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Povrzanovic Frykman, Maja; Narvselius, Eleonora; Törnquist-Plewa, Barbara

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# Postmigrant Talks

## Experiences of Language Use in Swedish Academia

By Maja Povrzanović Frykman, Eleonora Narvselius  
& Barbara Törnquist-Plewa

### Academic Migrants in Sweden

The following statements were uttered by university professors currently working in Sweden:

Everyone is Swedish at my department and regardless of the advertisements reading “international, globalization”. All that is just a mask – no one wants to speak English.

I can pull it off at meetings. However, if there is something very important, I ask them to allow me to give that lecture in English and not in Swedish, discussion can be in both languages. If it is very important, I ask for English, but it is very rarely nowadays.

These statements scaffold a polyptych of experiences and positions pertaining to language use that emerged as important in the frames of the project in which we investigate academia as a professional field in Sweden where migrants and migrant descendants have been relatively well represented in positions of high scientific prestige (Göransson & Lidegran 2005:268).<sup>1</sup> Pursuing personal experiences of academics working in Sweden, this article explores language use as a catalyst of emotions and self-reflection (Mohammed 2023). Against the background of the ongoing internationalization of academia, it uses language as a lens through which the changes in this field can be understood in relation to migration.

Around 34 per cent of employees in the higher education sector in Sweden were born abroad or born in Sweden to two parents born abroad, which is more than their ratio in Sweden’s employed population as a whole (31 per cent) (Hellerstedt 2022). However, Salö et al. (2022) pointed out that only 14 per cent of teachers and researchers at Swedish higher education

institutions overall hold a PhD degree from another country, while this is the case for only 7 per cent in the humanities and in medicine. This means that national recruitment prevails and that many migrants employed in Swedish academia completed their PhD studies in Sweden, as is the case with our interviewees (see Table 1). Most academics born abroad hold non-permanent positions: 78 per cent of postdocs in Sweden were born abroad, 65 per cent of research fellows, and 53 per cent of assistant professors. The non-permanent employment includes also the PhD students, of whom 47 per cent are foreign citizens (Myklebust 2022).<sup>2</sup> When it comes to the two categories that imply permanent employment, the figures are lower: 26 per cent of senior lecturers and 28 per cent of professors were born abroad (SHEA 2019).<sup>3</sup> The Swedish Higher Education Authority reported that the average share of permanently employed faculty members with citizenship other than Swedish is under 10 per cent (SHEA 2020).

Moreover, only 12 per cent of academics with the role of administrative leaders at Swedish universities are of non-Swedish background (which means that their representation in such positions is just over a third of that of their Swedish colleagues), with a quarter of them being from other Nordic countries (Hellerstedt 2022).<sup>4</sup> The ability to use Swedish (or other Nordic languages) has been perceived as a major reason for such disproportional inclusion (Ministry of Education and Research 2018). As recently pointed out by the representatives of the Swedish National Union of Doctoral Students’ Committee, despite the increasing role of English in both academic teaching and research in Sweden,

“in the sphere of academic decision-making, most non-Swedish speaking academics still face insurmountable challenges. In many cases international academics are virtually barred from collegial processes” (Aguiar Penha et al. 2023). Indeed, Swedish academia today looks very different than at the time of publication of Ehn and Löfgren’s (2004) book which pinpointed the “rules of the game” and power relations that are equally relevant today,<sup>5</sup> but never mentioned the (Swedish) language use.

The presentation of the theoretical framework in the next section is followed by a review of previous research on language equalization and contestation in academia. The presentation of our aim, questions and methodology is followed by empirical sections organized around the themes that emerged from the material. The concluding section summarizes the findings, answers the research questions, and suggests some lines of further research.

### **University as an Arena of Language Equalization and Contestation**

Academia is widely regarded as an organizational environment that advocates the value of intellectual freedom and that has been able to incorporate and benefit from diversity. Nevertheless, as pointed out by analysts such as Bourdieu (1969, 1986, 1993), Kerr (1994), and Clark (2002, 2004), it is highly selective when it comes to nurturing some language practices and discouraging and rejecting others within its own environment. In his discussion of how institutional history affects issues to be dealt with by higher education in the twenty-first century, Kerr (1994:39) points out that the tangled systems of modern-day

universities are pillared by three sets of values, namely “heritage versus equality versus merit”. These imperatives are by and large contradictory, and their concrete realization is context-dependent. Collegial equality presupposes certain common denominators, among them both institutionally sanctioned and consensually shared language practices. Drawing on Bourdieu’s work (1969, 1986, 1991, 1993), we conceptualize language not only as a medium of institutional communication, but also as a power resource through which individuals pursue their own interests, display their practical competence, and build personal alliances.

One of the most outstanding features of universities as epistemic communities standing out due to their cross-border/transnational knowledge exchange has been the use of institutional lingua franca. In medieval universities its role was uncontestedly played by Latin; later, it was taken over by the languages of imperial elites (English, German, French, Russian). The lingua franca of today’s academia is English. However, depending on circumstances, English may emerge not only as a koine facilitating equality of communication among the colleagues, and not only as a shared tool of liberalized research (Strömberg Jämsvi 2019), but also as an instrument of power games and (selfish) accumulation of merit. Excellent command of English, especially native proficiency, is a highly valued but double-edged asset that may provoke negative reactions as a power factor infringing language practices of speakers of other national languages and changing power balance in their academic milieu (see Holmes 2020; Hohti & Truman 2021; Salö 2022). Also, in Swedish aca-

demia, this contradiction between equality and merit viewed through the lens of language practices may result in conflict situations and nurture unwelcome informal hierarchies.

