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Language, integration, and investment: The regulation of diversity in the context of unemployment

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Abstract: Drawing on an ethnography in regional employment offices in a French-German canton in Switzerland, it is the aim of this article to articulate the complexities involved in the practices revolving around and geared towards the role of language competences in the process of professional reintegration, particularly so with regards to migrants who speak a different language. When comparing two cases of unemployed migrant job seekers and the variable treatment by their respective consultants, we will discuss the logics, ideologies, and discourses underlying the institutional regulation of the diverse body of unemployed migrants. We argue that in particular two discourses emerged in our fieldwork that seem to frame the variable approaches: the discourse of *integration* and the discourse of *investment*. It is in the interplay, tension, and confluence of the two discourses where “language” appears as a specific point of contestation. In other words: the consideration of language competences as productive for someone’s employability finally appears as highly variable and contingent on individual factors.

Keywords: critical sociolinguistics, integration, unemployment, labour market, language competences

1 Introduction

In a regional employment office in Fribourg, Switzerland, Mi-Cha is introduced to Mrs. Figo, a lively Portuguese woman in her early thirties, pregnant with her second child. Like many of her compatriots working in Switzerland, she has neither formal professional training nor any professional qualifications. Before registering with the unemployment services, she had been working night shifts

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in a bakery for several years. Because the quality of her family life had significantly deteriorated due to her working hours, she finally had decided to quit her job. Mrs. Figo is a vivid talker, but without formally acquired competences in French. Her personal employment consultant enrolls her in an individual language course at the level of A2 first and, after successful completion of the first course, in a B1-course.¹ In the consultant's understanding, enabling his client to attain certified language competence will broaden her playing field in the labour market, which so far has been restricted to auxiliary and "back-stage" work. Mrs. Figo is extremely enthusiastic about the opportunity provided by the unemployment services to improve her language skills at a time when she is unable to find work due to the impending birth of her second child.

In a different regional employment office, our colleague Pierre-Yves meets Mr. Kowalski in late summer.² He is a middle-aged construction worker, having migrated from Poland in the late 1990s to Switzerland after a series of work stints in other European countries. According to him, he had lost his job following an argument with his supervisor, even though he had been employed with an open-ended work contract. His consultant expects him to find employment with one of the construction companies upon the arrival of spring, at the very latest. This seasonal "cycle" is normal procedure for most construction and other "outdoor" workers on fixed-term working contracts, repeating itself on a yearly basis. To tide him over financially, Mr. Kowalski has registered with the regional employment office in the French-speaking south of the French-German bilingual canton of Fribourg in Switzerland. Short and bulky, he is an impressive appearance with his crisp tracksuit and loud voice. He talks a lot and with vigour, even if his competence in the locally dominant French language is limited.

Pierre-Yves follows him over three consultations with his personal consultant from the unemployment office (August 2013–December 2013) and witnesses the ensuing negotiations between Mr. Kowalski and his consultant regarding his efforts to find employment as well as the possibility of a "labour market

¹ These competence level descriptions (A1-C2), as proposed by the European Council, are elaborated in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp [last access: March 29 2016].

² All names and places of the participating individuals and institutions are anonymised and/or replaced with pseudonyms. The project "Access to the labour market, unemployment and language skills" was funded by the Research Centre on Multilingualism, of the University of Fribourg, and University of Teacher Education Fribourg (2013–2014; PI: Duchêne & Coray). The research team consisted of (in alphabetical order) Renata Coray, Alexandre Duchêne, Mi-Cha Flubacher, and Pierre-Yves Mauron. Pierre-Yves followed Mr. Kowalski, while Mi-Cha was the researcher who met with Mrs. Figo and her consultant.

measure” to increase his chances on the labour market.³ Over the four months, Mr. Kowalski repeatedly asks his personal consultant for a French language course with the objective of becoming more flexible on the labour market and reducing his dependence on the construction sector, which, he claims is run by the Portuguese community, and closed to outsiders. However, his consultant repeatedly denies him the participation in a language course financed by the unemployment services on the basis of the argument that Mr. Kowalski will ultimately find a job as construction worker (or in a similar field) with his existing language skills, which would render any language course superfluous (cf. Duchêne 2016 for a detailed analysis of the case of Mr. Kowalski).

When comparing these two cases and their different treatment by their respective consultants, the following questions arise: How does the Swiss state regulate its diverse unemployed population? In other words: What are the determining factors in a consultant’s decision on whether someone is entitled to a language course (or to another labour market measure for that matter)? What discourses and ideologies become evident in such decisions and in the negotiations leading up to them? It is in this array of questions that “language” appears as a specific point of contestation: Variability emerges related to the consideration of language competences as productive for someone’s employability. Continuing from this empirical approach, it is the aim of this article to grasp and articulate the complexities involved in the practices revolving around and geared towards the role of languages in the process of professional reintegration, i. e. finding work again, particularly so with regards to migrants who speak a different language.

