

LANGUAGE FOR INTEGRATION, LANGUAGE AS DISCIPLINE? A FOUCAULTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON L2 LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF ASYLUM

LINGUAGEM PARA INTEGRAÇÃO, LINGUAGEM COMO DISCIPLINA? UMA PERSPECTIVA FOUCAULTIANA SOBRE A APRENDIZAGEM DA L2 NO CONTEXTO DO ASILO

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Between 2014 and 2016, like in other European countries, a substantial increase of asylum requests took place in Switzerland, which forced the professionals and politicians involved in this context to take urgent action. This crisis produced an effect of magnifying glass on power issues linked to language learning, or in other words on language learning as Foucaultian discipline. In this article, I will show that the common link socially constructed between ‘language learning’ and ‘integration’ allows the social actors encountered by asylum seekers to make them learn French as soon as possible for preparation for life in their new country. In doing so, the society sustainably disciplines and controls them: asylum seekers, once they reach the status of legitimate refugees, are namely concentrated in low-skilled jobs, officially because they lack the necessary language skills for finding a job corresponding to their actual qualifications and desires. Most of them thus live on welfare, a situation that gives arguments to strengthen the current immigration policy and, at the same time, lock them in a refugee identity, that is, of people indebted to a society where they have no other role to play. Meanwhile, this discipline that the State and the host society impose to asylum seekers articulates with social representations of learning the language of the host country, and with the general equivalence that asylum seekers make themselves between learning the host language and integrating the host society. Asylum seekers often conceive of L2 learning as a discipline they have to exercise, as they appreciate the language level they should reach to get ‘normalized’ in an apparent linguistically homogeneous society, even if they know that it will never be enough to level social inequalities.

Keywords: Language, migration, power, asylum, integration

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Entre 2014 e 2006, à semelhança do que aconteceu noutros países de Europa, os pedidos de asilo na Suíça aumentaram substancialmente, o que obrigou os profissionais e os políticos envolvidos naquele momento a adotar medidas de urgência. Esta crise deu uma maior visibilidade a questões de poder ligadas à aprendizagem, ou, dito de outra forma, à abordagem foucaultiana da aprendizagem das línguas. Neste artigo, tentarei demonstrar que a relação socialmente construída entre ‘aprendizagem da língua’ e ‘integração’ permite aos atores sociais em contacto com os requerentes de asilo incita-los a aprender a língua francesa o mais rapidamente possível de forma a prepara-los a viver no seu novo país. Desta forma, a sociedade disciplina e controla-os: os requerentes de asilo, depois de se tornarem refugiados legítimos, concentram-se geralmente em empregos pouco qualificados, oficialmente por falta de competências linguísticas que lhes permitiriam encontrar um emprego correspondendo às suas reais qualificações e expectativas. A maior parte deles vive de subsídios, uma situação que fornece argumentos para intensificar a política atual de imigração, e ao mesmo tempo restringi-los à identidade de refugiado, ou seja, de pessoas que têm uma dívida para com uma sociedade em que não conseguem desempenhar nenhum outro papel. Além disso, esta disciplina, que o Estado e a sociedade de acolhimento impõem aos requerentes de asilo, articula-se com representações sociais sobre a aprendizagem da língua do país de acolhimento e com a ideia partilhada pelos próprios requerentes de asilo de que aprender a língua do país de acolhimento equivale a integrar a sociedade de acolhimento. Os requerentes de asilo assumem sempre a aprendizagem da L2 como uma disciplina, assim como consideram o nível linguístico a atingir como forma de alcançar uma ‘normalização’ numa sociedade aparentemente linguisticamente homogênea, embora saibam que nunca será suficiente para compensar as desigualdades sociais.

Palavras-chave: Língua, migração, poder, asilo, integração.

Les disciplines infimes, les panoptismes de tous les jours peuvent bien être au-dessous du niveau d'émergence des grands appareils et des grandes luttes politiques. Elles ont été, dans la généalogie de la société moderne, avec la domination de classe qui la traverse, la contrepartie politique des normes juridiques selon lesquelles on redistribuait le pouvoir. De là sans doute l'importance qui est attachée depuis si longtemps aux petits procédés de la discipline, à ces ruses de peu qu'elle a inventées, ou encore aux savoirs qui lui donnent un visage avouable, de là la crainte de s'en défaire si on ne leur trouve pas de substitut; de là l'affirmation qu'elles sont au fondement même de la société, et de son équilibre, alors qu'elles sont une série de mécanismes pour déséquilibrer définitivement et partout les relations de pouvoir; de là le fait qu'on s'obstine à les faire passer pour la forme humble mais concrète de toute morale, alors qu'elles sont un faisceau de techniques physico-politiques.

Foucault (2015, p. 505-507)

In the chapter "Discipline" in *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault describes in 1975 how tactics involving processes and bodies carefully construct the modern individual. As cogs in the machine, individuals experience and reproduce power effects generated by the surveillance society that we are part of. The modern individual – or "soul" in Foucault's words –, he claims, is born out of punishment procedures, surveillance mechanisms, humiliations, and constraints. Though real, it is an incorporeal area where the effects of a particular type of power articulate: it is the gear through which power relations give rise to possible knowledge, which in return re-conducts and reinforces the effects of power. More specifically, this power permanently produces the modern soul around, at the surface and within the body of those who are watched, trained, and disciplined, those who will be controlled throughout their lives.

Asylum seekers and refugees belong to this category of people that Foucault describes. The host State and society strongly monitor and discipline them to enter their potential new community and penalise them if they fail to reach an inaccessible norm. Like surveillance, Foucault explains, normalization becomes a primary mean of power, as it adds a whole set of degrees in normality, which are signs of membership in a homogeneous society, but which also play a role of classification, hierarchical organization, and distribution of ranks (Foucault 2015, pp. 461-463).

