1 Introduction

"I have not yet been confronted with racism, thank God, but sometimes, but very rarely, I have felt that I am also a foreigner," summarised Corina Matei from Romania during her interview with us. The 47-year-old office worker made these comments when she reported an experience of accent-related discrimination. Corina's statement points to the sometimes-subtle forms of racist discrimination that we have repeatedly encountered in our qualitative research with people from Central and Eastern Europe who live and/or work in Austria. A number of recent publications have dealt with racism and racialisation processes in relation to 'Eastern Europeans' in Western European countries (see e.g. Kalmar 2023; Krivonos 2022, 2023; Lewicki 2023). However, interviewees from our own research rarely described incidents of discrimination explicitly, in which case they were usually portrayed as exceptions and/or were normalised. In particular, some interviewees denied being affected by racism (sometimes vehemently), as illustrated by the quote above. According to Essed (1988), the denial of (racial) discrimination is sometimes a coping strategy for racialised people. In a recent publication (Scheibelhofer et al. 2023), we also reflected on the extent to which this may be related to our own research practice, which takes place in the context of racialised power asymmetries. Importantly, our current paper furthermore assumes that language and language skills play a decisive role in this context, because language-related discrimination can conceal racist discrimination (see e.g. Dirim 2016; Piller/Takahashi 2011b). Using examples from our research practice, we draw attention to how racism manifests itself in language-related exclusion processes and which language-specific mechanisms (re)produce inequality in the labour market and in access to welfare state benefits. In doing so, we refer to three research projects that investigate the accessibility of welfare state benefits (AMIGS[1] and TRANSWEL[2]) on the one hand and the phenomenon of 'deskilling' (DEMICO[3]) on the other. Our analyses focus on EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe who live and/or work in Vienna.

1.1 Discrimination in access to welfare state benefits and the labour market

Studies show that intra-EU migrants face considerable barriers to accessing welfare state benefits (Seeleib-Kaiser/Pennings 2018; Regös et al. 2020; Scheibelhofer et al. 2020; Scheibelhofer/Holzinger 2018; Ratzmann 2022, 2018a, 2018b), with Ratzmann (2018a, 2018b, 2022), among others, emphasising that socially constructed language barriers play an important role. She states that job centre employees perceive language as the main obstacle to both accessing benefits and integrating into the German labour market. Likewise, our previous research findings indicate that language barriers can restrict EU migrants' access to social benefits (Regös et al. 2020; Scheibelhofer et al. 2020; Scheibelhofer/Holzinger 2018).

Language also plays a central role in the social phenomenon of deskilling,[4] as seen in statistics that clearly shows its disproportionate effect on migrants. For example, 26.8% of the affected labour force in Austria were non-Austrian citizens (number for 2019, Labour Force Survey of the Microcensus), which is almost three times the share of employees with Austrian citizenship (Titelbach et al. 2021). People with foreign educational credentials who immigrated from a non-EU country were nine times more likely to be affected by deskilling than Viennese people whose parents were born in Austria (numbers for 2022, City of Vienna 2023).

There are several contributing factors that may lead to migrants' downward occupational mobility. Besides objective differences in qualifications and their non-recognition, this downward mobility is also affected by a lack of social networks, the need for low-skilled work in certain sectors or even hidden discriminatory elements (e.g., the devaluation of educational and professional experience abroad). Public discourse and academic literature frequently mention the role of language skills. According to Celia Roberts (2013: 91), language is often overused as an explanatory element for overqualification, but is usually underspecified ('over-used as an explanatory phenomenon and yet under-recognised and under-specified'). Our article addresses this often-

1 Department of Sociology, University of Vienna; 2019–2021, funded by the Jubilee Fund of the Austrian National Bank; see: https://inmi.univie.ac.at/projects/

2 Department of Sociology, University of Vienna; 2015–2018, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF)/ NORFACE; see: https://transwel.org/

3 Department of Sociology, University of Vienna; 2021–2025, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF); see: https://demico.univie.ac.at/

4 For the purpose of our study, we define deskilling as exercising a job that requires a lesser qualification than the level of the highest degree obtained (cf. Cardu 2015).

unquestioned assumption and shows that German language skills in the Austrian labour market do not only have a mediating function (i.e. aimed at conveying content), but also a social function (Bourdieu 1982), which is, therefore, sometimes more about inclusion and exclusion than about conveying information.

1.2 Research on racism, language and Central and Eastern Europe

This article applies a racism-critical perspective to the aforementioned language-related discrimination in the labour market and when accessing benefits from the Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS). Drawing on Gramsci and Hall, we understand racism as a hegemonic relationship (Opratko 2019). Racist knowledge provides meaningful interpretative frames for social inequalities and, like the effects of racism in the form of exclusion and discrimination, is rarely recognised as such, as it is part of the normality of everyday life (cf. Foroutan 2019: 104).