Seeing the questions mentioned above as emblematic, we will position ourselves in a critical sociolinguistic tradition and follow the lead of researchers such as Heller (2002), Boutet and Heller (2007), or Duchêne (2008), who see language as a potential site for the reproduction of inequality – oftentimes with language functioning as a proxy for a whole different set of socio-political interests. In this vein, we will argue that this discursive complex of professional reintegration (or: economic integration) and the role of language therein is part and parcel of broader socio- and economic-political practices and policies that might have less to do with “integration” purposes than with economic strategies related to the needs of the labour market. This points to an enlarged understanding of “integration” as encompassing a variety of facets and ascriptions. We will tease out the interdependence of two particular discourses that feed into the practices of the official unemployment services: the discourse of *integration* and

3 “Labour market measures” (French: “mesures du marché du travail”, German: “arbeitsmarktliche Massnahmen”) are an official instrument of Swiss labour market policy.

the discourse of *investment*. We will see how these two discourses serve and reproduce different ideologies revolving around language competence in the practices of the unemployment services.

On the one hand, the discourse of integration reinforces the hegemonic idea that competence in the local language is indispensable for an individual's (professional) integration; on the other, the discourse of investment informs practices to operate according to cost-benefit analyses and results in the assignment (or not) of language courses – in other words, the discourse of investment entails the valuation of what is considered a necessary vs. unnecessary investment. While the co-existence of these discourses might seem somewhat contradictory at first, we will show how they function complementarily, coming together in regulating the diversity of Switzerland's foreign work force. Finally, it is our argument that the negotiation regarding the importance of language skills comes to be the crystallization point of this very regulation. However, before turning to the data and its analysis, we will introduce the theoretical underpinnings, political economic background of the study as well as the data and methodology.

2 The variable invocation of language competence in migration and labour market policies

Discourses on the importance of language for the process of social and professional integration have become commonplace in different parts of the world, but especially so in Western Europe. This discursive development has materialized in policies and practices leading to the infusing of migration policy measures with different forms of language testing. Pre-entry requirements, integration contracts, residence permits and naturalization procedures are increasingly made dependent on the successful passing of tests at specific levels in the language of the “host” country (cf. on this development: Adami and Leclercq 2012; Extra et al. 2009; Hogan-Brun et al. 2009; Van Oers et al. 2010; Slade and Möllering 2010).

The increased focus in these migration policies on language competence have to be seen in the light of monolingual ideologies referring back to Herderian ideals of “one nation, one people, one language” (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Hobsbawm 1992), in which a “monoglot standard” (Silverstein 1996) serves as the point of social and cultural reference (Blommaert and Verschueren 1998), and thus, as a denominator of “us” versus “the other”. Against this backdrop, it is argued that proficiency in the local language is essential for integration, social cohesion, and,

finally, social mobility (Allan 2013; Flubacher 2014). Yet, linguistic requirements serve as gate-keeping strategies, limiting access to the country for “undesirable” migrants (Michalowski 2010; Milani 2008; Piller 2001; Plutzar 2010; Pochon-Berger and Lenz 2014). The institutional categorization of migrants into “desirable” and “undesirable” groups is based on an estimation of their contribution to the economy, as shall be elaborated below in a specific context in Switzerland. The needs of the labour market (or the political estimation thereof) play a prevalent role in regulating the diversity in terms of access, and residence and work permits, all the while framing it in migration/integration policy terms.

Switzerland’s entry regulation policy illustrates the variability of the role of language competence in terms of migration/integration and labour market policies: Depending on the estimated contribution of a “migrant” to the Swiss economy, certain requirements are made redundant (for example, language competence) that are usually considered in order to decide about someone’s entry (and, further down the road about residence and work permits), resulting in far-reaching processes of categorization with regard to the newly arrived: In some cases, language mastery is invoked in relation to integration concerns; in other cases (i. e. for highly qualified migrants from so called “third countries”), they do not figure as an integrative concern at all.⁴ Citizens of the European Union (EU) are free to enter Switzerland due to bilateral agreements and cannot be obliged to attend any integration or language course. While this is often considered an impasse by politicians and integration organisations alike, this completely changes in the case of unemployment. In this instance, the benefits can be made contingent on the compliance of the unemployed with “measures” deemed appropriate by their consultants, for example an integration and language course.