As foreigners, migrants, and claimants, asylum seekers are 'abnormal' and potentially dangerous and costly to the society. But as they are vulnerable, it may discipline them – like children, fools, or colonized people, Foucault may add – to exploit their strengths if they reach the required

standards to be accepted, that is, to become useful forces. In this context, language learning appears as a discipline (Foucault 2015, p. 473), or in other words as a specific technology of power that individuals conduct and reproduce themselves. Indeed, language is a critical and daily issue in migration regimes and appears as an essential asylum seekers' surveillance and regulation mechanism on the part of the State and society in general. Language as a norm allows creating inequalities within formal and apparent equality, as it introduces a gradation of differences within a homogeneity that is the rule. Differences in language levels appear as necessary and measurable, in particular through language tests:

On comprend que le pouvoir de la norme fonctionne facilement à l'intérieur d'un système de l'égalité formelle, puisque à l'intérieur d'une homogénéité qui est la règle, il introduit, comme un impératif utile et le résultat d'une mesure, tout le dégradé des différences individuelles. (*idem*, p. 163)

Indeed, asylum seekers are required to reach a threshold level (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, B1) useful to enter the labour market, but they are not supposed to go further in their language learning so that it becomes possible to justify that their role in the host society coincides with what is expected from them.

In this article, I will show that the strong link constructed between 'language learning' and 'integration' (see below for definitions) allows institutions and other social actors encountered by asylum seekers to make them learn French as soon as possible for preparation for life in their new country. In doing so, the society – through the institutions – sustainably disciplines and controls them (Kramersch 2005; Scollon 2004): asylum seekers, once they reach the status of legitimate refugees, are namely concentrated in low-skilled jobs, officially because they lack the necessary language skills for finding a job corresponding to their actual qualifications and desires (Allan 2013). Most of them thus live on welfare, a situation that gives arguments to strengthen the current immigration policy and, at the same time, lock them in a refugee identity, that is, of people indebted to a society where they have no other role to play. Meanwhile, this discipline that the State and the host society impose to asylum seekers articulates with social representations of learning the language of the host country, and with the general equivalence that asylum seekers make themselves between learning the host language and integrating the host society. Asylum seekers often conceive of L2 learning as a discipline they have to exercise, as they appreci-

ate the language level they should reach to get ‘normalized’ in an apparent linguistically homogeneous society, even if they know that it will never be enough to level social inequalities (Leudar, Hayes, Nevkapil & Baker 2008).

Since 2014, I have been investigating asylum in the canton of Vaud located in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. I have been researching L2 learning, and more precisely the modalities – or in other words the terms and conditions – of people’s access to social and linguistic practices useful to develop new competences in the host society, and in the host language. My ethnographic fieldwork led me to follow four French classes – from complete beginners to intermediate levels. I could also observe appointments with social workers, and I led interviews with many institutional actors, that is, with asylum seekers, social workers, French teachers, security officers in bunkers and shelters, but also with some of the Host Institution¹ board members. I also had access to institutional administrative documents and internal guidelines. Between 2014 and 2016, however, and like in other European countries, a substantial increase of asylum requests took place in Switzerland, especially from Eritrean, Afghan, Syrian and Somali people, which forced the professionals and politicians involved in this context to take urgent action. This crisis happened to structure my field work and produced an effect of magnifying glass on power issues linked to language learning, or in other words on language learning as Foucaultian discipline. Indeed, I have observed an ambivalent dynamic that characterizes this power process, which consists on the apparent and official inclusion of asylum seekers on the one hand, and their concrete and lasting social exclusion, especially if they are recognized as refugees, on the other hand. The data to which I will refer therefore comes from this research on asylum seekers’ access to linguistic and social practices in Switzerland.

To begin with, I will describe the conceptual framework of my study, to clarify why I use a sociolinguistic perspective on L2 learning. Then, after outlining the Swiss context of asylum and the broad understanding of the terms *language learning* and *integration* in federal and cantonal legal texts, I will explain how the canton organizes the logistical arrangements concerning asylum seekers’ stay on the Swiss territory. More specifically, I will then focus on language courses, to highlight why they are not appropriate for asylum seekers’ L2 learning or their social insertion. Some concrete cases will illustrate this point and make the power dynamics structuring this situation quite clear. Finally, I will analyze the discourses produced by

¹ As described in section 1, the cantonal state mandates and funds the Host Institution to organize and implement the asylum seekers’ hosting.

five asylum seekers during a French class. On the basis of what they identify as limitations to their social and professional integration, I will demonstrate how the institutional organization, in fact, contributes to limit the broadening of their linguistic repertoire, with various consequences: first, it confines them to low-skills jobs, and second, it makes them accept, incorporate, this matter of fact.

1. A sociolinguistic perspective on L2 learning: conceptual framework

Learning a new language is rarely a goal in itself. If it is sometimes the result of choice, it is mostly a necessity, especially for migrants who aim to settle in a new country and a new linguistic context. Thus, engaging in L2 learning is intrinsically linked to the person's engagement in social and linguistic practices, and most of the time it may entail a solution meant to overcome challenges inherent with her or his life circumstances (Zeiter 2013). According to Hymes (1984, p. 40),

(...) la langue est, en un certain sens, ce que ceux qui la possèdent peuvent en faire, ce qu'ils ont eu l'occasion et quelque raison d'en faire et (...) par conséquent, on peut constater des différences d'aisance et d'adéquation qui ne sont pas accidentelles, mais qui, au contraire, font partie intégrante de la langue telle qu'elle existe pour les personnes en question. Il faut établir une distinction très nette entre, d'une part, le potentiel infini et l'équivalence fonctionnelle des langues, en tant que systèmes formels, et d'autre part, le caractère fini et la non-équivalence qui peuvent les caractériser en tant que moyens possédés et utilisés en fait dans la réalité.

