Original Articles

Language as a Reflection of Social Practices and Values
guest-edited by Thulfiqar H. Altahmazi and Khalid Sh. Sharhan

Language, Discourse & Society, vol. 11, no. 2(22), 2023

Living with Multiple Languages, Being Forced to be Monolingual: Turkish Skilled Migrants in Norway

Meltem Yilmaz Sener [2]

Abstract

Based on an analysis of 44 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Turkish skilled migrants living in/around Oslo and Drammen in Norway, this article aims to point out the tension between the monolingual emphasis of public discourses and the multilingual reality of migrants in the context of Norway. It demonstrates that these migrants perceive the monolingual emphasis as a norm that they are expected to conform to, but that does not take their different life situations into consideration. The difficulty or impossibility of living according to that norm (because of their age, short duration of stay, the will to preserve the mother tongue, their multilingual realities) makes their lives difficult and creates confusion and anxiety in them. While they are trying to do their best to maneuver through the complexities of their multilingual lives, they are facing a system that tends to simplify their linguistic realities. This study demonstrates that there are multiple languages in migrants' lives and many of them see it as a richness that they want to preserve. Migrants also see it as a violation of their right to retain their mother tongue when they see reactions against their speaking of the native language. Overall, the monolingual emphasis in Norway both ignores the multilingual reality of migrants' lives as well as putting unrealistic pressures on them. This study also highlights the importance of a pluralistic approach to a migrant group with respect to their linguistic practices.

Keywords

Monolingual, plurilingual, Europe, Norway, Turkish, skilled migrant, civic integration

First submission: April 2023, Revised: September 2023, Accepted: October 2023

---

[2] Meltem Yilmaz Sener. PhD in Sociology from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in the USA. VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway. ORCID: 0000-0003-2333-3396, email: meltem.sener@vid.edu

Introduction

Migration to Europe especially from the countries outside of Europe has put questions related to integration and language in the center of political and public discourses (Augustyniak & Higham 2019). With the emphasis on civic integration of especially non-European migrants in the European contexts, there is an increasing focus on the significance of language for their integration. In many public debates, it is argued that the lack of competence in the national languages of destination countries plays an important role in the formation of ethnic inequalities, although it is not possible to look at the role of language on ethnic inequality independently from other factors such as the role of discrimination. Nevertheless, language fulfills many functions. Languages and accents can act as indicators of belonging or foreignness and they can lead to distinctions and discrimination (Esser 2006).

Learning the language of the destination country is considered a major factor in participating fully in the social life of the new society and a major sign of belonging (Burns & Roberts 2010, Chiswick & Miller 2015). As Blackledge (2004: 68) argues, when the dominant majority considers the ideal model of society as monolingual, we face questions about identity and group membership. The focus on monoglot standards or "ideals of monolingual homogeneous communities whose culture is expressed through one shared language" (Blommaert & Verschueren 1998) are getting stronger in at least parts of Europe. In many public debates, it is implied that monolingualism is crucial for social coherence. However, monolingualism as a criterion for belonging and citizenship is difficult to sustain in a world which is increasingly being characterized by language diversity of migrants and other linguistic minorities (Moyer & Rojo 2007). The insistence on monolingualism as a part of integration agendas brings tensions and difficulties to migrants' lives when the everyday life for many migrants is plurilingual and pluricultural.

Based on an analysis of 44 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Turkish skilled migrants living in/around Oslo and Drammen in Norway, this article aims to point out this tension between the monolingual emphasis of public discourses and the multilingual reality of migrants in the context of Norway. It demonstrates that these migrants perceive the monolinguist emphasis as a norm that they are expected to conform to, but that does not take their different life situations into consideration. The difficulty or impossibility of living according to that norm (because of their age, short duration of stay, the will to preserve the mother tongue, their multilingual realities) makes their lives difficult in many ways and creates confusion and anxiety in them. While they are trying to do their best to manoeuvre through the complexities of their multilingual lives, they are facing a system that tends to simplify their linguistic realities. This study also highlights the importance of a pluralistic approach to a migrant group with respect to their linguistic practices. The findings of this research are interpreted using a critical lens to reveal the notion of silencing power dynamics as perceived by the migrants who may be viewed as a vulnerable and, in a way, invisible group within policy on language hierarchy (cf. Farkas et. al 2023).

