

Migration Regime and “Language Part of Work”: Experiences of Syrian Refugees as Surplus Population in the Turkish Labor Market

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Abstract

The literature on migration, language and employment is dominated by the human capital approach and promotes multilingualism as a universal good. This paper examines the relationship between language and work for migrants illustrating how they are ascribed value as capital according to their position and the “language part of work.” First, we trace a genealogy of the migration regime in relation to the labor and linguistic market of migrants in Turkey, characterized by informality and exploitation. Then, we look at the experiences of refugees qualitatively to show how language is differentially valued and has modest effects on social mobility. We argue that language learning instead of stemming from individuals’ possession of capital should be examined within a broader linguistic and employment framework. This research goes beyond conventional wisdom about the centrality of language as a means to improve employment by shedding light on the structure that shapes language value.

Keywords

Sociology, Migration, Workers, Labor, Capitalism, Refugees, State, Work and Economy

Introduction

“Language is the primary handicap and the most serious barrier to employment,” Deniz, a representative of a local Istanbul municipality explained to us. During interviews with officials like Deniz, as well as nongovernmental organization (NGO) workers, employment specialists, and

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language instructors, we were repeatedly told that language skills automatically lead to labor market integration for Turkey's Syrian refugees. This perspective is also shared by business owners and workers alike. Policymakers promote multilingualism as a universal good for migrant employment. The academic field is dominated by the human capital approach, which links skills and qualifications to employment opportunities and tries to explain the success of certain individuals and not others, based on language ability. Yet, some researchers have also found that host country language level does not play a role in the emplacement of migrants, with the exception of the dwindling NGO and tourism sectors (Garrido and Codó, 2017). Additionally, despite possessing highly valued language skills, even English, qualified migrants with tertiary educational qualifications often still undergo declassing and downward professional mobility (Sert, 2016).

Our article interrogates the relationship between language and work for migrants, showing, through an in-depth qualitative approach, that language does not carry the universal, intrinsic overarching value that it is thought to have in the labor market, but instead its value depends on the positioning of migrants in the labor market and the "language part of work" of the sectors in which migrants are included. Instead of taking for granted that language skills are highly relevant, as is usually done in studies of migrant labor, their relevance needs to be interrogated in terms of the linguistic market in which they fit and from the point of view of the migrants.

As such, departing from human capital and neoclassical economic theories, we argue that language is differentially significant and investment in language often has only a modest effect on employment opportunities. Further, we join scholars who note that such neoliberal discourses about migrants' responsibilities to learn are far from neutral (Warriner, 2015), but serve to conceal their marginalization and to ensure their differential inclusion into society as surplus labor. We build our argument by emplacing work languages in Turkey within a Marxist perspective on labor exploitation (Marx, 1976; Rajaram, 2018; Wallerstein, 2007). We trace the genealogy of the migration regime in relation to labor market demands and use the concepts of "linguistic market" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991) and "language part of work" (Boutet, 2001) to understand the resulting experiences of individuals in the informal labor market. Our research asks: How do discrepancies between the discourse about the value of language and migrant experiences shed light on Turkey's linguistic marketplace and the broader regime of migrant precarity in Turkey and elsewhere?

The Turkish context is useful for exploring the effect of a linguistic market because there are three relevant employment languages (Turkish, Arabic and English), each with varying values in the labor market, due to the country's geopolitical position, its drive toward globalization, as well as increased business with and tourism from Arab countries and the presence of around four million Syrian refugees.

Furthermore, Turkey has also put in place a particular migration regime, which has evolved over the years to serve its labor market making it an interesting case to examine the value of these languages for migrants. As opposed to groups of migrants from relatively homogeneous socioeconomic backgrounds (Çelik, 2015; Rottmann, 2015), refugees have very diverse profiles, which makes it possible to analyze how these social differences interact with different employment sectors. The diversity of refugee characteristics in Turkey allows us to contribute to the literature on migration and language (Bemporad, 2016; Duchêne, 2016; Flubacher et al., 2017; Heinemann, 2017), by mapping the value attached to language mastery in the labor market. The qualitative in-depth research approach of the study through interviews and observations over time allows us to show how personal experiences, workplace norms and national discourses interact at a microlevel to critically examine the claims about value of language in employment of migrants. The entry point through language allows us to understand the processes of value that establish hierarchies in the labor market. Unlike conventional wisdom, language does not have the significance it is

thought to have in terms of employment advantages, as migrants serve employers by providing a cheap source of labor.

