

Boris Printschitz

All a question of the “right” capital? Subjectification – the hidden mechanism behind language tests for residence permit in Austria

Abstract: Impossible to detach from its political, cultural and social context, language is used to determine practical and symbolic membership (Dirim 2013), including citizenship. Language tests play an essential role in this practical and symbolic regulation. With this philosophical approach to the field “language tests for residence permit” in mind, the aims of my study are to analyse the (hidden) mechanism behind the use of language tests in the case of residence permits (theoretical approach) and to analyse their impact on test participants using empirical quantitative methods (empirical approach).

Résumé : Etroitement liée à son contexte politique, culturel et social, la langue est utilisée pour déterminer l'appartenance symbolique et pratique (Dirim 2013) y compris la citoyenneté. Les tests de langue jouent un rôle essentiel dans cette régulation symbolique et pratique. Gardant à l'esprit cette approche philosophique de « l'obtention d'un titre de séjour conditionnée par la réussite à un test de langue », mon étude analyse le mécanisme (caché) derrière le recours aux tests de langue pour accorder un titre de séjour (approche théorique) et leur impact sur les participants, en utilisant des méthodes quantitatives empiriques (approche empirique).

1 Theoretical part

1.1 Regime of integration – test regime

The terms “regime of integration” or “test regime” refer to Foucault’s “regime” and “governmentality”. According to Foucault (2013), it is the nature of a state to get control over everything in form of a contract to regulate the relation between state and people. If we see language tests from this point of view, we can see tests as instruments of power – they serve as gate-keepers. For example,

Boris Printschitz, Österreichisches Sprachdiplom Deutsch, Vienna, Austria,
E-mail: boris.printschitz@osd.at

Shohamy (2001) described language tests as tools of a policy of exclusion because only the applicants who pass a test are selected. McNamara and Roever (2006) call such tests instruments for regulating migration because not all who have to pass are able to pass. Another point criticised by Van Avermaet, Extra and Spotti (2009) and Hogan-Brun (2009) is the arbitrary nature of language requirements and criteria: the levels demanded to pass such tests differ from country to country. There is in any case a very doubtful connection between proficiency in the language of the host country and integration (Krumm 2011).

The next section will focus on Austria's integration regime, its language requirements and its gate-keeping activities.

1.2 Example: test regime in Austria

According to the *Niederlassungs- und Aufenthaltsgesetz* (NAG; Settlement and Residence Act) executed by the *Bundesministerium für Inneres* (BMI; Federal Ministry of the Interior) and supported by the *Österreichische Integrationsfonds* (ÖIF; Austrian Integration Fund), a certain politically constructed group of people called *Drittstaatsangehörige* (third-country citizens) have to prove their German language skills via standardised tests (e. g. Goethe-Institute, ÖSD, telc). Different needs require different levels of proficiency. Level A1 is required for the first visa application before entering Austria, while level A2 needs to be passed within the first two years in order to get a temporary residence permit. For a permanent residence permit and application for citizenship after 10 years' residence in Austria, level B1 is required, while applicants for "faster" citizenship, after 6 years' residence in Austria, need to pass level B2. In the case of applications for citizenship, beside German language skills, applicants have to fulfil a long list of other criteria, including a certain level of socio-economic status. These are obvious mechanisms of power. According to Gomolla and Radtke (2009) we can call this a "direct institutional discrimination". Of course, there are a number of mechanisms of power that are more or less hidden.

1.3 (Hidden) mechanism of power in test regimes

Some examples of important mechanisms in these regimes are identified in this section such as follows. Krumm (2011) sees a triple discrimination. There is discrimination by nationality (e. g. "third-country citizens"), by social standing (e. g. the cost of courses, the times when they take place, and the exams that must be taken) and by language (e. g. different languages enjoy different levels of pres-

tige). Plutzar (2010) criticises the argument that tests may be seen as motivating; in many cases so-called positive effects on better integration are predicted. Dirim (2010), on the other hand, criticises the “enable and deny” power of the authority which enables applicants to take an exam by providing a standardised test, but denies them the relevant resources (e.g. knowledge and courses) needed to acquire the hegemonic language. And McNamara and Roever (2006) criticise the claim that tests can be objective at all and that, for example, the status of residence depends on apparently non-objective results.

At this point we can come to a first assumption that language tests for residence are an instrument of power that reproduces social discrimination. Especially individuals lacking in specific capital (Bourdieu 1987) suffer from this discrimination. According to Gomolla and Radtke (2009) we can call this “indirect institutional discrimination”. The question then arises: If we are aware of those criticisms, why are test regimes still in use, so widely accepted and even on the increase?

