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**Multilinguals as Others in society &  
academia: Challenges of belonging  
under a monolingual habitus**

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# **Multilinguals as Others in society and academia: Challenges of belonging under a monolingual habitus**

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## **Abstract**

Public discourse in a range of countries has been reported to be characterised by Othering practices that support dichotomies between a national and monolingual “in-group” and multilingual speakers who are constructed as secondary citizens and often associated with special needs, even if they have grown up locally. Less in the focus of analysis is the fact that such patterns are also found in our field, and a closer look at linguistic publications reveals that certain patterns of Othering might be typical or even systemic, rather than exceptional. Exclusionary practices are evident in terminology that continues to reflect a narrow, monolingual view of (ethnic and) linguistic in-groups. Monolingual practices still tend to be canonised as defining the normal, unmarked case, and bilinguals are then assessed against this yardstick in terms of deviations. As a result, they can be erased as native speakers, have their language use analysed through a lens of potential errors and problems, or be excluded from the speaker pool for linguistic analysis. We present examples from different linguistic subdisciplines and discuss language-ideological implications and possible effects on research perspectives and agendas.

## **1. Background**

Multilingualism is the normal condition for contemporary as well as historical human societies (e.g., Grosjean 2010). However, European nation-state building has led to a strong “monolingual habitus” (Gogolin 2002; see also Fuller 2013) that constructs a community of monolingual speakers as bearers of a nation (Ortega 2009, Grosjean 2010, Cook 2016). This erases or exoticises multilinguistic practices and excludes multilingual speakers.

The effects of this exclusion are visible in the public discourse on multilingual speakers, where we find a widespread “Othering” of multilingual speakers, understood as constructing them as members of a social and linguistic out-group (Lamont & Molnar 2002, Dervin 2015). In particular, such Othering is evident for speakers from heritage language backgrounds, that is, speakers who have grown up with an additional language that is not the societal majority language, typically as a result of migration in an earlier generation (e.g., immigrant parents or grandparents). Even if such speakers have been born and raised locally, they tend to be not accepted as belonging to the national in-group, but rather are socially and linguistically excluded.

Such Othering is not restricted to public discourse but is also found in our own practice as professionals working in linguistics and related fields. In earlier accounts, multilingualism and language contact were often regarded as exceptional. Multilingualism was seen as a cognitive problem, or multilingual speakers were regarded as a data problem. The first pattern is illustrated by a quote from Jespersen (1922: 148), who states:

“First of all, the child [ ] hardly learns either of the two languages as perfectly as he would have done if he had limited himself to one. [...] he does not really command the fine points of the language. [...] Secondly, the brain effort required to master two languages instead of one certainly diminishes the child's power of learning other things which might and ought to be learnt.”

This pattern of problematising multilingualism was present all the way to the 1960s (Athanasopoulos 2016), as seen, for instance, in Weisgerber's (1966) claim that early multilingualism leads to mental, cognitive, and moral problems.

The second pattern, seeing multilingual speakers as a potential problem for the data, led to excluding them from linguistic analysis, as evident in the earlier structural linguistic tradition, for instance in Saussure's (1916) focus on an idealised, stable, and implicitly monolingual language system (“forme idéale”) and Chomsky's (1965) assumption of a monolingual ideal speaker-listener.

Since then, the field has moved forward, and today multilingualism is generally accepted as a normal condition of human language in our discipline. Diversity is understood as a central aspect of language, captured, for instance, through approaches to linguistic multi-competence (cf. contributions in Cook & Li Wei 2016), and by such concepts as translanguaging, metrolingualism and others within what Pennycook (2016) called the “trans-super-poly-metro movement” (e.g., Jaspers & Madsen 2019).

This has led to a review of research perspectives, categories, and terminology, including re-evaluations of such concepts as “native speaker”, in particular in second language acquisition (Ortega 2009, Cook 2016, Gudmestad et al. 2021, Shadrova et al. 2021; but see Cheng et al. 2021 for a critique of this concept in psycholinguistics; Tsehaye et al. 2021, Wiese et al. 2022 for heritage language research), and of hegemonic assumptions of monolingualism, standard language, and its links with race/ethnicity (e.g., Rosa & Flores 2017). This also involved the development of alternatives to hegemonic terminology surrounding multilingualism and multilingual speakers. Examples for this are the concept of “(trans-)linguaging” for the use of linguistic resources in multilingual practices (e.g., García 2009), the introduction of the term “new speakers” to replace the notion of second language learners (e.g., O'Rourke & Pujola 2015), or an understanding of new linguistic practices among adolescents as “contemporary urban vernaculars” (Rampton 2010) or “new urban dialects” (Wiese 2013; Kerswill & Wiese eds. 2022), rather than ethnolects.

