



Language as a Key to Society? Perceptions of Language, Belonging, and Responsibility among Migrants in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In Sweden, as elsewhere, migrants' language knowledge has become a debated topic and a cornerstone in restrictive migration policies. In this paper, we investigate how the metaphor 'language as a key' to society is used by migrant language learners and how it relates to the participants' experiences of learning Swedish. The study draws on interviews with 174 migrants enrolled in three different state-subsidized language educational contexts providing tuition in basic Swedish. The results highlight how the metaphor was recurrently used and how it constructed certain time-space relations. It positioned migrant language learners as outsiders to a national imaginary, and the temporal aspects of the metaphor both pointed to what was needed to be done in the present, that is, learning Swedish, and how language learning was associated with future-oriented possibilities. While the migrant students reproduced a simplified discourse on the relationship between language learning and integration, their language learning experiences simultaneously subversively challenged the simplified metaphor.

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'If you are a newly arrived migrant, language is the most important key for entering Swedish society and establishing oneself in the labor market.' This quotation comes from the Swedish government's press release for the announcement of *Swedish from day one*, an initiative to meet the needs of the large number of asylum seekers who arrived in Sweden in 2015 (Fejes 2019), which is one of the educational contexts we focus on in this study. The metaphor 'language as a key' is recurrently used in political discourse as a rationalization of the imagined relationship between language knowledge and integration, where language education for migrants is seen as the main means to foster integration (Simpson 2019a). Indeed, there are high expectations of participation in a language program both among politicians and adult migrants, who link language learning to employability and better life opportunities (Ahlgren & Rydell 2020; Lindberg & Sandwall 2017; Svensson 2023).

The metaphor 'language as a key' is not only employed in the justification of support for language tuition for migrants, but also, and increasingly so, in rationalizing language requirements in the migration process. Over the years, the insight that language knowledge is important has been transformed into a dominant and disciplinary discourse on the duty of migrants to learn the majority language (Milani et al. 2021). This is reflected in the introduction of a formal 'language duty' (Sw. *språkplikt*), stating that migrants depending on income support need to participate in language instruction. The aim is to inform migrants on the importance of language knowledge for enhancing their employability (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2019). Such stricter language policy measures are to some extent based on assumptions that migrants do not make sufficient effort to learn Swedish and become integrated (Dahlstedt & Fejes 2020, see e.g., Rheindorf & Wodak 2020b; Simpson 2019a for a similar argument in the British and Austrian context).

Another example is the introduction of restrictive migration policies and language requirements that emphasize migrants' responsibility for their own integration. While Sweden was long considered having generous migration policies, a temporary law (Law 2016:752) aiming at an EU minimum level was urgently implemented following the unprecedented high numbers of asylum seekers in 2015, when approximately 160,000 migrants applied for asylum (Ålund, Schierup & Neergaard 2017). Temporary residence permits became a rule, and the grounds on which to accord asylum were limited. The restrictive measurements have now become permanent (Elsrud & Lalander 2021). As argued by Flubacher (2023), such accelerated law-making to control migration often coincides with a rise of right-wing populism and discourses on migrants' insufficient language competence, which is framed as a threat to social cohesion and security, calling for restrictive policy measures. Indeed, a cornerstone of stricter migration policies is a range of language requirements (Rheindorf & Wodak 2020a), for instance, in decisions pertaining to residency and citizenship. This has recently been suggested in commission reports in Sweden, which has long been a European exception in this respect (Ministry of Justice 2021; 2023). Such suggestions are motivated by the symbolic value of learning Swedish as 'language is the key to the realization of citizenship' (Ministry of Justice 2013: 177), coupling language education for migrants with migration policies. Following the Swedish general election in 2022, the new right-wing coalition, supported by the nationalist party the Sweden Democrats, aims to push current restrictive migration policies further. Migrants' responsibility to integrate is increasingly accentuated. As formulated in the political agreement between the government and the Sweden Democrats (the

so-called *Tidöavtalet*) as well as in the recently proposed new integration policy in Sweden (Ministry of Employment 2024), integration policy is suggested to be based on what could be called a logic of performance-based deservingness where language competence plays a central role.

By rationalizing free language instruction with statements such as ‘language is the most important key for entering Swedish society and establishing oneself in the labor market,’ the responsibility of migrants to learn the majority language to enhance their integration is concomitantly emphasized. Drawing on interviews with 174 young and adult migrants enrolled in different language programs in basic Swedish, the aim of this article is to examine the way the metaphor ‘language as a key’ is used and how it relates to the participants’ experiences of learning Swedish. We investigate (a) how the participants talk about language as a key for belonging in a national imaginary, and (b) how the importance of learning Swedish, emphasized in the metaphor, is negotiated with respect to both individual responsibility and opportunities for learning.

