

# Language Hierarchies, Liminality, and Resistance in Canadian and Finnish Integration Educations for Adult Migrants

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*This article explores the effects of language hierarchies within SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) and LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) national integration programmes and how discourses of civic integrationism framed around monolingualism and neoliberalism position adult migrant students in the liminal spaces between belonging and othering. Based on research findings obtained during multiple case study fieldwork in Finland and Canada, I examine the underlying norms and subtexts upon which practices of host language acquisition are founded. How students are positioned depends greatly on who serves as an arbiter over which expressions of linguistic diversity are deemed beneficial or obstructive to integration. Migrant liminality within integration educations could be debilitating while simultaneously fostering resistance in transgressing and reimagining essentialist integration policy and pedagogical goals, thus creating opportunities for transformation.*

**Keywords:** Language hierarchies, liminality, integration educations, civic integrationism.

## Introduction

Fueled by the 2015 border crisis, perceptions of migrants as triggers of unease and scapegoats for a professed decrease of social solidarity have resulted in social policy responses to migrant incorporation into Western societies aimed at control and management (De Roo *et al.*, 2016). As a way of shoring up social cohesion, *integration* has emerged as the policy and rhetorical rationale to assure migrants of their belonging to the nation-state provided they adhere to the thrust of social and immigration policies inherent in so-called *integration regimes* (Pöttsch, 2020). These regimes function as boundary mechanisms by employing tests and measures designed to educate and ‘produce’ the desired migrant subject (Ratzmann and Sahraoui, 2021). Language hierarchies – as reflections of bordering – create hierarchies of belonging that have become essential in national politics, as they help maintain a narrative of a bordered ‘home’ and the desire for a purified society. As such, national language integration programmes such as SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) and LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) have the structural potential to exclude where, akin to traversing different rooms, migrants wander in and out of spaces of belonging and non-belonging on their educational journeys.

In this article, I explore the effects of language hierarchies within SFI and LINC national integration programmes and how these position adult migrant learners in the liminal spaces between belonging and othering. Based on research findings obtained

during multiple case study fieldwork in Finland and Canada – countries where multilingualism is constitutionally enshrined – I examine the subtexts upon which underpin views of language competence. Their ubiquitousness provides them with a *carte blanche* from critical analysis. However, the article also illustrates the complexity of liminality in being able to create opportunities for resistance and social change.

A characteristic of both Canadian and Finnish social policy initiatives targeting integration regimes is the rhetoric that state sponsored integration education should prioritise native language competences while closely aligning with national economic needs (CIC, 2010; MEAE, 2016). According to the *Finnish Integration Act (2010)*, and Citizenship and Integration Canada (2001), migrant inclusion into society can be considered successful when they have learned the host language and secured employment. Failing that implies that their integration, conceived of in primarily individual terms, must be considered as unsuccessful (Pöyhönen and Tarnanen, 2015). However, there is also a recognition that migrant competences within language integration programmes have been undervalued in educational journeys that are often convoluted and frequently frustrating (Boyd and Cao, 2009; OECD, 2018). Research has highlighted problems such as the ‘deficiency discourse’ where migrant subjectivities including minority languages are seen as obstacles to integration (see Hilt, 2015; Holzinger, 2019; Li and Sah, 2019). Such discourses produce a ‘cosmopolitan monolingualism’ (Gramling, 2009) characterised by an assimilationist focus on host language acquisition at the expense of the plurilinguality of migrant learners. This has led to the entrenchment of language hierarchies hereby referring to the inequalities embedded in integration regimes where mastering the national language(s) is positioned as *the* priority (Fortier, 2017) above skills in other languages (Kubota, 2001; Morgan and Ramanathan, 2005; Nikula *et al.*, 2012). Other critiques have centred on the neoliberal thrust of integration programmes in which language competence becomes commodified rendering it a measurable skill, as evidenced by the ever-tightening coupling of language to employability (Heller, 2003). As low-paid jobs require less language proficiency, providers increasingly target language programmes at functional literacy for rapid employment (Millar, 2013). Consequently, integration programmes mirror wider changes in social policy within the welfare state, that prioritise the accrual of measurable skills defined according to labour market demands (Kärkkäinen, 2017; Haque, 2017).