We assume that 'race' is not fixed, but "is created out of continuous and repeated discourses emerging from individuals and institutions within specific histories, political economic systems, and everyday interactions" and that "language and race are mutually constituted as social realities" (Alim et al. 2020a: 1). Consequently, 'race' or 'ethnicity' are socially constructed through processes of racialisation that define a group of people as a natural group through certain characteristics, but also formulate the nature of this group in relation to the own group (cf. Terkessidis 2018: 79). Many theories of racism assume it has a function for societal power relations (El-Mafaalani 2021), with literature repeatedly emphasising the link between racism and capitalism: Racialisation processes legitimise power relations and structural inequalities through the production and stabilisation of differences (see, for example, Bhattacharyya 2018). With regard to 'Eastern Europe,' Lewicki (2023) argues that the racialisation of 'Eastern Europeans' contributes to the political and economic peripheralization of the region and enables precarious mobilities between East and West (which in turn reinforce peripheralization). The homogenising term 'Eastern European' has ambivalent racialised connotations (Lewicki 2023; see also Safuta 2018).[5] In Austria, as in other Western European countries (see e.g. Lewicki 2023), migrants from Eastern Europe have received increasingly negative portrayals in the media and political discourse since their countries' EU accession (2004/2007) and the accompanying opening of the labour market (2011/2014), primarily as a threat to national labour markets and welfare states (Zelano 2018).

Based on these observations, this article makes three connections that received sparse attention in social science literature. First, we focus on the connection between racism and language(s) (for English-language research, see, for example, Alim et al. 2020b; Alonso/Villa Galán 2023; Flores 2021; Rosa/Flores 2017), which has received insufficient attention from German-language social research (exceptions in German-language research include Dirim 2016; Dirim/Pokitsch 2018; Prilutski 2022).[6] Second, we address racism in relation to 'Central and Eastern Europeans,' for which there has been more literature in recent years (for an overview, see Kalmar 2023), but still little in general. Since people from Central and Eastern European countries are usually read as 'white,' language skills and accent play a strong role in these racialisation processes. Third, our analyses explore racial discrimination in welfare state institutions. By examining these three connections, our work adds to the necessary, but still insufficient, interlinking of welfare state and racism research (Biskamp/Scherschel 2022).

As mentioned above, our analyses use data from three research projects (AMIGS, DEMICO, TRANSWEL) in which we were or are involved, which we briefly describe in the following sections. All three projects pursued a qualitative–interpretative research approach based on the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014). More information on the data collection methods and sample is below.

5 In regard to the ambivalent processes of racialisation, Lewicki (2023: 1494) writes: "People from Europe's East are often classified as white, privileged, and 'of Europe,' which some channel into white supremacy. Yet, they are also structurally and geopolitically positioned as inferior Others within." Referring to a "European racial triangulation," Krivonos (2023: 1513) describes migrants from 'Eastern Europe' as "situated at a distance from both and Black/Muslim racialisation, which simultaneously valorises and devalues them as non-workers or workers for low-paid service economy."

6 Most literature dedicated to approaching linguistic diversity has been written in regard to the school context. Following Gomolla and Radtke (2009), studies have demonstrated that institutions build upon monolingual expectations, thereby transforming migration-related multilingualism into a problem (see e.g. Dirim 2015; Draxl/Holzinger 2016; Brizić/Hufnagl 2016; Brizić 2022).

The next two sections discuss instances of language-related discrimination in access to labour market-related social benefits (Section 2) and in the labour market (Section 3) that we identified in our data. The final section discusses the extent to which these can also be understood as instances of racist discrimination.

2 Language barriers in accessing labour market-related social benefits[7]

The empirical AMS data that informed our analyses were collected as part of two research projects (AMIGS and TRANSWEL). We primarily conducted problem-centred interviews (Scheibelhofer 2008; Witzel/Reiter 2012) with AMS employees (N=24) and with migrants from Hungary (N=8). In addition, we made ethnographic observations (Spradley 2009) at regional offices and analysed texts from the research field (e.g., correspondence, forms, information leaflets, publications and AMS web presence).

The research results make it clear that the AMS is an organisation that is designed to be categorically monolingual. The rarely questioned prioritisation of German is legitimised by its status as an 'official language' in Austria. However, no uniform top-down policy could be identified with regard to language(s) and speaking (for details, see Holzinger 2023: 8). The institution's monolingual orientation is largely (re) produced (despite ambivalences and contradictions) through everyday institutional practices and habits and mediated by societal—but also organisationally shared—ideas and ideologies about language.

The essentially monolingual orientation of the AMS is at odds with the heterogeneity of clients' linguistic repertoires, which leads to difficulties and problems in counselling practice. However, since there is no uniform institutional concept for handling communication problems, the interacting parties (counsellors and migrants) must deal with them on an individual level.