This paper starts by outlining the theoretical framework we use to understand the link between employment and language, a critical perspective articulating Marxist concepts of surplus population, exploitation, and value system (Marx, 1976; Rajaram, 2018) with Bourdieu's concept of "linguistic market" (1977, 1991) to understand the way in which individuals are ascribed value as capital according to the context. Within a broader socio and economic-political context, the "language part of work" concept (Boutet, 2001) shows that language skills of migrants are commodified similarly to other skills and are used to harness profit creation in the exploitative labor process. After presenting the methodological approach, we build our argument by undertaking a genealogy of the migration system in relation to the labor and linguistic market in Turkey, which allows us to place language, as part of the value systems that mediate capitalist modes of production, creating hierarchies between desirable and valuable forms of work and surplus labor populations. Further, by looking at the microlevel experiences of refugees in light of this genealogy, we demonstrate that languages are anchored in social, political, and historical contexts and attached to hierarchies that affect language value in employment for migrants. Thus, the associated value of language learning is not based on individuals' capital or the capacity to learn, but rather on the broader linguistic and employment context in which it is embedded.

Surplus Population, Linguistic Market and Profit within the Capitalist Mode of Production

Contemporary research on migration, employment, and language is dominated by the human capital theory approach, which tries to explain the success of certain individuals in terms of pay, occupational status, and probability of employment. As such, migrants are believed to be concentrated in low-paid, inferior jobs because of their shortages of human capital, operationalized in terms of educational qualifications and language ability. These academic studies, quantitative in nature, point at deficient language skills and related social skills as one of the barriers to employment (Ho, 2007; Stevens, 2005; Syed and Murray, 2019) overlooking the existence of a particular national migration regime in relation with the labor market (Nawyn, 2016) and its impact on the value assigned to language. Yet, some researchers have also found that the host country language level of migrants does not have a particular positive effect (Duchêne, 2016; Flubacher et al., 2017; Garrido and Codó, 2017), nuancing celebratory discourses about language as a key to employment and upward social mobility.

In this paper, we build on this literature, examining the language-work relation in the wider national labor market context and its associated migration regime to conceptualize how capital operates with the state via migration governance to impose a register of values on labor and its mobility (Mezzadra, 2011). These regimes feed into exploitation through assigning a wide spectrum of contingent and conditional legal statuses (De Genova, 2005; Goldring et al., 2009), which let people in and keep others out. Through a process of setting up refugees' stay as "temporary" (Rajkumar et al., 2012) with a possibility of deportation in the future (De Genova, 2002), migratory regimes create cheap and disposable sources of labor without political influence or protection (Rajaram, 2018).

In that sense, migrants are socially embedded groups seeking to valorize their body power in different ways in the face of exclusionary ideologies (Rajaram, 2018). Migrants' positioning as a surplus population of cheaply exploitable and dispensable labor is tied to a value system within capitalist modes of production that privilege certain types of "desirable, valuable forms of work"

(Rajaram, 2018: 628) with certain values attributed to language investment. Industries take advantage of the presence of people unable to capitalize their labor power in formal economic modes (Sassen, 2014). Through techniques of power, people's bodies and time become labor power and labor time and constitute the backstage operation of capitalism (Rajaram, 2018), effectively used and transformed into profit.