Such a sociolinguistic conception of language underlines two main issues. First, language is a linguistic and social practice, as it refers to action. Second, differences in linguistic competence depend on these practices and are not accidental. L2 learning is thus a question of socialization, that is, of the ways a person integrates new social practices according to many factors that are unique to each and every situation (Zeiter & Goastellec 2017). In this sense, L2 learning also depends on language socialization, which means that

language is learned through interactions with others who are more proficient in the language and its cultural practices and who provide novices explicit and (or) implicit mentoring or evidence about normative, appropriate uses of the

language, and of the worldviews, ideologies, values, and identities of community members. (Duff 2010, p. 172)

Another complementary conception of language as social action is grounded upon Bakhtinian theory. Busch (2015), for instance, considers language as heteroglossic, as each discourse contains references to other times and spaces that are socially and ideologically structured regarding worldview and discourse. It also comprises positioning related to these visions of times and spaces, which means an internalization of others' words, as well as indices of social differentiation. Finally, discourse contains language dialogues within a single language or between different languages. In other terms, Busch's Bakhtinian perspective on language describes a multiplicity of discourses within the discourse. The author more specifically highlights the impact of language ideologies and discursive categorizations on the repertoire itself, as well as on the person's inclusion and exclusion feelings.

The focus here is not on how many and which languages speakers have available to them, or how 'proficient' they are in their L1, L2, or Ln. The question is rather how linguistic variation can serve to construct belonging or difference, and above all, how such constructions can be experienced by speakers as exclusions or inclusions due to language. (Busch 2015, p. 3)

Following many researchers, from Gumperz (1964) to Busch (2013, 2015) and García & Wei (2014), I am interested in the way that people develop their linguistic repertoire in and through social practices. My concern has been more precisely the modalities of people's access to social and linguistic practices useful to develop new skills in the host country, and in the host language. Recent post-structuralist studies raise the social, historical and subjective dimensions of the constitution of the linguistic repertoire, as Busch (2015, p. 5) defines it:

The repertoire is understood as a whole, comprising those languages, dialects, styles, registers, codes, and routines that characterize interaction in everyday life. According to Gumperz, it is up to the individual speakers to make decisions about the use of linguistic resources, but this freedom to choose is subject to both grammatical and social constraints. It is limited by generally accepted conventions, which serve to classify types of expression as informal, technical, literary, humorous, and so on.

Heteroglossic and multilingual, the linguistic repertoire not only comprises expressive possibilities but also positioning and membership issues, that is, linguistic and symbolic power. Thus, the question for the speaker is: to remain silent, to be silenced, or to have a voice and to speak.

The sociolinguistic perspective that I adopt on L2 learning concerns this particular matter of power issues structuring the possibilities of having a voice in a new language – which is a salient issue for asylum seekers and refugees. As Duchêne (2017, p. 43) reminds us, if the sociolinguistic perspective focuses on the social part of the language, it is also fundamentally looking into the language aspects of the social, which allows describing at the same time social and linguistic issues:

(...) si la sociolinguistique met au centre de ses investigations la part sociale du langage, elle est aussi fondamentalement engagée dans une réflexion sur la part langagière (...) du social. Ces deux dimensions inhérentes à la sociolinguistique renvoient (...) fondamentalement (...) à sa capacité – ou non – à contribuer à la fois à la compréhension du social et à la compréhension du linguistique.

Going back to Foucault, positioning and membership in discourse relate to questions of normalization in a homogeneous society, and language thus appears as the norm to reach to belong to this society. The concept of discipline encompasses the double movement described through the idea of the repertoire's configuration: on the one hand, the host society may give a voice to or silence the newcomer; on the other hand, he or she may speak or remain silent. Whatever the situation is, the clue is the discipline that needs to be exercised in order to reach the norm, in other words, the language to be learned. This dynamic is set in motion both by the society and the person herself/himself and appears to be an efficient technology for power, as I will show in the following sections.

2. Asylum and language in Switzerland: contextual and legal framework

Switzerland is a Confederation of twenty-six cantons, and the federal government is located in Bern, the capital. The cantons are sovereign, except for the powers attributed to the central federal State. The legal asylum procedure depends on the central federal authority, when the cantonal authority is in charge of assistance, that is, of asylum seekers' accommodation,

medical and health supervision and social support. In this context, each Canton may organize activities and educational programs, according to its legal framework concerning asylum. However, neither the Federal Act on Asylum nor the Act on Assistance to Asylum Seekers of the Canton of Vaud mentions language or integration. It seems useful, then, to get a glimpse into the legal framework on foreign nationals, to understand the broader sense given to the link between ‘language’ and ‘integration’ in Switzerland. Indeed, even if asylum seekers are not legally bound by these texts, as foreigners they indirectly depend on these acts. Here are the extracts of the Federal and Cantonal (Vaud) Acts on Foreign Nationals that mention these notions:

Example 1

Federal Act (Letr, art. 4)

1. L'intégration des étrangers vise à favoriser la coexistence des populations suisse et étrangère sur la base des valeurs constitutionnelles ainsi que le respect et la tolérance mutuels.
 2. Elle doit permettre aux étrangers dont le séjour est légal et durable de participer à la vie économique, sociale et culturelle.
 3. L'intégration suppose d'une part que les étrangers sont disposés à s'intégrer, d'autre part que la population suisse fait preuve d'ouverture à leur égard.
- ⁴Il est indispensable que les étrangers se familiarisent avec la société et le mode de vie en Suisse, et en particulier, qu'ils apprennent une langue nationale. L'intégration vise à établir l'égalité des chances entre Suisses et étrangers dans la société suisse. (OIE, art. 2, al. 1)

Cantonal Act (LIEPR, art. 2-3)

L'intégration implique, d'une part, la volonté des étrangers de s'intégrer dans la société d'accueil en respectant les valeurs qui fondent l'Etat de droit et d'apprendre le français et, d'autre part, la volonté de la société de permettre cette intégration.