2.1 Manifest and symbolic barriers

Consistent with other findings (e.g. Ratzmann 2018a, 2018b, 2022; Regös et al. 2020; Scheibelhofer et al. 2020), our analyses show how institutional language practices and the language regime lead to linguistic discrimination in access to social benefits. Our empirical data revealed both symbolic and manifest language barriers (Holzinger 2020) that can hinder access to benefits from the AMS. Manifest barriers include, above all, the fact that the AMS hardly provides any interpreters and only offers very limited multilingual material (including online). The problematic reliance on lay interpreters was also evident. In our research, migrants often reported feeling misunderstood by AMS counsellors, which could create obstacles in accessing benefits. In line with previous studies (e.g. Baran/Holmquist 2019; Codó 2008), our interviewees found it problematic that besides the lack of available multilingual information, there was rarely any written informational material (even in German). When there was, it often used complex language, which requires a high level of legal literacy (i.e. reading competence with regard to legal texts).

Our data also points to symbolic barriers which are closely interwoven with manifest linguistic barrier in practices: Without legal basis, knowledge of German implicitly functions as a symbolic exclusion criterion. Although none of the interviewed AMS employees explicitly advocated this, colleagues held the belief that basic knowledge of German is a prerequisite for AMS benefits entitlement. As office manager Karl Metzler reported to us, "but of course there are attitudes in the organisation that say: Well, if you want something from us, then you have to speak German. Yes. I can also understand that, yes."[8] His statement reflects nationalistic arguments in favour of restricted access to public services and illustrates how symbolic exclusion processes take place by devaluing clients as 'illegitimate speakers' (Bourdieu 1982).

Our data includes several cases where migrants were denied the right to speak due to their (supposedly) insufficient German knowledge. Lajos Bánkuti, age 49 and from Hungary, was affected by obvious discrimination. He had worked on construction sites in Austria for several years, but spoke little German. When he wanted to register as unemployed, he was denied this right by a receptionist, who sent him away using harsh language and referred him to the Hungarian labour office: "She told me [...] to leave. She told me to go home, to Hungary. And I said, why should I? I said: I've been here for five years and that's it. [She] said, 'Pfft, Hungary,' and threw my papers away." (Lajos Bánkuti)

7 This passage is largely based on my dissertation (Holzinger 2023) and previous publications (Holzinger 2020; Holzinger/Draxl 2022, 2023; Scheibelhofer et al. 2021).

8 All mentioned interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

Although Lajos' sister, whom he asked for help and who is more proficient in German, was able to solve the problem, his case vividly illustrates how some applicants can be denied access to their social rights because they are not recognised as legitimate German speakers (see also Scheibelhofer/Holzinger 2018). The example also paradigmatically illustrates the intersection of different dimensions and categories of discrimination. Lajos Bánkuti's story exemplifies how discrimination based on nationality, linguistic competence and, possibly, socio-economic status are almost inextricably intertwined.

While this was an overt example of discrimination—Lajos Bánkuti was explicitly denied the right to speak and therefore apply for social benefits to which he was entitled—symbolic barriers can also operate on an implicit level, causing migrants to remain silent and consequently not stand up for their rights. Symbolic language barriers may work through an internalisation of power relations (Bourdieu 1982): Speakers who perceive themselves as insufficiently competent in the legitimate language anticipate (symbolic) sanctions and are ashamed of their language skills. Hence, they are more likely to remain silent, feel less confident when dealing with authorities, be less likely to file complaints or even perceive themselves as less entitled and, consequently, tend to waive their rights and claims.

2.2 The social construction of language barriers

Language barriers are not 'natural' and objective, but arise in the context of certain structural conditions. Our AMS data reveals a de facto rejection of institutional responsibility to facilitate linguistic communication and sometimes explicitly shifts responsibility to clients. This externalisation of responsibility is evident in an information letter that is handed out to clients at regional AMS offices when communication difficulties arise. In 20 languages, this two-page letter requests the client to be accompanied to their next appointment by someone with a 'good knowledge of German' at their own expense (information letter from the AMS Vienna, as of 01/2016). The institution thus assumes and simultaneously demands that the clients be responsible for resolving communication difficulties.

The absence of a coherent institutional response to linguistic diversity challenges at the AMS places significant weight upon counsellors' discretion for handling societal multilingualism. On the one hand, this means that clients are dependent on goodwill and accommodation. Our data indicates that many consultants employ creative strategies to solve communication problems, compensating for the lack of a coherent institutional strategy with a range of individual multilingual and multimodal strategies (e.g., sketches, [digital] translation aids, their own [first or foreign] language skills or language mediators).

However, the data clearly shows a discrepancy between the AMS employees' sometimes-high personal commitment and clients' experiences of (linguistic) discrimination. This discrepancy can largely be explained by organisational constraints that ultimately produce language barriers: Besides the absence of a coherent institutional strategy for heterolingualism and the de facto rejection of institutional responsibility for enabling linguistic understanding, heavy time constraints, high case numbers and a lack of written (multilingual) information transform societal multilingualism into a problem for both counsellors and clients. Beyond instances of individual discrimination, the institutional level that is therefore decisive for experiences of inequality, which in turn is embedded in the larger societal context.