However, this reflection is far from accomplished, and furthermore, it has been mostly restricted to contemporary sociolinguistics and not spread substantially to other areas of linguistics. The effects of exoticising and problematising of multilingualism still overshadow our practice today, and this also includes sociolinguistic and contact linguistic research. In what follows, we take a closer look at Othering practices not only in the public discussion and educational practice, but also in academia, with a focus on linguistics.<sup>1</sup> We provide critical

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dirim (2016) on such related fields as pedagogics and language didactics.

reflection upon common practices in our own field, and discuss how this might lead to a research bias. As a key case, we focus in particular on the Othering of locally born speakers, that is, speakers who grew up with the national/majority language from an early age, yet are excluded as outsiders. Data, e.g., on labelling, comes from academic – mostly linguistic – publications (including data points from the “trans-super-poly-metro movement”). Since our goal is not to put individual authors on the spot, but rather to support an open discussion and critical self-reflection, we follow common practice for primary data handling by anonymising those citations from academic publications that are used as data points. We present qualitative discourse-analytic, rather than quantitative results since we are not drawing on a comprehensive database of public and academic writing, but use a selection that illustrates patterns we see as problematic.

In the following section (Section 2), we begin with a look at Othering in society and discuss common patterns in public discourse. Against this background, we investigate Othering that is still evident in academic practice (Section 3): we analyse topoi implicit in labelling multilinguals (3.1), the construction of multilingualism as an obstacle (3.2), and practices of approaching multilingualism as a problematic case (3.3) or excluding data from multilingual speakers as noise (3.4). We conclude with an argument for critical reflection of such exclusionary practices in academia (Section 4).

## **2. Othering in public discourse and educational practice**

Public discourse often neglects multilinguals’ language competences, especially concerning their heritage languages. Multilinguals are not framed as such, but as ‘migrants’, members of other nationalities or speakers of languages other than the majority language, e.g. German in Germany. If multilinguals’ language competences are addressed at all, this mainly happens under the frame of insufficient knowledge of German (e.g. *Der Standard*, 15. 9. 2020, GEW February 2014) and the need to support their language competences (cf. section 2.2, Scarvaglieri & Zech 2013). In the following we mainly discuss examples from Germany, but similar Othering practices are found in public discourse in many countries (cf. De Ridder 2010).

### **2.1 Labelling multilinguals in public discourse**

A salient Othering pattern found in many European countries is the labelling of multilingual children or adolescents born and raised in the country as ‘migrants’. This label is not grounded in their personal biography, but in the fact that their ancestors – parents or grandparents – have migrated.

One of the many examples of this pattern is the reporting of the Berlin newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* about the educational success of children in Berlin (22. 3. 2017, *Ungleiche Chancen bei Schulabschlüssen*). The article distinguishes between “German” pupils and “migrants” (*Migranten*) and states that the latter group performs worse in the education system. This observation is based on the administrative category “migration background” (*Migrationshintergrund*): in the article, pupils with a migration background are contrasted with the “German” or “German-speaking” group. Language is thus introduced here as a trait identifying and differentiating social groups, regardless of the fact that the multilingual ‘non-German’ group do speak German as well.

Crucially, the category “migration background” is not restricted to foreign nationals living in Germany, but even includes people who hold German citizenship or are entitled to it. By official definition (Will 2018, Mikrozensus 2019), “migration background” comprises persons who do not hold German citizenship by birth or who have at least one parent for whom that is true. Many who count as having a “migration background” are thus German nationals, born and raised in Germany. Furthermore, in public discourse, “migration background” is used interchangeably with “migrant” to denote people perceived as non-German. This practice was, until recently, even used in government-issued census documents (as confirmed in e-mail communication to us by the federal office). As a result, a lot of children who grow up in bilingual families are labelled as “migrants”. The following example from *Der Tagesspiegel* shows how this is combined with other labelling practices:

“Jamal is a Turk, Maurize a Palestinian Lebanese, Milo a Wallachian from Serbia. They are Berliners with a migration background, born and raised in Kreuzberg and Neukölln [= two Berlin neighbourhoods].”

(*Tagesspiegel* March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015, “Die Kids aus unserem Hinterhof”)

The article first identifies the adolescents it portrays as a Turk, a Lebanese and a Wallachian, and then calls them “Berliners with a migration background”. So on the one hand, they are localised as “Berliners”; on the other hand, they are subjected to Othering, first by being identified as members of other nationalities, then through the use of the “migration background” label. Disregarding their multilingual language competences, the article constructs a non-German group within the community of Berliners whose members have other nationalities and a migration background. This Othering persists, even when, as the text explicitly states, adolescents were born and raised in Germany.

A recent article in the German weekly *Die Zeit* brings up migration background with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic (November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020, “Die Angreifbaren”), demonstrating that the category continues to be applied to new societal phenomena. In the beginning sections, the article quotes an epidemiologist stating that “migration background alone does not reveal a lot” (‘Migrationshintergrund allein sagt nämlich recht wenig aus’) with regard to the spread of the virus. The distinction is thus rejected, and the expert points out that it is rather the “mother tongue or the knowledge of German” that is relevant (‘Wir fragen Muttersprache und Deutschkenntnisse ab, denn das spielt oft eine größere Rolle’). The expert thus foregrounds the importance of language competences. Later in the text, however, the article reintroduces migration background as a factor increasing the probability of economic disadvantage, which is taken to increase the likelihood of contracting the virus. Despite first marking the category as carrying little explanatory weight, the text hence reverts back to it and uses it to explain the spread of the virus, thus contradicting the expert quoted earlier.