Placing the microlevel employment experiences of refugees against this background reveals the dynamics of the interaction between labor market and language. Migrants' linguistic competencies are assigned labor value and anchored in social, political, historical contexts, which are attached to hierarchies. To understand the role of language within the employment context, we use the concept of "linguistic market" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991). This concept refers to the fact that linguistic competencies operate as forms of linguistic "capital," which under certain circumstances are "convertible" into economic resources. They are ascribed value as capital and offer distinction profit according to the context of the market in which they are offered. As such, their value should be examined within the wider national and global contexts in light of policies, opportunities, and needs of the market. In addition, the values of language skills of migrants and the associated benefit are related to the types of employment they do and their employment status. Indeed, Boutet (2001) demonstrates that employment involves a specific "language part of work," defined as the implementation of the linguistic competencies needed to do the job. This approach stresses the fact that the value of language skills as that of other skills is not universal and cannot be determined without a close look at how language is used and valued on the job. Some languages or styles of language use (accent, vocabulary, register, and so on) may be irrelevant or conversely subjected to a process of commodification to benefit the employer for profit creation but not the speakers themselves. By enabling us to place the value of language within the broader socio- and economic-political context, this concept demonstrates how the migration regime, labor precarity, and language learning investment are inter-linked, whereby the migration regime might have less to do with "integration" purposes than with economic strategies related to the needs of the labor market (Holborow, 2018).

Methodology

We draw from extensive qualitative fieldwork in 2018–19, including home, workplace, and classroom observation and 40 interviews with Syrian migrants in Istanbul between 18 and 55 years of age in homes, workplaces, language centers, NGOs, and cafes. Our sample included 24 women, 16 men; 32 did not complete high school, 8 received higher education, 25 under "Temporary Protection" legal status, and 5 naturalized. Interviews with migrants lasted between one and two hours and were conducted in Arabic. Author 1 is a native speaker of Arabic and Author 2 used the assistance of a Syrian research assistant. Wherever possible, long-term relationships with interviewees were established to increase the level of trust between interviewers and interviewees as well as to understand changes over time in social mobility and between their lives in Syria and in Turkey. The topics of interviews addressed migration to Turkey and daily life experiences in relation to work, education, housing, and family. Further, a total of 25 expert interviews were conducted with instructors at language schools, employment specialists, state officials, and representatives in NGO active in the field of migration. Interviews with experts dealt with the nature of their work and their perceptions of migrants' challenges and were useful for understanding the discourse about employment and their view of language and opportunities. Interviews were coded in NVIVO and content analysis was used to isolate recurring themes related to work (coded in terms of employment history, employment experiences, discrimination, and language use in the workplace) and language (coded with regards to languages learned, courses attended, views of language learning).

Genealogy of the Turkish Migration Regime: Capital, Surplus Labor and Value of Language

Syrian refugees' presence in Turkey is constructed as "permanently temporary" surplus labor (Osseiran, 2020), which has implications for their language learning and investment opportunities. To understand how they fit into the broader political and social context, we undertake a genealogy of how capital impacts the evolution of Turkey's migration governance before and after Syrian refugee arrival. In particular, we highlight the softer visa regime combined with securitization and multiplication of legal statuses of migrants as a response to the need for informal labor. Then, we examine the impact of this regime on the value of language to account for the state's lack of investment in individuals positioned as surplus labor.

Migrant realities are entangled with and reflect on the existing social, economic, and political context (Castles, 2015) meaning that there is a need to place migrants within a broader perspective. In Turkey, the demand for informal labor has greatly increased in the last decades, with increasing demand for child and elder care being mainly filled by migrant women (Toksöz et al., 2012). Further, the tourism, entertainment, and manufacturing sectors expanded and reduced labor costs by employing informal migrants to compete internationally (Icduygu, 2006). As such, Turkey's migration regime leads to employment in sectors with high levels of informality, such as the textile industry, construction, agriculture, and domestic work among others (Osseiran, 2020). Migrant workers are preferred by employers because they agree to working conditions refused by the local labor force, such as lack of social security coverage, long working hours with no overtime payment, and no annual leave, thus lowering the cost of the labor force (Toksöz et al., 2012). To support market demands, Turkey implemented a softer visa regime and showed deliberate negligence toward curbing rising informal migration. However, at the same time, securitization and increased border controls were introduced. This seemingly paradoxical stance (Eder, 2015) means migrants are constantly straddling arbitrary borders of regularity and irregularity, which leads to intense ambiguity and uncertainty (Calavita, 2005).

