for an experience to become meaningful and to be integrated into the socially constructed folk psychology of a given community. Carefully selecting those to share with, therefore, can influence the constructed meaning of an experience.

CONCLUSION

Some implications for future research include exploring this same topic in a different sociological setting – that is, in a more French-speaking context. This may include conducting the study in a majority French-speaking city or province, so as to see the differences that the fluency of bilingualism has on the outcomes of the study. Would the narrative structure look different than the current study? If there is a difference, it would be a great cultural psychological topic to explore further. As well, another study could potentially be conducted that narrows the definition of a religious experience. How would the results differ if religious experience was confined to dreams one has had, or out-of-body experiences one has had? This would potentially shift the narrative structure of experience, as it requires a different set of folk psychologies to understand the meaning of dreams and out-of-body experiences.

We asked the question: *What is it like to navigate ineffability in describing religious experience with the ability to choose between two languages?* We discovered that while meaning-making is a broader process for the bilingual person - having many kinds of language available to them to construct meaning - the linguistic specificity to experiences themselves places limits on the *meaningful* language available for making sense of experience. As such, describing religious experiences was still a difficult process for our bilingual participants, and there were no signs of ineffability being diminished because of the ability to choose between languages. Ineffability was, however, a more outstanding issue through participants' ability to *compare* resources from each language to make sense of the ineffable. There emerged an important consideration from this problem of interpretation: the *personal* challenges that arose from the difficulty in accounting for sacred experiences. The risk of diminishing the sanctity of experience through inadequate language use was a possibility that prompted caution in participants' willingness to share, and influenced how and to whom they told their stories. The implication of such a personal risk is paramount for individuals to capitalize the resources available to them in language to best meaningfully articulate their experience.

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Appendix A – Interview Procedure

Part I

Take a few minutes to think about a powerful religious experience and how you would describe it to someone. Briefly tell us what it is like to try to explain your experience.

Prenez quelques minutes à penser d'une expérience religieuse importante et comment vous la décririez à quelqu'un. Dites-nous brièvement comment que c'est d'essayer d'expliquer ton expérience.

Part II

Nous allons vous lire des brèves descriptions de nombreuses expériences. Certaines descriptions font référence à un phénomène que vous avez peut-être vécu, tandis que d'autres font référence à un phénomène que vous n'avez peut-être pas vécu. Dans chaque cas, notez soigneusement la description, puis choisissez 1, 2, 3, ou 4, en fonction de vos sentiments et de l'impact de la description sur votre propre expérience.

1: Cette description n'est absolument pas vraie de mon expérience
2: Cette description n'est probablement pas vraie de mon expérience
3: Cette description est probablement vraie de mon expérience
4: Cette description est certainement vraie de mon expérience

En répondant à chaque élément, veuillez comprendre que ces éléments peuvent être considérés comme s'appliquant à une expérience ou à plusieurs expériences différentes.

We will read you brief descriptions of a number of experiences. Some descriptions refer to phenomenon that you may have experienced while others refer to phenomenon that you may not have experienced. In each case note the description carefully and then choose 1, 2, 3, or 4, depending on how you feel in each case and how much the description applies to your own experience.

1: This description is definitely not true of my own experience
2: This description is probably not true of my own experience
3: This description is probably true of my own experience
4: This description is definitely true of my own experience

In responding to each item, please understand that the items may be considered as applying to one experience or as applying to several different experiences.