This shows how labelling and Othering practices persist even where there is overt criticism of them in the same text. Categorising by “migration background” is not only reinstated, but it is even treated as if it is a risk factor that helps explain the development of the pandemic. It is upheld and applied to new societal phenomena, creating new dimensions of separation and thus further distinctions between social groups. This line of thinking supports a topos – often brought forward by the political right – that sees people with a migration background as the “drivers of the pandemic”, thereby blaming them for the spread of the virus and the resulting health consequences and social-distancing measures (*FAZ* April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021; see also *Bild*, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021; *taz* April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021).

As has already become clear in the previous examples, public discourse frequently combines different labelling practices. Members of out-groups will not only be ascribed a “migration background” or be called migrants, they will also be categorised as foreigners, “German-Turks”, “German-Arabs” (cf. Wiese 2012, 2015) or Muslims. Reporting on “Antisemitism among Muslim Youth” *Der Tagesspiegel* (April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017), for instance, distinguishes between “German” adolescents and those of “Arabic descent” or “Turkish descent” and assigns much higher rates of antisemitic attitudes to the latter. The fact that both groups grew up in Germany and thus acquired those attitudes there, is not discussed. The distinction between a German in-group and a non-German (“Turkish”, “Arabic”, “Muslim”) out-group is again used to introduce differences between the groups and to assign problematic values and behaviour to the out-group. This practice permits the externalisation of social problems by laying blame on the ‘Others’.

Similar labelling practices are applied to officially recognised (so-called ‘autochthonous’) linguistic minorities. In Germany, the former prime minister of the state of Saxony was publically labelled a non-Saxon (*Der Tagesspiegel* January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018; *Neues Deutschland* January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2018), even though he holds German citizenship and he, like his ancestors, was born and raised in Saxony. This label was not related to immigration, but to him belonging to the Sorbian minority (an officially recognised minority living close to the Czech border) that speaks the Slavic language Sorbian as well as German. In this case, the fact that a person is part of language group different from the perceived monolingual German in-group led to them being labelled as non-German. In Switzerland, the leader of the biggest national party SVP said of the francophone minority that they had “always had a weaker awareness [‘Bewusstsein’] for Switzerland” (*Basler Zeitung* February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014), which was generally understood as labelling non-Germanic Swiss as ‘less Swiss’ (*Tagesanzeiger* February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014). These examples show that Othering practices are not restricted to multilinguals perceived as belonging to immigrant groups. Instead, they can be applied to anyone seen as a non-member of a narrowly defined linguistic in-group.

## **2.2 Constructing multilingualism as a condition of special needs**

Besides labelling multilinguals as Others, public discourse and educational policies also frequently construct multilingual competences as a condition of special needs. Public discourse in Germany, for example, constructs a connection between the percentage of children with “non-German languages of origin” in schools and difficulties of language development for all pupils (statement by the teachers’ union GEW, February 2014), between the share of children from “immigrant families” and the need to support language development in schools (*Zeit*, February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014) or between pupils in primary schools from “non-German families” and problems of the educational system in general (*Der Tagesspiegel*, December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013). This pattern of associating multilingual children with special needs and educational problems has a parallel in educational practices, as we show with two examples. The first concerns the construction of different groups of students in educational politics. In Germany, all federal states have developed indicators that construct “disadvantaged students” or “students with special needs”, and schools with larger groups of these students receive special financial support, usually in the form of additional teaching staff (Morris-Lange 2016, Tillmann & Weishaupt 2015). Indices in some federal states are based on the social index of a school district, some are based on the background of the pupils themselves, some mix these two dimensions. The indicator of “migration background” very often plays a role here (e.g. in the federal states of Hamburg, Bremen, Saxony, or Bavaria). Another indicator that is frequently used when constructing disadvantaged students is that of parents’ economic status,

determined on the basis of what families are exempt from paying for schoolbooks and educational materials (“learning materials exemption”, ‘Lehrmittelbefreiung’, short: Lmb). The state of Berlin has chosen to use the Lmb index and “non-German language of origin” (‘nichtdeutsche Herkunftssprache’, short: ndH) as indicators in order to identify schools with larger groups of disadvantaged students. The second is defined as follows: “Pupils of non-German language of origin, regardless of their nationality, are children whose language of communication within the family is not German”<sup>2</sup>. According to the regulations, then, one language of communication is the default norm; some schools also apply a weaker version and only ask for the dominant language of communication in the family. If parents name a language other than German, then the child enters the school's statistics as an “ndH pupil”. Schools with more than 40% ndH students get more teacher hours, as do schools with more than 40% Lmb students.

Interestingly, the ndH quotas of all Berlin schools are published as part of the school portraits on the web pages of the Berlin Senate Department of Education<sup>3</sup>, and these pages are what parents resort to when they choose a school for their children. Lmb quotas, on the other hand, remain under wraps. The Berlin Senate of Education thus not only excludes the use of more than one language of communication in the family, but constructs the “non-German” family language as a central problem indicator for schools (Vasilyeva 2013). This strengthens the tendency towards segregation in Berlin schools, which, according to Fincke & Lange (2012), happens in large part as a result of decisions parents make on the basis of ndH-figures.