In response to the demand of informal labor, the migration regime had already evolved before the arrival of Syrians through the multiplication and segmentation of legal statuses, namely, transit migrants, illegal labor migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees and regular migrants (Icduygu, 2006) often on an "ethnic" basis, which lay the basis for the creation of "precarious spaces" (Wagner, 2015). Yet, even ethnic kin are not exempt from precarious legal statuses (Parla, 2011). Only in 2003 did the Law on Foreigners' Work Permits allow migrants to apply for work permits even if they were not of Turkish ancestry and culture as was required by the Law of Settlement in 1934. In Turkey, as elsewhere, informal migrants are excluded or impoverished by capitalist structures and marginalized in similar ways (Rajaram, 2018).

With the arrival of Syrian refugees (now around four million), Turkey enacted Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP). This law placed Syrian refugees under Temporary Protection (TP) status. In January 2016, the government passed the Regulation on Work Permits for Foreigners under TP allowing Syrian refugees to be granted work permits and to join the labor force (Ministry of Labor, 2016). Policymakers expected a decrease in informal labor after this regulation (Icduygu and Simsek, 2016). However, in reality, the majority of Syrian refugees (like other migrant groups) remained in the informal labor market, which constitutes approximately 40% of total employment in Turkey (Senses, 2016). Syrians often work in the most precarious sectors of the labor market, have poor working conditions, and little job security. In some cases, they displaced poor Kurdish and Turkish workers (especially in the agricultural sector), but estimates of this effect have been modest in cities. As of March 31, 2019, a total of just 31,185 Syrians were given work permits (Refugees Association, 2019). As one of the consequences of the nature and

conditions of low wage, informal jobs available to refugees in construction, factories, and agriculture, gendered labor divisions among Syrians have largely continued in Turkey (Rottmann and Nimer, 2020) with the exceptions of some white-collar jobs.

An important aspect to consider when examining the effect of the governance of migration on the labor market is the fact that employment of Syrians is also about the responsibilities that the employer should undertake. The employees depend on their employers to obtain a work permit, a bureaucratic process that is time-consuming for the employer. Yet, the main reason for employers not wanting to obtain work permits for employees is their unwillingness to pay minimum wage. Syrian refugees working in the informal market receive no benefits and risk not getting paid at all or receiving delayed payments (Del Carpio et al., 2018). In this way, the state is serving employers to maintain a precarious workforce. In that sense, the governance of Syrian refugees in Turkey is yet another manifestation of the vital role that the state plays in the pursuits of capital (Bélanger and Saracoglu, 2020), especially combined with its unwillingness to enforce existing labor laws.

Ethnically Kurdish or Turkmen Syrians represent a smaller (but non-negligible) proportion of Syrian refugees in Turkey. On arrival in Turkey, these individuals could already speak and understand Turkish and/or Kurdish languages and could communicate with their Turkish- or Kurdish-speaking employers (though in most cases they had to learn writing and reading). The same is true for Arabic-speaking Syrians who came to South Eastern Turkish provinces where Arabic speakers are more widespread. Yet, based on our observations, they were still confronted with the same employment difficulties that we discuss here. In fact, their language ability gave them minor benefits initially, but a few years later, their situation was not much different from those who had learned basic Turkish.