Several studies focusing on migrants’ language learning experiences show how discourses of ‘language as a key’ are treated as a commonsensical fact (e.g., Ahlgren 2014; Krilova & Lønsmann 2020; Svensson 2023). Despite the widespread use of the metaphor of ‘language as a key’ to society, few studies have previously focused on to what extent and how this particular metaphor is used and negotiated by a large number of migrant language learners in different educational contexts and how the metaphor relates to participants’ learning experiences.

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND BELONGING IN A NATIONAL IMAGINARY

Language has for long played a central role in the construction of a national imaginary. Calhoun (2017: 23) argues that a national imaginary works as ‘an active part in the reproduction of a world organized in terms of nations.’ As a social imaginary, it serves as a ‘bridge between the objectively recurrent and the subjectively enacted’ (Calhoun 2017: 23). Hence, a national imaginary is not just an abstract notion, it is produced and reproduced in everyday practice (cf. Bauer et al. 2023). The idea of one unique and shared standardized language at the core of what brings people together in a geographical space has had a prominent role in the imagination of the nation as a discrete unit. In his seminal work, Anderson (1991) points to how the spread of print media, that is, through daily papers, novels, and the construction of grammars and dictionaries, played an important role in the construction of a shared and increasingly standardized language, which in turn was important for the construction of the nation as an imagined community. Arguably, the linkage between language and national identity has gained saliency in a contemporary era of globalization, mobility, and uprising nationalism (Rheindorf & Wodak 2020a), where language knowledge has become a prerequisite for residency and citizenship in many countries.

At the same time, for migrants, language knowledge plays a central role in the imaginaries of a better future and a desire to belong in a national imaginary. Norton (2013) used the metaphor of *investment* to show how adult migrants’ language learning commitment is driven by an expected future return from learning the majority language, both in terms of acquiring forms of social, cultural, and economic capital and fostering a future identity as part of an imagined community. The notion of investment ties social processes to language learning commitment and aims to go

beyond learner dichotomies such as being a ‘good/bad’ or ‘motivated/unmotivated’ language learner by pointing to learners’ possibilities of having the right to speak and being listened to in various social contexts (Darvin & Norton 2015). In this sense, investment in language learning should be understood with respect to how a learner’s agency and identity are constructed in relation to power relations in the social world and how language learning is motivated by a desire to increase one’s participation and sense of belonging in imagined communities.

Belonging is a multifaceted concept referring to both legal and political structures of enabling a membership in a country and emotional attachments to places and communities (e.g., Yuval-Davis 2011). One dimension is *perceived belonging*, focusing on the recognition or rejection by others (Helay 2019). Angouri, Paraskevaïdi & Zannoni (2020: 110) distinguish between *belonging* and *fitting in*, two concepts that index each other but become salient on different levels. Belonging ‘presupposes a pre-existing time/space/group and because of that it is built on powerful imaginaries’ (Angouri, Paraskevaïdi & Zannoni 2020: 110). Fitting in, on the other hand, is a future-oriented process that is projected onto the newcomer and thus becomes something migrants need to relate to and ‘perform’ in different contexts. It holds an expectation on migrants to become ‘one of us.’ Performing fitting in can also be a strategy employed by speakers in interpersonal encounters to align themselves with dominant discourses and thereby index membership to the majority group.

Previous interview studies have shown how migrants are most often strongly committed to language learning but experience difficulties in finding social venues outside the educational context to practice and develop knowledge in the majority language (e.g., Ahlgren & Rydell 2020; Cooke 2006). Being able to use the target language in various contexts is considered to enhance language learning (e.g., Kozar & Yates 2019). However, migrant language learners often have unequal access to opportunities to use and develop their language in a supportive environment in and outside the classroom (Norton 2013). In her study, Cooke (2006: 61) describes how the participants ‘believe it [learning English] is essential for their wellbeing and success in England, are keen to meet English speakers and practice English, and are extremely frustrated at their limited opportunities to do so.’ In Miller’s (2014) study with adult migrants in the United States, the participants oriented to a preference for positioning oneself as an active agent in relation to early efforts to learn English, even though the participants also contended with constraints encountered. Hence, even if language learners are both motivated and willing to engage in language learning, their learning opportunities can be affected by different circumstances relating to their lives in and outside the classroom, such as access to social networks, housing situation, experiences of racism, or being prevented from working as an asylum seeker (Cooke 2006; Khan 2019; Nordmark & Colliander 2023).