The second example from educational practice concerns diagnoses of speech-language impairment (SLI) or selective mutism (SM), a condition where children are unable to speak in institutional surroundings (like schools or hospitals), even though they do talk at home with parents and siblings. Multilingual children are often over-diagnosed for these conditions. For the Netherlands, for instance, it was found that “bilinguals constitute 14% of the mainstream school population, but 24% of those in special schools for children with SLI”, while without misdiagnoses, those percentages should be equal (Armon-Lotem et al.: 2015: 1; cf. Lindner et al. 2014: 59). In Germany, 20% of monolingual children between the ages of 5 and 7 are assessed as showing language-related anomalies (‘Sprachauffälligkeiten’), whereas the share for multilingual children varies between 30% and 70% in different federal states (Chilla & San 2017: 177). Other studies find diagnoses of “language deficits” for 8.7% of monolingual German children, but much higher rates for “bilingual children speaking Turkish (57.5%), Arabic (68.8%) and Eastern European languages (47.2%)” (Gagarina et al. 2020: 87).<sup>4</sup> Multilingual immigrant children are also significantly over-diagnosed for SM, at rates of 3 to 13 times higher than non-immigrant children (for a survey see Toppelberg et al. 2005).

Taken together, these examples illustrate how public discourse treats multilingualism as a problematic challenge and as a condition for special needs and that, correspondingly, multilingual children are significantly and systematically over-diagnosed for language-related development impairments.

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<sup>2</sup> Bundesland Berlin, Verordnung über den Bildungsgang der Grundschule (Grundschulverordnung - GsVO) vom 19. Januar 2005, § 17 Besondere Förderung für Schülerinnen und Schüler nichtdeutscher Herkunftssprache  
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.berlin.de/sen/bildung/schule/berliner-schulen/schulverzeichnis/> (25.06.2021)

<sup>4</sup> The fact that there is a considerable amount of variation between these numbers in our estimation points towards the methodological difficulties of assessing children’s language capabilities and diagnosing SLI at these ages.

### 3. Othering in academia

#### 3.1 Othering through labelling in academic practice

Patterns of Othering through labelling that are evident in academic writing are not substantially different from those found in public discourse: labelling practices in academia often exclude multilinguals from linguistic and national in-groups and mark them as Others. Perhaps this should not be surprising since researchers are, of course, part of the societies they live in, and as such are influenced by public discourse and participate in it. However, it is surprising – and somewhat disconcerting – to see how widespread such practices are in our field. We found them in publications across different perspectives, subdisciplines and research domains, including contact linguistics, heritage language research, language acquisition, grammatical analysis, and sociolinguistics (including from the “trans-super-poly-metro movement” mentioned in Section 1 above), and also in related fields of sociology and of education. Geographically, our examples come predominantly from research in Europe, but we also find data from North America and Australia.

As mentioned in the introduction, for our discussion we anonymised all sources. The reason for this is two-fold. For one, we use the literature as data points here, hence authors are treated as speakers and accordingly anonymised through speaker codes. Second, we hope that anonymisation will make an open discussion possible without putting individual authors on the spot, which we believe would be beside the point since these are widespread practices. In this context, let us point out that examples also include two quotes from our own earlier publications. Speaker codes identify the discipline (L – Linguistics; S – Sociology; E – Education), speaker number within a discipline (L01, 02, ... S01, ...), and publication year.

In our data, Othering through labelling falls into three main, interrelated strands: (1) Othering with respect to territorial belonging constructs geographic Others; (2) Othering with respect to national group membership constructs national Others; (3) Othering with respect to linguistic ownership constructs linguistic Others. These strands closely follow patterns of Othering in public discourse, where we found geographic Others constructed, for instance, through labels of “migration background” and “migrants”, national Others through labelling as “Turk” etc., and linguistic Others through labels of, e.g., “non-German language of origin”. In what follows, we discuss such patterns evident in our own professional practices as linguists. We look at each strand in turn.

#### *Othering with respect to territorial belonging: constructing geographic Others*

Labelling practices falling in this strand construct children and grandchildren of immigrants as geographic Others, although they are locally-born (and non-mobile). In some cases, a *migrant status* is perpetuated over several generations, with speakers labelled as immigrants, rather than locals. In other cases, a *foreign origin* is perpetuated for later generations, with speakers labelled as originating from other countries, rather than from the country of their birth and upbringing. We can identify two topoi here:

- Topos 1 “**Perpetual Migrants**”: Multilinguals are migrants.
- Topos 2 “**Not from Here**”: Multilinguals have a foreign origin.