The Role of Language in Migration

International migrants do not make only physical journeys between different countries, but also metaphorical journeys between societies, cultures, and language communities (Saville

2009, Norton Peirce 1995, Norton 2000). Migration has important socio-linguistic consequences, as migrants leave their familiar socio-linguistic environments and relate to a new speech community (Kerswill 2006). However, their socio-linguistic reality is much more complex than leaving one speech community behind and adapting to a new one. Especially the focus on mobility leads scholars to emphasize that “if we take into account the trajectory of real people across time, space, and borders, then simplistic, stationary, static and predictable perspectives about human lives and interactions are no longer possible” (Budach & Saint-Georges 2017: 66). Due to the multiple embeddedness of migrants, they engage in multiple social fields and networks of relations. As the scholarship on transnationalism demonstrates, transnational lives are characterized by being connected to multiple places at the same time (Basch et al. 1994, Dick 2011). This complexity of migrants’ lives also requires a questioning of the role of nation states in dealing with diversity and complexity in a context where simplification does not work (ibid: 67).

In Europe, as well as in other parts of the world, language has been seen as central to processes of nation building and developing a national culture (Stevenson 2006, Wright 2004). However, in a world which is increasingly characterized by international migration and movement of languages with the movement of people, it is becoming more and more difficult to talk about linguistic homogeneity. Due to what Gogolin calls the “monolingual habitus”, the actual linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe is being ignored, as European nation states consider themselves as monolingual in a different way form other parts of the world (see Gogolin 2021, 2011, 2002, 1997). Gogolin (2002) argues that this emphasis on monolingualism also leads to having insufficient data about the extent of linguistic diversity:

> This is the reason why hardly any reliable data on language diversity in Europe can be found in official statistics; the self-image of relatively homogenous national populations makes the question of how many and which languages are actually used in a country, unnecessary. In some statistics, next to the national languages the so-called 'lesser used' languages are taken into account: the languages of national or regional minorities, which are in fact mostly long- settled citizens of a particular nation state. They often use their language in addition to the national one. If these are included, roughly 60 or 70 languages are counted in Europe. And many people in Europe consider this a complex, complicated situation (p.7).

Despite the need for a reconsideration of the nation states’ role in a more diverse and complex world, there is tendency towards even more simplification of migrants’ lives and realities in especially parts of Europe. As Wodak (2013) argues, we are experiencing a re/nationalization in spite of multiple globalizing tendencies. The variety of mobilities which take place for different reasons and durations, during different life stages, and by migrants of different socio-economic backgrounds are ignored, and similar civic integration agendas are imposed on especially those migrants who are coming from outside of Europe. Originating from these civic integration policies, there are now language and citizenship tests for immigrants in many countries of Europe (Joppke 2010). Although language requirements and tests are presented as serving the aim of the integration of migrants, these requirements create legal barriers to migration and state “who should and should not belong to the EU” (Wodak & Boukala 2015, Wodak 2012, 2013).

The need to demonstrate language proficiency while entering a country as a newcomer or becoming a citizen is not new (Davies 1997, McNamara 2005, Saville 2009), but it is currently becoming more common in Europe. There is a prototypical immigrant who is assumed to be in the European destination country to live permanently, who is not highly educated, and who needs to shift from the language of the origin to the language of the destination country as soon as possible. This prototype does not correspond to the reality of many migrants' lives and their wishes. Additionally, as Carens (2010) argues, it is crucial to encourage migrants to feel that they belong to their new society. It might make sense to encourage them to learn the language of the place where they have settled and to learn how things work in this new context, "so long as this is designed to make them feel welcome and comfortable in an unfamiliar environment rather than as a way to pressure them to conform" (ibid: 19). Language and citizenship tests are not likely to contribute to creating such an environment. There is research which shows how the requirements for language certificates and tests/assessments rather serve as instruments of border and immigration control (see Gutekunst 2015, Kunnan 2013, Goodman 2011, Shohamy & McNamara 2009, McNamara 2005), functioning as gatekeepers (Wodak & Boukala 2015).

As Esser (2006: ii) discusses, the acquisition of the language of the destination country as a second (or, we can add, third, fourth, etc.) language is influenced by several factors:

- conditions in the country of origin and immigration country,
- the existence and structure of an ethnic community,
- individual and family living conditions,
- the specific circumstances of migration,
- age at migration,
- duration of stay in the country of migration,
- parents' age at migration and their language skills,
- level of education of immigrants or their parents,
- linguistic distance between the first language and the language to be acquired.