One way that the relationship between language and belonging in a national imaginary is materialized is through the commonly used metaphor ‘language as a key’ to society.

METAPHORS OF LANGUAGE AND BELONGING IN MIGRATION CONTEXTS

The study of metaphors is a vast research area in disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, and literary science. Metaphors are frequent in human interaction and in storytelling for describing and making sense of human experience. A metaphor

is a figure of speech where a word or a phrase denoting one thing is used to convey something else, creating an analogy between two conceptual domains (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Often, a concrete concept can be used to describe more abstract processes, such as ‘learning a language is a struggle’ and ‘life is a journey.’ One of the main characteristics of metaphors is highlighting and hiding, making some relationships salient while obscuring others (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). This makes metaphors pedagogical by pointing out relationships and directions. This is probably also why metaphors are often used in political discourse (e.g., Dahlstedt & Eliassi 2016; Musolff 2004).

Metaphors are frequently used in mediatized debates on migration. Some of them are used highly consistently across different media, such as ‘migration crisis/flows,’ which, as argued by Arcimaviciene and Baglama (2018), point to their ideological nature in creating a negative representation of migrants and a division between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Another study (Chkhaidze, Buyruk & Boroditsky 2021) illustrates that a single-word metaphor in otherwise identical passages in a text could organize how people think about migration. Such results highlight how powerful a metaphor can be.

In cognitive linguistics, metaphors are considered a conceptual tool that structures speakers’ view of the world, providing experiences with meaning (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Musolff 2019). Thus, the focus is not only on explicit uses of a certain metaphor, but also on conceptual metaphors underlying speakers’ reasoning. So, talk about how language knowledge gives access to different social spaces or life opportunities is built on a rationalization where language is conceptualized as a useful tool and a door opener in a metaphorical sense. In this sense, the metaphor ‘language as a key’ relates to the systematic metaphors ‘language as a barrier’ and ‘language as an opener’ (Ahlgren 2020). The concrete element in the metaphor—a key—creates associations to a specific tool leading to a particular door allowing entrance to a building. A key is also only needed when the door is locked. The key metaphor, when used in migration contexts, is thus closely associated with the spatial metaphor of the ‘nation as a home.’

A common type of metaphor is the orientational, based on spatial relations such as ‘in-out’ and ‘central-peripheral’ (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). Talk about ‘language as a key’ to society simultaneously brings other spatial metaphors to the fore, such as being an ‘insider’ or an ‘outsider,’ frequently used in discourses on migration (Dahlstedt & Eliassi 2016; Yuval-Davis 2011). In general, being an insider is more positively coded than being an outsider. The spatial imaginary of insiders and outsiders thus also serves as a social characterization (Gal 2018).

Arguably, the metaphor ‘language as a key’ has both a spatial and temporal dimension as a key leads to a certain imagined demarcated space that those who are considered as outsiders first need to acquire to ‘get in.’ The spatial and temporal dimensions of the metaphor make it relevant to investigate how the metaphor serves as a chronotope in the participants’ accounts. Originally described by Bakhtin (1981) in his analysis of literary works, a chronotope is a time-space configuration (from Greek *χρόνος* (time) and *τόπος* (place)) important in constructing meaning in narratives. Time-space relations are important in humans’ everyday sense-making (Blommaert & De Fina 2017), in students’ understanding of their learning processes (Ritella, Rajala & Renshaw 2021), and in the narrative construction of a nation in relation to the migrant ‘other’ (Bauer et al. 2023). By comparing the language ideological framings of two groups of migrants (high-skilled migrants working in academia and refugees),

Krilova and Lønsmann (2020) discuss how the discourse of ‘language as a key’ is a language ideological framework that is mostly used in relation to refugees or other migrants taking part of state-subsidized programs, where it is a pervasive discourse circulated by both teachers and students.

DATA AND METHOD

The data used in this article has been collected through semi-structured interviews with 174 participants of different ages, from about 20 countries, and with various educational and linguistic backgrounds and reasons for migrating to Sweden. Many of the participants were asylum seekers.

Despite being a heterogeneous group, the participants have in common that they were enrolled in different state-subsidized educational contexts providing basic language tuition, where they were recruited for the study (Table 1). Sixty-one participants were enrolled in the course *Swedish from day one* (SFD1) organized by study associations. The underpinning idea of the course was to make use of the waiting time that asylum seeking is associated with by providing basic language tuition and to give the newly arrived migrants an opportunity to develop knowledge of Swedish society. Due to the open nature of nonformal education, some participants continued to attend Swedish from day one even after continuing studying in the formal language programs. A further 39 participants were enrolled in *Swedish for immigrants* (SFI), a formal language program that is part of the national adult education system. The SFI courses stretch from new beginners’ level up to an intermediate level. Finally, there were 74 participants from *Language Introduction* (LI)—a program in upper secondary school for migrants under 20 years. Apart from learning Swedish, the students in LI do also study other subjects in order to qualify for upper secondary level.