State investment in language learning is a dynamic, contradictory, and historically situated practice organized by institutions and state actors, not just learners. Countries where the labor is mostly formal have a long history of immigration and have developed systems for integration (e.g. Germany) (Altenried et al., 2018). In contrast, Syrians in Turkey are expected to find a job immediately upon arrival, limiting their opportunity to learn the language. As described above, in light of the ever-growing demand for informal labor that is cheap and exploitable, their presence has been constructed as permanently temporary and as precarious, surplus labor power, and thus there is no perceived need for the state nor the labor market to invest in Turkish language training. Although several initiatives and programs funded by the European Union were implemented in coordination with the Ministry of National Education for teaching language to adults, there is still no general policy to teach Turkish to Syrian refugees. Learning Turkish is left up to the individuals' own initiative. It is widely believed that learning Turkish is dependent on refugees' individual "willingness to learn," as expressed by a representative at the Ministry of Education in an interview. Syrians are generally believed to have "weak motivation" to learn, yet this must be understood as part of this broader migration regime where they do not succeed in converting their bodies to valued labor through language mastery, because the language part of work does not reward those who do it.

Examining the Limited "Language Part of Work" in the Precarious Spaces of the Turkish Informal Labor Market

The majority of Syrian adults do not succeed in translating their body power into valued labor and are most often precariously employed to meet the demands of the informal market for cheap and exploitable workers. This positioning affects their strategies and autonomy with regards to their employment situation and language investment. The official language and the language of education in Turkey is Turkish. Turkish language knowledge is thus important for enabling migrants to

advocate for rights (Karakilic et al., 2019) and access healthcare (Cloeters and Osseiran, 2019) and education (Hohberger, 2018). However, the value ascribed to language in the labor market depends on the “language part of work” (Boutet, 2001), and we found that Turkish does not seem to be especially valued as capital in the informal market where migrants are concentrated, as the language part of work is often limited to a few words and thus does not offer distinction profit. The majority of migrants working in construction, manufacturing, or services sectors receive less than minimum wage, no social security, often go without pay for work performed, and are at risk of not being paid at any time (IYF, 2018). In many ways, their position is similar to working class Turkish or Kurdish informal workers, except that their lack of Turkish language skills makes it easier for these individuals to be taken advantage of by their employers. They are given the least desirable jobs and face discrimination. Workers in this category rarely know other languages besides Arabic and learn minimal Turkish on the job, particular to the type of job they do and not generalizable to other situations. For instance, Ashraf who worked in a shoe factory counting nylon pieces related that he learned all the numbers, but only the numbers:

My employer was asking me about the numbers, so I was telling him by writing on my mobile phone, and he was saying the numbers in front of me and I memorized these numbers, so I learned so many numbers here in the factory. I learned until a million.

The “language part of work” in his job is limited, consequently the value assigned to Turkish language is low. The majority of precariat workers like Ashraf feel that they are stuck and are unable to change their position. They are weighed down by long working hours (many work six days a week for 10+ hours per day) and have no job security. They are seen as surplus labor and do not have the opportunity to learn the language, nor are their language competencies valued.

Yet, despite these conditions, some do manage to learn, either on the job, or through social interactions. Doing so can improve the worker’s ability to defend his or her rights or lift them to being a manager of other workers. Yet, the benefits are modest. One example that demonstrates the very modest benefit is the story of a young man named Moussa, which is typical of many that we heard. Despite lacking formal education beyond elementary school, Moussa learned Turkish through working at low-level jobs in factories, and he eventually landed a low-level position in a restaurant. Although the language part of work was minimal, his Turkish level improved to the extent that he was managing Turkish employees. However, the position remained precarious and irregular. When he had a work accident, his boss did not pay him for the time while he was injured, and even though Moussa had enough Turkish to ask about compensation, he was not able to convince his boss to pay him or to register his employment formally so that he could have insurance. He explained:

When I came back. . .the manager didn’t accept to pay me for the days that he asked me to stay home. I asked him why he hadn’t paid me social security and registered me. It is his responsibility. But he didn’t accept.

Moussa decided to leave the restaurant for a tailoring workshop. Because he spoke Turkish (enabling him to manage Syrians), he earned slightly more than his coworkers, which was still below minimum wage. However, he still found himself exploited just like the others, including being forced to work over time. When he refused to do so, he was fired.

He [his employer] said, “I might have additional work to deliver. You have to help me as I help you.” I said: “in what way are you helping me? I have no insurance, nothing.”