Esser (2006) also discusses the factors that might hinder the language acquisition by migrants:

> "Significant linguistic distance between the first language and the language to be acquired, a high level of global usability of the first language (in particular English) and presumably strong socio-cultural distances (xenophobia) between the immigrant group and the majority society can inhibit the second language acquisition by immigrants. The acquisition of the language of the receiving country is hindered in particular by a high level of ethnic concentration in the neighborhood, intra-ethnic contacts, and opportunities for communication in the language of origin in the neighborhood and the availability of media in the language of origin. Children learn the language of the receiving country more easily… considerable effort and motivation are required to achieve a high level of proficiency and accent-free speech in adulthood" (p.ii).

This article benefits from the list of factors that Esser provides with some reservations. First, arguing that intra-ethnic contacts hinder language learning without mentioning the importance of frequency of those contacts is a problematic argument. It is natural that migrants have intra-ethnic contacts to get emotional and material support in an unfamiliar context. Especially in those contexts where there is a high degree of exclusion of migrants, this type of support might be vital. An argument that implies that migrants should stay away from intra-ethnic contacts for language learning not only suffers from overgeneralization, but also ignores the various ways in which migrants can benefit from those contacts. The same critique is also relevant for the argument about the availability of media in the language of origin as deterring new language learning: It will largely depend on the frequency of using those media. The will to preserve the mother tongue is relevant and one of the major ways to do that is benefiting from the media in that language, while one is physically apart from the context where that language is spoken. Making an argument against using these media is, in one sense, speaking against the right to preserve the mother tongue. As Lippi Green (2011) states:

> "When an individual is asked to reject their own language, we are asking them to drop allegiances to the people and places that define them. We do not, cannot under our laws, ask a person to change the color of her skin, her religion, her gender, her sexual identity, but we regularly demand of people that they suppress or deny the most effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world" (p.67).

Finally, Esser talks about a high level of global usability of the first language (especially if it is English) as a deterrent for second language learning. In the discussion of my research findings, I will demonstrate that even if English is a second or third language, if the migrant is competent in using it in daily life and professionally, they may be hesitant to learn or use the language of the destination country. English has been spreading as a world language, becoming the most commonly spoken second or higher order language in the world (Graddol 1998). The participants in my research also talked about their preference to speak the world language. This is especially relevant if they are thinking of their stay in Norway as temporary. In those cases, a higher level of education and proficiency in English is translated into not learning the language of the destination country or not shifting to Norwegian in daily and professional life, despite some knowledge of the language.

Research

This article is based on the findings of qualitative research that includes 44 semi-structured interviews with skilled migrants who were born in Turkey and are currently living in Norway (in/around Drammen and Oslo). The project which is titled "Perceptions of Turkey-Originated Migrants about Identity, Belonging, and Discrimination" was approved by NSD (Norwegian Center for Research Data)/Sikt. I conducted the interviews between March 2019 and August 2020. As skilled migrants, I interviewed those people who have at least an undergraduate degree. In addition to these interviews, I became a member of several Facebook groups which have been established by Turkey-originated people living in Norway. I have participated in their social activities, like dinners, parties, seminars, etc. I have had participant observations during these events.

I used different channels to recruit respondents to my interviews. I shared my call on the Facebook groups of Turkey-originated people. Additionally, I used my own network to reach those individuals who meet the criteria for my research. I also used snowball sampling, asking my respondents to give the names of the other people that I could interview. Before the Corona regulations, I conducted the interviews face-to-face at those places that my respondents chose and received written informed consent. During the Corona regulations, I conducted the interviews online and my respondents gave oral consent. I conducted the interviews in Turkish, but my respondents also partially used Norwegian and English during the interviews. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I have anonymized all my respondents, removing all identifying information. I have identified my respondents with the letter M and a number. This specific paper focuses on their responses to the questions about language and the comments about language that they made in response to other questions.

The Pressure to Learn the Language Regardless of the Duration of Stay

In the Norwegian context, the message to migrants about learning the language seems to be coming in the form of a "pressure to conform" rather than being "designed to make them feel welcome and comfortable in an unfamiliar environment" as Carens (2010) warned us against. Some of my respondents complained about the constant pressure on non-European migrants for learning Norwegian. M5 has been living in Norway for more than 30 years. As a graduate of a Turkish university where the language of instruction is English, he spoke English when he first came to Norway for his graduate studies. However, after living in Norway for a long time, he can now speak Norwegian fluently. M5 is very critical of the current pressure on migrants about learning Norwegian:

> Norwegians are now pushing people too much. About learning Norwegian… I am very critical of that attitude and I say it to my Norwegian friends. How does a person learn French? By listening to a song, for instance… You listen to it and you like the way it sounds, and then you say, "I want to learn this language." So, you develop an emotional connection with that language. Here, it is by force. And when it is forced on you, you develop a certain reaction against it. This is what I am trying to explain to my Norwegian friends. Having said that, I also see the political reasons behind this insistence. (M5).