Clark (2002, 2004) draws attention to differentiation and competition as foundations of university organization. Bourdieu (1988, 1996), in turn, brings to the fore the institutional nature of academia as a state-supported field of power. In the process of nation-state formation it played significant role in the language homogenization of entire societies whose national distinction was underpinned by the taken-for-granted supremacy of “correct” and “cultivated” language produced and consecrated by academia. Another seminal argument formulated by Bourdieu concerns the practical language competence of speakers, which goes hand in hand with other relational strategies of power activated by conversions of different types of capital. Depending on the circumstances and intentions of the speakers, language is a key cultural medium for converting cultural capital into social and symbolic capital; practical mastery of a certain language (or even its particular variant) can also give economic advantages.

Drawing on Bourdieu’s ideas about heteronomous and autonomous principles of hierarchization in the fields of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993:41), Salö et al. (2022) distinguish the correlating notions of academic and scientific capital. They point out that “while indicators of *scientific* capital include distinguished publications, [...] scientific awards and other signs of scientific prestige, the indicators of *academic* capital rather concern signifiers of academic power: managerial positions and

directorships [...] and the like” (ibid.:116; emphasis in the original). In theory skilful institutional players, both groups and individuals, may navigate between autonomous and heteronomous positions and accumulate both strictly scientific and academic-political credits at will. In practice, however, the limits of such manoeuvrings are set by institutional rules, organizational cultures and traditions, political impacts, stages of career development, time limitations, and a plethora of other factors. One of them is mastery of authoritative languages in Swedish academia. There, as in many other national contexts, English is construed as a language of scientific advancement, while the national language skills remain a taken-for-granted requirement in processes of acquiring academic capital and gaining access to positions of institutional decision-making (ibid.:124). Thus, as Salö et al. have observed, in modern-day academia “language skills may be a structuring feature in their own right, affecting administrative participation, employability, and social inclusion” (ibid.:115).<sup>6</sup>

Swedish is the national language, regarded as essential for political security and democratic reasons (Strömberg Jämsvi 2019). It is the official language of all authorities in Sweden. Consequently, the working language of university administration is Swedish, and the administrative personnel (especially of lower rank) may be less comfortable writing documents and speaking in English (see Holmes 2023). However, the relatively privileged status of Danish and Norwegian in Swedish academia should be mentioned. Traditionally, speakers of these languages enjoyed facilitated access to Sweden and were integrated into Swedish life quite easily. Ideas about

cultural solidarity, language proximity and the shared history of the Nordic countries make themselves continuously felt in various institutional and “banal” daily situations where communication among the native speakers of these languages appears relatively unrestricted. Also, at Swedish universities, students on courses taught in Swedish are allowed to submit and defend BA, MA and PhD theses in Danish and Norwegian and have the right to submit their answers in these languages during examinations.

Although Swedish and English do not have equal degrees of leverage in different institutional domains, they both remain uncontested as authoritative and officially sanctioned languages of Swedish academia. This is in stark contrast to minority languages and immigrant languages which, unlike Danish and Norwegian, remain beyond the institutional academic framework because of their linguistic peculiarity and lack of official acknowledgement. Even though the preferability of English, Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian is often negotiated in concrete circumstances, the spectrum of actual linguistic diversity is not taken into account. This might prompt the conclusion that, well in line with the academic value of heritage highlighted by Kerr (1994), Swedish academia’s status as a “national heirloom” (Salö et al. 2022:124) remains uncontested. Nevertheless, it makes sense to look more closely at struggles around Swedish and English to get a more nuanced picture of the academic field as criss-crossed by multiple axes of power and to understand the changes these struggles (may) bring about.

## The Theoretical Framework of Postmigration

We employ the theoretical framework of postmigration in the attempt to circumvent the common parameters of “research on migrants”, which Regina Römhild (2017) has dubbed “migrantology”. We endorse her claim that “what is lacking is not yet more research about migration, but a migration-based perspective to generate new insights into the contested arenas of “society” and “culture”” (ibid.:70). The prefix “post” in postmigration does not indicate stasis reached after migration to a country has ended; it “aspires to transcend “migration” as a disguised marker for racist exclusion, on the one hand, while embracing migration as social normality, on the other” (Foroutan 2019:150).<sup>7</sup> The notion of postmigration helps to identify the “constitutive and shaping role of migration within the society [...] to counter the social obsession of defining migration as the “Other” and, by doing so, constantly excluding it from the society’s own self-perception” (Römhild 2021:52).

The notions of “migrant” and “migrant descendant” are not problematic in themselves but become problematic when “mobilized as part of aggressive identity-ascriptions and processes of othering” (Petersen & Schramm 2017:6). Research has shown that inequalities may be affected both by actual and ascribed migrant background (Çağlar 2016; Foroutan et al. 2018; Kubota et al. 2021). By circumventing the analytical binaries of “native” and “migrant”, the notion of postmigration serves the task of “de-essentializing so-called migrant coherences and homogeneities and breaking up ascribed identities” (Çağlar 2016:134).



In the field usually referred to as “migration research”, this implies a significant shift from analytical binaries of native vs. migrant and majority vs. minority, towards the interest in transformations throughout the society that has been affected by migration. Postmigration is a framework for analysis of “conflicts, identity discourses and social and political transformations that occur after migration has taken place” (Foroutan 2019:150). We thus do not use postmigration as a normative, “positively utopian” notion, but as one that implies “negotiations and conflicts” (Tröger 2021:147), and “the struggle to be recognized by the ways you identify yourself rather than by identities ascribed to you” (Gebauer et al. 2019:137).