### **Integration, language, and liminality**

National integration education programmes have adopted a *civic integrationism* (Joppke, 2009) in which ‘good’ immigrants are reified by showcasing native language skills, filling prescribed labour market niches, and embracing dictates of liberal values. Such education determines how language hierarchies and proficiencies are negotiated between students and staff not only by what is done with, or to, migrants but also by what is omitted. What is absent is as important as what is communicated, because what is excluded frames institutional practices, which in turn frame the interactions of integration education with wider society.

#### *Integration and language*

Western integration policy has been criticised as a thinly veiled attempt to assimilate cultural and other differences into the essentialist narratives of ‘homogenous’ national

cultures (Schinkel, 2019). The underlying attitude of ‘we know what’s best for immigrants’ robs the latter of their agency by creating relationships of dependence, for which they are later chastised (Favell, 2022). In civic integrationist discourse, migrant learners are expected to reform home traditions and skills that presumably impede their ability to integrate with integration programmes becoming potent arenas for re-skilling and de-skilling (Guo, 2015; Kärkkäinen, 2017). Understanding the relation between language, national identity, and belonging is instrumental in articulating the public and policy discourses impacting educations such as LINC and SFI. In multilingual societies such as Canada and Finland, national language ideologies largely fail to entrench this bi- or multilinguality in practice resulting in the ‘misrecognition’ of the majority language as *the* legitimate national language and the subsequent marginalisation of speakers of minority languages (Millar, 2013).

Language discourses are also grounded in a neoliberal consensus in which language competence is repackaged as a series of easily evaluated skills (Li and Sah, 2019). Ann-Marie Fortier (2017) argues that language fluency has become a fetishised commodity prioritised within a hierarchy determining the worthiness of immigrants. Host language acquisition becomes ‘the primary bellwether’ of their desire to integrate – their deservingness – thus shifting the integration burden from society to the self (Gramling, 2009:135). Among countries that have enacted skills-oriented integration educations, studies have found that many programmes failed to improve migrants’ language proficiency in transitioning them into the labour market while simultaneously ignoring their linguistic, socioeconomic, and educational heterogeneity (Boyd and Cao, 2009). Consequently, there are calls to support the multilingual identities of students and teachers while promoting plurilingual ways of learning. According to Tarnanen and Palviainen (2018: 431) this entails teacher training to raise awareness of minority languages and the different language registers that students use, as well as creating pedagogies that allow students to utilise these in learning, and in functioning as critical citizens (see Galante *et al.*, 2020; García *et al.*, 2021, and Fisher *et al.*, 2020 a.o. for further discussions of transgressive plurilingual pedagogies with migrant learners). Multilingual identity formation is conceived of in terms supporting learners’ active involvement in the language acquisition process, in which classrooms are sites for participative identity (re)negotiation. Multilingual identity then becomes ‘an umbrella’ identity, where one explicitly identifies as multilingual precisely because of an awareness of the linguistic repertoire one has (Fisher *et al.*, 2020: 449).

### *Liminality*

Developed by folklorist and sociologist, Arnold van Gennep (1909), the concept of liminality refers to any betwixt and between’ state. It opens the door to a world of contingency where meanings – indeed reality itself – can be moulded and carried in different directions (Thomassen, 2018: 7). At its broadest, the term ‘liminality’ captures something essential about the unpredictability of transitoriness that characterises the lives of many adult migrants in LINC and SFI. Their liminal positioning as migrant learners – waiting in the now for their lives to restart – place them in limbo. But while van Gennep refers to such shifts as temporary, one-directional ‘rites of passage,’ in my study, they are not linear or fleeting transitions. Donnan and Wilson (1999) indicated that for many migrants these ‘passages’ become interminable trapping them in liminal spaces as

racialised others. Khosravi (2021) refers to these positionalities as ‘waiting rooms’ where migrants are subjected to a precarity that infantilises them. As such, language integration programmes have the potential of exacerbating learners’ existing personal and structural liminalities (Loon and Vitale, 2021). In this study, the liminal spaces were created precisely because of the intractability of institutional and curricular boundaries, which in some cases created a temporal fixation of liminal conditions (Swerts, 2017). Nevertheless, while liminality can constrict and thwart agency, it can also be enabling in ‘opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction, and deconstruction’ (Thomassen, 2018: 1). Migrant learners’ affective experiences of liminal positionings could thus also be emancipatory, inciting them to resist language hierarchies (Diedrich and Omanović, 2023).