Many of them who came to Norway after their 30s or 40s for professional purposes as expatriates or skilled workers stated that they speak English in their professional lives. As new learners of Norwegian, they know that they will not be able to express themselves in the language as competently as the native speakers. Hence, in a context like Norway, skilled migrants use the strategy of speaking English, knowing that it will be a non-native language both for them and for Norwegians. In one sense, it prevents being stigmatized and looking less intelligent or competent because of a non-native accent and positions them as more capable. They also talked about the ease of communicating in English in their everyday lives when they go to cafes, restaurants, grocery stores, etc. as most Norwegians can speak English. Working in international environments, they also speak English at work.

> I do not speak any Norwegian. It does not create any problems because everybody speaks English at work. It is an international company. We also have employees from other Nordic countries, from Finland, Denmark, and Sweden. All Norwegians can speak English well, so it is not a problem when I do grocery shopping or go to a café. I haven't taken any Norwegian courses because I don't have any time for it. I have a lot of workload. (M13).

Although she feels comfortable about communicating in English, M13 complains about the fact that sometimes when she returns to Norway from abroad, at the passport control, she is being questioned about whether she will learn Norwegian. As an expatriate who works for long hours and has young children and who will stay in Norway for a limited period, she does not like getting such questions. She feels the pressure about learning Norwegian but does not want to commit money and her limited time to it, knowing that she will be transferred to another country soon. Asking migrants questions about learning Norwegian at the passport control regardless of how long they are going to stay in the country is indicative of the simplifying approach to integration of migrants.

M40 is working as a researcher at a Norwegian university, and he is in Norway for a two-year position, although he is hoping that it will be extended. He expressed his frustration about having received very limited administrative support for the bureaucratic procedures, while hearing countless comments about the importance of learning Norwegian during his short stay in Norway. This implies that while the system does not provide much structural support to the newcomers, there is a discourse coming from various parties about the migrant's individual responsibility to learn the language. M40 sees it pointless to pay for expensive Norwegian courses without knowing for sure whether he will be staying in Norway after two years:

> I am quite busy and spending a lot of time on research applications. I think it will not be a rational use of my time to take Norwegian courses at this point. If I get this grant that I've recently applied and it will be guaranteed that I will be here for four more years, I can take courses. That will also increase my chances to get a permanent position here. I also have a lot of Norwegian friends. I would enjoy speaking Norwegian with them. (M40)

Others who are not sure about the duration of their stay in Norway also talked about their hesitance in spending time and money for learning Norwegian:

> I don't know how long I am going to live here. So, I decided not to invest a lot for it (learning Norwegian). I took one course, the first level… But it is hard to say that I could learn a lot… I communicate in English. I don't have any problems in communication, but there are other things… Like, there are these announcements on the subway and I sometimes don't understand them (M17).

M62 came to Norway to get an MS degree. He is enrolled in a program that is officially offered in English. However, he complains that some of the professors send articles or reports which are in Norwegian and expect them to do projects having read those documents. The university offered them a basic Norwegian course which he passed successfully. However, he finds it impossible to understand those documents after taking a basic level language course. He currently tries to prepare those school projects by getting help from his Norwegian classmates or using google translate. As he came to Norway for a program in English, he interprets it as a violation of his rights as a student.

Another implication of a temporary stay in Norway is regarding the decision about their children's education. In some of those cases where the parents thought of their stay in Norway as temporary, they preferred to keep their children at private schools where the language of instruction is English, or another language (German, French, etc.) in a few cases. As

Norwegian is not a language that is spoken in many countries, they preferred an education in the lingua franca or in another language that is widely spoken, thinking that it will provide their children better opportunities in the future. Some of these families are very mobile and they lived in different countries before coming to Norway, and they think it probable that they may move to another country in the future. However, regardless of their own life situation and the plans for future, they mentioned being questioned about their decision to keep their children at a private school and hearing generic comments about the egalitarianism of Norwegian public education. For these families, English has been the main language they have used in their contacts with the other people, while they speak Turkish at home. However, changes in the duration of their stay in Norway also brought changes in their decisions regarding their children's education:

M41 came to Norway with her husband and two kids in 2011. She is a professional working at a big Norwegian company. When they first came to Norway, they were thinking that they would live in Norway for a short period and they enrolled their children at a private school, as they did not prefer them to have their education in Norwegian. However, when it became clear that they would live in Norway longer, they transferred their kids to a public school after discussing it with them and getting their approval. After taking Norwegian courses for a semester, their children started their education at a public school. As a family, they are happy about these decisions they have made, as both are now fluent in Turkish, Norwegian, German, and English, and they are actively using all of them. She stresses that at home, it is Turkish they speak, as it is very important for her that her children speak Turkish well.