	SWEDISH FROM DAY ONE	SFI	LANGUAGE INTRODUCTION
Types of education	Non-formal	Formal	Formal
Directed toward	Adult asylum seekers	Residence permit holders, aged over 16	Residence permit holders and asylum seekers, aged 16–20 years
Number of participants	61	39	74
Females	31	25	18
Males	30	14	56
Age	20–63	20–53	16–20
Average age of the students	35 years	35 years	18 years
Time spent in Sweden	A few weeks–4 years	1–12 years	1–5 years
Number of countries of origin represented	15 (Five African, eight Asian, and one European/ North American countries)	13 (Five African, five Asian, and five European/ North American countries)	16 (Five African, seven Asian, and four European/ North American countries)

Table 1 Overview of the participants in the three educational settings.

The interviews were carried out by seven researchers in eight municipalities. We understand the interview discourse as co-constructed between the participants (Talmy 2011). Social positions in terms of ethnicity, professional status, gender, and age play a part in the relationship between interviewer and interview participant (Warren & Vincent 2001). As university-affiliated, Swedish-speaking, and born in Europe (six in Sweden), the interviewers may have been perceived as representatives of the Swedish society. In addition, the fact that all interviews were conducted at the local schools may have reinforced their institutional character, thereby emphasizing the distance to the participants. This can have impacted how the participants interpreted the interview situation, the answers given, and how they represented themselves. At the same time, the institutional setting may have increased the participants' trust in us as interviewers. We were introduced by the teachers/facilitators, and many of the participants spoke about their teachers/facilitators in positive terms and as supportive in different ways. In most cases, the interviews were also preceded by us being in the classroom as observers, so we were not complete strangers to the participants during the interviews.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Swedish, but the participants could choose to speak English. Twenty-seven participants were interviewed with the support of an interpreter. The participants' use of Swedish as a second language may have restricted their possibility to express themselves. However, many of the participants chose to do the interviews without an interpreter since they wished to practice their Swedish. The study is part of a larger research project and has undergone ethical vetting by a regional review board at Linköping University in Sweden (Ref. 2017/280-31). Prior to the interviews, the participants gave informed consent to participate. The interviews were based on an interview guide focusing on their background, their language learning experiences, and their hopes for the future. Most interviews lasted about 1 hour. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcription was made verbatim with L2 features kept to reflect the participants' way of expressing themselves, but some adjustments have been made for the sake of readability in the transcripts.

Initially, we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2019). For this study, we have focused on how the participants talked about language as a key, rationalizations for participating in a language course, and their opportunities and responsibilities for learning Swedish. These were recurrent themes in the interviews. We consider the participants' accounts as both representations and constructions of experiences and meaning. Analytically, we are interested in both *what* is said and *how* (Holstein & Gubrium 2003). In our analysis, we focus on examples reflecting the larger patterns in our data, and the quotations used in the analysis express ideas that are present throughout the data set. Our approach limits a deeper understanding of individual life narratives, but the breadth of the material, with a large number of interviews collected in different educational context, allows us to illustrate similarities in how the relationship between language learning and integration was conceptualized. We have chosen quotations from two to five participants in each educational context, in order to illustrate similarities among a diverse student group. The quotations have been translated by us. Table 2 gives an overview of the cited participants.

PARTICIPANT	EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT	GENDER	AGE	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	TIME IN SWEDEN
Abdul	Sw. from day 1	M	37	Yemen	Five months
Ana	Sw. from day 1	F	32	United Arab Emirates	3 years
Malika	Sw. from day 1	F	37	Kosovo	Not specified
Kian	Sw. from day 1	M	26	Afghanistan	3 years
Khalef	Sw. from day 1	M	30–40	Eritrea	2 years
Jerome	SFI	M	36	Liberia	1 year
Valid	SFI	M	33	Eritrea	1 year
Umar	SFI	M	53	Syria	4 years
Sarah	SFI	F	22	USA	1,5 years
Nezam	LI	M	19	Afghanistan	2,5 years
Hiba	LI	F	19	Syria	3 years

Table 2 Overview of the cited participants.