Moussa's Turkish ability was only helpful when his employer refused to pay him in the end, and he threatened to report the matter to the Turkish authorities. Despite being a hardworking and competent employee in both cases, Moussa did not earn minimum wage and was expected to work long hours with no social security or retirement benefits and no job security. Ultimately, his improved language knowledge was only marginally effective in addressing his main employment struggles. This example shows that the advantage conferred by learning Turkish is limited because the language expected for work in employment sectors open to people with Moussa's (lack of) cultural and financial capital is very low. In Turkey's migration regime, having the human capital to learn Turkish does not offer an escape from labor exploitation.

To further support our point, we can share the example of Ameer, a young Turkmen man from Syria. Although he spoke Turkish, he was still paid less than a quarter of the amount of his Turkish coworkers in a sewing shop. He eventually obtained a supervisory position in a clothing retail shop, however he still worked long hours, with few days off and for little pay.

The examples of Moussa and Ameer show us that we should approach refugees as laboring subjects doing surplus labor (Rajaram, 2018; Ramaddar, 2017). It is therefore not in their employer's interest for them to be able to express themselves and mitigate their exploitation. Higher level jobs where Turkish is needed are limited in these precarious sectors (and typically filled by Turkish citizens who are generally preferred for front-stage labor). Even when migrants do have the necessary Turkish language ability to obtain positions where Turkish knowledge is valued, the promotion and any benefits that come with it remain limited.

A minority of workers are slightly better positioned due to their cultural and financial capital that is mobilized if they do learn Turkish. One example is Mounir and his brother, Ahmed. Both interrupted their studies in Syria (in high school and university, respectively) and worked in a sewing company in Turkey. Mounir describes it as follows: "The work here is like a prison, from morning until night." Six months later, Ahmed supported him to study Turkish for one year in a private center, to be able to go back to his university studies. He was able to secure a job as a translator in an international British company. For Mounir, Turkish language played an important role enabling him to break out of insecure and into formal employment. However, this is mainly due to his particular advantages (university education and financial resources). The vast majority are like Ashraf, Moussa, and Ameer with limited chances of improving their situation through language. Yet, does getting a job in translation really represent a ticket out of prison as Mounir thinks or is it just another means of exploitation of migrants as part of the labor market?

Linguistic Capital Commodification - A Way Out of "Prison"?

Specific laboring modes and traits are accorded value in the labor market to distinguish front-stage labor power (hired formally, with a work permit), from those who are in backstage (Rajaram, 2018) or caught in the "prison" of long informal working hours and low pay. Linguistic competencies operate as forms of linguistic "capital" and thus contribute to the value of labor power. Almost all of our interlocutors hoped that they would be able to convert Turkish language skills as part of a "linguistic market" (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991) and gain value, to become front-stage, yet in reality the opportunities continued to be limited as their language skills, in jobs where the "language part of work" was significant, were commodified and not translated to benefit for the workers themselves. The two languages to consider in this regard are English and Arabic. English has been in ascendance globally as a lingua franca in international business, and Turkey is no exception in its efforts to join the global competition. English language skills are believed to influence prospects of better employment, and higher salary levels (Park, 2011). As for the Arabic language, it has gained great value in the Turkish labor market over the past few decades. The clear objective to improve trade

and investment with the Middle East, apparent since the 1980s, has become even more comprehensive under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) (Altunışık and Martin, 2011). The AKP fostered an increase in tourism through no visa policies for some Arab countries, encouraged by the growing popularity of Turkish soap operas in the region. As a result, Arabic language gained market value in terms of employment and an increasing demand for Arabic speakers to work in the field of healthcare, call centers, hospitality, and real estate agencies (IYF, 2018).