Much research employing the notion of postmigration addresses struggles about participation and representation (Schramm et al. 2019), as the presence of migrants and their descendants in leading positions does not develop at the same pace in all professional fields – neither in Sweden nor in other European countries (Gabelic & Nordin 2016; Neue Deutsche Medienmacher\*innen 2020). Tensions, contestations, and conflicts may bring about changes and be productive of new relations and constellations of power that cannot be captured by old analytical binaries but can be understood as postmigrant negotiations. We are inspired by Roger Bromley’s definition of the framework of postmigration as “epistemological in the sense that it raises the question of how, and at what point, someone ceases to be thought of as a “migrant” or in terms of their supposed ethnicity” (Bromley 2021:134). It serves to explore “postmigrant possibilities” (ibid.). These possibilities refer to the dissolution

of perception of “migrant” as “other”, or of “immigrants” (of “first”, “second”, or any generation) as essentially different from the “majority” or “native” population, and therefore predestined for (exclusion from) certain positions. In the context of academia, these possibilities further refer to the ways of dealing creatively with challenges, “to develop an innovative social praxis” (Hill & Yildiz 2021:117).

The highly but unevenly internationalized Swedish academia is a field in which the presence of migrants is notable and in which ethnicity and race in principle should not (and legally must not) matter for academic professional trajectories based on merit. However, as indicated by the figures mentioned in the introduction, positions of power are uneven in terms of the stability of professional presence and institutional influence.

Gebauer et al. (2019) identify language and institutions as some of the main sites of postmigrant negotiations of presence, representation, power, and influence. Looking at practices of language use in this article, and at career trajectories and the support academics give to each other in our broader project, we are interested in what Gebauer et al. see as “the dissolution of old and the founding of new alliances, of misunderstanding and understanding” (ibid.:135). Instead of “researching migrants”, we shift the attention to relationships emerging in their professional contexts. We contend that this is both scientifically and socially relevant, as academic institutions are “sites that urge us to invent new categories, tools and languages to communicate with and to describe the status quo, as well as who ‘we’ are and who ‘we’ want to be in the future” (ibid.).

### **Aim, Questions, Methods, and Material**

The overall aim of this article is to contribute to the understanding of the struggles unfolding around migration and its after-maths, by exploring language use among the academics in the context of the ongoing internationalization of Swedish academia.

We ask, what do the practices of daily language use among the academics working in Sweden look like and what emotions and reflections do they entice? How does academia as a professional setting that accommodates several authoritative languages customize and condition inclusion and exclusion with their help? What struggles become visible through the lens of language use?

Our material is based on 22 open-ended interviews (Rapley 2001) with university teachers and researchers conducted between summer 2021 and summer 2022 and characterized by explorative questions (Bogner & Menz 2009) about processes of professional embedding, establishment, and gaining positions of responsibility in academia.<sup>8</sup> The interviewees (presented in Table 1) gave elaborate answers which made us understand that they found language use a particularly important aspect of their academic trajectory and daily work.

Our empirical interest in the first project year was directed at the paths to recognition and professional influence of people who self-identify as migrants, so for migrants among the interviewees presented in Table 1 Swedish is a foreign language. These initial research participants were asked to identify their allies – people who have been particularly supportive and helpful for their professional development and establishment. They form the second,

equally important group of our research participants to whom we posed the same questions as to the migrants. The material includes a smaller number of interviews with allies as not all persons identified as allies have been available for interview.

All the interviewees presented in Table 1 (13 men [M] and 9 women [F]) are or (if retired) have been employed at the universities in Gothenburg, Lund, Norrköping, Stockholm, Umeå, Växjö, or Örebro. To ensure the interviewees' anonymity, we avoid specification of workplaces as well as of the year of birth and arrival in Sweden. As the article does not deal with professional trajectories that need to be closely contextualized, the complete anonymizing of the interviewees does not hinder the understanding of the issues at hand.

Out of those 22 interviewees, 17 are migrants: 4 migrated to Sweden from continents other than Europe and 10 came from South-Eastern and Eastern European countries. They were born between 1948 and 1975; 2 among them came to Sweden as young children and underwent their entire education there and 15 came to Sweden as adults at different stages of their career. None of them was headhunted as an established academic; all achieved the title of professor in Sweden. Moreover, all but 3 received their PhD titles from Swedish universities. The interviewees included 7 persons approached in the study as allies; 2 of them are themselves migrants and 5 are born in Sweden to Swedish parents. The allies were born between 1942 and 1948 and all received their PhD titles from Swedish universities.

The material used in this article stems primarily from the interviewees' answers to the questions: "Which language/s do

Table 1. Information about the interviewees.

Academic field	Academic title and country of PhD studies	Gender	Approached in the study as migrant or ally	Country of birth – region	Birth	Arrival in Sweden
Natural sciences	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	F	migrant	South America	Early 1960s	End of 1990s
	Professor (PhD in Great Britain)	M	migrant	Middle East	Early 1960s	End of 1990s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	migrant	Eastern Europe	Early 1950s	Mid 1970s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	F	migrant	Eastern Europe	Mid 1940s	Early 1970s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	migrant	Eastern Europe	Early 1950s	Mid 1970s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	ally	Sweden	Early 1940s	Born in Sweden
Technical sciences	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	F	migrant	Eastern Europe	Early 1970s	End of 1980s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	F	migrant	Eastern Europe	Mid 1970s	Early 2000s
Social sciences	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	F	migrant (arrived in early school age)	Nordic country	Early 1960s	Early 1970s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	ally	Sweden	Early 1940s	Born in Sweden
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	F	ally (herself also a migrant)	Eastern Europe	Mid 1940s	Mid 1960s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	F	migrant	Asia	Early 1950s	Early 1970s
	Professor (PhD in home country)	F	migrant	Eastern Europe	Late 1940s	Early 1980s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	ally	Sweden	Early 1940s	Born in Sweden
Humanities	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	migrant	North America	Early 1960s	Early 1980s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	ally	Sweden	Early 1940s	Born in Sweden
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	migrant	Eastern Europe	Mid 1950s	Early 1980s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	ally	Sweden	Early 1940s	Born in Sweden
	Associate Professor with a high administrative position (PhD in Sweden)	M	migrant (arrived as infant)	Eastern Europe	Early 1960s	Mid 1960s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	ally (himself also a migrant)	Nordic country	Late 1940s	1970s
	Professor (PhD in home country)	F	migrant	Eastern Europe	Late 1950s	1990s
	Professor (PhD in Sweden)	M	migrant	Eastern Europe	Late 1940s	Late 1960s

you use in your professional environment? Tell about your use of Swedish in your professional context (when; with whom; how do you feel about using it). If you use several languages, tell about the experience of shifting languages (when, where, why, with whom).”