### **Structural research in LINC and SFI**

Previous research that looks at LINC and SFI educations from a structural perspective, such as analysing the societal, institutional, and linguistic norms shaping pedagogy is sparse. Among the notable exceptions are those that examine the ‘hidden curriculum’ of unstated norms and values guiding teachers and teaching (see Thomson and Derwing, 2004; Pinet, 2007; Cervatiuc and Ricento, 2012; Pötzsch, 2018). They advocate the need for more critical self-reflection among instructors as well as the development of empowering educator-learner partnerships in which social issues reflecting migrant experiences are promoted and students have increasing curricular input. Other studies have interrogated the ramifications of entrenching principles of neoliberalism in LINC and SFI exemplified by a focus on migrant employability, linguistic assimilation, and reskilling (see Sandwall, 2013; Haque, 2017; Desyatova, 2018; Carlson and Jacobson, 2019; Paquet and Xhardez, 2020). They illustrate that educational policies are inextricably enmeshed within racialised cultural and administrative structures. Additionally, studies have critiqued the heavy focus on monolingual language acquisition in underlining that language proficiency alone is not a guarantor for social inclusion or socio-economic advancement (see Boyd and Cao, 2009; Rosén, 2014; Ennser-Kananen and Pettit, 2017). Research has also problematised the programmes’ deficiency discourse (see Carlson, 2002; Gibb, 2015; Guo, 2015). Here migrants’ home languages and cultures are treated as barriers to be overcome, thereby further perpetuating hierarchies in power and belonging. Lastly, although there are a few studies in which migrant liminality is constructed as both restricting and enabling (see Yijälä and Nyman, 2017; Pötzsch, 2020; Diedrich and Omanović, 2023), this topic remains under researched.

### **Methodology and data**

*Language hierarchies* represented one theme in a wider examination of critical social inclusion of adult migrant students in LINC and SFI as part of a multiple case study framed around research questions exploring the potentials and constraints when integrating critical principles of social inclusion into diverse educational, social, and linguistic settings, and how this stance affects the positioning of migrant learners within these environments (Pötzsch, 2020). Here I analyse this theme in greater depth by integrating discourses on liminality. This study took inspiration from qualitative research designs, which embody a collaborative approach (Brown and Strega, 2005; Yellow Bird

*et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, I spent extended fieldwork periods at Arbis SFI in Helsinki, Norquest College in Edmonton and Medis SFI in Mariehamn between the years of 2016–2019. The material constitutes fifty-two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with teachers, planners, and support staff, twenty small-group interviews with eighty-seven adult migrant students and fourteen weeks of participant observations. Interview transcripts and observation logbooks generated a diverse qualitative dataset, inductively analysed using ATLAS.ti.

The analysis included stages of coding, categorisation, and theming. Although codes were taken from the entire data base in ATLAS.ti, each data element was tagged to denote its originating case narrative. Code groups encapsulated intra-institutional factors like curriculum structure, student and teacher participation, discrimination, alongside extra-institutional factors such as coordination efforts, structural or socio-political influences, and internship experiences. Interview guides facilitated the coding process by aligning with the specific sequential structure of the interviews. The adaptable functionality of the code family programme within ATLAS.ti provided the flexibility to creatively reorder and reconfigure code groups, forming interlinkages to develop themes. Ostensibly, the thematic phase of the study commenced quite early. As data collection progressed and initial analyses unfolded, certain subjective truths began surfacing, particularly concerning the impact of structural factors in either fostering or impeding social inclusion. This cognitive attunement was reinforced during the coding stages of subsequent fieldwork periods. When deciding on themes, the decision-making process wasn't solely guided by the high occurrence of specific codes. In fact, it was the unconventional or marginal categories that encapsulated a unique significance in illustrating the dynamics of language hierarchies and the liminal positioning of migrant learners. Before making a final selection then, I revisited the NorQuest, Medis, and Arbis material separately and compared the associations the themes had with the data (for a detailed account on the data collection, analysis, and ethical considerations, see Pötzsch, 2020). Within the theme of language hierarchies, the subthemes of language perfection, language plurality, and language as resistance will be explored in this article.