Au sens de la présente loi, on entend par intégration toute action visant à promouvoir l'égalité des chances d'accès aux prestations sociales, aux ressources économiques et à la vie culturelle, la participation des étrangers à la vie publique et la compréhension mutuelle entre Suisses et étrangers.

The federal act defines the aim of integration as the co-existence of the Swiss nationals and the foreign population by the values of the Federal Constitution as well as mutual respect and tolerance. It stipulates that integration should enable foreign nationals who are long-term lawful residents of Switzerland to participate in the economic, social and cultural life of the

society. Integration is understood as requiring some willingness on the part of foreign nationals and openness on the part of the Swiss population. Finally, foreign nationals are required to familiarize themselves with the social conditions and way of life in Switzerland and especially to learn a national language.

The cantonal act mostly respects the guideline given by the federal act. But it is important to notice that the cantons are reasonably free regarding the concrete implementation of the federal law. The cantonal act uses thus the same terminology to say something slightly different: integration involves, on the one hand, the willingness of foreigners to become integrated into the host society by respecting the Federal values and by learning French and, on the other hand, the will of the host society to allow this integration. Integration is then defined as any action to promote equality of opportunity in access to social, economic, cultural and public life, as well as mutual understanding between Swiss people and foreigners.

The main differences concern L2 learning. In the federal act, language appears as a way to become acquainted with the host society, when the cantonal act requires L2 learning as a proof of the foreigner's willingness to integrate into the society. Notions such as coexistence and openness disappear, and the promotion of equality between two legally different populations is under the federal state's responsibility. Foreigners thus have the responsibility to demonstrate their willingness to integrate by learning the language but have very few opportunities to determine the modalities of their integration, especially regarding education and labour market.

It seems, then, that the Swiss federal government gives L2 learning a rightful place in the integration process, which is procedural and contextual, when the Vaud Canton considers L2 learning a proof, a requirement and an outcome of integration, placing foreigners in a double bind. Even if asylum seekers do not depend on the acts mentioned above, as they are not considered a resident population, such an ideology structures their future social practices as well as their understanding of the role they occupy in the Swiss society. Their social practices contribute to position them as refugees and to make them conscious of this matter of fact. Language materializes these dynamics in different ways. First, the popular and media discourses that they encounter about asylum structure their representations of asylum seekers' status in the Swiss society. Second, the limited social practices to which they have access restrict the language varieties and social norms that they can learn. Finally, these few opportunities to act socially and linguistically in French, as well as the role that they gradually endorse as refugees

may influence the particular configuration of their linguistic repertoire itself. In other words, the terms of their access to social practices in French appear to have lasting structuration effects on their future role in society.

More precisely, asylum seekers rely on the Federal act on asylum (LAsi) – which does not mention language or integration at all – and on the Cantonal act on the Hosting of Asylum seekers (LARA), where one can find the following article:

Example 2

LARA (art. 39)

1. L'établissement peut organiser des programmes d'occupation et de formation pour les demandeurs d'asile.
2. Ces derniers y participent en fonction de leurs besoins et aptitudes, ainsi que des disponibilités offertes par les programmes d'occupation et de formation.

As mentioned above, the Canton is in charge of the assistance, that is, of asylum seekers accommodation, medical and health supervision and social support, including occupation and education programs, like language courses. However, article 39 above explicitly mentions that this is not a right that asylum seekers have: the Canton of Vaud may organize it. Thus, access to language appears as a favour dependent on the Canton's goodwill, according to the ideology out forward in the cantonal act on foreign nationals. In return, people must implicitly be grateful for what they are getting, regardless of the amount and the quality of the language courses or other services linked to language and socio-professional integration.

As the following section will show, the canton of Vaud mandates the Host Institution to organize and implement such courses, aimed to attain a low-intermediate level (B1) in French considered to be enough for the social and professional integration of future refugees, as described in the *fide*² outline-curriculum:

2 This level is set according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) and adapted to migrants' L2 learning in the *fide* outline-curriculum. This curriculum meets the importance given at the federal level to learning a national language: "The integration of migrants is an important political and social objective. A key role is attributed to understanding a local language. The Federal Council commissioned the Federal Office for Migration (FOM) with the development of a conceptual framework for the linguistic integration of migrants." (<http://www.fide-info.ch/en/fide>)

*Example 3**Independent use of language B1*

- Can understand important information from a school, employer, landlord or public authority if a clear standard language is used and familiar topics are being discussed.
- Can cope with the majority of situations in everyday life, at the place of work or in public spaces.
- Can express him- or herself simply and coherently about familiar topics, personal interests and experiences.
- Can describe his/her own opinions, goals, hopes and wishes and substantiate or explain these briefly.

However, my point is to highlight the fact that the federal state and the cantonal organization actively regulate asylum seekers' opportunities to engage in social practices. Indeed, their legal status determines their rights, especially concerning employability, and for their daily life, that is for housing, money, employability, healthcare and activities programs, as they have to follow the instructions given by the social workers at the cantonal level. The Host Institution appears thus to be the main interlocutor for the asylum seekers, not only for their vital needs but also for their future. Indeed, the proceedings time is a waiting time from which asylum seekers might benefit to develop new skills – and in particular language skills – and also to develop projects for the future. However, most of the social practices within the Cantonal system take place with an interpreter or in English when possible, except for administrative issues³. Asylum seekers, thus, have very few language practices in French, which means that they have a very restricted access to the language they are supposed to learn.

