

State of the art: Conceptualising linguistic disadvantage in the context of diversifying welfare institutions

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Abstract

Social policy has not systematically addressed linguistic disadvantage and its enactment through welfare policies and practices. In this state-of-the-art article, we review literature on linguistic disadvantage in various fields, highlighting its dialogue with broader social policy research on inclusive and exclusive tendencies within welfare policies and practices. We distinguish between three thematically separate, yet intertwined, perspectives that we find important for future research: (1) language policy, linguistic disadvantage and social (in)justice, (2) language ideologies and current nativist ideologies and discourses, and (3) the influence of (1) and (2) on the enactment of welfare policies at the street-level. We argue that more direct focus on issues of language and linguistic disadvantage is needed in social policy research. Particularly, it would benefit from a stronger conceptualisation that recognises how language policies and ideologies surface in minority language speakers' relational encounters with the street-level welfare state, leading to linguistic disadvantage and discrimination.

Keywords: language policies; linguistic disadvantage; linguistic diversity, social policy research, street-level welfare state

Introduction

Social policy literature has not systematically addressed the issues of languages and linguistic disadvantage in social policies and welfare state practices despite the apparent trend of linguistic diversification across welfare societies. Although social policy analyses often mention language as one of the factors that influence, for example, migrant integration and migrants' capacities to act, language barriers are frequently approached as merely instrumental matters and not made a direct

object of analysis. Consequently, social policy research does not fully recognise the implications of how linguistic disadvantage is produced and experienced in real-life welfare institutional encounters and how these processes are relational, not only vis-à-vis the person representing the institutions in question but also the state and society at large (Resnyansky, 2016; Cheung & Phillimore, 2017).

This state-of-the-art article addresses the gap in social policy literature in terms of language and linguistic disadvantage. In the article, we review literature on linguistic (in)justice, linguistic disadvantage, and linguistic discrimination in various fields of study. Research on these issues has mainly developed in fields other than social policy, particularly in sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and citizenship studies. Evidence from such fields shows that minority language speakers, including the speakers of non-standard varieties of the official language(s), are often deprived of equal opportunities at different levels of society (Piller & Takahashi, 2011; Gracia and Wei, 2014; Piller, 2016; Sabaté Dalmau et al., 2017; Shorten, 2017; Barakos, 2020) and excluded from the national citizenship regime (Shindo, 2021; Puumala and Shindo, 2021).

While some recent contributions to social policy and social service studies have sought to focus directly on the role of language in producing disadvantage in terms of welfare outcomes (Brodkin, 2015; Gustafsson et al., 2019; Holzinger, 2020; Scheibelhofer et al., 2021; Ratzmann, 2022; Safarov, 2023), the practical capacity of states to meet the linguistic needs of residents requires further attention, along with how these realities intersect with issues of language ideologies and linguistic discrimination. From existing studies, the issues of linguistic disadvantage appear largely unaddressed or unresolved even in strong and resourceful welfare systems – a reality further reinforced by on-going restructuring and cut-backs (Lonergan, 2015; Scheibelhofer et al., 2021; Nordberg & Kara, 2022; see also Kara et al. in this thematic section).

The article forms part of a thematic section including papers that empirically analyse the traversing issues of language policies, language ideologies, linguistic disadvantage, linguistic discrimination and linguistic injustice in the context of social policy implementation at the street-level in various national contexts. The articles in the thematic section examine the critical role of language in shaping the lived experiences and outcomes of encounters between minority language speakers and street-level welfare state actors in diverse areas of welfare policy. This state-of-the-art article places these contributions in the wider debates on linguistic disadvantage in social policy literature and other relevant research fields.