In interviews with migrant students, the policy of giving voice and choice dictated arrangements entailing that students chose their own interview groups, venues, and languages (Swedish or English). In addition, interviews were not pre-structured but co-created with themes emerging serendipitously depending upon the varying constitutions of migrant groups. SFI learners had the option of using either Swedish or English, with English frequently being favoured due to the higher proficiency of most students. To foster trust with participants and key stakeholders, I initiated contact beforehand and conducted preparatory visits to the schools, establishing a solid rapport. Securing participation involved distributing formal consent letters that outlined the voluntary nature of involvement and addressed confidentiality, privacy, and data security concerns. Safeguarding interviewees' identities was ensured through pseudonyms and anonymising identifiable background details. Additionally, my study underwent a comprehensive ethical review by the Red Deer College research ethics board.

### **Site descriptions: NorQuest LINC, Arbis SFI, and Medis SFI**

LINC is a federally funded programme introduced in 1992 (Cervatiuc and Ricento, 2012). In the province of Alberta, prerequisites for student eligibility include having permanent

residence status and a preliminary language assessment (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2015). The LINC programme at NorQuest College offers integration classes for migrant students, covering CLB levels 3–8. These classes are centred on Portfolio-Based Learning Assessments (PBLA) as the basis for curriculum design. In LINC, students with similar educational backgrounds are grouped together. Acknowledging the diverse circumstances of students' lives, the programme offers a broad spectrum of full-time and part-time study options, including daytime and evening courses. Additionally, specialised classes are arranged with flexible schedules to accommodate employed students, daytime caregivers, and individuals with other specific needs.

The Swedish Adult Education Institute in Helsinki (Arbis) has offered an SFI programme since 2012. Its curriculum is based on the guidelines laid down by the National Board of Education (Utbildningsstyrelsen, 1/011/2012) and the *Finnish Integration Act* (1386/2010). SFI is primarily aimed at migrant newcomers, offering mandated integration support, but it also functions as a voluntary study programme within *fria bildningen*, the non-formal adult education system subsidised by the state. It caters to migrants who possess an integration plan provided by local employment services (AN-byrå), entailing twenty hours per week of compulsory language learning in either Finnish or Swedish, the official languages. Admission to the programme involves a pre-programme assessment that evaluates Swedish language proficiency, along with competences in mathematics and IT skills. Arbis SFI operates within a majority Finnish language environment, providing integration education in Swedish, the other official language and a minority language.

Since 1992, the Civic Institute (Medis) in Mariehamn, situated on the Åland islands, has offered SFI education as part of a labor market training initiative. Åland holds a distinctive status within Finland as a semi-autonomous region with Swedish as the sole official language. This unique status grants the Ålandic federal parliament significant authority in shaping the education and integration policies for migrant newcomers. The curriculum framework draws from guidelines specified by the National Board of Education and the *Finnish Integration Act*, alongside those formulated by the Ålandic government's educational agency. Programme applicants are registered as job seekers with permanent residency status, entitling them to coverage under the Finnish social security system (FPA). The curriculum comprises components including Swedish language proficiency, communicative skills incorporating IT proficiency, practical work-related skills, social skills, internships, and mentoring. Medis offers three distinct study paths according to students' years of previous education (Ålands landskapsregering, utbildningsbyrå, 2017).

Although it is not my intention in a multiple case study analysis to provide an integration policy comparison of Finnish and Canadian integration regimes, the study's international perspective does broaden the scope of interrogating language hierarchies and their attendant liminal positioning of adult migrant learners. Canada and Finland both have constitutional guarantees for official bilingualism, yet the implementation of integration programmes in minority languages like French (in Canada) and Swedish (in Finland) can differ significantly. Regional elements such as the concentration of minority language speakers in specific areas, unique local or provincial laws, and the overall willingness or inclination to address minority issues influence the accessibility and availability of these programmes (for a more detailed analysis of Canadian and Finnish immigration/integration see Ugland, 2014; Koikkalainen, 2021; Haapajärvi, 2023).