2.3 Legitimising the dominance of the 'official language, German' through powerful discourses on language and integration

Internal organisational and political–societal discourses are highly relevant when approaching linguistic heterogeneity. Against the backdrop of welfare-related transformation processes, austerity measures and reforms in the sense of New Public Management, activation discourses (Lessenich 2015; Penz et al. 2017; Penz et al. 2017; Soysal 2012) proved significant in our data. These discourses emphasised the personal responsibility of jobseekers—in our case, also in relation to ensuring linguistic understanding. Diversity discourses were also identified, which—following a neoliberal logic—promote a superficial appreciation of diversity without addressing social inequality (see, for example, Bührmann/Schönwälder 2017; Flores 2019). Discourses that simultaneously propagate language as a measuring instrument and the key to integration in a monolingually conceptualised nation state are also discernible in our data (Busch 2013; Dirim 2021). These discourses articulate language ideologies that see migrants' linguistic homogeneity and assimilation as indispensable to the local community (Cooke/Simpson 2012). In the context of the AMS, these discourses are

especially apparent concerning the 'official language, German:' The interviewed AMS employees reproduced an image of the organisation as a fundamentally monolingual institution that legitimises German through its unquestioned status as the 'official language' of the Austrian nation state. The insistence on German-language counselling is often portrayed as necessary to migrants' labour market integration as well as being a pragmatic, supposedly apolitical approach to multilingualism. This perspective does not perceive, e.g., explaining something to a client in a language they better understand than German, as a successful way of transferring information that ensures understanding. Instead, relying on other languages than German is problematised with regard to an assumed 'education to learn German,' as demonstrated in the following interview passage:

"I say, information is all well and good, but it doesn't help for life here and it certainly doesn't help with integration. Unfortunately, I'm a realist, so my heart is more on the left, quite far to the left in fact, but I just see the need for it. Because it completely isolates an area of society due to the language barriers that they build for themselves, and we encourage that." (Bernhard Schmid, counsellor)

In this passage, the counsellor expresses the fear that the AMS could even reinforce language barriers by offering multilingual services and thus contribute to the disintegration of society. Like many of our interviews, this passage reflects paternalism and the unquestioned assumption that pressure must be exerted on the unemployed for them to actively work on improving their employability (in this case, work on their German-language skills). Interviewees used similar arguments to express criticism of translation services, describing them as "double edged" (Bettina Hartmann, regional office employee) or "counterproductive" (Bernhard Schmid, counsellor), because clients would "eventually stop trying so hard" (Bettina Hartmann) and this would support "people's laziness" (Bernhard Schmid). By ascribing an educational and symbolic function to client communication, clients are denied personal responsibility and initiative. Hence, these practices and ideologies remain unquestioned in terms of their relevance for fulfilling the AMS mandate, which is constituted as a 'service provider under public law' and is responsible for advising and placing jobseekers, but also for calculating entitlements to financial support.

Another argument used to legitimise the insistence on German at the AMS is the alleged risk of "massive attempts at appropriation" (Karl Metzler, head of a regional office): Several interviewees reported that clients would sometimes try to instigate multilingual employees to disregard the legal framework and give them preferential treatment due to a (supposedly) shared natio-ethno-cultural affiliation. Communication between client and counsellor in a shared minority language was presented as a threat to the counsellor's professionalism and the dignity of the office. Likewise, it was associated with a loss of control on the institution's part and expresses a fear that it is no longer 'the counselor' and 'the client' who are facing each other in the respective roles, but two 'compatriots' whose (linguistically uncontrollable) interactions are potentially subversive and dangerous. This fear also partly motivates the resistance to changes in institutional language practices within the AMS and the strong rejection of questioning German as the only legitimate (official) language. For example, in 2017, there was "a lot of headwind" (Theresa Lenz, head of department) among employees and managers against establishing an initial counselling centre for persons entitled to asylum and subsidiary protection that explicitly offered multilingual counselling. Those who insisted on German being the only official language of the AMS did not only mistrust clients, but were also suspicious of multilingual employees 'solidarising' with clients and no longer being controllable by the AMS department manager. (cf. Holzinger/Draxl 2023: 9)

The data thus illustrates the complexity of language-related barriers to accessing social benefits. In the language regime of the AMS, which is characterised by the absence of a consistent communication strategy and the individualisation of communication problems, institutional language practices are mostly negotiated informally and individually. However, language-related processes of inclusion and exclusion are not limited to accessing welfare state services. Therefore, the following section shows findings from another research project that deals with migrants' experiences in the Austrian labour market and at work, which examines the role of language(s) and forms of language-related discrimination.

3. Language-related discrimination in the labour market

Language-related discrimination and the internalisation of power relations have emerged as a decisive factor in deskilling processes, which our current DEMICO project investigates

The qualitative–interpretative project examines the social construction of the 'deskilling' phenomenon among highly qualified migrants living or working in Vienna. As part of a qualitative panel, interviews were conducted over a period of two years about participants' job search and labour market experiences. The population of interest are mobile citizens from Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU during the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargements. We interviewed 27 people in a first wave, who are currently being contacted for follow-up interviews in a second research cycle (seven follow-up interviews to date). This data is supplemented by interviews with employees from institutions or associations who encounter deskilling in their everyday work (five people so far). The interpretive interviews (Scheibelhofer 2023) follow a multilingual research approach; they are conducted in German, English—or with interpreter support in Romanian, Czech or Hungarian.

