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Uncertainties Compound: How the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the pressures of the linguistic integration facing refugees in Germany

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Uncertainties Compound: How the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the pressures of linguistic integration facing refugees in Germany



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Anisah * and I met online every Wednesday and Sunday from April to July 2021

to practice German. Anisah is planning to pursue a bachelor's degree in computer science; a field she had been preparing to study since completing secondary school in Damascus – plans which were put on hold when she and her family were forced to relocate to Germany during the still-ongoing war in Syria. In order to achieve her goal of studying computer science, Anisah would need to complete beginner through advanced level German (B1 – C1 on the CEFRL Scale).

Having successfully completed the B1 course in 2018, Anisah paused her language studies after her son Yusef was born. She later resumed courses in 2020 shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic swept through Europe. She was now preparing for her B2 (intermediate-advanced level) language exam and asked me to help her revise the course material. Her course, which ran through one of Berlin's central universities, had shifted online during the pandemic, and so her class gathered on Zoom every morning at 9 am. By the time we met in the evenings, Anisah would already have had four hours of online German lessons behind her. She was determined to pass this exam on her first try, so we tried to make use of the downtime between housework, dinner and her children's bedtime.

Like Anisah, many newcomers to Germany are required to learn intermediate to advanced levels of German in partial fulfilment of employment, higher education, citizenship and permanent residency eligibility. In most cases, those who have been granted refugee status in Germany must begin language training within their first few months of arrival. The so-called *Sprach-und-Integrationskurs* – language and integration course – is a state-funded language and civics knowledge programme, which is part of Germany's National Integration Plan (NIP), aiming to *sustainably integrate* newcomers. Herein, the intermediate B1-integration course is the first threshold newcomers are expected to cross within the first year or two. Upon passing the B1 course and receiving the *Zertifikat Deutsch* (German Language Certificate), state-funded B2 and (in some cases) C1 courses are mandatory for those seeking so-called 'skilled' employment, vocational training and university education.

On paper, these requirements seemed easy enough: courses are funded by Office of Migration and Refugees (BAMF) and in the meantime, Anisah and her family could rely on financial support from the government. In fact, Anisah once told me that she and her husband, Halim, had intentionally sought asylum in Germany because they believed these programmes and governmental support would better prepare them for their futures. The trouble is that in practice these programmes are incredibly onerous and difficult to complete. They are time-intensive: running four hours a day and five days a week over the course of four to seven months. They have high failure rates: during my ethnographic research

on these programmes from 2017 to 2018, I observed that on average at least 50% of participants fail the B1 language exam on their first attempt, forcing them to re-enrol. In B2 courses, failure rates run as high as 80-90%. This means that in reality, many newcomers spend their first years in Germany in and out of these programmes before they are able to access higher education and secure formal work.

Now, five years after arriving in Berlin, Anisah felt that she was finally reaching an inflexion point: despite the constraints brought on by the pandemic, Anisah determined that, if all went to plan, she would receive the B2 certificate by the end of August 2021, giving her enough time to complete the four-month C1 programme, before applying for university next spring. However, like most of the plans that Anisah and Halim set out for themselves, this could easily be thwarted if she failed the exam, if childcare precluded her from attending the course regularly, or if urgent personal matters – from caring for ageing parents, health problems, or finding suitable schools for their children – intervened and forced her to drop out of the course – as they had in the past. Beyond that, uncertainty persisted over the outcomes these programmes really offered: the language certificates were only part of the many requirements they needed to fulfil. Was Anisah missing any other qualifications? And what about access to work? Though Halim had passed all necessary language courses and underwent professional training in computer science and cyber security (a field in which he had previously worked successfully for over 12 years), he spent years receiving strings of rejections from potential employers who argued that the three years Halim spent learning German presented too much of a gap in his CV. It was clear that the rules set out by the language-integration system did not necessarily coincide with the imperatives of the German education and labour market. This puts the onus on newcomers to navigate their way through opacity, misdirection and conflicting information. More urgently, completing language courses is tied to a broader matrix of requirements for citizenship and permanent residency eligibility. In order to qualify for permanent residency, for example, an individual must prove – alongside the linguistic requirements – that they have lived in Germany legally for five years, can support themselves and their families financially, have sufficient living space and have been paying into state pension insurance for at least 60 months [1]. All of this relies on their ability to secure employment and thus, on their ability to complete necessary language training.

A large body of research in linguistic anthropology and education argues that access to dominant linguistic resources early on after physical arrival in a new environment, contributes to various forms of socio-economic mobility for newcomers (see e.g., Dryden-Peterson 2017) [2]. In this way, language-as-tool can engender forms of agency and empowerment. However, my research

findings suggest that when language learning becomes an institutionalised requirement – as it does in Germany – it instead often becomes a central barrier to their mobility and future-building – economically, legally and socioculturally. Language-as-requirement can thus contribute to acute experiences of isolation and marginalisation as societal and institutional expectations of integration are often ignorant of or inflexible to the goals and expectations of newcomers.

In the now over four years of my anthropological research on migrant and refugee experiences with Germany's language-integration policies, I have found that, though these programmes are designed to *accelerate* newcomer incorporation in the national economy and society, in practice they significantly *delay* their access to work, higher education and a sense of inclusion. In part because of the *slowing* effect these programmes have on their sense of progress, newcomers to Germany encounter *temporal disruptions, tears and distortions*, (see e.g., Griffiths 2014) [3] which contribute to ongoing experiences of *temporal uncertainty*.