Due to the distinct starting points and socio-cultural contexts of these programmes, the research uncovered a notable array of similarities and differences. NorQuest possessed a resource foundation, encompassing staff and educational opportunities, which Medis and Arbis lacked. This reality endowed the programme with a particular academic credibility, fostering a sense of stability and assurance that wasn't equally present in SFI educations. In the quotidian interactions within schools, however, the ways in which language competence and plurilingualism were negotiated in LINC and SFI shared many similarities. The prevailing monolingual language emphasis, mainly revolving around grammar and oral exercises, established similar routines to days spent in integration classrooms. Similarly, discourses on language hierarchies and their normative subtexts were generally absented. The myth of Finland's national and/or cultural homogeneity as the essentialist narrative was one reason these issues were ignored, while Canada's multiculturalist doctrine, founded on an implied cultural egalitarianism, downplayed discussions on linguistic discrimination. Arguably, the nature of civic integrationism as interpreted within Western nations framed around a 'deficiency discourse' in which migrant learners are identified by what they lack, in perceived language, cultural, and employment competences speaks for the similitude in language ideologies and practices in LINC and SFI (see Gibb, 2015; Hilt, 2015).

### **Language hierarchies and liminal positioning**

It might seem ironic to claim that language hierarchies expressed through normative subtexts constituted an absented discourse as LINC and SFI revolve around just that, language. Certainly, the pedagogical narratives suffusing LINC and SFI curricula extensively highlight topics of language acquisition, competence, and skills. Nevertheless, these discourses fail to fully interrogate the fundamental assumptions that underlie them. In presenting my findings, I will highlight the themes of *language perfection*, *language plurality*, and *language as resistance*.

#### *Language perfection*

At what point does proficiency in the host language signify that one belongs? How is the concept of 'perfection' in language defined, and by whom?

An observable trend when these questions were addressed – often indirectly – was that it juxtaposed two very different positions. The initial stance emphasised adherence to dominant language norms, focusing on grammatical and phonological precision labeled as 'language perfection', a term frequently cited by research participants. Conversely, the second viewpoint endorsed a diverse interpretation of 'competence', based on acknowledging linguistic and dialectical diversity as norms. An illustration of this pluralistic view of competence is reflected in the perspective of this LINC student:

*When you study in multicultural groups it is good that you catch all [types of] pronunciations. And I think Canada is multicultural and you have to know peoples' [different] dialects.* (LINC student)

By embracing the diversity celebrated within official accounts of Canadian multiculturalism, the student underscores the importance of embracing various pronunciations

and dialects as inherent components of belonging. Nevertheless, this recognition of the vicissitudes within pluralist linguistic environments, reshaping language ‘perfection’, was not without its detractors:

*A lot of students think they should be speaking English at home to practice with their children. Well, I say, all you’re going to be teaching them is to speak bad English. You are still not using perfect English with them. They are going to get perfect English from their Canadian classmates. If you are going to come in with your broken English, you are going to disturb how they learn English. (LINC teacher)*

‘Perfect English’, in this teacher’s quote, is conflated with being ‘Canadian’, thereby othering migrant students whose English is labelled as ‘bad’ and ‘broken’. Their English ‘disturbs’ and additionally creates barriers to their children’s language learning. By suturing language perfection to being Canadian, the quote not only highlights existing language competence norms, but also who is entitled to set them. Language perfection becomes the intersection that positions migrant students in liminal spaces between belonging and othering. They are included by being educated in the host vernacular while simultaneously being subjected to efforts seeking to ameliorate their immigrant condition.

Yet, some educators were aware of the risks associated with assimilating ‘perfection’ into linguistically and culturally essentialist norms.

*Arbis has as one of its most important aims ‘to foster and maintain proper Swedish’ with Finnish-Swedish culture and the language in some way being ‘clean and pure’ [laughter]. Now, I understand it but at the same time it excludes as well. If you have an ideal conception of how ‘pure’ Swedish should be, it can be dangerous, even though you understand the reason why one strives for it. (Arbis SFI teacher)*

The teacher highlights the paradoxical nature of promoting language purity, wherein the Finland-Swedish minority sees the preservation of a dynamic, thriving Swedish language as crucial for their existence, all the while acknowledging the hierarchical subtexts evoked by such an emphasis.