These so-called “labour market measures” are designed to test the “placeability” (motivation, capability and reliance) of the unemployed, and to improve their employability.⁵ While some of the measures are veritable “occupation programmes” (for the lowly qualified unemployed) or internships (for the more highly qualified), there are also a variety of courses provided and paid for by the unemployment services. Most commonly, courses in job application strategies are prescribed, closely followed by language courses. These encompass courses

4 Cf. Art. 23 “Personal Requirements” in the law on the foreign population (“Federal Act on Foreign Nationals”, SR/classified compilation 142.20).

5 The labour market measures are regulated in the Law on unemployment insurance and insolvency compensation, in Art. 59–72 and in its ordinance, in Art. 81–90 (original name of the law in French “Loi fédérale sur l’assurance-chômage obligatoire et l’indemnité en cas d’insolvabilité”: and in German: “Bundesgesetz über die obligatorische Arbeitslosenversicherung und die Insolvenzent-schädigung”, SR 837.0).

for allophone Swiss or migrants in the locally official language and courses in other (national or international) languages. So while in the whole of Switzerland, in 2010 80 million Swiss Francs were spent on courses on job application strategies (and similar measures), language courses comprised expenses of almost 55 million (Semadeni 2012: 12). The “popularity” of prescribing language courses undoubtedly relates back to the ideology that languages are considered to be key skills for finding new employment (e. g. Spescha 2006), which persists even if the results of several quantitative econometric studies have questioned the effective integration effect of language courses for professional reintegration (Gerfin and Lechner 2000; Lalive d’Epinay and Zweimüller 2000; Marti and Osterwalder 2006).

At any rate, language courses for the unemployed are normally granted up to a certain competence level only (i. e. A2/B1), as is stated in an internal regulation of the unemployment services (unless a future employer explicitly makes a work contract contingent on the acquisition of a higher language competence level). This regulation raises certain questions relating to the role of language as an integrative factor. The targeted, and thus the “threshold” competences are envisaged to be rather low to mid-level (A0-B1) for non-qualified migrants. However, as we have seen with the example of Mr. Kowalski, even rather low competence levels are deemed sufficient for finding a job. This points to a variability in the realisation of the discursive dogma “immigrants need to learn the local language to get a job”, depending on the needs of the labour market (or its conceptualisation by the unemployment services). So even if EU-citizens can (be forced to) attend integrative language courses in the course of their unemployment, not everyone is automatically enrolled in such measures. The question thus arises how the difference and diversity of the various “unemployed” subjects is imagined, negotiated, and regulated.

3 The regional employment offices as ethnographic terrain in the bilingual canton of Fribourg

Over the course of half a year, our research team at the Institute of Multilingualism, Fribourg, followed, as participant observers, the (bi-) monthly meetings of unemployed people with their counsellors in three different so-called “regional employment offices” (English translation, hereafter REOs; original name in French: “Office regional de placement” and in German: “Regionales Arbeitsvermittlungszentrum”)

of the canton of Fribourg. These REOs are the official regulatory body of the Swiss state, supporting its diverse unemployed (foreign and native) population in the reintegration process into the labour market through financial benefits and measures. While the REOs are embedded in a national legal framework (the law on unemployment insurance, cf. footnote 5), their management falls under cantonal authority. Hence, reintegration strategies are decided upon by the cantonal labour market authority, which can take into account idiosyncratic local political economic conditions (e. g., the political orientation of cantonal governments, the relevance of the different economic sectors, regional unemployment rates and the composition of the canton's unemployed population). Before we turn to the data and methodology of our research project on which this contribution is drawing, we will first discuss the local conditions.

3.1 Unemployment policies and practices of the canton Fribourg

The canton of Fribourg has its own law on employment and labour market, which is in force since October 2010 (original name in French: “Loi sur l’emploi et le marché du travail” and in German: „Gesetz über die Beschäftigung und den Arbeitsmarkt“). The law marks an explicit effort of the canton to regulate its reintegration processes and to position itself as a responsible actor on the national scene. In a similar vein, the canton of Fribourg, or rather: the head of the section “Unemployment” of the cantonal Office for Labour, has streamlined its processes and installed a new strategy for the prescription of labour market measures and the use of the budget allocated to the canton by the Swiss government, based on the cantonal unemployment rate. At any rate, the canton's unemployment numbers are below the national average: according to the numbers from the Office for Labour for March 2016, the unemployment rate for Fribourg amounted to 2.6%, while the Swiss rate reached 3%.⁶ As a result, this canton is often presented as a role model by the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), which is the national body in charge of providing the legal, political and administrative framework for the REOs.