The first topos is evident when multilingual speech communities are described as “immigrant populations” (L01/2019), and when locally-born speakers are labelled as “migrants” (S01/2014) and set apart as “migrant peers” (L19/2009) of monolingual local speakers. Rather

than being acknowledged as first or second generation locals – or indeed just locals – they are labelled as “second” or “third generation (im-)migrants” (L01/2019, L03/2020, L06/2020, L10/2017, L11/2013, L16/2011, L19/2009, E02/2017), or as coming from “migrant families of the second or third generation” (E01/2020).

The second topos manifests itself when foreign “home countries” (L01/2019) or “countries of origin” (L05/2013, E02/2017) are postulated for locally-born speakers, who are characterised, e.g., as of “Turkish origin” (L19/2009) or of “Moroccan” or “Turkish descent” (L07/2014, E02/2017) or as having “foreign roots” (S01/2014). Adopting a perspective of the speaker, multilinguals are described as “living abroad” (L06/2020) even when they have lived in the same country all their lives.

Taken together, this kind of labelling foregrounds an ancestral migration event in the family history and applies it to a generation that has not participated in it, making them new arrivals in the country of their birth (Topos 1), and constructing them as aliens whose home is not the country they live in, but the sending country of those earlier generations in their family history (Topos 2).

#### *Otherring with respect to national group membership: constructing national Others*

Labelling practices in this strand construct multilingual speakers as members of a foreign out-group or establish dichotomies between them and the local in-group. The following two topoi are associated with this:

- Topos 3 “**Foreign Nationals**”: multilinguals are Turks, Chinese, ...
- Topos 4 “**Not Our People**”: multilinguals are not German, Dutch, ....

Topos 3 is evident when speakers who were born and grew up in, e.g., Germany, the Netherlands, or Australia are labelled “Chinese”, “Greek”, “Turks”, “Moroccan”, “Albanian”, or “Surinamese” (L01/2019, L02/2013, L07/2002, L07/2014, L12/2008). In some cases, similarly to the “Perpetual Migrants” topos, there is explicit reference to the fact that speakers are already the second generation living in the country, but instead of, e.g. “second generation Dutch/Australian”, they are labelled as “second generation Chinese/Greek” etc. (L01/2019, L13/2019).

Feeding into Topos 4, locally-born multilingual speakers are contrasted to an in-group of, e.g., “Dutch” or “German” children or adolescents who are characterised as monolingual (L04/2017, L07/2002, L17/2008, S01/2014, S02/2017). This restricts local belonging to monolingual speakers and demarcates multilinguals as outsiders. Especially in the context of the Netherlands, an additional opposition pair sometimes used here is that of “autochthonous” vs. “allochthonous”, which terminologically restricts belonging to one group, marginalising the second group as “allo-”. While this is in keeping with census terminology, associating this dichotomy with monolingualism vs. multilingualism supports further Otherring of multilingual speakers.

Taken together, these topoi feed into a narrative that sets multilinguals in contrast to the national in-group and casts them as members of another nationality. Especially in the context of European nation states, this constructs an alien speaker group that is excluded from local belonging.

*Otherring with respect to linguistic ownership: constructing linguistic Others*

Labelling practices within this strand deny multilingual speakers ownership of the languages they speak, even if they grew up with them as a family language or as the dominant language in the society they are born into. In our data on this, we observe two topoi:

- Topos 5 “**Not Native Speakers**”: multilinguals are not native speakers of Spanish, Dutch, ...
- Topos 6 “**Not of Our Language**”: multilinguals are not German-, ... speaking

Topos 5 is evident through labelling that constructs only monolingual speakers as native and contrasts them with bilinguals. In heritage language research, this is evident when differences between “native speakers and heritage speakers” or deviations of “heritage speakers from native speakers” are investigated (L01/2019, L14/2018), thus denying native-speakerhood to bilinguals who acquired the language from birth. The other side of the coin is evident when bilinguals are contrasted to “native speakers” of the majority language that they speak in addition to their heritage language (S01/2014). Taken together, this kind of labelling denies bilingually grown up speakers native-speakerhood for both of their languages.

In Topos 6, this is taken a step further for the case of the majority language, excluding bilinguals from its speaker base altogether. Such Otherring is evident in a paper constructing German university students with a “migration background” who went to school in Germany (and usually were born and have grown up there) as “non-German speaking students” (L09/2010). This might look like an extreme case, and it certainly seems to be less frequent than Topos 5. However, the paper in question is not a fringe publication, but a contribution to a well-established handbook where this obviously remained unnoticed throughout the reviewing and editing process, which underlines the normality of such terminology in our field.

*Integration of topoi in different strands*

Relating to public discourse on language and belonging in the wake of European nation states, Bommes & Maas (2005) describe a “counterfactual ideology” of ‘one country, one people, one language’. Our findings indicate that this nexus is not restricted to the general public and “lay” discourse: results reveal labelling practices in academic writing that construct multilingual speakers as Others with respect to territorial belonging, national membership, and language ownership, mirroring the trinity of country, nation, and language. Figure 1 illustrates this integration of the three strands and the topoi feeding into them.