Most participants in this study had been in Sweden for a relatively short period of time. Although one might argue that integration and developing a sense of belonging takes time, our emphasis is on how the participants understood the relationship between learning Swedish and integration with respect to the participants’ current position and their initial phase in the migration process.

ANALYSIS

The analysis is divided into two sections. First, we investigate how the metaphor ‘language as a key’ is drawn upon by students in different educational contexts when asked why they were studying Swedish. Then, we examine how the metaphor relates to their learning experiences by examining how the participants negotiate the importance of learning Swedish in terms of individual responsibility for learning Swedish and opportunities for doing so. In our analysis, we wish to point out how the metaphor constructs certain time–space relations by positioning the migrant students as outsiders to a national imaginary and where ‘the promise of language’ mainly lies in the future. At the same time, the metaphor emphasizes the importance of learning Swedish, which constructs the metaphor as an imperative for the present. While the migrant students reproduced a simplified discourse on the relationship between language learning and integration, their language learning experiences simultaneously subversively challenged the simplified metaphor by pointing to the need of social relations and access to various social communities in the present in order to learn the language.

LANGUAGE AS A KEY TO SOCIETY AND A SWEDISH NATIONAL IMAGINARY

In the data set as a whole, the metaphor ‘language as a key’ was used recurrently as a rationale for participating in a language course. The metaphor was also referred to as an institutional discourse, introduced by the teacher: ‘it [language] is the key to society, as my teacher says’ (Valid, SFI). Expectations of what language knowledge

would give access to were sometimes expressed in rather vague terms, such as language being ‘the key to Swedish’ (Umar, SFI). Moreover, Swedish was described as a multifunctional key—‘a key for everything,’ as exemplified here below:

The first thing they taught us, it’s that you should learn Swedish. Because here in Sweden, it is the key to everything. (Ana, SFD1)

... when a newly arrived (migrant) arrives in Sweden, they must be able to go to school to learn Swedish, because language is a key for everything. If you don’t know the language, you can’t make contact with other people, you can’t get a job or get a new friend. So, it is very important. (Nezam, LI)

In the excerpts above, the key metaphor was used together with time–space configurations such as ‘the first thing’/‘when a newly arrived migrant arrives’ and ‘here in Sweden’/‘in Sweden.’ It was also used in accounts where future possibilities are imagined. Adverbs like ‘here’ and pronouns like ‘they’/‘us’ are important in the creation of national narratives and in the discursive construction of who is considered to be an insider and who is considered to be an outsider (Bauer et al. 2023). In line with the key metaphor, language was simultaneously considered a door opener and a gatekeeper (Ahlgren 2020). As stated by Nezam, not knowing Swedish would disqualify him from initiating and sustaining social relations or finding employment. Across the interviews, one common rationale for learning Swedish was the expressed aim of ‘managing on one’s own’ in different social contexts, such as in everyday interactions and institutional encounters (cf. Carlsson 2002; Rydell 2018). The participants thus saw learning Swedish as an important investment for belonging in a national imaginary (Norton 2013), and the reasons were grounded in both present communicative needs and future-oriented hopes.

The capacity of language to serve both as a gatekeeper and a door opener to new possibilities was also made relevant by the younger migrants in the Language Introduction (LI) program, who in most cases did not have a professional background. For these students, becoming eligible for a national program in high school was a primary concern (cf. Hagström 2018). Hiba fled the war in Syria and had at the time of the interview, been in Sweden for 3 years. She studied LI with the aim of pursuing studies at a higher level in the future and nourished a dream of working at a bank or becoming a teacher.

Interviewer: Yes. Can you tell me a bit about why you started to study here at the school?

Hiba: Because I want to study here. I want to study for the future too. I want to study Economics. I like it. [...] I want to learn a lot of Swedish here, because this is the key.

Interviewer: Ok. What do you mean? In what way is it a key?

Hiba: A key to get a job.

In the formal education system, passing language courses opens up new possibilities. To Hiba, Swedish was ‘the key’ to the education system, which in turn would lead to a professional career in the future. Indeed, a certain level of language competence supported by formal certificates is required for entering complementary adult education, vocational training, and higher education. Moreover, proficiency in Swedish is mentioned as a requirement in job advertisements, and more sectors are starting

to use language tests in the recruitment process. These formal qualifications thus became a space of representation, ‘brought into existence by a policy invention’ (Baynham & Simpson 2010: 11), to which the participants often oriented themselves and their possibilities. Without language qualifications, many doors toward continuing education and various professions would remain closed.