For Anisah, like many of my interlocutors, anxieties over the future have increased substantially during COVID-19 pandemic, as new forms of spatiotemporal constraints and uncertainties compound the existing uncertainties brought on by the pressures of linguistic integration and the desire for socioeconomic stability and legal security.

‘Ich spüre zu viel Druck’: Time pressures and compounding uncertainties

On one Sunday afternoon in June, Anisah and I met to practice letter writing; one of two core sections of the written examination. Before beginning our sessions, Anisah would send me a selection of letter-writing exercises, which we would then work through together. More often than not, these were complaint letters to be addressed to fictional companies: a faulty product, a bad hotel experience, an overpriced bus tour, an unsatisfactory Spanish language course. In the actual exam, participants have 30 minutes to read the instructions, write and proofread a 150-word letter. Letters are marked for their structure, their formal accuracy, spelling and grammar, the degree to which they address the themes laid out in the instructions, and their so-called *kommunikative Gestaltung*: including text organisation and breadth of vocabulary.

This was arguably the most important section of the exam, yielding 45 points out of 300. It was also the most challenging section of the exam for Anisah, not only because it was marked so strictly by examiners, but also because preparing for this particular exercise demanded quiet. *Quiet time* was, however, scarce in the family's apartment as childcare, home-schooling, housework and language

learning now concentrated in the same 64 square metres.

Over the months of working together, we found that the most effective mode of practice was to simulate exam conditions as much as possible. I'd set a timer on my phone – in this case, 30 minutes – and Anisah would get to work. Every few minutes, however, the door behind Anisah would creep open as one of her children, Sofia and Yusef, sauntered in. While her children's frequent visits brought welcome levity to the otherwise stress-filled writing assignments, it did become increasingly clear that the pandemic was bringing on new constraints. "Ich spüre zu viel Druck", Anisah said – I feel too much pressure. "Was für einen Druck?", I asked her – what kind of pressure?

As Anisah explained to me, outside of the pandemic, the pressure she felt often concentrated around expectations of her to pass through the language courses quickly, so that she could begin studying and eventually begin working, and, most urgently, become a permanent resident in Germany. Now that her studies, personal and family life had become compressed to their small apartment, however, Anisah felt that she was facing not one singular pressure, but multiple, compounding forces that weighed down on her. The largest of these forces is what she calls "Zeitdruck" – time pressure. This meant a number of things. The first came with a restructuring of her daily schedule. With the entire family at home most of the day, she now had to balance home-schooling, family time and housework alongside the existing pressure she felt to learn German quickly and attend courses regularly. On most days this meant waking up at 4 or 5 am to complete her German homework and revise for the exam before class began at 9 am. Her afternoons were filled with household chores and children's homework and her early evenings were dedicated to study. The structure of her time now compounded the speed with which she needed to complete her goals.

But *Zeitdruck* also meant the kind of temporal pressure Anisah felt to *actualise her future*: to finally shift out of the liminal space of her temporary refugee status, of being a language learner, an *Integrationsbedürftige* (someone in need of integration). A pressure to become financially independent from the German state and to resume a life that, for so many years, had been suspended by uncertainty. This pressure to anchor expectation in reality had become amplified by the pandemic as language programmes adapted to online formats, as lockdowns cut her off from friends and family, and as fears of illness forced them to remain at home – to *wait out* a further period of upheaval and uncertainty.

Global lockdowns and restrictions have left many of us confronted with a sudden compression of the spaces we live, work and study in. Experiences of stuckness, uncertainty and waiting may seem all-too familiar. As we wait for a

sense of ‘normalcy’ to return, we may be looking to understand what lies beyond the pandemic and how we can best prepare for that. However, as I asked in [an article for Digg Magazine](#) last year, the question is: how does the pandemic exacerbate experiences of uncertainty among those who have already been kept in liminal and transitory positions, in ways that may outlast the pandemic while others ‘return to normal’?

The collateral consequences of uncertainty are much higher among refugees in Germany, whose ability to secure long-term financial and legal security relies largely on their ability to navigate Germany’s stringent bureaucratised language-integration system. As my time revising for the B2 exam with Anisah has made strikingly clear, for many refugees in Berlin, the pandemic is not only making the future seem less knowable, but it is also making an already uncertain reality more uncertain.

[*] All names and identifying information have been changed to protect the pseudonymity of my interlocutors. This piece was written in consultation with Anisah. I am very grateful for her comments and feedback during the writing process.

Dr Leonie Schulte is a linguistic anthropologist and anthropologist of migration. She is a Postdoctoral Affiliate at the School of Anthropology and Museum of Ethnography, University of Oxford, where she has recently completed her PhD. Her doctoral thesis, *Learning to Integrate, Waiting to Belong: Language, Time and Uncertainty Among Newcomers in Germany*, examined the impacts of state-sanctioned language-integration requirements on newcomers’ socioeconomic (im)mobility. In so doing, Leonie’s work addresses the *lingua-temporal* dimensions of migration, displacement and policy-in-practice, exploring themes of temporal disruption, uncertainty, waiting, stuckness and boredom. Leonie’s ongoing work is concerned with the relationship between language proficiency requirements and newcomer access to the German labour market, exploring how underlying societal expectations for linguistic integration, as well as bureaucratic and administrative procedures, intersect with newcomers’ own decision-making and future-building.

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Coverpicture: Anisah’s desk with course materials (image taken by Anisah for the purpose of this piece).

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