The REOs (about 130 in the whole of Switzerland in 2014) have only existed since 1995, as a result of a reform of the unemployment insurance, when it was decided to standardise and professionalise the unemployment services in Switzerland on a national level (cf. Erb 2010; Magnin 2005). The institutionalisation

⁶ Online publication of the numbers by the Office for labour: http://www.fr.ch/spe/de/pub/wirtschaft_gesellschaft/statistiques.htm [last access: 21 March 2016].

of the REOs and, especially, the drafting and implementation of the law on unemployment, have to be read in a historical perspective. While unemployment insurance had existed since the 1920s, it became obligatory only in 1977 (Degen 1993) as an attempt of the Swiss state to counter the negative effects of the increasing economic crises of the twentieth century. As Switzerland had always relied on a temporary migrant work force, it had been possible to mitigate economic crises by “exporting” these workers back to their country of origin when they lost their jobs (Piguet 2013). However, with new agreements between Switzerland and “sending” countries, such as Italy, and with new residence status policies in place from the 1970s onwards, the migrant workers had to be included in the efforts and benefits of the unemployment services (Degen 1993). As a later reaction to the repeated economic crises of the 1990s and growing structural unemployment, the SECO changed its paradigm towards an “activation policy” (Curti and Geiger 1998; Ferro-Luzzi et al. 2003; Lechner et al. 2004; Magnin 2005), as recommended by the OECD (Magnin 2004), meaning that the unemployed are required to be engaged in their job search (a minimum of applications per month which have to be documented and presented to the consultant), attend any labour market measures deemed necessary by the consultant and accept any reasonable job offered through the REOs. The unemployed people are thus inscribed in a logic of “rights and duties”, and sanctioned if they do not comply.

Among the negotiations taking place in the bi-monthly consultations (on average), language competences are a constant undercurrent – especially so in the French-German bilingual context of Fribourg (with 63% French- vs 29% German-speakers, according to the Census 2000). In the REOs, written correspondence with clients is possible only in the three official languages (German, French, and Italian), which includes forms, information brochures, flyers, and other documentation, as decreed by the SECO. In terms of consultations, language practices vary depending on the language competence of the consultants and clients and (cantonal) in-house regulations, with no institutional interpretation services.

3.2 Fieldwork in the REOs: data and methodology

With these political economic conditions and their historical transformations in mind, we considered the REOs to be a site where the implementation of policies materialize in the interaction between the consultants and their unemployed clients. In other words, it was the overall aim of our fieldwork to understand why, at what point, and for whom language becomes negotiated and foregrounded (or not) as a key element for professional reintegration. On the basis of this understanding, we were granted access to three REOs in

Fribourg; one in the cantonal capital, one in the north, and one in the south of the canton, which showed us the different linguistic and economic conditions across the cantonal territory. We participated in the meetings of a total of 30 unemployed Swiss (7) and migrants (23) with their consultants (all meetings were protocolled and digitally audio-recorded). In addition, we interviewed all participating consultants (9) and as many unemployed as possible (a total of 20). Furthermore, we met with experts and actors involved in national and cantonal labour market policies (e. g. labour market measures) to make sense of the broader implications and constraints of the practices of the cantonal unemployment centres and their consultants. Finally, we participated as observers in a series of language-related labour market measures. Adding on to this, we amassed a large amount of field-notes, official forms, documents, and photos, which, in combination, inform the following analysis of the discourses that shape the regulation of diversity in the context of unemployment services in the canton of Fribourg in Switzerland.

In our contribution, we thus draw on an in-depth qualitative analysis of institutional processes and their individual manifestations (cf. also Duchêne et al. 2015), based on a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995; Zimmermann 2016) that is informed by a critical sociolinguistic perspective (Codó 2008; Duchêne et al. 2013) and Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault 1969, 1971), which departs from the idea that discourses never appear or exist at random, but have clear political-economic functions and shape what is said and how. Finally, in presenting excerpts from interviews with a variety of experts and consultants, and excerpts from consultations, we will trace the two discourses of integration and investment. Indeed, we argue that these two discourses inform the practice of the REOs and are variably invoked – or refuted – in explanations of decisions regarding clients' access to language courses. Their co-existence has a particular function in that they become contrastive positions against which certain institutional practices can be legitimized, such as prompting unemployed immigrants to comply with certain measures or to deny them such labour market measures (cf. for a different case study Conter 2011). Ultimately, these practices are inscribed in the regulation of diversity.

4 Discourses of integration and investment in the regulation of diversity

As elaborated in the introduction, the discourse of integration is based on the dogma that proficiency in the local language(s) is necessary for migrants to

function in the “host” society on a daily basis, i. e. for social, political and economic integration. It is thus the common sense discourse that without language skills, these migrants will (have to) lead a life in a parallel society where they are in danger of becoming dependent on the state and its social services; hence, they will become a problem for society unless they master the local language (cf. Flubacher 2014). While we question this broad societal discourse, it is not the aim of this paper to deconstruct it as such, but rather to analyse its co-occurrence with the institutionally emerging discourse of investment, which is infused with the logics of the unemployment service as an insurance that employs cost-benefit analyses.