In sum, our material consists of the interviewees’ narrations of their subjective perceptions and experiences of work at Swedish universities that in their turn participate in the global trend of internation-

alization of academia as a professional field. We employed thematic analysis of the material that looks for meaning in the interview transcriptions. We did an inductive analysis, looking at what may appear significant in the material. In this we followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guideline “for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (ibid.:79). This allowed us to preserve in the text the richness and complexity of the interview material.



The following sections empirically substantiate the main themes discerned in the material and paint a picture of what is going on in our research participants' professional environments: which languages are used, by whom and with whom, and how our interviewees feel about it. As this text focuses on language use among academic staff, the administrative positions mentioned in the quotations are occupied by academics, not by administrative personnel. Also, while exchanges with administrative personnel and students are mentioned, we explore formal and informal daily exchanges among the academics.

### **Swedish and English: An Unsettled Interplay**

Considering the status of English explained in the section on the university as an arena of language contestation, it is hardly possible to write separately about the use of English and Swedish; most interviewees narrated about one in relation to the other. We therefore tease out the themes that address tensions between conflict and cooperation and the interweaving of linguistic alienation and accommodation.

#### *The Power of Swedish*

One of the professors we interviewed is a native speaker of English who made a great effort to learn Swedish in the course of his doctoral studies in Sweden:

I've always spoken Swedish in Swedish contexts, which makes me sound like a slightly confused five-year-old, but, you know, I accept that my emails were even worse because people don't... After a while I think, people get used to the accent and they understand what I'm saying, but you read my emails and you wonder – what is he doing? And that's hard in that sense.

To the question whether appearing “as a confused five-year-old” is a problem, he answered:

On daily basis, it doesn't matter, for 95 per cent of the stuff I do, you know, being a confused five-year-old is more than enough for, for the setting. When things get hot, when meetings have to be filed out precisely, when, you know, small nuances in words make a difference, it makes a huge difference not being able to master the language, a huge disadvantage. You say what you want – middle-class Swedes, they're not physically violent, but they are verbally abusive, extremely. I've seen colleagues riding people down, being able to choose the right words to use. I don't master that, I can't do that in that way, and that puts me at a disadvantage.

While the quotation above reveals the perception of language as an instrument of domination (and introduces the topic of class which we will explore in the project, but do not discuss in this text), a migrant professor whom we approached in the study as an ally pointed out the help she receives from her native-speaker students:

It's going better now, we help each other and then send the text to someone else. I have always asked doctoral students for support when it comes to Swedish. In the last 20 years of my work, doctoral students have been important, to check a little. They have a look and correct some details.

There is an indication of cooperation, unlike in the previous quotation that stressed the conflictual potential of language use. The doctoral students are positioned as valued allies for possessing the capital of native-level fluency. On the other hand, some interviewees pointed to the fact that the capital of native language fluency coupled with a good mastery of English grants younger Swedish colleagues an insur-

mountable advantage in the competition in a disciplinary field for which writing is crucial. They do not have to invest time in mastering Swedish, and time is a scarce resource at any stage of an academic career (see Hohti & Truman 2021). An interviewee highlighted this advantage by telling a story about her doctoral student, a native speaker of Swedish, who quickly became an academic “star”.

We published so much internationally, 90 per cent internationally as that is a precondition for becoming a professor – to appear in international situations as a well-known person. [...] Those who emerged as exceptionally important, like [name], my [former] doctoral student– he published a new book every year. These are quality books. And so, you become a star. And I, when I write in Swedish, I still feel insecure. So, I am constantly in the situation to think, do we need help?

All the interviewees agree that being able to understand and speak Swedish is of crucial importance for their career and well-being,<sup>9</sup> not least for the possibility of advancing in leadership/management positions: “To learn Swedish is important since it gives a totally different insight into how the university is governed and opens a possibility of affecting it.” Indeed, some made a serious effort to learn Swedish. One of our interviewees who came to Sweden in the 1970s as a young researcher and was determined to work in Swedish academia told us that he started to learn Swedish immediately. He studied it very intensively at least six hours a day. One interviewee learned Swedish as a PhD student. She explained:

Of course, the seminars were in Swedish, so I used to sit with a dictionary and I would ask [...] what

was that word? Then, slowly, I realized that no one wanted to sit next to me because I was disturbing them.

She also noted that she was “really privileged” as each seminar leader would spend some twenty minutes with her after the seminar, to summarize it in English, which was the language of her entire former education.

### *Insecurities, Ambiguities*

Several interviewees bore witness to the constant sense of insecurity as Swedish is not their native language and not even their first foreign language:

My Swedish was relatively good when I started to study [for a doctoral degree] but in the beginning I could make it in the scientific environment first and foremost thanks to my good knowledge of English and German that I had from [the native country]. In [a Swedish university town] the colleagues wanted to talk English to me, at least in the beginning. For a long time, maybe always, I felt uncomfortable with teaching in Swedish. I therefore avoided the teaching and did administrative work rather than stand in the classroom. Until this day I prefer teaching in English, and as it is more and more accepted, I am doing it.

Also, a retired professor who did invest time and energy in learning Swedish, said:

I never felt comfortable at leadership meetings, very much because of my accent in Swedish, but I was also bad at interpreting the signals in the Swedish academic culture.