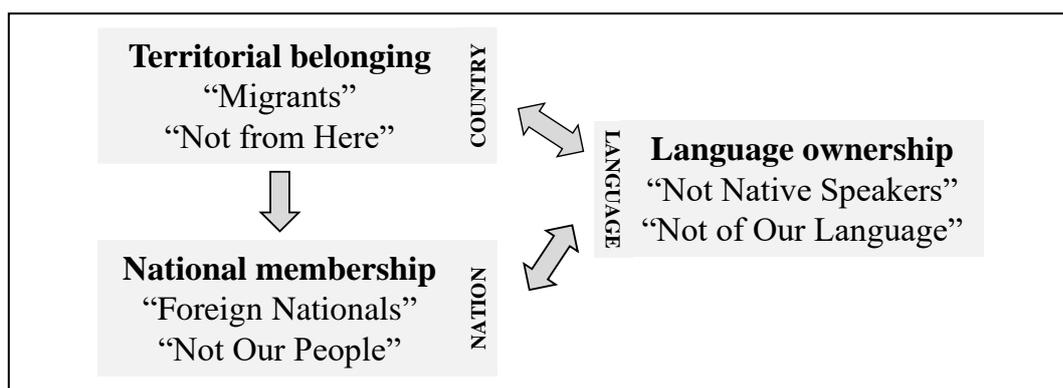


Figure 1: Otherring of multilingual speakers through labelling practices in academia

Avoiding such labelling practices is not only important from the point of view of scholarly terminology. The Othering implicit in such labelling also affects our research perspective. If multilinguals are constructed as Others, this can lead to a problematic research bias. In the literature, we find some indication for this in different areas:

- (1) doubts on majority language competences: e.g., young, multilingual speakers using new urban dialects (or urban vernaculars, see above) are characterised as speakers with “incomplete mastery of the dominant language” (L19/2012) or as speakers who need to practice the standard variety in order to “become valuable co-designers of our society” (L08/2013);
- (2) a primary association of noncanonical patterns with multilingual speakers: e.g., monolingual speakers using such patterns are characterised as secondary users who “adapt to the language of adolescents with migrant background” (L04/2017);
- (3) the interpretation of noncanonical features in multilingual speakers as outside majority language grammar: e.g., patterns found in multilinguals are characterised as normally not found in the majority language including its “colloquial and/or regionalized varieties” (L16/2009) or as “deep interventions in the structure of autochthonous” language “in its standard and nonstandard forms” (L02/2013);
- (4) an erasure of majority language practices in multilingual speakers: e.g., speakers are characterised as using, in private domains, the heritage language almost exclusively and encountering few “members of the majority culture” in their daily lives (L01/2019), and when a locally-born speaker claims L1 ownership of the majority language for their community, this is qualified as “interestingly for him, ‘our first language’” (L13/2019).

Such statements are in and of themselves not an indication of a research bias. However, they were made without any empirical backing, which suggests that they were considered self-evident, or at least not in need of further evidence. At the same time, there is in fact empirical evidence casting doubt on the assumptions listed above (e.g., empirical results pointing to register differentiation and majority language competences of speakers of new urban dialects, to matching noncanonical patterns in monolingual speakers, and to an often habitual use of the majority language in several domains of family communication). This points to a possible implicit bias in line with the Othering evident in labelling practices which can have negative effects on our research.

### **3.2 Constructing a clientele in need: the field of German as a second language**

In section 2.2, we discussed examples from public discourse, educational policies and diagnostic practises where multilingualism is constructed as a condition of special needs. This, too, has parallels in academia. A pertinent example is the field of “German as a second language” (‘Deutsch als Zweitsprache’, short: DaZ). DaZ is concerned with the study, diagnosis, and promotion of the acquisition of German as a second language that builds on a different first language. It thus focuses on a specific constellation of multilingualism, namely one where multilingualism is brought about by the successive acquisition of another language after the first.

DaZ as an academic field originates from the period of the first ‘guest worker’ immigration to Germany in the 1970s. The German economy experienced an economic boom in the late 1960s, and the demand for labour exceeded domestic resources. As a result, workers from Southern Europe and North Africa were recruited in large numbers. Initially, it was planned that these so-called ‘guest workers’ would stay only for a few years, but it soon became clear that the need for labour continued, and the companies did not want to let their trained workers leave again. Consequently, the workers were invited to settle for good, together with their families. This resulted in something that the German educational institutions were not prepared for: they had to develop measures of support for school children who did not speak German yet (Menk 2000). From this need, the academic field of DaZ developed as an applied linguistic field.

Following its school-oriented origin, a focal topic of DaZ is a particular register of formal, academic German that is presumed to open the doors for social participation (Lange 2020). In principle, there is nothing wrong with this focus. However, the field sometimes seems to develop an operational blindness and treat bilingual young people who are born and raised in Germany as if in need of special language support, ignoring the fact that they do not, in fact, lag behind monolinguals in their competencies in this formal register (Goschler 2017, Haberzettl 2016, Wiese et al. 2022).

A central problem here is the discursive construction of a clientele in need of support. This construction does not ask for acquisition modalities, age of onset and/or current language competencies, it assumes that the bilingual language acquisition of children or adolescents with a “migrant background” is generally a successive one, and it does not distinguish between bilingual children born and raised in Germany and children from newly immigrated families (Riehl & Schroeder 2022).