Like the AMIGS and TRANSWEL projects, the role of language(s) in DEMICO goes beyond the mere communication of content. Analysing the interviews in the context of a thoroughly multilingual working environment makes clear that languages play an important role in inclusion and exclusion processes and that language-related discrimination can be effective even when language skills or accent do not hinder communication. The internalisation of power relations is also significant, as we will show below.

3.1 Multilingual working environment

Although our sampled described German as the most important language in the Austrian labour market, taking a closer look at the interviewees' AMS working context revealed that the Austrian labour market is far more multilingual than its notion as a monolingual German would suggest.

On the one hand, some respondents described an "English-speaking bubble" in certain areas (Zsofiá László, 33, from Hungary): Several interviewees use English as their working language (mostly at international companies, especially in the IT sector and in the scientific field). On the other hand, multilingual practices were present at most jobs, regardless of whether the primary working language was English or German—whether it was due to the companies' inter- and transnationality or the multilingualism of colleagues and/or customers.

However, when analysing the multilingualism described above, there were recognisable language hierarchies, which were closely related to societal power relations: For example, multilingual skills can sometimes be used as a resource and seen as an advantage (e.g. for interpreting services or relationship building and communication with international clients). However, applied language skills (in the interests of the company) were not often compensated in monetary terms, even if they involved additional work. In the literature, this phenomenon is referred to as the "decommodification of language" (Alonso/Villa Galán 2023) and is linked to the prestige of languages.

Nevertheless, German holds a dominant position in the labour market and its knowledge represents a clear advantage. As a Czech interviewee, Lukas Vacek, described: "it's not a must always but it's a big plus." When searching for a job or looking to leave a current employer for a new one, success is much more likely for those with at least intermediary German language skills. German is also seen as an advantage when building relationships (with customers and colleagues), in informal communication, as well as in smaller meetings—even if English is the official company language.

3.2 Contradictions between official and unofficial language policies

Our data showed discrepancies between the official company language and unofficial, informal practices, which can lead to processes of exclusion: On the one hand, job advertisements often list higher language levels than necessary for job performance. Therefore, language skills that seem neutrally formulated as a basic job requirement can act as an exclusion criterion without any objective basis. This is sometimes intensified by the fact that—although the AMS offers German-language courses—they only fund those above B1 in exceptional cases. On the other hand, language can also have an exclusionary effect when German knowledge is not officially required for the job, but de facto plays an important role in everyday working life, both informally and unofficially.

This is illustrated in the case of Lukas Vacek, a 32-year-old lawyer from the Czech Republic. At the time of the interview, he had been working for an international company in Austria for over three years. Soon after being hired, he reported noticing a differentiation between Austrians and non-Austrians—mainly with the help of linguistic practices. Although English was the official company language, meetings were often held in German (at least the smaller, department-level

ones). Although company policy was to hold meetings in English, speaking German at the department level was legitimised by the fact that most meeting participants were German native speakers. Older employees were sometimes unwilling to speak to Lukas Vacek or his colleagues in English, which he experienced as marginalisation. In his interview, he also made it clear that he felt disrespected by both his colleagues and the company, and was paid less than he deemed to deserve. Lukas Vacek asserted that he was disadvantaged by his inadequate knowledge of German. However, he was cautious to avoid seeing this as racist and repeatedly relativised the importance of perceived discrimination, locating it purely on a linguistic level and expressing his understanding of monolingual nation-state exclusion mechanisms ("And I do get it, it's your country and it's polite to know your language"). Lukas Vacek made experiences of exclusion through linguistic practices 'his' personal (emotional) problem: "Sometimes it feels uncomfortable for me but […] no problem." By contrast, we did not interpret Lukas Vacek's experiences as an individual problem, but as an experience of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1982), which manifests itself in linguistic practices and which we also found in other interviews.

3.3 Accent-related discrimination

While Lukas Vacek's story illustrates a form of relatively overt marginalisation, our interviews also revealed subtler forms of marginalisation— even amongst interviewees who were very proficient in German. Above all, having an accent was repeatedly described as a professional barrier. For example, Klara Blažková (from the Czech Republic, 32 years old, who came to Austria as a doctoral student in German studies, but dropped out of her studies and worked in a hotel, among other places) said:

> *"Ah ... I might have that forever, I have the fear uh, of the language barrier because of my accent and I think to myself, uh doesn't it bother them? Is it alright? But uhm I think to myself on the other hand, I have the education, I can do it, I can communicate, but still I have it in my head. [...] It's really an issue for therapy, no one has ever told me that my German is terribly bad, yes. [...] In my head there is always the feeling of a language barrier in quotation marks, it's more difficult, but in practice it has never shown."*