In the interviews, learning Swedish was not only ascribed an instrumental value as a door-opener to future life possibilities, but also as a key to a national identity. Although Sweden has one official main language (Swedish), English has a particular status as a common lingua franca, and migrants who speak English can get by quite well in their everyday lives using English. Sarah, a native speaker of English from the United States who came to Sweden to live with her Swedish boyfriend, expressed that she can use English in her everyday life to communicate. However, this was described as unsatisfying. In her rationalizations of why she studied Swedish, she ascribed learning Swedish a symbolic value as a sign of belonging:

I would like to become a Swede, as my boyfriend lives here, and I want to live here. And I talk English with many Swedes, but it doesn't feel ... I don't want to say that it doesn't feel good, but I don't feel Swedish if I don't know Swedish. And I want to. So, I heard that SFI was the best first step, so I started there. (Sarah, SFI)

Sarah displayed a desire to belong to a Swedish national imaginary (‘I don't feel Swedish if I don't speak Swedish’). To this end, learning Swedish at SFI was described as ‘the best first step’ and a feasible path.

In the interviews, we see how investment in language learning was motivated by relational aspects and a hope of belonging, in the sense that language was regarded as a necessity for enabling social contacts, finding employment and to perceive oneself as part of a national imaginary. Throughout the dataset, we see the idea that learning about language (and culture) is something that, preferably, should be done *first*. After that, many good things are expected to come. Thus, the participants’ conceptualizations of ‘language as a key’ constructed the metaphor as a chronotope, bringing particular time–space relations to the fore. The metaphor positions migrants as outsiders to an imagined society if they do not have sufficient language knowledge. This, in turn, accentuated the importance of learning Swedish, and the temporal aspects of the metaphor both pointed to what was needed to be done in the present, that is, learning Swedish, and how language learning was associated with future-oriented possibilities. Despite the heterogeneity among our participants, talk about ‘language as a key’ was done in a strikingly similar way.

Talk about ‘language as a key’ and conceptualizations of language as a door-opener to various life possibilities, thus point out a given direction suggesting that all migrants need to do is to learn the language. In this sense, learning Swedish becomes a form of ‘migrant duty.’ In the following section, we investigate how the importance of learning Swedish, emphasized in the metaphor ‘language as a key,’ is negotiated in the participants’ accounts of their learning experiences.

NEGOTIATING RESPONSIBILITY AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING SWEDISH

In the interviews, the participants stressed the importance of learning Swedish. This was manifested through agent-oriented modalities expressing necessity such as

‘must,’ ‘have to,’ ‘should,’ and ‘need to’ (cf. Miller 2014) coupled with statements of importance. ‘I’ or ‘newly arrived migrants’ were often the active agents in these statements. The participants thus discursively constructed themselves as responsible agents with respect to the necessity of learning Swedish:

I think that if you move to another country and want to live there and start life again, you must fit in as they say, fit in to affect the change that they want. To influence your situation. So if you want to do this, you must learn the language, as it is better to talk to others or go into society. That’s why it’s important. (Jerome, SFI)

I struggle a lot to be in contact with people. I need to go inside, to mix myself inside the Swedish community. That’s why I just decided to go to the school, to learn the Swedish language, to be one of these people. (Abdul, SFD1)

The spatial metaphor ‘I need to go inside society’ points to how the default position for migrants is *outside*, triggered by the fact that migration entails to ‘start life again.’ ‘Talk to others’ and learning the language were coupled with the spatial metaphor ‘go into society,’ creating a link between Swedish-speaking social relations in the present and becoming integrated in ‘the Swedish community.’ Moreover, ‘fitting in’ is described as a duty of migrants, emphasized by phrasings like ‘I need to,’ ‘you must fit in,’ and ‘I struggle a lot.’ The participants’ expressed desire to be part of a national imaginary resonate quite well with current political discourse with an emphasis on migrants’ responsibility to integrate (Dahlstedt & Fejes 2020; Musolff 2019) and how narratives of willingness to integrate become part of a ‘migrant respectability’ (Mulinari & Nergaard 2018). This is also in line with the discursive image of ‘good migrants’ or ‘good citizens’ who adjust to the expectations of the majority society (Abdulla 2017).