3. Language courses for asylum seekers: educational framework

In the canton of Vaud, asylum seekers benefit from language courses given by the Host Institution. Semi-intensive and intensive courses are aimed to reach a low-intermediate level (B1) in French and are supposed to follow the *fide* outline-curriculum planned at the federal level. This curriculum relies on an action-based approach considering the current and future need for communication and education of the migrants:

³ Formal correspondence is drawn up in the official language(s) of the host canton – in French in the canton of Vaud.

Example 4

The central element of action-oriented teaching is the action, i.e. coping with real communicative situations. (...) In action-oriented teaching, the learners work with real or at least sufficiently realistic tasks that are relevant to them. By doing so, they not only expand their language competencies but they also develop skills for addressing tasks in a structured manner, to look for solutions and to learn autonomously.

The characteristic feature of action-oriented teaching according to *fide* principles is that situations and action steps are not addressed in isolation (e.g. “presenting oneself” or “writing a letter of application” but are embedded in a course of action i.e. in a scenario (e.g. “Presenting oneself as the new tenant at the neighbour’s” or “Applying for a job”). This procedure is efficient from the point of view of the psychology of learning on the one hand and makes the integration of sociocultural information easier on the other.⁴

Unfortunately, very few asylum seekers attain this level, and there are various reasons for that. First of all, they lack social interactions with French speakers. Asylum seekers benefit from a limited right to labour, for example, and hardly make contact with the population. Besides, teachers in charge of language courses are not well qualified⁵ according to the criteria set by *fide* or trained in action-based perspectives. They were massively hired in 2015 due to the increased number of asylum requests, but the Canton could grant only limited financial means to this program. Most of the teachers are neither education professionals nor language learning specialists, and very few had achieved the *fide* curriculum training when I did my observation. Additionally, they have been hardly sensitized to this particular public. Teaching practices are thus traditional – that is, grammar, vocabulary, verbs, and pronunciation – and at best include communicative role-plays. A very illustrative example is the following group exercise, where the students receive a house layout with the following instruction:

4 <http://www.fide-info.ch/en/fide/haeufigefragen>

5 Following the *fide* outline-curriculum is not compulsory, but every language institute that is seeking an official mandate in Switzerland claims to be *fide*-qualified. However, as the curriculum came out 2009, many language teachers have not received the necessary training yet. Most of the institute, like the Host Institution, thus, make a commitment to funding their teachers' education.

Example 5

Teacher: let's imagine a flatshare . you try to imagine who sleeps in which room . it's a holiday home. you'll stay two weeks (...) now let's try to make rules . what can we do in this house ((?))⁶

Needless to say that the same exercise would have been much more significant and efficient if the instruction had been something like "You can finally leave the bunker to move in a flat with three other friends. Organize yourself to find furniture, and so on". It is always difficult, however, to measure such a task's efficiency. My field notes are the following:

Example 6

At least one out of four students in the group speaks a different language. Activity is negotiated between the students. Roles attributed according to language level: M. is drawing on the layout again, and other students do not agree; H. is facilitating the discussion in farsi and translating into French to M. and Z. (Eritrea).

In the other groups, some students use the time to ask questions unrelated to the task to the teacher, like filling out a form. Teacher asks them to come after the lesson.

Students give two rules, they write it on the white board: 'On peut pas téléphoner' (No phone calls, literally 'we cannot phone') and 'On doit écouter le cours' (Please listen to the teacher, literally 'we must listen to the lesson'). Other rules are oral: it is forbidden to smoke/eat/make phone calls/wear caps.

In response to the teacher asking for rules structuring the holiday house, students mainly express prohibitions, even though the teacher took care to formulate the task positively ('what we can do'). This example is illustrative of the influence of the social practices on the repertoire's configuration, as it is clear that the students are used to prohibitions: they see some everywhere (in the bunker, in the classroom, in social workers' offices, ...) and are fully able to reproduce such chunks. The second rule written on the white board is surprising, as it is related to the course itself. It may represent indices of some of the students being fed up with the lack of discipline in the language class. In section 5, a similar episode will show that asylum seekers give different meanings to the discipline of learning French, with various outcomes.

⁶ The data is originally in French. I translated it into English for ease of reading, and I anonymized all the names.
Transcription code: I use dots for 1 second pauses; ((?)) to underline a questioning tone; (...) to mark cuts in the citation.

Nevertheless, the actual teaching given to asylum seekers happens to be so far from their current – and future – needs that they are not getting much out of it. According to research (e.g. Bobrow-Finn 2010; Gordon 2011; McDonald 2000), key constraints to language learning in such a context are insecurity, war trauma, psychological problems, and lack of social interactions. But it must be said that the educational system designed for asylum seekers in this canton – at least – is inappropriate for these particular learners, despite the efforts made.

4. Access to French in the everyday life: social contexts

As mentioned above, asylum seekers hardly interact in French in their everyday life, mainly because they are restricted in their interactions with the local population, as Jamila explains when she says: “some weeks I speak three sentences in French. not more. I can’t learn like that. I understand everything but I can’t speak”. However, the luckier ones benefit from volunteering associations that propose language courses, like the one that I observed and called *The Association*. Here is an extract from their website:

Example 7

Le besoin numéro un des migrants: L'apprentissage du français !