The Will to Preserve the Mother Tongue

Those of them who have Turkish spouses/partners stated that they speak Turkish at home. Some of them also emphasized that they find it important that their children can speak Turkish as well as Norwegian. As their children are surrounded by Norwegian in their everyday lives, they do not worry about their fluency in Norwegian, but they are rather concerned about their Turkish. M55, for instance, thinks that Turkish is a difficult language to learn after childhood, so she always speaks Turkish with her daughter at home. From her conversations with the teachers at the barnehage, she knows that her daughter's Norwegian is improving every day, so she does not worry about it. M68 mentions their conversations with a pedagogue who suggested them to speak Turkish with their children, as competency in the native language also facilitates the learning of Norwegian. As people who have transnational lives, living parts of their lives in Norway and Turkey, they consider it crucial that their children can speak Turkish. This was a common emphasis in the statements of most of my respondents.

Some of my respondents also shared their worries about preserving their own competence in Turkish. M19 feels concerned that the longer they live in Norway, the more limited their Turkish becomes. The Turkish people they interact with in Norway have all been in Norway for long periods and she worries that they all speak an outdated version of Turkish now. These worries demonstrate how crucial it is for her, and many others, not only to preserve but also to develop their Turkish language skills. Nevertheless, while they consider it important, some of them feel that Norwegian society reacts negatively when they hear them speaking Turkish with other Turkish people. They gave examples of those cases in which they have felt that their right to preserve their native language and transfer it to their children is not recognized in Norway.

> I haven't lost my Turkish identity. They seem to be annoyed when we speak Turkish and question us about why we don't speak Norwegian. I also speak Norwegian. I speak Norwegian with Norwegian people. Language is a medium for communication. The crucial thing is how I can express an issue to the other person. I also speak English when there is a need for it. (M34).

M23 also considers what she names "the silent pressure" as one the most negative things about her life in Norway. She feels that there is increasingly a more negative attitude towards people who speak foreign languages. When she speaks Turkish on the subway or in other public places, she feels uncomfortable because of the looks on people's faces. She thinks that the increasing emphasis on integration of migrants is a major factor behind this negative attitude towards migrants who speak other languages in public spaces.

Insufficient Institutional Support for Learning Norwegian

As emphasized in the previous sections (and footnote 3), many of these individuals need to pay for Norwegian language courses when they decide to learn the language. This is one aspect of the structural situation in terms of learning Norwegian. Additionally, despite the constant emphasis on the importance of learning Norwegian which puts the responsibility on the migrants themselves, my respondents gave examples of insufficient institutional support for it. M36 stated that her daughter is currently fluent in three languages, Norwegian, Turkish, and English, and she is also learning Spanish. However, when she first came to Norway as a child, she had a lot of problems at school. When she first started school, although they, as her parents, warned the school that she does not know any Norwegian, she was not provided extra language classes. Because of the challenges with the language, she became quite and withdrawn at school. Although she was talking a lot at home in Turkish, at school, she did not talk much. At the end of the first year, the school called the parents to a meeting and told them that their daughter had retardation in her intellectual development. M36 protested and told the teachers that they were not interested enough to understand her difficulties in language and were not providing her the support that she needed. M36's general impression was that neither teachers nor administrators took migrant kids or families seriously during that period. However, thanks to her persistence, her daughter was offered extra classes, and the rest of her education went more smoothly.

The Age at Migration

Research shows that there is an age-based constraint on gaining proficiency in a second language (Patkowski 1990). Learning a second language after early childhood almost inevitably leads to non-native accent and a kind of speech which differs from the speech of native speakers (Tahta et al. 1981; Flege et al. 1995; Munro et al. 2006). Consequently, it is not realistic to expect a person who learned a new language as an adult to speak it like a native speaker (Ingram 2009).