Perspectives on linguistic disadvantage

In the following sections, we distinguish between three thematically separate, but in effect intertwined, perspectives that arise from existing literature on linguistic disadvantage in various fields of study, which we find important for future research on social policy and language. These include, firstly, perspectives that look at questions of language policy and linguistic disadvantage as matters of social (in)justice. Secondly, perspectives on language ideologies as part of the increasingly mainstreamed nativist ideologies and discourses and their influence on welfare and language policies. Thirdly, the previous two perspectives come together as they are reflected in the enactment of welfare policies at the street-level. Here, concern lies in the materialisation of macro-level policy and ideology in minority language speakers' everyday encounters with the welfare state, such as with social workers, teachers, and unemployment administrators.

The framework we propose highlights and acknowledges how minority language speakers' relationships with state institutions and the language itself inevitably depend on their intersecting positionalities. These include citizenship and immigration status, educational and occupational position, religious and political orientations, as well as nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and so on. All of which can shape their encounters with street-level actors, some of whom deliver policy as representatives of the state (Lipsky, 1980; Brodtkin, 2015), while other non-state actors act as intermediaries between the state and its residents (Glyniadaki, 2021b; Ratzmann, 2023). Importantly, the positionalities of street-level actors vary as well (they can, for example, have migrant backgrounds themselves) (Glyniadaki, 2021b), as do the national and institutional conditions in different societies. Yet, we would claim that, despite the intricacy of these lived realities, attending them and conceptualising issues of language is an important task for future social policy research.

Language policies and linguistic disadvantage as matters of social (in)justice

In sociolinguistic research, when it comes to questions of the realisation of social justice through language policies, focus has traditionally been placed on the linguistic rights of established national–cultural–linguistic groups. This has come at the expense of addressing situations created by the expansive diversity within societies in the contemporary era of global migration (De Schutter, 2021). However, as Piller (2016) shows, linguistic diversity in urban centres is not a new

occurrence, and building welfare societies on the idea of linguistic homogeneity has always been a political decision rather than one reflecting the linguistic realities of any given time.

Indeed, minority language speakers face particular challenges in dealing with welfare state institutions. While the language and procedures of the bureaucracy can also prove challenging for majority language speakers, for minority language speakers, these barriers are more pronounced, particularly when knowledge and experience of the local welfare regime are lacking. For instance, Safarov (2023) analyses a mixture of linguistic barriers in relation to the ability of migrants to navigate digitalised welfare bureaucracies in Finland. According to Safarov (2023: 11), these barriers are not only a matter of ‘digital literacy’ and technological skills but are critically conditioned by the ability to understand the language(s) used in information about welfare organisations, their functioning, rules, formularies, and services.

The way different states adapt to linguistic diversity becomes materialised, for example, in translation and interpretation policies offered with varying generosity in different national contexts. Meylaerts (2011: 753) notes that contemporary democratic societies often seem to opt for a ‘monolingual territoriality regime’ with translation services for linguistic minorities, the extent and organisation of which is largely defined by ad hoc policies and practices. Indeed, translation and interpretation studies have addressed questions of social justice in multilingual societies (e.g., Meylaerts, 2011; De Schutter, 2017; Monzó-Nebota and Mellinger, 2022), and community or public service interpretation has been presented as essentially social justice work (Bancroft, 2015).

As De Schutter (2021, 429) points out, migrants rarely expect their languages to be given equal status to already-recognised host society languages or make claims in this respect. In a recent Swedish study, Gustafsson et al. (2022) investigated the practices and experiences of interpretation from the point of view of non-Swedish-speaking service users and concluded that the service users often downplayed their right to interpretation due to costs and their own lack of Swedish language. This reflects public discourses in Sweden on migration, language skill acquisition and integration. Gustafsson et al. (2022) thus suggest framing the use of interpretation services more prominently as a right, as well as a need of public authorities who are responsible for fairness and equal access to welfare. Similarly, Monzó-Nebot & Mellinger (2022) suggest that the provision of translation and interpretation should not be seen as an allocation of resources to one group but rather a way to facilitate communication for both dominant and non-dominant language groups (see also Shindo, 2021).