C'est une question de survie et d'intégration en Suisse romande, à savoir comprendre son interlocuteur, saluer un passant, épeler son nom, prendre rendez-vous, déchiffrer une consigne, parler de sa santé, exprimer des excuses, retirer un envoi à la Poste, demander son chemin, ouvrir un compte... (...)

Très hétérogènes par rapport à leurs connaissances scolaires et linguistiques et leurs façons d'apprendre, nos requérants d'asile progressent dans une ambiance décontractée, personnelle et souvent ludique, et nous sommes contents de voir leur envie d'apprendre, de mémoriser, d'étudier.

Unlike in the legal texts, *The Association* does not present language learning as a duty, but as a vital issue for asylum seekers, the number one problem to solve if they want to survive and integrate into the society. The problem is that the volunteers very often repeat the same pattern as formal language courses, adding patriarchal and often post-colonial attitudes to the existing power dynamics (Caglitutuncigil 2015; Pujolar 2007). Expressions like ‘our asylum seekers’ are representative of such attitudes and symptomatic of volunteers’ difficulties to empower the people that they help (Muehlebach 2012; Théolis & Thomas 2002). Even more, the suggested activities like apologizing, or opening up a bank account – which

is indeed a typical Swiss activity, beneficial to integration! – bring to light their representations of the role of refugees in the Swiss society, as well as an instrumental perspective on language. Nevertheless, such associations are necessary, as they ensure minimal interactions in French and usually are a source of friendship and cultural communication.

Another aspect of social interactions is that asylum seekers are not students on language holiday. L2 learning is not necessarily a priority for them, as they have other preoccupations, such as the asylum procedure. Furthermore, when they need to see a doctor, a social worker or a federal officer regarding their asylum status, they are supposed to benefit from a translator. But in reality, it is not that easy. Researches concerning asylum and translation, as well as studies on asylum interviews (Maryns 2015), have already underlined the bias and power issues characterizing translation. Another problem, however, is the lack of translation in the daily interactions. For instance, a translator should be present when the person meets her/his social worker to solve current problems. However, as such a service is expensive, it is not automatically provided: the asylum seeker must ask for it. If he or she does not, they have to deal with the situation, which implies that the asylum seekers already have some competences in French and a smartphone with a translation app. If not, they draw on another asylum seeker who knows enough French to help. Thus, having observed such situations, the Host Institution has established a new activity program called ‘Translation’: asylum seekers who speak French better (B1) can do the translation for newcomers. For this activity, they receive pocket money, they are supposed to improve their French and to develop translation skills (they receive a work certificate at the end of the agreement). For its part, the Host Institution saves money, regardless of the necessary confidentiality and protection of asylum seekers.

Let me mention now the case of Zhora, a Somali woman. Her legs hurt and she needs to see a doctor. As she speaks Somali, the doctor is supposed to call in a translator, but as he is an Arabic speaker and knows that Zhora went to the Coranic school as a girl, he does not. She is unable to express herself in Arabic, as well as to understand the diagnosis. She explains in an interview that her doctor did not ask her or tried to explain the diagnosis: she is an asylum seeker, she says, a woman and a Muslim, and the doctor feels the right not to do his job properly. As a consequence, Zhora’s health situation deteriorated so much that she had difficulties to follow language courses or any other activity.

5. Integration in debate: individual contexts

The cases presented below illustrate the underlying social principles that structures asylum seekers language learning. Let us concentrate now on the discourses of five asylum seekers during a B1 language class, which is, as already mentioned, the highest level available at the Host Institution. Azad, a 19-year-old and high school graduate Afghani asylum seeker, spontaneously organized a debate on integration as an oral exercise, and I had the opportunity to record this fantastic source of information on the sense they give to their situation. Indeed, in their answers and comments to Azad and other students' questions, Jibril, Abdiou, Cyrus, and Ali highlight some of the institutional dynamics structuring their current and future social practices. They also clearly underline the critical role played by the language and by the way that the language courses are organized. I translated all the extracts, which are originally in French.

Azad first asks his fellows the following questions: What is the definition of integration? Can somebody living on welfare be integrated? What are their professional or educational projects? Do they have any? How far does the Host Institution help them in this project? How could the institution help better? Why is it that the institution does not help? During this classroom interaction, Jibril, a young man from Côte-d'Ivoire, first underlines different issues.

Example 8

I asked all the time to do things and I had no answer. I had to wait to work . because you're an asylum seeker and you are not a priority . even if your motivation is great . you are abandoned on the side . it is discouraging . even if you are motivated .. the fact that you are not allowed to work because you are an asylum seeker . and then you try to do an internship . because I did the house painting training . but it is difficult to find an internship and they don't help you (...) we integrate the society . we try to . but we don't know the companies and they must help us . but they don't.

First, the federal and cantonal acts concerning asylum are very restrictive concerning employability.⁷ Jibril seems to know it when he says, "I had

⁷ According to the federal law (LAsi), asylum seekers are admitted to employment three months after the asylum request if the economic situation and the labour market allow it, and if the order of priority is respected concerning Swiss and European citizens' employment. Thus, employers must proof that they have no other Swiss or European candidate to employ. Besides, he or she must deduct 10% of the worker's wages as "special tax". The federal "special tax" is aimed to pay back the costs arising from the asylum request.

to wait to work because you're an asylum seeker and you are not a priority" or "you are not allowed to work because you are an asylum seeker." These restrictions are "discouraging," he says, but he still tries to find an unpaid internship, which should be much easier, from an administrative point of view. But the problem now is his socialization in the local labour market: as an asylum seeker, he is, so to say, nobody, and he does not know the companies. Jibril points out an inconsistency. The Host Institution invested for him in an internal educational program called *Practical French for Painting*, which is an introduction to this job in French, but he benefits from no help to find a real job outside the institution. From a linguistic point of view, this situation prevents him from accessing professional practices, which would be useful to develop his vocational skills and may be a key factor in the expansion of his language repertoire in French. Jibril is allowed to work within the institution, as an unpaid painter trainee, but not in the real society. This situation represents a significant limitation to his employability for the future and represents all the characteristics of Foucault's panoptical machine.