4.1 The discourse of integration

In the context of the REOs, the discourse of integration results in different language-related practices. In the following first excerpt, a REO director argues for imparting basic knowledge in the local language (French) to unemployed immigrants with the goal for them to be able to properly perform their work tasks.

Excerpt 1: Work related language courses

Interview with Director REO3:

dès que nous on suit les dossiers on se rend compte / que (-) la langue n'est pas suffisante pour trouver un travail \ y faut faire quelque chose supplémentaire sans devoir devenir (-) Bilingue ou PARfaite connaissance de la langue / mais un minimum il faut quand même euh avoir (-) euh surtout que ben \ voilà / à un moment donné sur la place de travail s'il arrive pas comprendre ce qu'on lui dit il risque de perdre son emploi très vite/ [okay \] parce qu'il comprend pas les consignes ou des choses comme ça / ouais ouais \

*English translation from French*⁷

*as soon as we follow the dossiers we realize / that (-) the language isn't enough to find work \ something extra has to be done without having to become (-) Bilingual or PERFect knowledge of the language / but a minimum you still need to erm have (-) erm especially well \ at one point at work if he can't understand what he is being told he risks losing his job very quickly / [okay \] because he doesn't understand the instructions or things like that / yes yes *

As we can see in his formulations, his language-related concern goes beyond accessing the labour market in anticipating their performance at work: “at one point at work if he can't understand what he is being told he risks losing his job

⁷ Translations of the excerpts were provided by the authors. For transcription conventions see the Annex.

very quickly”. Language instructions thus need to focus on what is expected of a worker in his daily routine, framing integration in this sense as primarily professional.

A second practice of the discourse of integration emerging in the interviews follows the first argument in that the prescription of lower level language courses is aligned with the very idea of promoting integration. In the following excerpt, a personal consultant recounts a discussion she had with a colleague on the obligation of the unemployment insurance (therefore of the REO as the executing institution) to provide language courses for newly arrived migrants.

Excerpt 2: Basic language courses

Interview with Personal Consultant 5 (PC5):

- PC5: j'avais un de mes collègues qui disait justement que les cours de langues devraient être / (-) enlevés /
 INT1: ah oui /
 PC5: parce que c'est pas au chômage de donner des cours de langues /
 INT1: m=h
 PC5: alors on avait une discussion là-dessus où moi je disais oui mais les bases de français / pour des gens qui arrivent / ils ont quand même à apprendre

English translation from French

- PC5: *i had one of my colleagues who said precisely that the language courses should be / (-) stopped*
 INT1: *ah yes /*
 PC5: *because it's not up to the unemployment to give language courses /*
 INT1: *m=h*
 PC5: *so we had a discussion about this where i said yes but the bases of french / for the people who arrive / they still have to learn /*

Thus, despite the on-going discussion as to which federal department should be asked to finance these courses, the necessity of such courses seems uncontested. After all, the colleague did not question the use of the courses either, according to the personal consultant, but rather the responsibility of the “unemployment”, i. e. unemployment insurance and its administering agencies.

Nonetheless, the third instance of the discourse of integration frames the REOs as involved in the integration of the foreign population. For instance, this materializes in a SECO decree for the exclusive use of the three official Swiss languages (German, French, and Italian) for any form of external communication of the REOs, as mentioned above. As a result, official information, brochures,

letters and forms are available in these languages, with language and communication practices depending on the respective cantonal policies. Thus, an allophone person will most likely have to organize a translator to fill out the diverse forms and to comprehend the letters, invitations and decrees sent to them. What the REOs in Fribourg offer to people without knowledge in either German, French or Italian, are models of the registration form in the most current foreign languages. However, as the director of another REO explains, this linguistic service is as far as it gets:

Excerpt 3: “Integrative” language policy

Interview with Director REO1:

mais euh là où le SECO est quand-même très attentif c'est de pas non plus euh trop pousser ce système puisque l'idée quand-même en termes d'intégration c'est d'amener les gens à parler une de trois langues officielles du pays \ si on maintient les gens dans leurs langues (-) ça risque de leur poser des problèmes

English translation from French

but erm there where the SECO is still very attentive is neither to push this system too much because it is still the idea in terms of integration to lead the people to speak one of the three official languages of the country \ if the people are kept in their own language (-) this risks to cause problems for them

The director legitimizes the practice of pushing the national languages, as is common practice also in other administrative offices, as helping the clients to advance their language acquisition. Rather than acknowledging the potentially exclusive aspect of this practice in creating linguistic and, hence, institutional barriers, it is presented in integrative terms: “if people are kept in their own language this risks to cause problems for them”, alluding both to the aforementioned common-sensical idea that their access to the labour market will be restricted without language competences, as well as to the hazardous creation of a “parallel society”, in which migrants live without rather than within mainstream society. In the end, the interpretation of linguistic integration as a broader social issue rather than directly connected to the labour market, as apparent in Excerpts 2 and 3, finally also allows the consultants to deflect the responsibility to other institutions than the unemployment services and to distance themselves from tasks expected, e. g., of social workers in the field of integration.