Fluency in a local language is not necessarily coupled with a fluency of “reading” socio-cultural codes in a particular professional setting; this migrant remains painstakingly uncertain about signals that

make the spoken language just one part of the ongoing communication, and as such insufficient for capturing its complexity.<sup>10</sup> This resonates with Olsson et al. (2018:199) who observe that not only the “right contacts” but also the ability to behave unhindered language- and style-wise, i.e. demonstrate social competence in the institutional context, are crucial for not being excluded from the institutional centre in the academia.

### *Frustration, Irritation, Conflict*

An interviewee of migrant origin who occupies a high leadership position at his university objects to efforts by his migrant colleague to willy-nilly impose the authority language of global academia in the governance of the Swedish institution:

I have a professor [a native speaker of English] at my faculty whom I would like to send to SFI,<sup>11</sup> because I can't endure holding all meetings in English just for his sake. Swedish is the official language of the authority. It is one matter when we teach at master level or if we have doctoral students, and there we need the English language. But hell no, you can't sit there and hold a meeting without the official Swedish, because I feel like a 13-year-old! There are terms in English that I don't use. I can talk about my [academic] discipline in English, for I learned those terms – perhaps even before I learned them in Swedish. But now I sit there and lead, I have a formal role on a board or a body at [name] university, and I have to speak Swedish, otherwise I sound like an idiot! I suddenly interrupt and ask: “By the way, what is *nämnd* called in English? Is it committee or steering group?” Oh, language, language, language!

Most obviously, when analysing it through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of practice, this interview excerpt demonstrates a typical tension/slow-motion conflict under-

pinned by differential access to cultural (the native-speaking professor's English) and symbolic capital (the interviewee's position as executor of administrative authority, with high status in the administrative hierarchy) that are both institutionally recognized but abide by different “rules of engagement”:

We have legally established Swedish as the official authority language in Sweden. Of course, it is excluding, and that is why the language is key: if I could not manage Swedish, I could never have become a head of department, a dean, a vice chancellor. I really believe that it is in a way easier to succeed with the academic than with the leadership parts. [...] When it comes to the highest top, it is still very homogeneous.

The interviewee's interpretation of the situation as a breach of conventions distinguishing the quite homogeneous administrative “highest top” highlights the realization that switching to English changes the power balance between the two actors in the field, where the skilful use of bureaucratic style of language matters a lot. The quotations above can also be read as acknowledgement of internal tensions between cultural capital as an inherited property and an acquired resource (Bourdieu 1986:18). They reveal the mechanisms of *conditioned inclusion* into particular institutional communities that is impossible without time-consuming investment in Swedish language competence that helps to “open the doors” (“language is key”). The interviewee strongly questions his “free-riding” colleague who uses inherited language proficiency in English as an excuse to skip the time-consuming investment in learning Swedish, since he not only *de facto* gets around general institu-

tional conventions but also breaches the rules of inclusion into the “highest top” of leadership.

Another interviewee presented the use of Swedish at a humanities department as a power play and a kind of resistance to the internationalization of academia:

It can be nasty [...], colleagues who see this as a power play, you know: I’m Swedish, I’m gonna speak Swedish, why do we have to give in to this international pressure, this neoliberal power play, yeah.

He told us about a doctoral student who attended a retreat meeting of the department his unit is a part of, where everyone spoke Swedish – a language she did not understand:

She ended up breaking down in tears after the second day, sitting around the table just watching people speak Swedish. The result was: a colleague of mine answered her in Swedish again, it’s like ... [laughing]. She left the room crying and I had to leave the meeting to go talk to her for a while, but, in that sense [...] it’s about power, you know, all of this it’s about: I’m taking a power position, I’m going to speak Swedish. There are other colleagues [at the Faculty] who will send out emails in Swedish and if you want to read this in English, google translate it. You know, it’s really a slap in the face, an active slap in the face if people aren’t speaking Swedish.

He sees this tension as “a highly politicized question”, which has been discussed openly at his department, resulting in both languages being allowed, but not in a fully balanced manner:

Last spring, we did meetings mixed, so you could speak English or Swedish, if you wanted to answer in Swedish, you do that. The decision now from the

current head of department is that meetings will be held in Swedish but important points will be taken in English also. Who decides what the important point is? I can’t do that, I have no idea.

While without Swedish a migrant does not feel fully at home at a workplace where Swedish is the dominant language, Swedish colleagues may not feel at home with a person who cannot understand their informal exchanges. “Learn Swedish properly if you want to stay in Sweden”, was the advice shared by one of the retired professors we interviewed. However, another one questioned an easy definition of ‘properly’:

I can write [scientific] articles in Swedish. I have great ambitions when it comes to language. [...] [when it comes to] the writing of other things, not only scientific – there I am terribly fearful, there I feel my limitations. And when I speak Swedish, people can still recognize me as a foreigner. I still have an accent, after all those years. [...] It is a sense of second-ratedness with regard to the language, as we who succeeded [becoming professors in Sweden] are not some average, we are above that and have enormous demands on ourselves.

The feeling of insecurity and discomfort expressed by several interviewees is in many respects subjective. Several of them speak very good Swedish according to their allies, yet they are not pleased with their performance because the demands they impose on themselves are high. As academics, they are competitive and would like to be able to play with all the language nuances on a par with their Swedish colleagues. And finally, they know from experience that their accents and linguistic mistakes will always give them away and may provoke the question “where are you from?”



that points to their not being at home. In a way, the quotation above provides a possible answer to our research question about the nature of struggles that become visible through the lens of language use in the Swedish academia. By and large, these are the struggles over the main thing at stake, which is the vision of academic excellence. The postmigrant context implies that the sharp contours of academic excellence as described by Bourdieu, i.e., flawless and speaking with the right accent (or “no accent”), are becoming blurred. In modern-day Swedish academia, the stigma of a wrong accent or imperfect mastery of authoritative language seems to be gradually diminishing.