Through this, a clientele of “DaZ children” (DaZ01/2018, DaZ02/2010) and “DaZ adolescents” (DaZ03/2014, DaZ04/2015) emerges as a “risk group” (DaZ03/2014) with “typical errors” (DaZ01/2018) and, as one of the most widely used introductions in the field puts it, with “insufficient knowledge of German as a second language” (DaZ05/2021:17).

This approach, then construes two groups, one being children and adolescents with full competences in German, the other DaZ children and adolescents. Bilingual children growing up in Germany are subsumed under the second, rather the first group, while the first is reserved for monolinguals. This is very much in line with the labelling patterns of linguistic Othering observed above, and it is reminiscent of the English term “deceptive fluency”, which denies the status of native speakers of English to children born in Britain with South Asian ancestry (Rampton 1995, see also Cole & Graham 2012 for the Canadian context).

This construction is particularly problematic when it is reflected in school curricula for German as a second language (see Steinbock et al. in prep.). For example, the official curriculum for primary schools of the federal State of North Rhine-Westphalia, the largest federal state of Germany, introduces the chapter on German as a second language with a highly simplifying statement, saying that “Special support is required for children whose language of origin is not German and who usually learn German as a second language” (Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 2008: 14), thereby suggesting to teachers that all children with German as a second language face linguistic challenges.

One aspect of this miscategorisation is the persistent notion that the acquisition process and/or the linguistic difficulties that Germany-born ‘DaZ children’ and ‘DaZ youngsters’ have, can be explained or understood by recourse to their first language. Thus, manuals explaining to teachers the “mother languages” (DZ06/2014) of their bilingual students, even naming these languages “foreign” (DaZ07/2012), continue to enjoy great popularity, and linguists who should know better (including the author of these lines) gladly participate in producing them.

### **3.3 Approaching multilingualism as a problematic case**

Linguistic research investigating “heritage languages” and their speakers is another area where multilinguals have often been perceived as exhibiting some sort of deficiency. In the literature from this field, we find terms such “vulnerability / resilience”, “attrition”, and “incomplete acquisition” to describe the dynamics of heritage languages. Such terms suggest a perspective that is deficit oriented, focussing on aspects of heritage speakers’ grammar that are interpreted as lagging behind those of monolingual speakers, rather than the development of novel patterns. Such wording is reminiscent of the semilingualism controversies in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Edelsky et al. 1983, Oksaar 1984, Martin-Jones & Romaine 1986, Cummins 1994, MacSwann 2000, MacSwann et al. 2002). In other words, as we saw above for the field of DaZ, heritage speakers are set in opposition to monolinguals, and their grammar is described as deviant.

While critique towards this attitude has been expressed in earlier literature, this ideology persists in the field. However, we note that nowadays more and more researchers in this area have started to acknowledge that such terminology, along with assessments of heritage speakers’ competences against a monolingual standard norm, may be misguided. In particular, there have been calls to acknowledge heritage speakers as native speakers (Rothman & Treffers-Daller 2014), to see innovation as a possible outcome of linguistic developments that differ from monolinguals (Montrul 2016, Polinsky 2018), and to reconsider assumptions of incomplete acquisition (see Kupisch & Rothman 2018).

In this vein, one could explore reasons why the language of heritage speakers differs from that of monolinguals from a positive, multilingual perspective. For instance, differences in heritage speakers’ language use can be due to the fact that they are proficient in some, but not all registers of the heritage language, see the discussion on repertoires in Blommaert & Backus (2011). The picture of vulnerability painted for heritage grammars might hence be due to analyses that ignore register-specific patterns. Once register knowledge is taken into account, we might see more parallels with monolinguals, changing our view of heritage speakers, see e.g. Rothman (2007) and more recently Wiese et al. (2022). Register variation also highlights that monolingual grammars are not free of variation either, and once this aspect is taken into account, heritage grammars need no longer be perceived as deficient or vulnerable, but can be acknowledged as dynamic.

Secondly, the language of heritage speakers might differ from that of monolinguals due to processes of internal language change. For a long time, a widespread pattern in heritage research has been that if the language in the heritage country (the sending country of the first, immigrant generation) changes, this is taken as a healthy sign of normal language change, whereas if the language of heritage speakers (that is, subsequent generations in the new country) changes, this is regarded as a sign of vulnerability or errors.

This kind of perspective contributes to the Othering of heritage speakers. Acknowledging that heritage speakers have a grammar, and that this grammar is internally consistent, is an

important step towards overcoming a monolingual research bias. We feel that not only such terms as “incomplete acquisition” have to be abandoned, but also descriptions that view heritage speakers as being “vulnerable” or making “errors” and measuring their “native-like” attainment. Heritage grammars should not be compared to the monolingual baseline in order to identify deviations, but to investigate variability, innovation, and change within native grammars.