Across the interviews, having the opportunity to use Swedish was seen as crucial for language learning. This idea was sustained by both those who had and those who did not have Swedish-speaking social relations outside the educational context. Several participants highlighted their own agency in the process of getting to know Swedes. Kian is an asylum-seeker from Afghanistan who has been in Sweden for 3 years. Kian pictures himself as someone who actively seeks spaces where he can find Swedish-speaking friends:

Swedish friends I found in different places, like church, like the language café ... there are many. But I, myself, ... I try a bit actively in different ways, for instance I have the church, the language café. I try [to be] a bit active, not stay at home. (Kian, SFD1)

This ability to find friends is presented as a personal trait since Kian describes himself as ‘active,’ which is contrasted with ‘stay at home’ (cf. Miller 2014). Indeed, some social venues were described as important for creating opportunities to interact with Swedes. The language cafés were frequently mentioned as an accessible and tangible part of the more abstract notion of society. Importantly, they specifically target migrants. This, in turn, facilitated the performance of a more active agency, as could be seen above. Many participants spoke about how they regularly attended the language cafés as a complement to other educational settings. In migratory contexts, civil society has been shown to play an important role in providing social venues and social networks (Puigdevall, Pujolar & Colombo 2022). Welcoming spaces that are easily accessible,

such as language cafés, religious communities, public libraries and gyms, enabled participants to exert their agency and responsibility for meeting people and using Swedish. Hence, what seemed to be crucial for the participants' language use and language learning was not one type of specific activity or location, but rather that it was perceived as a friendly space that also reduced linguistic anxiety and where they were seen and listened to (cf. Norton 2013; Puigdevall, Pujolar & Colombo 2022).

Although the participants aligned with a dominant 'integration narrative' (Svensson 2023) emphasizing the importance of learning Swedish and migrants' own responsibility to integrate, their accounts simultaneously challenged this narrative by pointing to different obstacles impacting their opportunity to meet Swedes and develop their language through social interaction. Practical obstacles, such as lack of time and a shortage of venues, were mentioned as reasons. The difficulty of encountering Swedes was sometimes described as a sociocultural problem. Khalef, who is from Eritrea and had been in Sweden for 2 years, described Swedes as uninterested in talking to their neighbors or getting new acquaintances:

Khalef: Here are people from Somalia or from other countries. One can make contacts with them. But not with Swedes. Swedes, you could say, are isolated.

Interviewer: Swedes are extremely isolated.

Khalef: Extremely, yes. Because they don't want to. Now I have a neighbor. I live [there] for almost a year. They just say 'Hi', I say 'Hi'. [There] is none who says 'Hi, how's it going?' ... To me that's strange. (Khalef, SFD1)

Khalef finds Swedes 'isolated,' which is confirmed and upgraded by the interviewer's response. The interviewer and the interviewee thus co-constructed a common ethnical stereotype of Swedes, which Khalef positioned himself against. Other participants pointed to the difficulty of making new acquaintances.

Malika is 37 years old, from Kosovo and lives with her sister. She finds it hard to describe how long she has been in Sweden since she has moved back and forth for some time. She describes herself as a communicative person and is keen to learn Swedish. She appreciates the friends she has made in Sweden.

Interviewer: Where did you have the possibility to get to know Swedes?

Malika: I have got to know them ... One of them I have got to know at the fitness center. I just went there to see how the exercise thing works here, how many people there are, I don't know, and also if it's possible to work out seven days a week, for free. I was happy to see what it looks like close up ... and there I got to know the woman, the girl, whatever, in the dressing room. She tried to talk to me about something ...

Interviewer: In Swedish?

Malika: Yes, she talked to me in Swedish. Like: 'Why do you work out? You don't need to'. So I told her that I just came to take a look and then I said that my Swedish wasn't good and she told me: 'You know Swedish very well, because you understand everything I ask you, and I have understood what you have told me ... Have you finished with your exercise?' I said yes. 'Where do you live?' I said there and there. She said: 'I live there too. Let me give you a ride in my car'. I said: 'Great you know

the way'. And then, when we went our separate ways, she asked me if I will come tomorrow and I said: 'I don't know, I can't say'. And then our friendship began. (Malika, SFD1)