#### *Lingua Franca and Its Local Limits*

Ideally, high achievement in academia is based on a combination of talent, passion, and hard work. For some migrants among our interviewees, however, hard work included not only the effort to master Swedish but also English as a language of their research field:

I learned French and German in [the native country] and both English and Swedish I started to learn only now [after migrating to Sweden], while I was studying for the doctoral degree, was working extra, and also had three children in the same period.

The old professor [...] was not encouraging. He used to say, “What shall we do with you, you speak neither Swedish nor English.” I had no English with me from [the native country] so I had to study English at evening courses. But I was very good in the lab! [...] [In the US, with a scholarship], there were fantastic working conditions and very nice colleagues. And my English finally became much better! I could go to conferences and hold presentations. That meant very much.

The quotations above point to the necessity of mastering English in academia but also the benefits of academic mobility to English-speaking environments. Some problems touched upon in this article are generational. The problem of mastering English is not as big today as it was with migrants coming in the 1960s–80s, but not all countries in the world have equally advanced teaching of English and academics coming from some countries may therefore be disadvantaged.

A retired Swedish-born professor, interviewed as an ally, said:

I think it’s a blessing to be able to write tolerably and speak tolerably although my English is getting rusty by being retired. But the periods I spent in England and the US were so important.

Our older interviewees who mastered neither English nor Swedish at the start of their doctoral studies in Sweden worked in the fields of natural sciences where they at least for some time could compensate for their poor language competence with talent and excellent practical skills, which bought them time to learn both languages. This would not be possible in the humanities, social sciences or law; one would need English at least, in the past as well as today. Today, a person can start an academic career in most fields without any knowledge of Swedish, providing that their English is up to standard.

Our older interviewees also pointed to the fact that in some disciplines they had to publish in Swedish in order to be recognized as scholars, whereas today in most disciplines international peer-reviewed journals are prioritized. One can hardly qualify for a high-status academic



positions without being internationally published and connected, which requires English proficiency. However, proficiency in English is usually not enough if one is to develop a career in Sweden. As indicated above, the lack of ability to use Swedish can limit teaching opportunities, and by rule excludes a scholar from leadership/senior management posts.

*Forced-Upon Language Use and the Strategy of Not Giving In*

A professor who did her doctoral studies in Sweden and returned to the country after having worked elsewhere, had no choice but to use Swedish at her present department:

That is actually good because it made me learn. I also learned from my child, also on the go [without formal lessons]. [...] Actually, there is support for learning Swedish for foreigners [SFI] only on the first level. That was only basic conversational Swedish; I passed that without a problem since I knew something from before. There was nothing else for foreigners. Of course, you had to do it all in your spare time. [...] With my head of department, I speak only Swedish since she hates everything that is not the first village next to [the town in which the university is placed]. But I have a colleague who has recently retired, and we use to walk, and I like that he does not force me and does not insist, but somehow, he taught me Swedish. I learned a lot from those conversations.

The subjective feeling of insufficiency and incompleteness with regard to the mastery of Swedish has been prevalent among many of our interviewees, even those whose Swedish proficiency is objectively very high. Only a few felt very confident about their Swedish. Some interviewees said that they did not care – they consciously decided

not to care – about the mistakes they make when speaking Swedish. We were not too surprised to observe this tendency towards perfectionism that can be interpreted as an effort to guard academic excellence. In that regard, a sense of “giving in” to one’s own incapacity to speak Swedish “perfectly” is compensated by other aspects of the cultural and scientific capital they obviously possess as university professors.

It is notable that the interviewees whose mother tongue is English make an effort to use Swedish even in situations in which no one would mind them using English. When asked about the motivation for such a self-conscious behaviour, they skipped mentioning colonial histories or the insurmountable privilege of being a native speaker of English in today’s globalized academia (see Hohti & Truman 2021). Instead, they maintained that avoidance of Swedish would be perceived as a weakness they do not want to admit to.

A professor from South-Eastern Europe whose English is far better than that of most of her colleagues said that is “proving her ability to speak Swedish”, notwithstanding the many mistakes she is aware of making. Her co-ethnic, on the other hand, feels embarrassed about such mistakes and does not use Swedish in formal meetings while being able to understand Swedish and not forcing others to use English. However, her trick is to politely ask the Swedish speakers if it would be fine with them if she used English – a question that always gets a positive answer, as it slyly turns the table of skills and prestige. Such tactics may work in situations in which people have clearly defined roles, but they can rarely be used in informal situations.

### *Lunchroom as a Space of Postmigrant Possibilities?*

Universities may have different language policies or guidelines, but English tends to be widely used not only in master's and doctoral level teaching but also in informal contexts in corridors and lunchrooms. The youngest among our interviewees told us about the department at a technical faculty at which she had her doctoral education:

Everyone was a foreigner there and everyone spoke English, at lunch and with the secretaries. Even if I wanted it, I could not make learning Swedish my priority. Simply, the doctoral thesis was too demanding for me to find time to study Swedish and there was really no need.

Another professor described the language use at her internationally oriented department as follows:

We never talk about cultural differences. People are very sensitive to language, so like, OK, like between Swedish and English, or if someone is in the room who is not fluent in Swedish, then everybody switches to English.

However, other interviewees testified to lunchroom talk creating a space of a going-without-saying supremacy of Swedish as a language of informal communication.<sup>12</sup> While this is hardly surprising, it means that language use becomes a tool – at the same time symbolic and practical – of place ownership and exclusion (see Salö 2022). One of the migrated professors we interviewed concluded:

Swedish is important!!! You come into the coffee room where everyone is Swedish, they talk to you in English for a half an hour or so, and then go back to Swedish. And you can't demand anything else! It would be like that in any country.