Considering that every SFI teacher at Arbis was white and from a Finland-Swedish background, an inherent implication arises: the association of language perfection with ideas of language purity linked to specific ethnic or culturally dominant groups adds to the othering of migrant learners. The instructor joked wryly, ‘I have reflected a lot on that now, whether perfection exists or if there are just degrees of perfectionism?’

### *Language plurality*

Language hierarchies also found their expression in how plurilingualism in the classroom was negotiated. Interactions varied from teacher to teacher, but also mirrored institutional policies and directives. For example, Medis’ administrative policy specifically mandated the exclusive use of Swedish in SFI teaching methodologies. Staff and students were aware of its import as encapsulated in this log entry:



*Next, we have a listening comprehension exercise and again students are admonished not to discuss in their own language. I am surprised when even my neighbour admonishes 'Jamila' not to speak Arabic with 'Nizar' in clarifying some meaning. (Medis Observation log)*

This mandate censored 'foreign' expressions, deeming them disruptive to Swedish language acquisition, and it made other students complicit in ensuring compliance. It was partly implemented to counter the prevalence of English as the *lingua franca* in the classroom and aimed to creating a level playing field for all language learners. This prompts the question of whether the policy's well-intentioned paternalism, aimed at preventing discrimination, inadvertently condones it by excluding other languages and, consequently, various forms of cultural expression. Belonging – and the liminal space it constructs – is predicated upon the subtext that parts of migrant selves have to be bracketed-off in classroom interactions.

However, language hierarchies could also be reimagined and deconstructed. Rather than perceiving 'foreign' vocabularies as obstacles, certain educators across all programmes built on migrant students' native languages as cognitive frameworks to aid in second language acquisition. In one specific instance, a Medis teacher – in contravention of policy – embraced their own linguistic diversity, as illustrated in the following example:

*Sometimes there are words that they don't find in their dictionaries, and then I usually say what it means in English, German, and in Finnish, if I know. Now I have a girl from Estonia and if I say it in Finnish then she understands and a Romanian who has lived in Germany may find German grammar helpful. English of course, and I also use classical Latin. For Romanians, it's a daughter language, and I also have Portuguese speaker. If I say it in Latin, all of them are happy because they understand. You plant small words and phrases, and I am always honest that I cannot translate into every language. It does not require so much effort. It is great fun even and I see nothing wrong in doing it. (author's translation) (Medis SFI teacher)*

This instructor underscores that the labour required in plurilingual teaching is insignificant compared to the valuable time it affords for mutual recognition while concurrently facilitating language learning. I witnessed analogous linguistic endeavours by teachers at Arbis SFI and NorQuest LINC where utilising students' native vernaculars transformed classrooms from monolingual environments into diverse linguistic landscapes.

### *Language as resistance*

This pragmatism shaping views on language and its usefulness was particularly evident within the context of the minority language programme, Arbis SFI. Migrant students encountered widespread structural discrimination when opting for Swedish as their integration language. This discrimination manifested in authorities actively withholding information about their right to integrate in the minority language and undervaluing the importance of Swedish language integration in decisions impacting their studies and access to social welfare benefits. Thus, migrant learners enacted their political agency, herein defined as opposing policies that categorised language 'skills' according to an economic viability which was framed within mono-lingual nationalist terms

(Pötzsch, 2020). The reasoning behind students' choices positioned them well beyond the bordered nationalism of civic integrationism, as elucidated by this staff member:

*I think it is utterly stupid not to take advantage of the fact that many of our Arbis students see Scandinavia as one single area. It's not just Finland, and I think that's smart and sensible. I also think that the argument, 'why should I read Finnish when only five million speak Finnish, I have much more benefit from Swedish', is worth considering. (author's translation) (Arbis SFI staffer)*