Nevertheless, Holzinger (2020: 1797) points out that, while institutional contexts and the generally high level of pressure placed on street-level bureaucrats (e.g., rigid timelines for meeting clients and the scarcity of written information in general) contribute to linguistic barriers, the latter are also produced through a neglect and even certain denial of the needs of linguistic minorities whose communication problems tend to receive minor political attention. Even in contexts such as Finland, where multilingual services are, to some extent, guaranteed under legislation, the increasing outsourcing of social services for migrants to third sector organisations can be seen as a sign of devaluation of the needs of linguistic minority groups and their right to professional services (Buchert & Wrede, 2021). This also applies to welfare states' reluctance to invest in professional development related to multilingual awareness (Nordberg & Kara, 2022; Kara & Nordberg, 2023; see also Hall and Valdiviezo, 2020).

Piller (2016) has argued for linguistic disadvantage to be addressed as a central facet of the contemporary social justice agenda. Drawing on Fraser's (1995) seminal conception of social justice, Piller applies the notion of linguistic justice to explore how linguistic diversity relates to economic inequality, cultural domination, and impurity of political participation. For Piller (2016: 162), linguistic justice is also about "broadening our linguistic imagination to acknowledge that everyone has the right to be heard and to be listened to". She critiques normative approaches to linguistic justice presented within political philosophy, for example, in that they ignore the fundamental character of linguistic diversity in all social organisation (i.e., also 'within one single language') (Piller, 2016: 205). Such approaches align with the idea of language learning being a rather straightforward task, within which minority language speakers become individually responsible for learning local language(s) and, in failing to do so, "agents of their own exclusion" (Piller, 2016: 62, 162). Hence, rather than acknowledging the right of minority language speakers to have their language-related needs recognised, language barriers may be used to justify the rationales for inequalities, particularly regarding migrant populations. Overall, language arguably plays an important part in migrants' differential inclusion as neither fully included in nor entirely excluded from social rights and participation (Ratzmann and Sahraoui, 2021b).

Language ideologies and the mainstreaming of nativist policies and discourses

To explore how language is vested in reproducing inequalities and injustice, Barakos (2020: 276) suggests that a step forward from recognising the centrality of language in migrants' differential inclusion is to look at how different agents and institutions use language on discursive and

ideological levels. This recognition involves a focus on national language ideologies which perceive linguistic standardisation and a shared linguistic universe as fundamental in safeguarding a viable, culturally unified, and cohesive national polity into which migrants are expected to integrate (Flubacher and Yeaun, 2016). At the same time, language ideologies are linked to social, racial and linguistic hierarchies that shape the value given to different types of linguistic capital in different contexts (Sung-Yul Park and Wee, 2017; Piller, 2021).

The dominant language ideologies in Western countries combining ‘language’, ‘nation’, ‘ethnicity’/ ‘race’ and ‘land’/‘territory’ are products of the European modernist project of ‘cleansing difference’ that gained popularity alongside the rise of the nation-state as a political entity during the 18th and 19th centuries (Flores, 2013: 267–271). Arguably, the current populist, nativist and identitarian movements, and the generally growing resistance towards immigration and cultural difference (Flores, 2013; Malešević, 2019: 6), risk reinforcing the discriminatory tendencies of language policies. Fortier (2017) notes that, in the UK, a politicisation of English fluency as a ‘benchmark of entitlement’ is used to police the borders of citizenship rights. Migrants’ insufficient command of local language is thus easily viewed as a misconduct that may be sanctioned rather than recognised as a basis for support (Flubacher and Yeung, 2016: 609; Heller, 2022).

Overall, language plays a central role in state practices of determining belonging through differentiation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Piller and Takahashi, 2011; Anderson, 2013). These include processes of everyday internal bordering (Ratzmann and Sahraoui, 2021a: 441–442) that heightens suspicion towards those visibly and/or audibly different in their encounters with welfare institutions such as settlement services, social offices, schools, employment offices, hospitals, and so on (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Holzinger (2020: 1794) suggests it is important to investigate the reproduction of social asymmetries through language and linguistic practice, even though it is often difficult to separate linguistic discrimination from other types of discrimination. As will be discussed in the following section, recognising how language intersects with other socially constructed differences requires an analysis of minority language speakers’ encounters with state institutions and their representatives and any experiences of discrimination.