We can summarize that the discourse of integration materialises in specific practices which in turn index a particular image of whoever would be in need of integrative language measures: low-qualified migrants. It is this discourse then that leads to the financing and granting of specific language courses for this target group (e. g., language courses with an integration framework). At the same time, there is a complementary discourse that emerges in the REO practice simultaneously, i. e. the discourse of investment.

4.2 The discourse of investment

As stated above, the unemployment insurance is obligatory for employees, financed jointly by employers and employees with monthly payments of 1.1% each of the gross salary.⁸ In case of unemployment, anyone has the right to register with the regional employment office, upon which their eligibility to receive unemployment benefits will be verified. Right from the beginning, e. g. in the mandatory information event for the newly registered unemployed, it is made explicit to them that it is their duty to minimize the risk of remaining unemployed and, hence, to reduce the costs incurring to the state from their unemployment. For the unemployed, this means that they are expected to lower expectations with regards to salary or work position and to accept any job offer deemed acceptable by the consultant. Further, on the basis of the logic of cost-benefit, the assignment of labour market measures are decided upon that will maintain or optimize the employability of a person in question – irrelevant the national background or residence status of that person, i. e., including Swiss, EU and third country citizens. It is this logic of cost-benefit that underlies the discourse of investment and determines the question of to whom a language course is granted or not.

In the following excerpt, the implementation of this logic becomes manifest with Personal Consultant 3 arguing for the granting of an individual private language course:

Excerpt 4: Cost-benefit as legitimation

Interview with Personal Consultant 3:

und nachher wenn ihr en kurs gebed für 3000 franken / das isch nid emal en drittel vom äh / vom äh monatliche äh taggeld / wo sie beziehnd oder / (-) und wenn das nachher uf äh / äh vier fuf monat hochrechnet / ebe zum bispiel bi de dame i han zehh monat grechnet / nach vier monat han i sie / nach vier monat han ich sie dusse gha \

English translation from Swiss-German

And then when you give a course for 3000 francs / that's not even a third of erm/of erm monthly erm allowances / that they get or / (-) and when you then gross up this erm / erm to four five months / exactly for example for this lady i estimated ten months / after four months i had her out “ \ ”

Basically he argues that even though the course cost 3000 Swiss Francs, in the long run he saved money. In his original assessment she would have needed about ten months to find a new job, but now, thanks to the investment in a language course she actually managed to get a job after four months only, hence saving the REO six months of benefits. This is also the justification he provided

⁸ As regulated in the Law on unemployment, Art. 3.

his boss, who had previously admonished him for granting access to too many language courses. It seems that it is not a coincidence that he did not invoke the discourse of integration in this case, but resorted to the discourse of investment: His client was a highly qualified woman with an English-speaking background, who needed B2 certification in French for her new work contract.

The discourse of investment, however, does not only occur in the context of highly qualified people, which could have served as an explanation of why certain courses are granted to a certain stratum of unemployed people rather than others. Mrs. Figo seems to present an unusual case: she has no qualifications to speak of, but is extremely motivated. Hence, her consultant (again, Personal Consultant 3) decides it is a good investment to assign a language course to her so she can be employed, for example, in sales rather than in night shift production of a bakery. He emphasizes that he only assigns language courses to people who he knows will profit and who are motivated:

Excerpt 5: Profit and motivation

Interview with Personal Consultant 3:

i tus wirkli nume dene lüt gä / woni weiss / di (-) di wärde au profitiere \ di (-) di sind au motiviert \

English translation from Swiss-German

i really only give it to those people / where i know they (-) they will profit \ they (-) they are also motivated “ \ ”

Not only is she highly motivated, however. She was, in fact, highly pregnant, thus not able to find a job. As her consultant agreed on the impossibility of her getting hired in such a state, he decided to make the best out of the situation and to grant her a language course. In a way, then, he “rewarded” her motivation by granting a language course, which would have most probably not happened had she not been pregnant, all the while upholding the mantra that “le travail prime sur tout” (translation from French: work takes precedence over anything else). Further, insisting that he would not grant a course to just anyone, especially not to construction workers employed within groups of compatriots, we are reminded of Mr. Kowalski and we come to realize that “integration” becomes highly variable as a concept and inextricably contingent to ideas of investment. This also becomes evident in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 6: Employability as contingency