This fear of speaking , of making mistakes, but also a certain shame due to one's own accent, were addressed in several interviews. In doing so, interviewees only rarely referred to specific examples where they were explicitly confronted with their mistakes or their pronunciation by others with. Rather, interviewees repeatedly emphasised the contradiction between a lack of concrete negative experiences ("in practice, it has never shown") and the experienced discomfort of speaking. Most interviewees portrayed this as an individual problem of poor self-confidence or as a general problem of being non-native speakers. However, our data indicates that our target group (from Central and Eastern Europe) was also affected in a specific way. For example, Patrik Procházka (35 years old, from the Czech Republic), who works in a company's sales department, described customer conversations on the phone:

> *"It can be a barrier right, because I can imagine if ah one Austrian manager or an owner of the company ah picks up the phone and there's a person with apparent, with some even Eastern European accent, then probably it's not the first very best first impression."*

These comments show how interviewees perceived accents as an identifying feature, as a sign of belonging. In particular, an Eastern European accent was mentioned as a disadvantage. Some Romanian interviewees reported that they considered themselves lucky because their accent is rarely identified as Romanian or sometimes confused with an Italian accent.

These examples show that interviewees internalised a linguistic norm (of an idealised native speaker), which thus becomes effective and powerful. Although the two above examples concern anticipated or expected discrimination, they are nevertheless indicative of existing societal power structures that can lead to actual experiences of discrimination. For example, Corina Matei (47 years old, from Romania), who was working in an Austrian company's data control department at the time of the interview, reported that she was once explicitly rejected at a job interview over her accent:

> *"[...] at one job interview, they told me, well your accent and your German is not good enough for the office. [...] they were also looking for Romanian skills, German, Romanian and English and yet they said my German— my accent is so strong. [...] Unfortunately I can't erase my accent [both laugh] Was—I don't think it's an issue in my current job, because there are already enough foreigners there and they are looking for employees with the knowledge or the skills, the accent isn't necessarily an issue, and I understand everything, I can write, so they are looking for qualified employees, not necessarily that they can speak perfect German. [...] Because Vienna is a*

metropolis with many different nationalities and so on. [...] But small companies [...] want Austrians [...] in the application, in writing, I wrote without mistakes—without spelling mistakes and yes, when I was looking or speaking it wasn't so great. [...] I'm not, I haven't been confronted with racism yet, thank God, but sometimes but very rarely I have felt that I'm also a foreigner."

In her statement, Corina Matei's experience points to the super-diverse multilingual context that explicitly seeks the jobseeker's multilingual repertoire. However, Corina's spoken German skills, which were not completely flawless and were associated with an accent by the employer, ultimately represented a barrier to accessing the desired position. Nevertheless, the passage also shows that this barrier does not apply equally to all contexts: Corina Matei ultimately found a job at a company that she described as placing more importance on professional skills and technical expertise than "speak[ing] perfect German." This interview passage exemplifies that language (here, in the form of the accent) functions as a marker. Corina Matei portrayed being marked as a "foreigner" as indelible. Nevertheless, she emphasised, like Lukas Vacek above and other interviewees (not mentioned in this article), that she does not perceive experiences of exclusion based on language as racist. We, on the other hand, argue that it can be insightful to look at our data from a critical perspective of racism and to specifically examine the (re)production of raciolinguistic difference through discourses and interactions. This strengthens our understanding of how racism is perpetuated and legitimised and how it materialises in structural barriers for racialised subjects to access social, economic and symbolic capital (cf. Alonso/Villa Galán 2023: 3).

4 Linguicism and racism

Our examples from all three projects show that language-related exclusion processes take place that hinder people's access to social benefits and the labour market in Austria, which the literature refers to as "linguicism." Nguyen and Hajek (cf. 2022: 214) broadly define linguicism as a collective term that characterises the entire spectrum of linguistic discrimination (including in connection with race, ethnicity or social class).[9] The previous sections have shown that linguicism can be realised openly and directly through language regimes and speech practices by excluding people with certain linguistic repertoires from communication (e.g. by holding meetings in a language that not all participants can understand or speak, or by not providing interpreters and translated documents at the AMS). We also identified subtle exclusionary practices in our data, where the importance of language skills and practices goes beyond communication. Our findings suggest that while language skills have a mediating function in terms of content, they also serve a social function (Bourdieu 1982) that is sometimes more about inclusion and exclusion than about transmitting information. Often, subtle (linguistic) differences make it more difficult to access professional positions and promotion opportunities. Therefore, the role of language in the Austrian labour market goes beyond communication problems, since linguistic discrimination can be effective even if language skills or accent do not hinder communication. Here, the orientation towards a native speaker ideal (Holliday 2018) is especially relevant, which is also internalised by speakers of other first languages.

Some authors conceptualise linguicism as a form of racism that excludes speakers by referring to their language(s) (see Dirim 2016; Dirim/Pokitsch 2018; Prilutski 2022). While we do not assume all forms of linguistic discrimination to be racist, our data highlights that linguistic and racist discrimination are often intertwined (e.g., the example of Lajos Bánkuti described above).[10] Linguistic discrimination can sometimes mask racist or ethnic discrimination: Piller and Takahashi (2011a: 591–592) emphasise that linguistic discrimination is "often a commonsense proposition, and it 'just happens' that non-standard speakers […] usually happen to be minority members". This was evident regarding the language regime described at the AMS: Those who experienced exclusions and access barriers due to the institution's monolingual German-language orientation were also largely affected by racialisation processes and racist discrimination.