Individuals in our sample who know Arabic and one other language, either Turkish or English, could use their language skills to gain market value. They obtained jobs with significant English or Arabic “language parts of work” (Boutet, 2012) in translation in NGOs, for international companies that need translation services, outreach in NGOs to reach out to Syrian populations and translation and transcription for research projects for universities. Their employment is still most often informal, but they can usually expect a living wage. Many face precarity in that their employment is limited term, according to a particular project and dependent on foreign funding, but they may have more autonomy and flexibility than the larger, previously discussed, group.

One example that illustrates limited opportunity and precarity despite multilingualism and cultural capital is Nadia, a 32-year-old woman from Damascus. She has a degree in engineering and was taking education courses toward a teaching diploma when war broke out. When she first arrived in Turkey in 2014, she taught English in a school for Syrians, but three years prior to the interview, she decided to shift to working in civil society. She had held a number of positions with varying, but usually inadequate remuneration, benefits and stability, each of which relied on her Arabic and English abilities. She started as a field worker visiting families with children in their homes. A year later, she became a project officer responsible for a team of field workers organizing activities in a community center. Her knowledge of Arabic and English and basic Turkish as well as the fact that she possesses a university degree enabled her to find these positions. She was also able to obtain Turkish citizenship. She worked long hours, commuting two hours to her job and barely made ends meet. In parallel, she worked as an interviewer, translator, and transcriber for academic researchers. When the projects ended, she left the organizations, moving on to another, eventually coming to a Syrian-led organization, where she worked for a year, until their funding ran out. She was again looking for a job at the time of writing this article.

Like Nadia, people with a university degree can find work using their multilingual abilities. Although these jobs are preferable to positions in the precarious informal labor market, they do not allow them to valorize their level of education. For instance, Nadia is not using her skillset as an engineer or as a teacher. Further, those who work in academia as assistants, as Nadia did, are usually excluded from working with the data and analyzing material, even when they are trained social scientists (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019). They are valued for their language skills, commodified for the benefit of their employers, but not for the individual to obtain a secure position.

Similarly, entrepreneurs running online businesses as freelancers for Arab markets (graphic design, accounting and advertisement) for companies that work in the field of medical tourism, real estate, or the hotel industry can also be highlighted as an example of a group with limited opportunities despite their linguistic capital. These entrepreneurs use English to develop their skills in terms of computer programming and to create an online presence and need Arabic and sometimes English to speak with clients. An example is 21-year-old Hasan, an online entrepreneur who received financial support from his family while he improved his computer skills, now designs websites for several real estate and medical tourism clients. Entrepreneurs, like Hasan, who are mostly interfacing with Arab clients, investors and only occasionally with Turkish speakers, do not actually enter the dominant Turkish labor market, and thus are in some sense trapped in a system of tenuous and limited market opportunities. Despite being lauded in the media, refugee-run businesses are extremely risky and likely to fail (News about Turkey, 2019). Hasan’s business (like many) is not legally registered and is not providing him with retirement or health care benefits.

In sum, English language (in combination with Arabic and/or Turkish) is useful for opening up access to the global market, allowing individuals, who have other qualifications, such as university degrees and computer skills, to seek jobs in international companies and NGOs, but also in their professions or online businesses. Yet, most stay precarious despite their qualifications. The current geopolitical situation creates a need for people with some formal education, who know Arabic, and have the know-how of learning foreign languages (English and/or Turkish), such as Nadia and Hasan. In these types of employment, the “language part of work” is very important. They are working on the basis of their knowledge of language. While the working hours and conditions in these positions are more desirable than those in the precarious spaces, these still lack most advantages that we would expect for educated, multilingual people.

Highly qualified migrants, even when they learn Turkish, rarely manage to learn “enough” and remain, in any case, in lower positions than native Turkish speakers. For instance, Hani, who was an anesthetist in Syria and now a Turkish citizen, is not able to practice his profession because Turkey does not provide anesthetization services in the small migrant health clinics where Syrians are allowed to work. In fact, the health ministry passed an exceptional law accepting Syrian certificates in health sectors to allow them to work in these medical centers for migrants. He tried to apply for jobs at hospitals, but he did not succeed. He explained that, although he had been studying the language for a year and had made some progress, his language skills were still judged to be insufficient.