For my respondents, the age at which they came to Norway seems to have made an important difference in terms of how competently they can express themselves in Norwegian, their vocabulary, and whether they speak it with a foreign accent or not. M43 compares herself with her three older siblings in terms of their Norwegian skills. She was younger than 5 when they came to Norway, whereas her siblings were older than 12. She finds their vocabulary much more limited than her own and thinks that they cannot express themselves as fully as she can. For those who came to Norway during later stages of their lives, during their 30s and 40s, it became even more challenging to use Norwegian especially in their professional lives. M41 came to Norway in her 40s, after having a long and successful business career in Turkey. For having worked in the same area for more than 20 years, she is used to communicating in English for business purposes. Although she has taken Norwegian courses, she does not want to use Norwegian at work. Her job depends highly on verbal skills and persuading people, and she thinks that she cannot do it competently in Norwegian. Although she was hired as an English-speaking professional, at the beginning of many meetings, she is questioned about why she has not learned Norwegian yet. She finds it offensive and feels uncomfortable.

M8 came to Norway in her 30s after living in different countries. Although she has taken several Norwegian courses and passed high level language tests, she does not feel comfortable using Norwegian while socializing. At work and in her close circles, everybody speaks English with her. However, when she needs to socialize with other Norwegians, she thinks that she cannot really be herself while speaking Norwegian.

> The parents at my child’s school most probably thinks of me as a quite person, as an introvert. Because it is an environment where Norwegian is spoken. Before I figure out how to say what I want to say, the conversation topic changes. I end up saying nothing. (M8).

M9 talks about the language as the biggest difficulty about living in Norway. Although she spends a lot of effort to improve her Norwegian and uses it in her everyday life, she is having a difficult time in finding a job that is in line with her qualifications. She thinks that it is mostly because of the language. When she is invited to job interviews, she speaks Norwegian at those interviews. However, having moved to Norway at a later stage of her life and learning the language as an adult, she thinks that she cannot competently express herself in those interviews:

> I speak Norwegian, I do. But job interview is a totally different thing. They ask many questions, and as I am not competent enough in the language, I start repeating the same things after a certain point… I know that I need to say something that is more sophisticated, but it is not easy to think about a response and formulate it immediately. (M9).

M23 took Norwegian courses right after she came to Norway and got a certificate for B1 level at the end of it. However, when she got a full-time job, she could not take other courses as she did not have time for it. At her current workplace, she is the only non-Norwegian employee, and everybody speaks Norwegian with her. She talks about the experience as overwhelming:

> It is very difficult. I have a lot problems understanding. For instance, during the meetings… Even in a meeting in Turkish, I may need to ask, “Is this what you mean?”, “Do I understand correctly?”. It is important to understand the exact message. When things are in Norwegian, I miss a lot of things… I sometimes start in Norwegian, but then shift to English. Because my Norwegian is too basic for the

> things that I try to express… The worst thing is, when we go to lunch together… Everybody speaks Norwegian and they make jokes. But I cannot understand most of those jokes. (M23)

Hence, as exemplified by the examples above, although learning a new language as an adult comes with some limitations in proficiency in that language, there seem to be unrealistic expectations from migrants in terms of learning Norwegian because of the emphasis on monolingualism.

Speaking Norwegian with a Non-Native Accent

Discrimination based on non-native/L2 accent is a subject that has not received enough attention yet, although it might have important negative impacts on the life chances of those who are exposed to it. As Derwing et al. (2014) argue, societies have become more aware of prejudices based on categories like gender or skin color and spend efforts to protect vulnerable groups against them, while it is not the case for accent prejudice. Individuals who speak with a non-native accent are prone to experiencing stigma (Lippi Green 2011, Gluszek & Dovidio 2010) which can also lead to discrimination in different spheres. Although there are studies about non-native accent discrimination, for instance in the US (Lippi Green 2011, Zuidema 2005), for the Norwegian context, it has not been studied sufficiently yet.

In my study, I have heard comments about this type of discrimination from some of my respondents. M33 came to Norway when he was a child. He got his education, including his undergraduate degree, in Norway and he is currently working at a public institution. He argues that in Drammen, until the last 5-6 years, it was quite difficult to get a public job for a person who spoke Norwegian with a foreign accent. He states that he was one of the very few people with a foreign background who could get a position at a public institution and it was because he does not have a foreign accent. He gives examples of those migrants who have been speaking and writing Norwegian very skillfully but had difficulties when they apply to jobs because of their accents. He explains that in his current position, he is now doing his best to give opportunities to those people who speak Norwegian with foreign accents.

M37 has been living in Norway for a long time now, and she feels herself very competent in Norwegian, although she stresses that she speaks it with a foreign accent. She knows that it is unavoidable to speak a language with a foreign accent if it is learned after adolescence. But she thinks that many people in Norway associate an accent with having recently arrived in Norway.