1.4 *Dispositif* of integration – (re-)production of “we” and “not-we”

To answer this question another term introduced by Foucault is necessary – the *dispositif*. Very briefly, a *dispositif* is a structured method, a strategy to balance power within a group, an area, a state etc. (Foucault 1978). Mecheril (2011) uses the term to analyse methods and strategies within the discourse of integration and calls it “*dispositif* of integration”. According to Mecheril a *dispositif* of integration:

- differs between the national-ethno-cultural “we” and “not-we” and makes these constructed differences understandable;
- turns individuals into certain subjects, a process known as “subjectification” (Foucault 2013; Butler 2013);
- generates political, cultural and social order which then becomes institutionalized, systematically differentiated and hierarchic;
- and is therefore socially realized and authorized (Mecheril 2011; Mecheril et al. 2010).

Within the *dispositif* of integration and focused on language tests, we come to the second assumption that language tests for residence permissions are an essential tool to support the *dispositif* within the regime of integration.

And these two assumptions – alongside others – I aim to prove in a large scale quantitative study.

2 Empirical part

2.1 Empirical study – design

Due to the very political nature of the topic and in order to get representative data, I've chosen the quantitative empirical paradigm in order to prove my theory. I've therefore designed a standardized questionnaire to collect socio-economic and sociocultural data from test participants. The questions used are based on Bourdieu's types of capital (Bourdieu 1987) as well as on several large scale studies which collect socio-economic and sociocultural data from specific populations. It is planned to administer the questionnaire to participants in B1 German language courses in the week before the test. The questionnaire will be devised in German and translated into the five languages which are the most common among the random sample of participants. To collect language data from these participants I shall use a standardised German test often used for the purpose of getting a residence permit (ÖSD B1 ZDÖ).¹

In order to validate the questionnaire (n = 50), I have conducted a pre-pilot study, of which I'd like to share the first results in section 2.2.

The study itself will hopefully take place in the autumn of 2016. A representative number of participants in B1 courses (n > 500) is aimed for. After the data collection, the test results will be compared with the results in the questionnaire and analysed using the statistical program SPSS.

2.1.1 Empirical study – main questions

- Do language tests used to grant or refuse residence permits (re-)produce social inequality? If so, how?
- Which characteristics of heterogeneity, according to Bourdieu's types of capital (1987), have a significant impact on individuals' performance in standardised language tests?

2.1.2 Main hypotheses

Following Settineri et al. (2014) and Albert and Marx (2014) main hypotheses are as follows:

¹ <http://www.osd.at/default.aspx?Sfid=32&LAid=2&ARid=388> [accessed: 30.4.2016].

- Alternative hypothesis
 - H_A : There is a significant impact of economic factors (independent variable, IV) on the individuals’ performance in standardised German language tests (dependent variable, DV).
- Distinctive hypothesis
 - H_{A1} : Economic factors (IV1) of individuals have a greater influence on their German language test performance than cultural factors (IV2).
 - H_{A2} : Economic factors (IV1) of individuals have a greater influence on their German language test performance (DV) than social factors (IV3).

Certainly, some of the theories presented above might appear quite obvious, and we already have reliable figures on the impact of socio-economic status and segregation in the school system on children’s test results. Examples are PIRLS and PISA studies as well as Gomolla and Radtke’s (2009) study of institutional discrimination within the German educational system. But as far as I know, there is still a lack of at least quantitative data focused on the impact of test regimes on adult participants. Also, since this topic is very political, data are very important to prove these claims.

2.2 First results (pilot study) and conclusion

Before presenting some preliminary unofficial data, I should emphasize that they were collected in a pre-pilot study. The aim was simply to confirm the relevance of the questions and how the participants used the questionnaire in the first place. The data were collected as part of the piloting of an ÖSD B1 test (piloting followed by statistical analysis is a standard feature of test production). In other words, personal data about the participants and language data were collected at the same time.

The selected parameters according to Bourdieu’s theory of capital (1985, 1987) were as follows:

- net income (economic capital);
- level of education (cultural capital);
- number of social contacts (social capital) outside the course and family.