9 „[L]inguicism is an umbrella concept that can characterise the full range of linguistic discrimination issues, including those related to race, ethnicity, social class, language variation, marginalization and injustice." (Nguyen/Hajek 2022: 214)

10 Bourdieu (1982) and early research on linguistic barriers (e.g. Bernstein 1977; Labov 1977) referred primarily to class-specific language varieties.

4.1 Accentism and Raciolinguistic Sensemaking

Most of the interviewees from the DEMICO project rejected the idea (sometimes vehemently) that they were affected by racism (Scheibelhofer et al. 2023). On the other hand, they frequently discussed experiencing disadvantages due to their language skills or accent, which the literature has described using concepts like accent prejudice (Roessel et al. 2020) or accentism. Dovchin and Dryden (cf. 2022: 34) describe the latter as "ideologies and practices that are used to normalize and regularise accents based on 'native speakerism' while excluding and contesting other types of non-standard or non-native like accents." As Roessel et al. (2020) point out, prejudice against accents is rarely explicit, but can still be efficacious in job application and employment contexts, resulting in discrimination.

It should be emphasised that not all 'non-standard' or 'non-native like accents' are considered and treated equally in society. The interview data underscored the specific associations related to an 'Eastern European' accent. Given the racialisation processes towards people from 'Eastern Europe' (Kalmar 2023; Krivonos 2022, 2023; Lewicki 2023), we interpret this accent-related discrimination in the labour market as hidden racist discrimination (Ramjattan 2022). If people's accents create speech barriers, for example, this is not only due to a fear that their deviations from the standard pronunciation could lead to communication difficulties. As shown above, the role of accents as identifying markers for members of a racialised group Is also relevant. This is clearly illustrated in the following quote, where an interviewee says that her interlocutors do not associate her accent with her first language, Romanian:

> *"And what's interesting for Romanians is that they have a softer accent compared to Poles, Bulgarians or Slavic languages, and uh, I—even at the dinner parties where we were, interestingly enough, people always thought I was from Italy and not from Romania, and then it was too late when I said, so, they—they probably had such a fine conversation, I don't know what we were talking about, that they said where are you from, you're from Italy, and we said well, worse, from Romania. Then it was too late for them to manifest any prejudices and so on, because they no longer reduced me to my origin, um, so they were—on a relational level, we were not one from Romania and one from Austria, but two people who may have the same opinion or a different opinion on a topic, and the focus was the topic and not the origin." (Daria Albescu, 50 years old, from Romania)*

The above interviewee spoke about her anticipated prejudices upon being identified as Romanian, which she does not expect when she is perceived as Italian. Her narration refers to anticipated processes of othering: As a Romanian, she would be othered and the "focus" during small talk with strangers at a party, dinner or reception would not be the 'topic,' but 'the origin.' She felt that she only has the chance to be seen as a "human being"—as an equal conversation partner—because her accent does not immediately identify her as an 'Eastern European.' Daria Albescu's story also revealed racialised social hierarchies when she remarked, perhaps sarcastically, that it is "worse" to be from Romania than from Italy. This comparison can be understood as a reference to the fact that coming from Italy is not at the top of this hierarchy either.

The above passage illustrates why migrants' fear of speaking is not simply an "issue of therapy" and not just "the feeling of a language barrier in quotation marks" in the interviewees' head (Klara Blažková). Rather, accents can be auditory markers that indicate status position in racialised hierarchies. This marker is 'sticky' and can only be influenced by the concerned person to a limited extent: As Corina Matei put it, "unfortunately, I can't erase my accent" (see quote above).

In the context of social multilingualism, languages are not 'sociolinguistically neutral:' They can be seen as hierarchically arranged, with some linguistic resources having more value than others and opening up different opportunities for their speakers (cf. Angermeyer 2013: 114, see also Blommaert 2003). Language-related hierarchies reflect racialised hierarchies between speakers as well as economic inequalities between countries with the respective official languages. As Alonso and Villa Galán (2023: 6) write, they have concrete effects on speakers: "The different values assigned to various languages (and linguistic practices) have obvious repercussions for racialised speakers, who have it more difficult to access well-paid positions and even find work." Additionally, our data illustrates that accents are also evaluated differently depending on which first language they are associated with and consequently have different effects on speakers' opportunities for action.

However, the interviewees rarely interpreting their experienced language-related discrimination as racist represents 'raciolinguistic sensemaking' (Ramjattan 2023). Raciolinguistic sensemaking leads to a naturalisation of racism in the field of language: Even speakers affected by racism are socialised as white listening subjects. As a result, they internalise dominant ideologies

and hierarchies in relation to languages, varieties and their prestige and perceive the linguistic repertoires of racialised minorities (to which they themselves belong) as inherently deficient.