1. I have had an experience which was both timeless and spaceless.	1	2	3	4

2. Je n’ai jamais eu une expérience dans laquelle j’étais incapable de l’exprimer en mots.	1	2	3	4
3. I have had an experience in which something greater than myself seemed to absorb me.	1	2	3	4
4. J’ai déjà eu une expérience dans laquelle tout semblait disparaître de ma tête jusqu’au point que j’étais seulement conscient d’un vide.	1	2	3	4
5. I have experienced profound joy.	1	2	3	4
6.Je n’ai jamais eu une expérience dans laquelle je me sentais absorbé en union avec toutes choses.	1	2	3	4
7. I have never experienced a perfectly peaceful state.	1	2	3	4
8. Je n’ai jamais eu une expérience dans laquelle je sentais que tout était vivant.	1	2	3	4
9. Je n’ai jamais eu une expérience qui me semblait sainte.	1	2	3	4
10. I have never had an experience in which all things seemed to be aware.	1	2	3	4
11. J’ai déjà eu une expérience dans laquelle je n’avais aucun sens de temps ou d’espace.	1	2	3	4
12. I have had an experience in which I realized the oneness of myself with all things.	1	2	3	4
13. J’ai déjà eu une expérience dans laquelle une nouvelle vision de la réalité m’a été révélée.	1	2	3	4
14. I have never experienced anything to be divine.	1	2	3	4
15. I have never had an experience in which time and space were non-existent.	1	2	3	4
16. Je n’ai jamais vécu quelque chose que je pourrais appeler la réalité ultime.	1	2	3	4
17. I have had an experience in which ultimate reality was revealed to me.	1	2	3	4
18. J’ai déjà eu une expérience dans laquelle je sentais que tout était parfait en ce temps.	1	2	3	4
19. J’ai déjà eu une expérience dans laquelle je sentais que tout dans le monde faisait partie du même ensemble.	1	2	3	4
20. I have had an experience which I knew to be sacred.	1	2	3	4
21. I have never had an experience which I was unable to express adequately through language.	1	2	3	4
22. J’ai déjà eu une expérience qui m’a laissé avec un sentiment de vénération.	1	2	3	4
23.J’ai déjà eu une expérience qui est impossible à communiquer.	1	2	3	4
24. I have never had an experience in which my own self seemed to merge into something greater.	1	2	3	4
25. Je n’ai jamais eu une expérience qui m’a laissé avec un sentiment de merveille.	1	2	3	4
26. I have never had an experience in which deeper aspects of reality were revealed to me.	1	2	3	4

27. Je n’ai jamais eu une expérience dans laquelle le temps, l’espace, et la distance étaient dénués de sens.	1	2	3	4
28. Je n’ai jamais eu une expérience dans laquelle j'ai pris conscience d'une unité à toutes choses.	1	2	3	4
29. I have had an experience in which all things seemed to be conscious.	1	2	3	4
30. I have never had an experience in which all things seemed to be unified into a single whole.	1	2	3	4
31. J’ai déjà eu une expérience dans laquelle je sentais que rien n'était jamais vraiment mort.	1	2	3	4
32. I have had an experience that cannot be expressed in words.	1	2	3	4

1. In which language would you like to have the interview? **Dans quelle langue préfériez-vous faire l’entrevue?** Why? **Pourquoi?**

2. Tell me about statements that were easier for you to answer than others.
   Dites-nous des énoncés qu’étaient plus faciles à répondre que d'autres.

3. Tell me about some of the questions that were more sensible to you than others.
   Dites-nous des énoncés qui semblaient plus sensibles que d'autres.

4. Tell me about statements that better described your experience than others.
   Dites-nous des énoncés qui décrivaient mieux votre expérience que d'autres.

5. How would you describe any elements of your experience that were *not* included in the list of statements?
   Comment décririez-vous les éléments de votre expérience qui n’étaient *pas* présents dans la liste d’énoncés?

6. What can you tell us about the role that language played in answering the questionnaire?
   Que peux-tu nous dire de l’impact que le langage a eu sur tes réponses au questionnaire?

Background Questions:

What is your gender/ **Quel est votre sexe?** ___________________

What is your age/ **Quel âge avez-vous?** ___________________

What is your current occupation/ **Que faites-vous comme travail?** ______________________

What is your current religious affiliation/ **Quelle est votre appartenance religieuse?** _________________________

Religiosity is the devoutness of one's practice of faith and importance of faith in one's life. On a scale of 1-10, how would you describe your religiosity (1 = Not at all religious, 10 = Extremely Religious)?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

La religiosité est le dévouement de la pratique de la foi et l'importance de la foi dans la vie. Comment décririez-vous votre religiosité sur une échelle de 1 à 10 (1 = Pas du tout Religieux/se, 10 = Extrêmement Religieux/se)?