Norwegian Spouse/Partner and Multilingual Lives

Many of them who have Norwegian spouses/partners had met outside of Norway, and they mentioned English as the main language that they have used in their communication with each other. The ones who have children mostly said their spouses/partners speak Norwegian and they themselves speak Turkish with their children. Therefore, (at least) three languages are being spoken within these families. M3, for instance, said that during her first seven years in Norway, she just spoke English, both at home with her husband and outside. She stated that she started speaking Norwegian when they got divorced and she started a new job which required her to speak Norwegian. However, she always speaks Turkish with her child. Although there are sometimes practical difficulties, they mostly talked about their multilingual lives as enriching for their children.

> When he speaks Norwegian with the kids, I can understand what they are talking about. I don’t miss anything. But my husband does not necessarily understand everything when we speak Turkish. I need to repeat some of them in English for him. Otherwise, there can be problems. But it is good for them that they are learning three languages when they are so young. (M8).

Conclusion

Currently, there is a lot of emphasis on the integration of migrants in Norway in a similar way with other European contexts. Learning Norwegian, the national language of the country, is considered a major component of migrant integration. However, in public debates on learning Norwegian as a prerequisite of integration, the complexity of the transnational lives of migrants and their multilinguistic reality is ignored. As this research demonstrates, migrants stay in Norway for different periods of time and every migrant is not permanent. When they know/think that their stay will be temporary, they do not want to spend a lot of time and money for learning Norwegian. Additionally, if they see it as a temporary stay, they do not want their children to get education in Norwegian thinking about their future. They prefer them to get education in the lingua franca- English or another language that is spoken more widely in other parts of the world. Hence, migrant families make decisions in the light of their plans for future and based on the future interests of their children. However, despite their intentions to stay temporarily in Norway, they face pressure to learn Norwegian. As free language courses are not offered to those who are work migrants coming from outside the EFTA/ EEA/ EU area, these individuals are expected to pay for expensive Norwegian courses themselves. Therefore, the pressure to learn the language puts the financial responsibility on individual migrants. Second, migrants come to Norway at different ages. There are limits to language learning and using it especially in professional lives when people migrate at later stages of their lives. However, there are unrealistic expectations from migrants in terms of language learning regardless of their ages. Additionally, the imposition of Norwegian on these people as the single language they should use is unrealistic and alienating. Third, migrants’ use of language is not limited to the language of the country of origin and the destination country. There are multiple languages in migrants’ lives and many of them see it as a richness that they want to preserve. The pressure to use a single language creates reactions against learning the language. Finally, they see it as a violation of their right to retain their mother tongue when they see reactions against their speaking of the native language. Overall, the monolinguist emphasis in Europe and specifically in Norway both ignores the multilingual reality of migrants’ lives as well as putting unrealistic pressures on them. This is a surprising discovery when considering the EU drive for learning at least two foreign languages at school and in light of the discussion about the popularity of English as the common language for basic communication in Europe (c.f. Odrowaz-Coates 2018, 2019).