Abdiou wanted to pursue higher education in Switzerland, as he had already achieved a high school diploma and began pharmacology studies in his former country. Here is his view on his situation:

Example 9

when I turned 18 I asked for education . I asked my social worker but the issue was the housing . I stayed in a foster home very far away from the city in the mountain in the forest . I told my social assistant I already achieved high school and studied pharmacology but she said it wasn't recognized here and I have to learn French . six months later I feel that I improved my French a lot but she doesn't help me . she says that I have to keep learning French within the institution . I can't go to the college . it was possible but the institution doesn't help me . they said that I haven't found any apprenticeship .. but I want to study at university (...) And now I found an apprenticeship on my own and I wrote the curriculum vitae on my own and the letter of interest all on my own . the institution didn't help me

He identifies different pretexts not to let him go to the university in Switzerland. The first issue concerns his housing in a "foster home very far away from the city in the mountain in the forest." His humoristic way to repeat what her social assistant explained hides that the Host Institution is in charge of the housing and could have let him get closer to the city, something that he asked for, by the way, more than one year before this debate. Then, after six months mainly spent improving his French, the social assis-

tant explains to him that Switzerland will not recognize his previous studies, which is partially wrong, and he knows it as he says, “it was possible but the institution doesn’t help me.” Another argument is that Abdiou has not found any apprenticeship yet, which is an entirely fallacious argument: he was always very clear on this matter. He wants to continue his studies at the university and is not willing to do an apprenticeship. Finally, he seems to internalize two pieces of information: first, the institution will never let him study, and second, he will have to do everything on his own. Abdiou experiences a similar situation with Jibril, as the institution tries to keep him confined within its system, especially in the French classes. Language appears again as a significant limitation, as the social assistant uses it as a comfortable and measurable clue to prevent Abdiou from going out of the established framework or, in Foucault’s terms, out of the Panopticum.

When Azad asks his fellows about the reasons why the Host Institution limits so much any access to higher education, two responses are given, each one argued with a specific ideology. To start with, Cyrus speaks during the whole debate from a strong meritocratic perspective.

Example 10

Az so we reach the last question: why is it so ((?))

Cyr I know that the institution doesn’t need us. we need the institution. and I know many people abuse the institution for instance they are in Switzerland for years they don’t work and they don’t learn French. and so the institution doesn’t do much for them because they are misusing it. if someone is looking for a job or an internship they help but if not they don’t

In this extract, he communicates an absolute loyalty to the Host Institution, especially when he says “the institution doesn’t need us, we need the institution.” The beginning of the debate helps to understand what he means, as he says that it is a great luck for asylum seekers to benefit from such an institution and that they have no right to complain. At the same time, he reproduces here, when he speaks about people who “abuse of the institution (...) who don’t work and don’t learn French”, a popular stigmatizing discourse against welfare recipients, especially when they are refugees. Besides, he conceives of the modalities of asylum seekers’ L2 learning a show of good faith. His conclusion, “if someone is looking for a job or an internship, they help, but if not, they don’t,” means that they must be autonomous. Cyrus’ perspective on L2 learning and professional issues, thus, appears to be entirely congruent with the institution’s policy.

Ali concludes the debate with this intervention.

Example 11

I've been in Switzerland 15 months now and I think the institution thinks we don't understand anything well. I came here in order to progress. everybody knows that in Afghanistan in Syria in Africa there are many problems we can't live in peace that's why we came here (...) for example the institution can show me a good solution or good choice to achieve my goal. but now I know that I have to learn French here ((*in the institution*)) until I reach a low intermediate level and then I have to find an apprenticeship. nothing more I can't how can I say it's the rule (...) because there are enough students here enough people who are going to become a doctor a great man and we who are only refugees we have to be only manual workers ((*other students nod loudly*)) that's it we have to (...) what [Cyrus] said before that Swiss people need no refugees: when we entered Switzerland borders were open not closed . it means that Switzerland gave us the permit to enter Switzerland . they gave us the permit to stay . and now they are closing the border

He provides here a critical input not only on Cyrus' words but also on the political and social context structuring their lives in Switzerland. When he says "the institution thinks that we don't understand anything well," Ali notes the contempt that is their lot. When he says "now I know that I have to learn French here (in the institution) until I reach a low intermediate level and then I have to find an apprenticeship . nothing more . I can't (...) it's the rule" he shows his understanding of an institutional system he has no right and no chance to escape. Like Jibril and Abdiou, he stresses the non-recognition of his integrity, but also the non-recognition of his previous life and projects. Besides, he makes it clear that the impossibility to learn French outside the institution and further than the B1 level correlates his professional perspectives. Saying "we who are only refugees we have to be only manual workers," he communicates a consciousness of the position that asylum seekers must occupy in the society. Such a consciousness of his situation as an asylum seeker relies on the ultimate power technology described by Foucault (2015, p. 483):

Celui qui est soumis à un champ de visibilité, et qui le sait, reprend à son compte les contraintes du pouvoir; il les fait jouer spontanément sur lui-même; il inscrit en soi le rapport de pouvoir dans lequel il joue simultanément les deux rôles; il devient le principe de son propre assujettissement. Du fait même le pouvoir externe, lui, peut s'alléger de ses pesanteurs physiques; il tend à l'incorporer; et plus il se rapproche de cette limite, plus ces effets sont constants,

profonds, acquis une fois pour toutes, incessamment reconduits: perpétuelle victoire qui évite tout affrontement physique et qui est toujours jouée d'avance.