In the following contexts, I primarily use… / **Dans les contextes suivants, j'utilise principalement… (English/French or both)**

Occupation/ **Au travail**: E / F
Education/ **Mon éducation**: E / F
Home/ **À la maison**: E / F
Church/ **À l'église**: E / F
Daily life/ **Au quotidien** (Movies, books, technology language settings, etc…): E / F
Other/ **Autre** (if any other important contexts not listed/ **s'il y a autre contexts manquants**):
______________________________ E / F ______________________________ E / F

Part III

We really want to thank you for participating in our research, and we just wanted to explain what our goals are for this study and what we believe what it might contribute to the field of the psychology of religion. We first wanted to look at bilingual participants because we believe there is a lot of dynamic elements to the way they choose between languages and how they describe their experiences. In looking at religious experiences that are hard to describe, we wanted to explore what impact it would have on the interpretation of religious experiences if the people describing them had access to two languages. Therefore, the booklet with various religious experiences were partly translated in order to discover any preference participants would have toward experiences described in one language over another.

Do you have any questions for us, the researchers? Do you have any thoughts regarding this topic of study, now that you know the entire purpose of our research? Do you still give us permission to use your data for our research?

Nous tenons vraiment à vous remercier pour votre participation à notre recherche et nous voulions vous expliquer nos objectifs pour cette étude et ce que nous pensons elle pourra contribuer au domaine de la psychologie de la religion. Nous avons choisi des participants bilingues parce que nous croyons qu'ils ont beaucoup d'éléments dynamiques dans la façon dont ils choisissent entre langues et décrivent leurs expériences. En examinant les expériences religieuses qui sont difficiles à décrire, nous avons voulu explorer l'impact que cela aurait sur l'interprétation des expériences religieuses si les personnes qui les décrivant avaient accès à deux langues. Par conséquent, le livret présentant diverses expériences religieuses a été partiellement traduit afin de déterminer les préférences des participants à l'égard des expériences décrites dans une langue plutôt que dans une autre.

Avez-vous des questions pour nous, les chercheurs? Avez-vous des pensées sur ce sujet d'étude, maintenant que vous connaissez le but de notre recherche? Est-ce que vous nous autorisez toujours à utiliser vos données pour nos recherches?

If you feel upset or are experiencing unwanted feelings after this study, here are a few resources you may reach out to that are in the Calgary area:

Ambrose University Counselling Services: 403-410-2925

Building Bridges Counselling Service: 587-318-0018

Liberty Counselling Service: 403-253-3801

Appendix B – Informed Consent Form

AMBROSE UNIVERSITY

Consent for Participation in Religious Experience Interview

The aim of the present study is to investigate the religious experience of bilingual individuals and how they describe their experiences in French or English.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in the research project conducted by students Angela Roberts and Chantal MacLean, supervised by Dr. James Cresswell, all from Ambrose University. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about my religious experience. I will be one of approximately 12 people being interviewed for this research. I understand that I may be asked to disclose personal information regarding my religious experience, which may bring up unsettling emotions.

The researchers will provide equal opportunity for me to communicate my answers in either English or French. I understand that I have full freedom to express myself in either language at any point in time, as I feel most comfortable.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, that information will be kept confidential, particularly from any social networks I may share with the researcher(s); nor will it impact the relationship I may have with the researcher(s).

2. My participation involves an hour-long interview (approximately), during which I will be asked to answer questions about my religious experience. I understand that my interview answers will be audio recorded for analysis by the principle researchers of this study (Angela Roberts and Chantal MacLean of Ambrose University).

3. I understand that the researchers will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from the interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

4. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by Ambrose University's Chair of the Research Ethics Board for Review. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, Ambrose University's Chair of the Research Ethics Board for Review may be contacted: Dr. Alan Ho (aho@ambrose.edu 1-403-410-2000, extension 5911).

5. I have read and I understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

6. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

______________________________	______________________________
My Signature	Date
	______________________________
______________________________	______________________________
My Printed Name	Investigators’ Signatures

For further information, please contact:
Dr. James Cresswell
Jim.Cresswell@ambrose.edu
1-403-410-2000 Ext. 6904