Interview with Head Unemployment:

quelqu'un qui ne maîtrise pas bien la langue n'est pas quelqu'un à qui on va forcément payer un cours de langues(...) si on estime que ça n'a pas de conséquences pour

l'employabilité (...) le but de chômage n'est pas de former les gens à un niveau linguistique euh standard

Translation from French

someone who doesn't speak the language well isn't someone for whom we'll necessarily pay a language course (...) if we figure that it doesn't have consequences for the employability (...) the goal of unemployment isn't to bring the people up to a linguistic standard level

In this excerpt, the Head of Unemployment relativizes the necessity of language instruction to anyone who might not be competent in the local language – the relevant decisive factor for the REOs and their consultants remains the estimate if the investment in a language course would increase the person's chances on the labour market, i. e. their employability. Consequently, Mr. Kowalski's several vain requests for language instruction are legitimized on the grounds of his employability. As his re-employment on a construction site appears to be a question of timing rather, his consultant refuses to grant a language course, which, from this perspective, would be an unnecessary investment (and, thus, acting according to the cantonal strategy for labour market measures, which lists language courses only as second priority after occupation programmes and courses in job application strategies). The following excerpt shows his line of argument:

Excerpt 7: No automatism for language courses

Consultation of Mr. Kowalski with Personal Consultant 8 (speaking):

alors ce qu'y a / c'est comme ça \ on va pas automatiquement vous donner un cours de français / [NON /] parce QUE je vais être sincère avec vous / monsieur kowalski jusqu'à présent ça vous a pas empêché de trouver un travail \ [ouais \] vous voyez si maintenant / euh il est clair que vous aviez jamais pu travailler parce qu'on vous dit toujours vous parlez pas assez bien le français / le chômage tout de suite on devrait vous payer un cours de français parce que ça améliorerait cette possibilité-là \ d'accord /

English translation from French

so what there is / it's like that \ we will not automatically give you a french course / [NO /] because i will be sincere with you/mister kowalski/until now this hasn't kept you from finding work \ [yes \] you see if now / erm it's clear that you never couldn't work because you were always told you couldn't speak french well enough / the unemployment immediately would have to pay you a french course because that would improve this possibility \ alright /

The consultant thus estimates that Mr. Kowalski will find work again without having to improve his French. Only if Mr. Kowalski had been confronted with the requirement of better competence for a specific job, would he be granted a course. What happens then with Mr. Kowalski is the following: In September, the consultant sends him to an “occupation programme”, in accordance with the cantonal strategy. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Kowalski finds a temporary job for a few weeks and, since work takes precedence, he drops out of the programme. In his ensuing consultation in

December, he again asks for a language course. Now, his temporary job is becoming a problem in this respect. First of all, it is yet another proof to the consultant that Mr. Kowalski will find another job without having to improve his language competences. Secondly, since he had dropped out of the occupation programme due to a temporary contract, he now should go back to the occupation programme (for three months), after which he might finally visit a language course – if still unemployed. In a way, then, Mr. Kowalski is “punished” for being able to work in the meantime.

Several consultants have recounted the practice of “testing” the employability of a client on the labour market before potentially investing in filling certain gaps, e. g. linguistic ones. In the end, the consultants are the administrators of the unemployment insurance and are in charge of keeping the incurring costs at a minimum. Finally, the discourse of investment and the insurance logic results in a variabilization of competences deemed necessary, including linguistic ones, according to the needs of the labour market or rather: how these needs are conceptualized by the consultants. A union secretary formulates this principle in general terms:

Excerpt 8: Principle of capital

Interview with union secretary:

mir düen jo nid nach dr soziale (erwünschtheit) unseri gsellschaft organisiere sondern nach em kapitalprinzip und vo däm här (-) und halt döt investiere wo de am meiste gäld widr usehole chasch

English translation from Swiss German

it isn't according to societal desirability that we organize our society but rather to the principle of capital and therefore (-) invest there where you can get the most money out of

The union secretary claims that profit and the principle of capital, i. e., investment, does not only rule the process of professional reintegration, but economy and society in general. It is on these grounds that he problematizes the current practice:

Excerpt 9: Import rather than investment

Interview with union secretary:

jo aso ebe ich mein ich persönlich ich dänk jetzt au zum bispil es wird au nid investiert in die lüt odr wenn jetz öbber irgendwann mol \ mit äh \ jo ab 50 irgendwie dänkt me okay chumm s bringt jo au nüm odr so odr \ me duet halt lieber ähm: irgendwie fachkräft wo scho fertig usbildet sin importiere / as as wirklich in die lüt investiere zum si dört ane z bringe ((klopft auf den Tisch))