According to Malika, she went to the fitness center because she wanted to see if it could be something for her. The Swedish-speaking woman who approached her there did so by focusing on their common interest: 'Why do you do work out?'. In interview discourse, speakers frequently draw on reported speech when narrating life events. An analysis of reported speech can show how speakers position their own agency and responsibility in relation to reported events or goals (Miller 2014; Rydell 2018). Importantly, reported speech should not primarily be understood as 'truths,' but rather as utterances remembered, interpreted, and given meaning (Vološinov 1974). In particular, other-attributed reported speech can point to the importance of others in the speaker's self-perception and how they perceive their own agency. In the extract above, Malika assigned her interlocutor as the one initiating contact: 'She tried to talk to me,' and the one assuming a more active role in the interaction that resulted in their acquaintanceship. As the quotation illustrates, the other-attributed speech designates questions, whereas the self-attributed speech mainly designates answers to the questions. Hence, Malika downplays her own agency in initiating and sustaining the described social interaction. Interestingly, Malika refers to initially having answered that she was there to check out the gym and then added a downgrading self-assessment of her linguistic competence: 'my Swedish wasn't that good.' This was met by her interlocutor's counter-assessment: 'She told me that I speak Swedish very well' which was evidenced by 'you understand everything I ask you.' This negotiation, and in particular Malika's unsolicited negative self-evaluation, can be interpreted as an awareness of the symbolic value ascribed to learning 'good Swedish' (cf. Miller 2014: 138). In this vein, the migrants' language competence is made relevant in the construction of social relations, not only on a political level, as discussed in the introduction, but also at a micro level. Moreover, the woman Malika met at the gym introduced her to her friend, who later also became Malika's friend. Thus, the woman at the gym became 'a stepping stone' (Puigdevall, Pujolar & Colombo 2022) to further contacts.

In sum, the participants constructed language learning as an individual responsibility and at the same time, as dependent on the attitude and actions of others. In the participants' narratives, the abstract notion of society was boiled down to different social relations needed for language learning. In this sense, their experiences challenged the directions highlighted by the metaphor 'language as a key' since the participants constructed society as much as a key to language, as language is a key to society (cf. Carlsson 2002).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, we have illustrated how the metaphor 'language as a key' to society is not only used in political discourse. It is also productive among migrant language learners in all three investigated language educational contexts, both as an explicitly used metaphor and as an underlying conceptualization of the relation between language knowledge and belonging in a national imaginary. Arguably, the metaphor 'language as a key' to society represents a dominant and simplified discourse where society and nation are merged into one (Calhoun 2017).

Despite the heterogeneity among our participants and the institutional differences between the investigated educational settings, there were significant similarities in

how the participants talked about ‘language as a key’ to society. The rationalization of the importance of learning Swedish and how language knowledge was construed as a door-opener to various communities and future life opportunities were expressed in a similar, almost formulaic way. In the participants’ accounts, the metaphor ‘language as a key’ to society served as a chronotope, interconnecting temporal and spatial dimensions and bringing them to the fore. The metaphor positions the migrant language learners as outsiders in relation to a national imaginary that they need to qualify first through language and where the ‘promise of language’ mainly lies in the future. Language learning thus became an important investment for belonging (Ahlgren & Rydell 2020; Norton 2013). This future-oriented emphasis can partly be explained by the fact that the average age of the participants was approximately 35 years in two of the educational settings and 18 years in LI. The spatial aspects were both vertical in the sense that the participants talked about gaining qualifications for future access and in order to create a desired future, and horizontal as language was viewed to enable relations in a variety of social contexts (Baynham & Simpson 2010).

Discourses about ‘language as a key’ highlight migrants’ responsibility for learning Swedish by pointing out a desired direction and desired actions (Svensson 2023). In this sense, talk about ‘language as a key’ also works in a disciplinary way, impacting the present. In the interviews, the participants both reproduced a discourse of the necessity of learning Swedish and their own responsibility for doing so, at the same time as they challenged the rationalizations underpinning the metaphor by pointing to the need for Swedish speaking social relations in order to enhance their language learning. Hence, there is a divergence between the participants’ language learning experiences and the discourse of ‘language as a key’ to society emphasized in political discourse and by the participants themselves. Thus, the participants’ experiences subversively challenge the simplified direction pointed out by the metaphor.

As migration and integration have gained saliency in political discourse and in the light of up-rising nationalism, migrants often need to navigate an environment that is tending to become more hostile toward them (Simpson 2019b). Migrants’ language knowledge has become a contested topic, used as a political instrument of migration control in many European countries and beyond (Flubacher 2023; Rheindorf & Wodak 2020a). As evident from our interviews, ‘an integration through language-ideology’ (Flubacher & Yeung 2016) seems to be a pervasive institutional and educational discourse to which migrant language learners need to relate. Arguably, this dominant discourse does not offer many other positions for migrant students to take. Aligning with such discourse can thus be understood as a way of ‘performing fitting in’ in a new society (Angouri, Paraskevasidi & Zannoni 2020). Thereby, the interviews become an example of how education becomes a site for the reproduction of a national imaginary (Bauer et al. 2023; Karrebæk 2012). Ultimately, talk about ‘language as a key’ can be used to legitimize unequal social relations, distinguishing between those who belong from those positioned as outsiders. The reproduction of the metaphor thus becomes a tool for a symbolic division between ‘us’ and ‘them.’

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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