Similarly, Assaad was a dentist in Syria and has not managed to obtain an equivalency for his diploma after several attempts, despite having successfully completed B2 level in Turkish language. He related, “For me, especially Turkish [language] was a problem. Last year I took the exam and did not pass. It was 20 pages and took 2.5 hours. Even four hours would not be enough for me to read the whole exam.” He is thus currently working as a salesperson in a real estate company while continuing to work on his language ability. It is difficult for Syrians to get their qualifications recognized in general but for many, including Assaad, the language issue is the major barrier standing in the way of being able to practice their profession, despite having a high level of ability. Assaad now keeps his exam preparation books in the drawers of his real estate office, hoping to still be able to retake the exam at a later point.

Both Hani and Assaad are not using their educational and professional qualifications. Hani now works precariously in the migrant health clinic, despite the much lower salary and the fact that this job consists of carrying out “necessary nursing procedures, like wrapping bandages,” and is not related to anesthesiology. This job is also very temporary and precarious, as such centers depend on EU funding and run the risk of being shut down. Hani was well-aware of this fact, telling us, “They can close it any day, and my job would be gone with it. I was expecting it to be better.” His case, like that of Assaad, demonstrates that even migrants seemingly at the top of the market in terms of training and prestige are still relegated to working outside of their fields, for lower pay, with little chance of advancement and in precarious conditions, despite learning the language.

This research thus demonstrates that the migration regime in Turkey predetermines the entry point of the majority of refugees and serves the labor market by keeping Syrians in precarious low-skilled labor, leaving them little opportunity to be upwardly mobile with or without language knowledge. Learning languages can only become an advantage when coupled with cultural and financial capital. Even then, the benefits are limited as the case of Nadia demonstrates, since employment that requires English and/or Arabic as a part of work still does not ensure advancement and job security. Similarly, as the examples of Hani and Assaad’s trajectories show, even highly skilled migrants who gain an advanced level of Turkish are kept away from the dominant sector, and the best that they can hope for is to occupy precarious positions in the migrant sector (in the migrant health clinics, for instance).

Conclusion

This research explored how Turkey's broader migration regime in the service of its labor market affects migrants' employment opportunities and the value that language skills and capital confer to migrants in the market. We argue that the labor market, which is characterized by high levels of informality, exploitation, and differential use of Turkish, Arabic, and English, structurally positions migrants to have particular language use on the job and opportunities to learn. The microlevel experiences of refugees show that the value ascribed to language learning should be examined within the broader employment framework of the migration regime. The possession of different types of capital and skills set migrants apart from one another in terms of their access to the labor market, their use of language, and their ability to gain language skills, but only to a limited extent in terms of benefit. Yet, the burden of mastering (many) languages is often placed on individuals.

Languages have different values depending on the sector in which individuals work. Yet ultimately, in contrast to the discourse on the importance of language learning for migrants in absolute terms, there is only a modest effect of language investment on social mobility. The myth that language is the key to labor market success of migrants conceals efforts to keep refugees at the level of precarious workers and puts the responsibility on refugees who do not "make it," as being at fault for not learning. Differences between this discourse about the benefit of language mastery and migrant experiences and the value placed on language sheds light on how Turkey's migration regime places refugees as surplus labor, as in other countries in the region (Osseiran, 2020). Our study joins others in blurring the distinction between refugees and economic migrants to reveal an increasing flexibilization of labor markets, what has been described as a "new migrant division of labor" (Altenried et al., 2018). This work shows that it is important to understand the place of value and the way it is attributed to the labor within particular contexts as well as the role of language in that value making process.

Its main contribution is to move away from the basic recommendations in studies and reports about the centrality of language as a means to improve integration and employment opportunities and instead to have a broader look at the structure that shapes refugees' positioning in the labor market. Migrants' labor market successes or failures therefore cannot be attributed to the sufficiency or lack of their own "human capital" without considering the broader socio- and economic-political context and placing employment as part and parcel of the migration regime.

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