As public but informal sites of communication between colleagues, lunchrooms often reinforce already established institutionally accepted linguistic lines of division. As the previous quotation indicates, group dynamics define the choice of language in concrete situations, and the usual strategy is switching from Swedish to English and back or conversing in English while inserting Swedish words due to the difficulty of quickly finding English terms for the specific Swedish phenomena.

### **Using Other Languages: (Un)Intended Visibility?**

In this section we take up the use of other languages in daily exchanges in academic institutions that may not have a polarizing effect but emerged as an issue of concern for our interviewees. A Swedish-born ally expressed his pride at having some knowledge of languages other than English that are used in his scientific work but also in professional meetings. He described his mastery of German and French as “a blessing”.

However, a migrant's use of one's own native language in academic environments (for example, when phoning in a public corridor) is not necessarily a “blessing” as it can imply their exposure as a “foreigner” using a language that other colleagues cannot understand.

Several interviewees who migrated to Sweden as adults also talked about a struggle with using their native language for academic purposes. For example, one professor over-prepared a public lecture to be given in her native country, only to discover that such extensive preparation was not necessary. As a contrary example: a professor who came to Sweden as a young

university student talked about the difficulties in teaching in her mother tongue that she never used for academic purposes. In a summer school where she was obliged to teach in her native language, she had to rely on the *ad hoc* help provided by the students in the classroom.

Graber (2020) explains how the process of losing a language is suffused with personal sentiments and often with strong emotions of anger, sadness, and shame.<sup>13</sup> The story above was not about losing a language as such, but about not being able to use one's own native language for academic purposes. It was still framed as a story of shame and sadness, as the professor was not able to perform as a professional and share her knowledge with the students in a way that meets her own standards.

Sevinç and Backus' (2019) study of linguistic and socioemotional causes of what they call heritage (native) language anxiety and majority language anxiety among migrants and their descendants, suggests that there is a vicious circle that connects language knowledge, language use, and language anxiety. Our interviewees, however, are resolved to struggle on: even if they may feel homeless both in their native language and in Swedish (or any other languages they use), they may be able to embed their feeling of being at home in their scientific capital formally confirmed by their professorial title.

The use of languages of the Scandinavian neighbours creates another interesting line of inclusion/exclusion into the national community and into the official context of academia. Danes and Norwegians often maintain their linguistic privileges and use their native languages in daily commu-

nication in Swedish academia. However, some migrant interviewees mentioned that even if they can communicate in Swedish, it is still a challenge for them to understand Danish and Norwegian. This highlights their own "external", non-Nordic – "other" – position and exemplifies the complexity of language-based relations and their unstable, potentially conflictual character. The "unprovoking" use of these Scandinavian native tongues may provoke, complicate, and limit communication with non-Nordic migrants. The use of English could be an accommodating postmigrant answer here. Some interviewees mentioned the examples of Danish and Norwegian speakers switching to English for the sake of the non-Nordic colleagues. Such sensitivity, however, seems to be typical of academics who themselves have spent some time in workplaces abroad and have become aware of the shifting grounds of misunderstanding and understanding evoked by Gebauer et al. (2019:135).

### **Conclusion: Language as Capital in Postmigrant Academia – Symbolic Struggles and Shifting Positionings**

The language negotiations discussed in this article reveal a yet unresolved conflict of values in Swedish society in general and in academia in particular between equality and inclusion on the one hand and the value of national language as a multi-functional tool of communication on the other. Frustration and complaints about the fact that at Swedish universities, "linguistic market conditions with conflicting (internationalising *and* nationalising) effects converge and intermingle" (Salö et al. 2022:127; emphasis in the original) is exactly what we have encountered in the

interview material. However, it is also instructive to observe how our interviewees have developed their reasoning about enabling qualities of language acquisition and use. At the end of the day, language is also a part of “collective magic” and “alchemy of consecration” (Bourdieu 1986:20, 22) that triggers cooperation, solidarity, and mutual acknowledgement of different personal trajectories and heritages. This article points to the “constitutive and shaping role of migration” (Römhild 2021:52) in Swedish academia, where a prominent postmigrant struggle concerns representation in decision-making bodies. The debate article by Aguiar Penha et al. (2023) resonates with the struggles for recognition and public representation on equal terms discussed in much of the literature referred to in the theoretical framing section above.

The empirical sections presented a plethora of experiences and perspectives that shed light on the ongoing practices and negotiations of power in the realm of language use that may affect collegial relationships and professional trajectories in Swedish academia. Building on Bourdieu’s understanding of a field, the article has highlighted both competitive/differentiating and cooperative/solidarizing aspects of language practices detectable in our interview material. It has offered examples of Bourdieu’s claim that language is par excellence a cultural capital which “takes time to accumulate and which, as potential capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself in identical or expanded form, contains a tendency to persist in its being, is a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that *everything is not equally possible or impossible*” (Bourdieu 1986:15; emphasis added).