This quote reflects the sentiments of many migrant students on the question of 'why Swedish?' They reasoned that their opportunities to fulfill professional aspirations would be exponentially increased, thus expanding nationalist conceptions of economic viability. The staffer argues that this transgressive student agency is something SFI should build on. Here, Swedish is posited as the gateway to a Nordic pluralism in contrast to the blinkered national context where Finnish was misrecognised as the only legitimate language choice. Nordic pluralism challenges the 'preordained' antecedence of majorities in deciding the parameters for language integration according to neoliberal scripts stressing nationalist economic priorities. Student claims that language choices should primarily align with their life choices and transnational affiliations debunk this. In reality, for numerous migrants, choosing a minority language became a deliberate political stance defying the assimilationist subtexts of language hierarchies:

*Yeah, they ignore me when I try to speak Swedish. YOU MUST LEARN FINNISH! You need to learn Finnish everybody says, and I don't want to learn Finnish after this. It is oppressive! (Arbis SFI student)*

For SFI students, Swedish represented an escape route – a means to assert their individuality and shield themselves from inculcated forms of national and cultural affiliation. The emotional investment and significance were evident and unequivocal when they articulated their motives for opting to integrate as a minority within a minority. Defying majority dictates exemplifies the emancipatory potential of liminal positionalities. By strategically performing their racialised roles as migrant students, Arbis SFI learners simultaneously succeeded in contesting and transcending their liminal position by becoming empowered subjects.

## Discussion

Language hierarchies as encapsulated in the snapshots on *language perfection*, *language plurality*, and *language as resistance*, illuminate the normative subtexts of integration regimes in uncovering language ideologies that entrench migrants' personal and structural disadvantages. In my study, despite official assurances of the bi/multilingual nature of Canadian and Finnish societies, the majority language became posited as the de facto legitimate national language in integration educations. National and, to an extent, institutional discourses were grounded in a neoliberal consensus around language skills as commodities (Li and Sah, 2019) and in a monolingual cosmopolitanism (Gramling, 2009) with its singular focus on host language acquisition while largely neglecting the linguistic diversity newcomers brought with them. However, the findings also attest to

these discourses being transgressed by both students and staff through acts of resistance from the margins, illustrating the emancipatory potential of liminal spaces (Pötzsch, 2020).

The assimilationist subtext of language hierarchies was aptly illustrated in the theme of *language perfection*. It is revealed in the LINC teacher's admonitions to students to eschew practicing their 'bad' English at home and in the ruminations of the SFI staffer on Arbis' language purity. In suturing the 'right' language competence to 'perfection', it also equates it with being a native speaker. In addition, when language perfection in alluding to diffuse skill-based linguistic competencies is coupled with 'language purity' as associated with dominant ethnic or racial groups, it succeeds in entrenching othering and racialising mechanisms. These subtexts further define migrant learners 'by the lack' in linguistic and other competences (Kärkkäinen, 2017). Here, students are liminally positioned as included in the national body by being enjoined to learn the national language, yet simultaneously excluded by implying that they may never learn it well enough to truly belong.

Antithetically, the discourse on monolingualism and perfection is transgressed by the LINC student who describes dialectical learning as a significant element of belonging and by teachers' remarks comparing 'objective' norms of perfection to subjective perfectionism. By advocating for a perspective on competence that embraces the diversity of voices, dialects, pronunciations, and accents of migrants, linguistic differences are brought into the light. As Ryuko Kubota (2001) argues, when non-standard varieties of a second language are integrated in learning, when these become self-evident in discourse and teaching, the confidence of language learners is bolstered and subtexts around perfection are challenged. This presupposes a reimagining of language, and language acquisition as syncretic, creating space for local vernacular codes (Morgan and Ramanathan, 2005).