References

Augustyniak, A., & Higham, G. (2019). Contesting sub-state integration policies: Migrant new speakers as stakeholders in language regimes. Language policy, 18(4), 513-533.
Basch, L., Schiller, N. G., & Blanc, C. S. (1994). Nations unbound: Transnational projects. Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States, Switzerland.
Blackledge, A. (2004). 2. Constructions of Identity in Political Discourse in Multilingual Britain. In Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts (pp. 68-92). Multilingual Matters.
Blommaert, J., & Verschueren, J. (1998). Debating diversity: Analysing the discourse of tolerance (Vol. 10). Psychology Press.
Budach, G., & de Saint-Georges, I. (2017). Superdiversity and language. In The Routledge handbook of migration and language (pp. 63-78). Routledge.
Burns, A., & Roberts, C. (2010). Migration and adult language learning: Global flows and local transpositions. Tesol Quarterly, 44(3), 409-419.
Carens, J. (2010). The most liberal citizenship test is none at all. How liberal are citizenship tests, 19-20.
Chiswick, B. R., & Miller, P. W. (2015). International migration and the economics of language. In Handbook of the economics of international migration (Vol. 1, pp. 211-269). North-Holland.
Davies, A. (1997). Australian immigrant gatekeeping through English language tests: How important is proficiency. Current developments and alternatives in language assessment, 71-84.
Derwing, T. M., Fraser, H., Kang, O., & Thomson, R. I. (2014). L2 accent and ethics: Issues that merit attention. Englishes in multilingual contexts: Language variation and education, 63-80.
Dick, H. P. (2011). Language and migration to the United States. Annual Review of Anthropology, 40, 227-240.
Esser, H. (2006). Migration, language, and integration. Berlin: WZB.
Farkas K. J., Romaniuk J. R., Mamzer H. (2023). Using multiple lenses to see an invisible group. Society Register 7(3): 21–34.
Flege, J. E., Munro, M. J., & MacKay, I. R. (1995). Factors affecting strength of perceived foreign accent in a second language. The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America, 97(5), 3125-3134.
Gluszek, A., & Dovidio, J. F. (2010). The way they speak: A social psychological perspective on the stigma of nonnative accents in communication. Personality and social psychology review, 14(2), 214-237.
Gogolin, I. (2021). Multilingualism: A threat to public education or a resource in public education?–European histories and realities. European Educational Research Journal, 20(3), 297-310.
Gogolin, I. (2011). The challenge of super-diversity for education in Europe. Education Inquiry, 2(2), 239-249.
Gogolin, I. (2002). Linguistic diversity and new minorities in Europe. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Recuperado el, 17(9), 2006.
Gogolin, I. (1997). The" monolingual habitus" as the common feature in teaching in the language of the majority in different countries. Per Linguam, 13(2).
Goodman, S. W. (2011). Controlling immigration through language and country knowledge requirements. West European Politics, 34(2), 235-255.
Graddol, D. (1998). The future of English. London: The British Council.
Gutekunst, M. (2015). Language as a new instrument of border control: the regulation of marriage migration from Morocco to Germany. The Journal of North African Studies, 20(4), 540-552.
Ingram, P. D. (2009). Are accents one of the last acceptable areas for discrimination. Journal of Extension, 47(1), 1-5.
Joppke, C. (2010). How liberal are citizenship tests?. How liberal are citizenship tests, 1-4.
Kerswill, P. (2006). Migration and language. Sociolinguistics/Soziolinguistik. An international handbook of the science of language and society, 3, 1-27.
Kunnan, A. J. (2013). Language assessment for immigration and citizenship. In The Routledge handbook of language testing (pp. 176-191). Routledge.
Lippi-Green, R. 2012. English with an accent: Language, ideology and discrimination in the United States. Abingdon: Routledge.
McNamara, T. (2005). 21st century shibboleth: Language tests, identity and intergroup conflict. Language Policy, 4, 351-370.
Moyer, M. G., & Rojo, L. M. (2007). Language, migration, and citizenship: New challenges in the regulation of bilingualism. Bilingualism: A social approach, 137-160.
Munro, M. J., Derwing, T. M., & Sato, K. (2006). Salient accents, covert attitudes: Consciousness-raising for pre-service second language teachers. Prospect, 21(1), 67-79.
Norton, B. (2013). Identity and language learning. In Identity and Language Learning. Multilingual matters.

Norton Peirce, B. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. TESOL quarterly, 29(1), 9-31.
Odrowaz-Coates, A. (2018). Soft power of language in social inclusion and exclusion and the unintended research outcomes. Language, Discourse, & Society, 6, 15–30.
Odrowaz-Coates, A. (2019). Socio-educational Factors and the Soft Power of Language: The Deluge of English in Poland and Portugal. Rowman & Littlefield.
Patkowski, M. S. (1990). Age and accent in a second language: A reply to James Emil Flege. Applied linguistics, 11(1), 73-89.
Saville, N. (2009). Language assessment in the management of international migration: a framework for considering the issues. Language Assessment Quarterly, 6(1), 17-29.
Shohamy, E., & McNamara, T. (2009). Language tests for citizenship, immigration, and asylum. Language Assessment Quarterly, 6(1), 1-5.
Stevenson, P. (2006). ‘National languages in transnational contexts: Language, migration and citizenship in Europe. Language ideologies, policies and practices: Language and the future of Europe, 147-161.
Tahta, S., Wood, M., & Loewenthal, K. (1981). Foreign accents: Factors relating to transfer of accent from the first language to a second language. Language and Speech, 24(3), 265-272.
Wodak, R., & Boukala, S. (2015). (Supra) national identity and language: Rethinking national and European migration policies and the linguistic integration of migrants. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 35, 253-273.
Wodak, R. (2013). Dis-citizenship and migration: A critical discourse-analytical perspective. Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 12(3), 173-178.
Wodak, R. (2012). Language, power and identity. Language teaching, 45(2), 215-233.
Wright, S. (2016). Language policy and language planning: From nationalism to globalisation. Springer.
Zuidema, L. A. (2005). Myth education: Rationale and strategies for teaching against linguistic prejudice. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 48(8), 666-675.