### **3.4 Excluding multilingualism as noise**

A lot of recent work on multilingual speakers makes use of experiments where multilingual speakers are compared to monolingual controls. In the majority of these studies, the comparison again takes the perspective of error and vulnerability or lack of proficiency and L1 interference. An exception here is the discussion of the cognitive advance of bilinguals, where bilinguals are found to carry out controlled processing better than monolinguals, see for example work by Bialystok and colleagues (2004). Cognitive control aside, though, typically multilingual speakers are viewed as lagging behind monolingual controls.

Against this background, psycholinguistic studies on specific grammatical phenomena often exclude speakers who do not come from a monolingual family, even for the majority language, which is highly dominant in societies with a strong monolingual habitus. The reason behind such practices is typically to avoid interference. For instance, an experiment on German passives excluded bilingual speakers (LX/2019), presumably out of concern that bilingualism might influence the way speakers process passives, e.g., bilinguals might be slower than monolingual speakers. However, once we abandon the notion that the monolingual native speaker is the sole model for language acquisition and competence, it is not clear why such speakers should be excluded, since they should just be regarded as part of the normal speaker range. Accordingly, this sampling bias, and others related to it, has lately been criticised in the field. For instance, Speed et al. (2017) offer a critical assessment of traditional psycholinguistic studies: “psycholinguistics—a discipline whose major goal is to understand the mental representations and processes underlying human language use—must strive to be representative of the whole of humanity. It must not leave aside neglected populations (e.g., sign language users, bilinguals, aphasia patients, etc.), or culturally diverse groups.”

Along similar lines, Andringa & Golfroid (2020: 139-140) discuss the sampling bias in applied linguistics and point out that: “As Ortega (2005) has poignantly argued, our sampling choices not only create problems for generalizability, but also pose ethical dilemmas. Our science may not provide answers to questions for a vast majority of language learners.”

Such calls resonate with our concerns in this paper: if we continue Othering and excluding multilingual speakers, we do not only further contribute to such a lack of generalisability, but also perpetuate ethical dilemmas of discrimination and marginalisation.

## **4. Conclusions: why we should practice what we preach**

In this paper, we have looked at practices that exclude multilinguals from the ‘normal’ in-group of speakers and construct them as social and linguistic Others. In particular, we looked at such Othering rooted in European nation-state building with its key ideology of ‘one country – one nation – one language’. This ideology has led to a strong monolingual habitus

in most European countries and those based on former European settler colonies (e.g., the USA or Australia), challenging multilinguals' right of belonging.

We showed that multilinguals are constructed as Others not only in public discourse, but also in academia, in particular in linguistics, and a closer look revealed that certain patterns of Othering might be typical or even systemic, rather than exceptional.

For public discourse, we discussed examples illustrating two main patterns of Othering: (1) multilinguals are labelled in a way that perpetuates a “migrant” or “foreigner” status for subsequent, locally-born generations and excludes multilingual speakers from the national in-group, and (2) family multilingualism is constructed as a deviation from the normal state and as a criterion of special needs in educational contexts.

Our analysis of academic writings revealed a number of similarities to these patterns from public discourse, pointing to Othering practices across linguistic subdisciplines and neighbouring fields:

*Multilinguals as geographic, national, and linguistic Others.* Widespread labelling practices in academia exclude multilinguals from linguistic and national in-groups and mark them as Others: we identified three main, interrelated strands that involved recurring topoi constructing multilinguals as Others with respect to (i) territorial belonging, (ii) national group membership, and (iii) linguistic ownership.

*Multilingualism as an obstacle.* In second language research, multilingualism is often still constructed as an obstacle: for the example of the field of ‘German as a second language’ (DaZ), we discussed the discursive construction of a support clientele with insufficient knowledge of German, with far-reaching and problematic effects on educational policy and practice.

*Multilingualism as a problematic case.* In heritage language research, our results support recent calls for a more positive, multilingual perspective on heritage speakers: we critically discussed practices that assess bilinguals against a monolingual standard norm, guided by concepts of “vulnerability” (vs. “resilience”), “attrition” and “incomplete acquisition” for heritage speakers’ languages.

*Multilingualism as noise.* Psycholinguistics and applied linguistics have been characterised by an implicit notion of the monolingual native speaker as the key model of language acquisition, processing, and use, and we join recent demands for more inclusive practices in the field.

Taken together, such findings suggest that we should target the Othering of multilinguals not only in public discourse, but also in our own professional practice. Given that multilingualism is acknowledged as a normal condition of human language in our field, this calls for us to practice what we preach. Based on our findings, we contend that such Othering, based on labelling practices, deficit perspectives, and methodological biases, should be critically reflected upon and reassessed in academia, and in particularly in linguistics.

We argued that this is also important because such marginalisation and problematising of multilinguals can lead to a problematic research bias. For one, we primarily find what we look for, and might miss out on important evidence about multilinguals’ language (including register distinctions and majority language competences). Second, we can only gain an

incomplete and seriously tilted picture if we exclude multilinguals from our data base (cf. also Lohndal et al. 2019): if we are interested in human language, then evidence from multilingual speakers should systematically be part of (psycho-)linguistic analysis, inform grammatical description, and feed into our understanding of linguistic architecture.

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