However, our analysis aspires to update and “complicate” Bourdieu’s conceptualizations, as his time-specific studies were centred in on (French) academia, where the language of power was only French, and provinciality and a local/class accent could not only result in falling from grace, but in dropping out of academia. Unless one did something spectacular with the lower positioned accent or dialect and transformed it into a “distinction”, one remained an underdog. In the context of present-day Swedish academia, there is a nexus of legitimate languages and, generally, quite a permissive attitude to their imperfect command. Also, the structure of the academic field became more fragmented and multi-centred in the last two decades that saw the boom of academic mobility. However, enabling qualities of different languages used in Swedish academia are often counterbalanced by not always clearly expressed, but compelling demands on high (most preferably, native) proficiency and refinement. Thus, in different institutional contexts and in different periods of careers, language practices may either enable conversions of one’s merits to prestige or set up obstacles to “intrinsic demands of his [the intellectual’s] project” (Bourdieu 1969:91). Academic institutions are positioned as authorities advocating inclusive institutional values of equality and merit, but at the same time they carefully guard their “heritage”, most obviously in the form of group boundaries. Consequently, collegial acknowledgement and inclusion presuppose “the reacknowledgement of a minimum of objective homogeneity” (ibid.:21). Language practices and the symbolic struggles and shifting positionings they entail are important components defining limits of such mutual (re)ac-



knowledge, as they blueprint boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

This is the issue at the core of the postmigrant debate. Our material indicates that, optimistically, in academia as a field ripe with postmigrant possibilities, boundaries of the academic/intellectual field can be loosened and made more penetrable with continuing investment of personal time and human capital. At the same time, personal efforts to acquire desirable language skills and convert them into a “voice being heard” as well as into positions of high prestige, do not guarantee a desired output (“everything is not equally possible”). Our results resonate with the research by Pudelko and Tenzer (2017), who argued that the impact of language on career advancement differs greatly depending on the English proficiency of local faculty and staff on the one hand, and on the international migrants’ ability to work in the local language on the other. This suggests the need for relational, bi-directional linguistic accommodation. In translation to Bourdieu’s research apparatus, such accommodation would contribute to the gradual formation of a “postmigrant habitus” – an embodied and tacit system of dispositions performed “without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor” (Bourdieu 1992:96) that makes a play of postmigrant possibilities realizable.

The framework of postmigration made us sensitive to the relevance of migration background for professional establishment and allowed us to capture the contradiction between equality and merit viewed through the lens of language practices. Our material revealed that positions of high status in academia need to be negotiated when it

comes to everyday workplace communication. At the same time, not only institutional power hierarchies stand and fall with fluency – or the lack thereof – in a particular language, but also personal well-being and assessment of one’s own academic excellence. Hence, a binary distinction between privilege and marginalization does not capture the complexity of the interviewees’ experiences. Regardless of origins, ethnicity, and length of stay in Sweden, all our interviewees are equally firmly positioned in academic terms. However, they need to make different kinds of efforts in daily negotiations of inclusion and recognition. These negotiations, or even struggles, in their turn depend on the institutional context of faculties and departments, in intersection with the fields and sub-fields these academics work in.

We therefore see the need to refine the discussion of academia by empirically investigating the “postmigrant talks” at different departments and in different disciplines. We also see the need for a sustained investigation of the changes over time that would highlight the outcomes of the tensions for which language use is of paramount importance.

*Maja Povrzanović Frykman*

Professor

Dept. of Global Political Studies

Malmö University

SE-205 06 Malmö

email: maja.frykman@mau.se

*Eleonora Narvselius*

Associate Professor

Dept. of Arts and Cultural Sciences

Lund University

Box 192

SE-221 00 Lund

email: eleonora.narvselius@kultur.lu.se



Barbara Törnquist-Plewa  
 Professor  
 Centre for Languages and Literature  
 Lund University  
 Box 201  
 SE-221 00 Lund  
 email: barbara.tornquist-plewa@slav.lu.se

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- 2 PhD students in Sweden are full-time employees at the university for four years.
- 3 In Sweden the title of professor can be earned on the basis of scholarly achievements (after an evaluation process involving external evaluators) or acquired in a competition for an advertised vacant professorship.
- 4 For example, Uppsala University's (2016) report showed that 85 per cent of staff in "administration" and "qualified administration" positions had a Swedish background, and for leadership positions the share was 94 per cent at that university.
- 5 See, e.g. Behtoui & Leivestad 2019 and Olsson et al. 2018.
- 6 For a research-based review of language matters in European higher education, see Apelgren et al. 2022. Critical race theory helped uncover "everyday experiences of racism by highlighting the intersectionality of race with other identity categories, among which language constitutes an important, yet under-explored, component" (Kubota et al. 2021:1; see also Pudelko and Tenzer 2019; Rita & Karides 2022; Sterzuk 2015).
- 7 See Gaonkar et al. 2021 for an extensive review of the conceptualizations of postmigration.
- 8 The interviews lasted for two hours on average and were conducted in Swedish, English, Polish, Croatian, and Russian. The transcripts were done in the original language and the non-English excerpts were translated into English by the authors.
- 9 Wolanik Boström & Öhlander (2018:166–167) observed that the capacity of communicating in Swedish plays an important role in the self-understanding and self-appreciation as professionals of medical doctors who migrated to Sweden.
- 10 See Bodycott and Walker 2000, Jnawali Pherali 2012, and Śliwa & Johansson 2015, for experiences of teachers in higher education working in countries culturally foreign to their own. Katarina Mozetič (2018: 121) has discussed the quest for cultural capital in terms of "good knowledge of Swedish and Swedish body language" in the medical profession and pertaining to issues of language and communication, and social and cultural distance.
- 11 SFI (Svenska för invandrare) stands for "Swedish for immigrants" courses that the municipalities offer to people who are registered as residents. Asylum seekers who have obtained a residence permit attend these courses as part of their two-year establishment plan, but knowledge of Swedish is not a criterion for obtaining citizenship. Nor are people who come to Sweden on employment contracts obliged to learn Swedish. Not all job contracts at Swedish universities include the obligation

to learn Swedish during the first two years of employment.

- 12 See Berbyuk Lindström 2018 for a discussion of the social pressure to participate in *fika* – coffee breaks in a hospital as a workplace. This author also points out the difficulties migrant doctors meet when trying to participate in informal conversations due to their limited linguistic and cultural competence, and their inability to make jokes.
- 13 See research on the nature of language and cultural transformation that emphasizes emotion as a key condition for constituting a new sense of self, highlighting the reflexivity of language (Sung-Yul Park 2019).

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