4.2 Language ideologies and institutional racism

Public, traditionally monolingual organisations and their employees face communicative challenges with regard to migration-related linguistic diversity in their mediating function between the state and the public. We agree with Biskamp and Scherschel (2022: 89) that the functional logic of the democratic welfare state is not racist per se, but is accompanied by stratifications (both within as well as between inside and outside) that can be interpreted in racist terms. While we see them as problematic and worthy of criticism in many respects, we would not necessarily classify the monolingual German-speaking orientation of the AMS as racist: It primarily distinguishes between an ingroup and an outgroup (and probably also stratifies within the 'German-speaking' group), but the monolingual orientation does not homogenise the outgroup as a natural group. Consequently, we follow the argument of Biskamp and Scherschel (2022: 102) that criticism of inequalities (brought about by this language regime) between speakers of different language repertoires is justified, but must be based on a different normative foundation than anti-racism. Instead, this requires problematising the legitimacy of excluding residents and workers without German knowledge from accessing social rights (for which they have usually paid social insurance contributions). However, welfare states are, in fact, historically situated in contexts that establish racist ideologies on a cultural level, which likewise means that actors in state institutions or organisations probably also orient their actions towards these ideologies and shape the individual decision-making scope in a racist manner (cf. Biskamp/Scherschel 2022: 107). These welfare state organisations are typically places with powerful traditional ideologies, thereby closely linking institutional identity and national language (Duchêne et al. 2013).

As the literature has argued (e.g. Bourdieu 1982; Brubaker 2015; Busch 2009), linguistic homogenisation is central to the formation of nation states. Language becomes a fundamental focus of personal and collective identity (cf. Brubaker 2015: 6) and is used as to justify the exclusion of those who are not part of the (linguistic) national community. On a symbolic level, this results in the stigmatisation of non-standard varieties and non-dominant languages as well as the devaluation of racialised speakers, which is internalised through the use of symbolic violence. Discourses that promote knowledge of the national language(s) as a measuring instrument and key to integration in a nation state perceived as monolingual, while simultaneously obscuring power relations and controlling affiliations, are powerful in Austria as well as other de facto multilingual migration societies (Busch 2013; Dirim 2021). These discourses are hegemonic and are generally accepted without question as "common sense," and can be located in language ideologies that see the linguistic homogeneity and linguistic assimilation of migrants as indispensable to the community (Blommaert/Verschueren 1998; Cooke/Simpson 2012). Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) refer to the "homogenism" ideology, which posits that monolingualism is a social norm or ideal to strive for. This also underpins political and internal organisational discourses that shape how linguistic heterogeneity is handled in our study of the AMS.

Institutional rules can also be characterised by racism if public discourses or institutional decision-making processes that formulate or review institutional rules are affected by both racist ideology and racialised power asymmetry (cf. Biskamp/Scherschel 2022: 107). This was exemplified in our data regarding how interviewees legitimised their insistence on German as an official language. As explained in Section 2.3, interviewees repeatedly introduced racialised stereotypes that homogenised, naturalised, polarised and hierarchised (Rommelspacher 2009) migrants; accused them of ‚encapsulation,' harboured suspicion of migrants wanting to cheat the welfare state and justified paternalism regarding German acquisition. Against this background, our research findings also reflect an institutional racism perspective: Besides individual and societal racialisation processes, institutional factors are crucial to producing social inequalities. The empirical data revealed a range of strategies (e.g., being accompanied by acquaintances, hiring lawyers, creative translation techniques, use of technology) that migrants use to overcome socially constructed language barriers and in order to access AMS benefits and services. In doing so, they must activate social, economic and/or cultural capital. Since these types of capital (Bourdieu 1986) are unequally distributed among applicants, the analyses point to a social stratification in accessing AMS benefits through the organisational language regime—also along racist hierarchies that attribute different values and prestige to languages and their speakers.

Conclusion

Our article showed how linguistic and racial discrimination are closely intertwined in access to welfare state benefits and the labour market in Austria. Even if we assume (and our data confirms) that, empirically, racism and linguicism usually occur together, that they are also historically closely interwoven (Knappik/Ayten 2022) and that there is a large overlap in terms of the people affected by the two types of discrimination, it is nevertheless useful to analyse both types of discrimination. Our findings suggest the importance of keeping several dimensions in mind regarding public institutions and the labour market: Research should consider how, in general, language-based discrimination beyond racism differentiates between speakers of the official language and those who do not speak it (well enough), excluding the latter. It is always important to examine how language-based discrimination masks or reinforces racist discrimination. The value of multilingualism should also be examined in relation to access to welfare state benefits and the labour market. Drawing on Villa Galán and Alonso (cf. 2023: 154-155), we ask: Under what conditions do languages acquire (no) economic value? How does this relate to racialised hierarchies? More research on linguistic discrimination is desirable, particularly research that uses critical approaches to examine its interaction with racism. Finally, we would like to emphasise that future work in the field of language-related discrimination could benefit strongly from the combination of racism-critical approaches and critical perspectives on classism (as advocated by Prilutski 2022).

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