Discourses on *language plurality* mirror those on language perfection in highlighting the subtexts of monolingual cosmopolitanism. Language hierarchies are exposed in the "Swedishonly policy" of Medis SFI. Implemented as a measure to prevent the dominance of English in the classroom and to mitigate against the formation of ethnic language enclaves, its primary goal was to be anti-discriminatory. However, by absenting other languages from second language acquisition, a license to discriminate was being granted by one's commitment to work against discrimination (Carlson, 2002). Mari Toivanen (2014: 192) accentuates the role language plays in socially constructing our auditory fields. She contends that what is visible and invisible in language hierarchies act as signifiers of belonging as well as social exclusion. The enforcement of the 'Swedish only policy' effectively illustrates the liminal positioning of migrant learners by communicating what, and essentially who, is absented in these monolingual subtexts. In addition, the policy also preempts the kind of 'translanguaging' envisaged by García *et al.* (2021) in which migrants, by using foreign languages, reshape the parameters of learning. In so doing, this reflects something inherent in the civic integrationism of Canadian and Finnish immigration regimes, namely the fear of losing control of integration by allowing racialised others to shape it (Beauzamy and Féron, 2012). Here too, however, the 'monolingual script' was challenged by pedagogies that embraced the classroom as a language polyglot. Illustrated by the plurilingual teaching of the Medis SFI instructor in repositioning student multilingualism as a resource, it disrupted assumptions grounding language hierarchies. In this context, foreign vocabularies and language competencies serve as scaffolds, not solely for tailoring or student-centring language acquisition, but also for fostering mutual acknowledgment. Such an approach expands narratives of belonging

by valuing migrants' previous skills and enabling reciprocal learning (Galante *et al.*, 2020).

While the underlying subtexts of *language perfection* and *language plurality* expose the taken-for-grantedness of norms governing language integration, the pragmatic approach exhibited by Arbis SFI students in *language as resistance*, raised more fundamental questions: Do migrants have the right to select their integration language? Can they determine its value independently, despite the normative standards set by the majority? In the cases of Medis SFI and NorQuest LINC, situated in regions that offered programmes exclusively in the majority language, language choice was simply a 'given'. Therefore, by posing these questions, migrant learners in Helsinki exposed certain assumptions regarding the role and importance of language in integration regimes and ran afoul of governmental bureaucracies by demanding constitutionally entrenched rights to minority language integration and challenging monolingual social welfare practices. Mika Helander (2015) found that nearly all migrant respondents reported discrimination by authorities who failed to recognise integration in the Swedish language in decisions affecting studies and benefits by the National Employment Service (AN-byrå). This confirms the power of street-level bureaucrats in circumscribing migrant deservingness and choice in language integration regimes (Ratzmann and Sahraoui, 2021). Alternatively, the Nordic pluralism adopted by Arbis SFI students contests the right of entitled majorities to unilaterally determine the boundaries or utility of host language acquisition – typically defined within neoliberal frameworks – and positions migrants at the centre of decision-making. Language preferences for Arbis students became expressions of personal life choices, as well as forms of resistance. As such, they illustrate that language choice is embedded in socio-political and cultural contexts and enmeshed in contestations of power and identity (Millar, 2013). Conversely, a normative monolingualism risks that migrant minorities remain silenced, misrepresented, and misunderstood. By orchestrating political agency through critical engagement, students demonstrated that language policy is never neutral in debates and struggles over social futures (Li and Sah, 2019). Moreover, by enacting the 'borderland identity' of a minority within a minority in Finland as a pragmatic strategy of being included in a wider Scandinavian 'society', they simultaneously succeeded in retooling their liminal positionings as emancipatory agendas to resist language hierarchies.

## Conclusions

By examining language hierarchies within LINC and SFI in creating hierarchies of belonging, this article explores how nationalist discourses of integration policies framed around monolingual cosmopolitanism and neoliberal notions of languages as commodities positioned adult migrant students in the liminal spaces of being neither too excluded, nor too included. The themes of *language perfection*, *language plurality*, and *language as resistance* highlight how certain linguistic norms and expressions are valued over others, and how these result in hegemonic practices while simultaneously opening the door to contestations and struggles. In this vein, examining language policies in LINC and SFI underlines the contradictions brought about by civic integrationist discourses as reflected in the quotidian institutional practices and pedagogical norms of these educations. Despite the receiving societies' increasing multilingualism and multiculturalism, migrants' ethnic and linguistic pluralism continues to be viewed as an impediment to host language

acquisition and to expanding spaces of belonging. Instead, migrants continue to be defined by ‘the lack’, which treats their native languages as encumbrances. Consequently, there is a need to support migrant students’ and teachers’ multilingual identities as well as championing plurilingual ways of knowing. In principle, this compels us to imagine new forms of co-created, reciprocal learning rather than reinforcing educational norms that do not meet migrant needs.

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