English translation from Swiss German

yes well exactly i mean i personally i also think for instance investments aren't made into people or when someone \ with erm \ well from 50 on somehow you think okay come on it's

no more use or so \ it is preferred to erm: somehow import specialists who are already fully trained / rather than really invest in people in order to bring them there ((knocks on table))

While he criticizes the practice of importing foreign specialists rather than investing in the local workforce, this is actually common practice for non-specialists, non-qualified workers recruited directly on-site, e. g. in Portugal.⁹ At the same time, several interlocutors expressed the importance of quickly adapting to the “needs” of the labour market, which would ultimately necessitate such “imports”. The Head of Labour Market Measures, a special department of the REO in charge of designing and managing the diverse measures, agreed that it was the ultimate goal of his department to be more attuned to the labour market in the future (French original: “à l’avenir ce qui est important c’est de se rapprocher du marché du travail”). Language, in this respect, becomes a variable factor in the labour market, since hardly anyone “imported” speaks neither German nor French.

5 Conclusion or the regulation of diversity

In conclusion, the practices of the unemployment services as executed in the REOs highlight the necessity of the state to regulate its diverse population in accordance with the (perceived and changing) necessities of the labour market. In this process, both the discourse of integration and the discourse of investment co-occur, gaining precedence depending on the individual situation and the risk estimation incurring to the unemployment insurance. There are several questions that arise and warrant consideration: What is the function of the two discourses? And what is at stake for the unemployed migrants?

With regards to the discursive functions, the discourse of investment appears to legitimize economist practices that include considerations of profitability and calculations of cost-benefit. As the REOs are inscribed in the logic of an insurance, the main maxim lies in the minimization of costs, which, in the end, amounts to saving taxpayers’ money. Yet, while the discourse of integration fuses with the discourse of investment in terms of educating migrants to conform to work duties, the investment on the side of the unemployment services does not foresee social mobility. This would necessitate better conditions of

⁹ It is still unclear how the positive vote on the national initiative for the curbing of “mass immigration” (9 February 2014) will affect migration policies and their regulations and requirements. What can be expected, however, is an even clearer and stricter categorization of migrants applying for entry into “desired” and “non-desired” according to political economic conceptualizations of the labour market.

employment, which, again, is oftentimes coupled with demands of higher qualifications and/or higher language competences. The institutional discourse of investment furthermore forecloses broader issues connected to societal conceptualizations of “language and integration”, deflecting the (financial) responsibility away from the REOs to other governmental institutions and organisations, e. g., to the ones in charge of education and/or integration.

When it comes to the consequences for migrants, the decision making process of consultants on whether to sponsor a language course or any other labour market measure oscillates precisely between the discourse of integration and investment. While competences in the local language (mostly French, in the case of bilingual Fribourg) are constructed as indispensable in the former discourse, the latter relativizes the relevance of language competences in invoking the principle of employability. The tension between these two discourses emphasizes the variability regarding language competences as *the* condition for the access to the labour market. Finally, it is left to the consultants and their superiors to decide whether a language course is deemed necessary for the professional reintegration of an unemployed person registered with the REOs. With the accommodation to the needs of the economy as the driving force behind the practices of the REO and their consultants, migrants are thus categorized as either investment-worthy or integration-needy.

In the end, then, it is the discourse of investment that makes it possible to politically legitimize *not* to invest in language courses for non-qualified migrants. Consultants discursively weigh the costs of a language course against the expected outcome, i. e. its financial and societal benefit. One could thus argue that while “integrative” measures are paid for in order to provide the conditions for a smooth functioning of work places as well as of the officially Swiss multilingual state and its institutions (since for example no interpretation services are provided by the unemployment service and documents are available only in the three official Swiss languages: German, French, and Italian), these migrants are kept in a specific social stratum, as Mr. Kowalski had come to learn in his fruitless negotiations with his consultant. Mrs. Figo, on the other hand, was given a chance to attend French lessons and thus switch occupational positions from back-stage to, hopefully, more front-stage work, due to her pregnancy and obliging consultant. Her example, as untypical as it might seem, emblematically highlights the variability of how the diverse body of unemployed job-seekers is regulated, all the while remaining in the prescribed framework of the unemployed services as chartered by the two discourses. In this interplay, then, between the discourse of integration and investment, negotiations occur, – which, in turn, materialise in the variability attributed to language competences. Language, ultimately, remains a variable on the site of

which the needs of the labour market are conceptualized. Migrants might thus be integrated in the labour market, but with different prices to pay – by the REO, but especially by the unemployed themselves.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

[]	simultaneous speech
=	unfinished utterance
(·), (–), (–)	short, medium, long pause
(2)	duration of pause longer than 1 second
CAP	emphasis
/	rising intonation
\	falling intonation
(...)	omitted passage
((xxx))	action by speaker

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