Even if he replies to Cyrus' meritocratic ideology by a political and economic analysis implying that Switzerland met the quotas for recruitment of foreign labour in 2016, Ali not only understands the power dynamics structuring his life in Switzerland but also integrates them as a matter of fact. In doing so, he finally reaches the same point as Cyrus: he is an asylum seeker, and this status determines his current and future positions in society. Whatever his opinion on the issue is, he knows that he will have to play along, and this consciousness is part of the Foucaultian discipline of which he is a part.

6. Language learning as discipline: discussion

The discourses of these five asylum seekers show that language activities such as French courses and opportunities to broaden their social practices are very regulated and restricted, with a lasting effect on their life projects. The dynamics linked to L2 learning overlap with Foucault's definition of what he calls "discipline":

La 'discipline' ne peut s'identifier ni avec une institution ni avec un appareil; elle est un type de pouvoir, une modalité pour l'exercer, comportant tout un ensemble d'instruments, de techniques, de procédés, de niveaux d'application, de cibles: elle est une 'physique' ou une 'anatomie' du pouvoir, une technologie. (Foucault 2015, p. 499)

As he repeatedly reminds us, power is not something that one possesses, but something that can be used. In this sense, discipline is a type of power including different tools, techniques, methods, application levels, and targets: in other words, discipline is a technology of power which simultaneously classifies individuals according to a norm, and increases their usefulness for the benefit of the capitalist society. Language, as a norm, matches both criteria, as language levels appear to be an objective way to classify and hierarchize, and additionally, language is presented as an empowering and useful tool. Language tests thus correspond to what Foucault (*idem*, p. 472) defines as the *exam*: a power modality where every individual receives its individuality as status, and where measures, quotes, and differences characterize the individual and structure its status.

Nevertheless, helping asylum seekers and refugees to learn the local language also grows their potential utility for society, and empowers them: the profit seems to be on both sides.

The tensions that exist between Cyrus and Ali otherwise fall within these ideas of discipline and norm. Regardless of the sense they give to the asylum system, they play along because they have no other choice in financial, administrative and social terms:

l'acceptation d'une discipline peut bien être souscrite par voie de contrat; la manière dont elle est imposée, les mécanismes qu'elle fait jouer, la subordination non réversible des uns par rapport aux autres, le 'plus de pouvoir' qui est toujours fixé du même côté, l'inégalité de position des différents 'partenaires' par rapport au règlement commun opposent le lien disciplinaire et le lien contractuel, et permettent de fausser systématiquement celui-ci à partir du moment où il a pour contenu un mécanisme de discipline. (*idem*, p. 507)

Learning the language of the host society is an apparent resolve for asylum seekers, which may be similar to the contract that Foucault mentions. However, as already said, learning the language is not a priority for them, even if most of the people that I interviewed stated that they wanted to speak French as soon as possible. In any case, the Canton, through the Host Institution, imposes language courses on the asylum seekers and presents them as a gift. The state does not consider alternatives because such a discipline is supposed to grant social cohesion: on the one hand, language empowers and helps the migrants to integrate the society, which means fewer costs regarding social assistance and more benefits regarding humanity. On the other hand, the language grows their potentialities, in terms of labour forces, making them useful – if not necessary – to the capitalist society.

According to Castelloti, Leconte, and Huver (2016), if linguistic competencies are always an asset, they are neither necessary – think for example of people working in multinational companies and humanitarian agencies in Geneva, who never learned French (Yeung, 2016) – nor sufficient to enter the society. Language is an excuse to the systematic minorization of asylum seekers and refugees. Language learning requirement is an easy, concrete and measurable way to deny them the opportunity for equality and to maintain the social hierarchy between populations. García (2017, p. 14) also highlights that “a shift to dominant language practices has not led to the structural incorporation of minoritized groups in the dominant soci-

ety's economic, political, and social life." On the contrary, the present study shows that engaging in host language learning emphasises and maintains alterity and enhances it as the basis of refugees' identity. Simultaneously, refugees are stigmatized through language, i.e. through the new language to learn as well as through their impossibility to have their language heard, having to be grateful for the opportunities given by the host society. According to Duchêne *et al.* (2017), we must then remain vigilant with regards to linguistic skills, as they do not guarantee refugees' social insertion. Language as discipline may be instrumentalized for political ends and sweep under the rug even more fundamental issues:

De là sans doute l'importance qui est attachée depuis si longtemps aux petits procédés de la discipline, à ces ruses de peu qu'elle a inventées, ou encore aux savoirs qui lui donnent un visage avouable, de là la crainte de s'en défaire si on ne leur trouve pas de substitut de là l'affirmation qu'elles sont au fondement même de la société, et de son équilibre, alors qu'elles sont une série de mécanismes pour déséquilibrer définitivement et partout les relations de pouvoir; de là le fait qu'on s'obstine à les faire passer pour la forme humble mais concrète de toute morale, alors qu'elles sont un faisceau de techniques physico-politiques. (Foucault 2015, pp. 506-507)

After such a study, it would be tempting to conclude with a Manichean and militant perspective on asylum. But it is not my goal. The question is not to know how far the state organizes discrimination, or if there is a hidden agenda linked to French classes. It seems to me that researchers on such topics must question issues related to language to identify dynamics and malfunctions provoking discrimination and oppression. According to Bourdieu (1981), and in conclusion, understanding how this type of dynamics function may drive to fatalistic resignation or irresponsible utopia. The point of such a study, however, is to provide a scientific basis to contest the likely consequences of discrimination processes.

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