A relational view on language policies and language ideologies at the street-level

Currently, as the political propagation of hostility towards newcomers is shaping societal atmospheres and public discourse across Europe, certain policymakers are increasingly questioning migrant groups' access to welfare state protections (Anderson, 2013; Seeleib-Kaiser, 2019). The mainstreaming of such attitudes will likely influence social policies, their implementation and encounters between street-level actors and migrant and minority service users, although not necessarily in a straightforward manner (Lafleur and Mescoli, 2018; Simola, 2018; see Ratzmann, 2022). Indeed, as previously discussed, a range of other factors and positionalities may also play a part in these encounters during which social rights are negotiated (see Dobson, 2015: 694; Glyniadaki 2021b; Peeters and Campos, 2023; see Ratzmann and Sahraoui, 2021b for a review).

There is a relatively well-established body of research that recognises the importance of street-level actors' discretionary power in making normative judgments regarding who is deemed 'worthy' and 'deserving' of welfare support and services (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003; Nordberg, 2015; Jørgensen and Thomsen, 2016; Glyniadaki 2021a; 2022; Kara et al. in this thematic section). In this sense, as Ratzmann and Sahraoui (2021a) suggest, street-level representatives of the state should be understood as co-producers of normative value systems relating to the legitimacy of migrants' claims. However, social policy analyses focusing specifically on the role of language in street-level institutional encounters remain scarce. Ratzmann (2021; 2022) looked directly at the role of language in judging migrants' deservingness of social support, demonstrating how a lack of fluency in official language(s) can be used in everyday institutional encounters to delimit foreign EU citizens' access to entitlements. Street-level workers in German job centres use their discretionary power to draw boundaries that constitute *de facto* barriers to this access based on connecting deservingness with speaking German and 'appearing German enough'. Ratzmann (2021) highlights that this happens even though knowledge of German language is not a *de jure* condition for entitlements for foreign EU-citizens. In a similar vein, Gowricharn and Çankaya (2017) revealed the practice of Dutch police officers refusing to file the complaints of Moroccan-Dutch citizens, because of feeling agitated by their lack of knowledge in Dutch. This happens despite a judicial obligation to arrange for an interpreter if necessary.

Importantly, even fewer social policy analyses take the perspective of minority language speakers, and thus little is known about how people experience welfare encounters with power asymmetries related to knowledge of the official language (see Dobson, 2015; Ratzmann and Heindlmaier, 2022: 210). However, as the aforementioned discussions indicate, the key issues related to language in the context of social policy implementation are not limited to the ability to

understand the administrative language or communicate fluently enough to proceed through cases with institutions and their representatives. They also include important questions regarding peoples' (self-)respect and well-being related to their perspectives being heard, understood, and given consideration for the sake of their dignity (De Schutter, 2021: 428; see also Piller, 2016). As De Schutter and Robichaud (2015: 96) note, language is a central source of personal self-respect which is easily affected by the esteem one's language gets from others. That way, broader issues of linguistic (in)justice become intimately linked to people's personal sense of deservingness and recognition.

In societies where both success and failure are seen as one's personal responsibility, the self-respect of those in need of state support is generally at risk (Kampen, Elshout and Tonkens, 2013). Tonkens et al. (2013) showed how people who need to rely on the state over longer periods of time experience their dignity being undermined in institutional encounters. They thus argue that welfare state reforms and retrenchment should be studied from the perspectives of people affected by such reforms, paying particular attention to the lived experiences and emotions of both service users and the street-level actors who enact them (Tonkens et al., 2013: 407). This, we find, is also an important suggestion when considering how linguistic disadvantage becomes materialised in minority language speakers' encounters. During such encounters, experiences of disrespect and humiliation may occur if the service users' linguistic needs go unrecognised or are considered illegitimate. Linguists, (see for example scholarship on translingual practices and translanguaging Canagarajah, 2011; 2017; see also Garcia and Wei, 2014), have valuably discussed how multilingual communicative competence should be recognised by focusing on repertoire building, on 'developing abilities in the different functions serviced by different languages – rather than total mastery of each and every language' (Canagarajah, 2011: 1).