The pre-pilot-study questionnaire included more parameters for each of Bourdieu’s capital types, and the final questionnaire may include even more. Nevertheless, the characteristics of the participants in the pre-pilot study may be summarized as follows:

- 50% vocational training/high school degree, 30% academic degree;

- 3–5 languages (even more if Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian are counted as separate languages);
- 90% had a regular income of less than €1000 per month;
- 70% lived within a solid social network.

In a second step, I used a scale with a range from 0 to 4 in each of the chosen parameters to get ordinal data and to calculate Spearman Rho to see if there is any significant association. The chosen range also represents the points (or level of capital) participants can reach. Although this procedure might appear a little arbitrary, even with a small sample of 50 people, I got some interesting results:

- There is a strong association between “total capital” and test result: $R = 0.57$ (Spearman Rho). Participants with higher “capital in total” reached higher results, even in this small pre-pilot-study.
- There is only weak evidence for an association between income and test result: $R = 0.47$. A possible explanation might be that most of the participants were on the same income level (only 10% of them had employee status). Therefore, I’ll need more parameters to collect economic data (economic capital).
- There is also only weak evidence for an association between number of social contacts and test result: $R = 0.35$. Of course, the data tell us nothing about the quality of the contacts. The challenge here is to find parameters which measure the quality of social contacts.
- But there is no evidence of an association between level of education and test result: $R = 0.26$. This was slightly surprising even within this small pre-pilot study. But also here, more parameters to collect cultural data (cultural capital) are needed.

So far, the following tendencies have become visible: If test results differed, it was a matter less of educational level than of financial status and number of social contacts.

References

- Albert, Ruth & Nicole Marx. 2014. *Empirisches Arbeiten in Linguistik und Sprachlehrforschung*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1987. *Die feinen Unterschiede*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1985. *Sozialer Raum und Klassen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Butler, Judith. 2013. *Psyche der Macht. Das Subjekt der Unterwerfung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

- Dirim, Inci. 2013. “Deutsch als Zweitsprache” als Fachgebiet. http://dafdaz.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/lehrstuhl_daf/Definition_DaZ.pdf (accessed: 30. 4. 2016).
- Dirim, Inci. 2010. “Wenn man mit Akzent spricht, denken die Leute, dass man auch mit Akzent denkt oder so.” Zur Frage des (Neo-)Linguizismus in den Diskursen über die Sprache(n) der Migrationsgesellschaft. In Paul Mecheril, Inci Dirim, Mechthild Gomolla, Sabine Hornberg & Krassimir Stojanov (eds.), *Spannungsverhältnisse: Assimilationsdiskurse und interkulturell-pädagogische Forschung*, 91–112. Münster: Waxmann.
- Foucault, Michel. 2013. *Analytik der Macht*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *Dispositive der Macht*. Berlin: Merve.
- Gomolla, Mechthild & Frank-Olaf Radtke. 2009. *Institutionelle Diskriminierung. Die Herstellung ethnischer Differenz in der Schule*. Wiesbaden: VS.
- Hogan-Brun, Gabrielle (ed.). 2009. *Discourses on language and integration: Critical perspectives on language testing regimes in Europe*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Krumm, Hans-Jürgen. 2011. Deutsch für die Integration – notwendig aber nicht hinreichend. In Barbara Haider (ed.), *Deutsch über alles?*, 7–26. Wien: VHS GmbH.
- McNamara, Tim & Carsten Roever. 2006. *Language testing: The social dimension*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Mecheril, Paul. 2011. Wirklichkeit schaffen. Integration als Dispositiv. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 43. 49–54.
- Mecheril, Paul, María do Mar Castro Varela, Inci Dirim, Annita Kalpaka & Claus Melter (eds.). 2010. *Migrationspädagogik*. Weinheim & Basel: Beltz.
- Plutzer, Verena. 2010. Sprache als “Schlüssel” zur Integration? In Herbert Langthaler (ed.), *Integration in Österreich*, 123–142. Innsbruck: Studien Verlag.
- Settinieri, Julia, Sevilen Demirkaya, Alexis Feldmeier, Nazan Gültekin-Karakoç & Claudia Riemer (eds.). 2014. *Empirische Forschungsmethoden für Deutsch als Fremd- und Zweitsprache: eine Einführung*. Paderborn: Schöningh.
- Shohamy, Elana. 2001. *The power of tests: A critical perspective on the uses of language tests*. Harlow: Longman.
- Van Avermaet, Piet, Guus Extra & Massimiliano Spotti (eds.). 2009. *Language testing, migration and citizenship: Cross-national perspectives on integration regimes*. New York: Continuum.