It is obvious that, facing diversity, it may be very challenging for states to provide services and information in everyone's native language. However, it is different to admit difficulties in attending the language needs of a linguistically diverse population than to neglect such needs or deny their legitimacy altogether. Importantly, a relational view on how exclusionary policies are lived and experienced by minority language speakers in their encounters with street-level actors will allow the consequences of such experiences and interactions to be addressed. These can include material, but also social and emotional hardship (Nordberg and Simola in this thematic section). Through a relational lens, we can additionally analyse the implications that linguistic disadvantage in welfare state encounters may have on people's well-being and life chances.

Conclusions

In this state-of-the-art article, we have reviewed literature from various fields of study showing how language policies and institutional welfare practices can produce multiple structural disadvantages for migrants and other minority language speakers. This occurs when building on language ideologies and hierarchies that place the mastery of local languages above other language skills or lead to discrimination. Such disadvantages not only mean language barriers in access to social protection and welfare services, but can also result in a sense of undeservingness, disrespect, and needs not being recognised. Consequently, linguistic disadvantages can have negative implications on the material, social and emotional well-being of minority language speakers. We have therefore argued that a more direct focus on issues of language and linguistic diversity is needed in social policy analysis, debates, policies, and practice, addressing how language intersects with other social inequalities. Furthermore, such analyses would benefit from a stronger conceptualisation and more complex understanding of the role of language; one that recognises how language policies and ideologies surface in the encounters minority language speakers have with the street-level welfare state, leading to linguistic disadvantage and discrimination. Methodologically, approaches that allow observing encounters and interaction unfolding in real-time, such as institutional ethnography (e.g., Smith and Griffith, 2022) can be useful, along with analyses interested in the relational experiences of minority language speakers and street-level welfare actors.

How language policies are reflected in these relationships and interactions is a vastly complex question due to the variation between national and institutional contexts and the positionalities of different parties involved in welfare state encounters (Puumala and Shindo, 2021). We have maintained that this intricacy does not reduce the importance of attending and conceptualising issues of language in social policy as they arise across contexts and institutional encounters in their distinct forms. On the contrary, the question of how language policies reflect the differing rationales and resources of different welfare systems in the global North and South is a pertinent one for future research. Moreover, there can be surprising similarities in the experiences of linguistic disadvantage regardless of minority language speakers' status and positionality, institutional context, and even the language policies in their state of residence (see Nordberg and Simola in this thematic section). These resemblances are important to discover to understand linguistic disadvantage.

Ultimately, there is the question of why multilingual services should be offered by states in general, and welfare states in particular, despite the high cost. Drawing on the discussions in this article, we argue that welfare states cannot avoid addressing issues related to multilingualism and linguistic justice, even though the agency of street-level workers and their power to implement language policies differ between societies (see also Peeters and Campos, 2023). For minority language speakers, key welfare state principles such as the equality in terms of opportunity and protection against social risks are contingent on the adequate functioning of services such as translation and interpretation, whatever the organising institution. In this vein, it would be important for comparative welfare research to also include language policies, ideologies, and street-level practices as objects of analysis in studies conducted in different welfare regimes.

Acknowledgements: The authors are grateful to the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions for revisions to the earlier drafts of the article.

Financial Support: The authors have received financial support from the following institutions: Le Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique - FNRS (Credit n. 1.B.376.23F), the Institute for the Analysis of Change in Contemporary and Historical Societies (IACS) at the University of Louvain, the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and the Research Council of Finland (#310610, 334686).

Competing interests: The author(s) declare none.

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