The German You Need to Know: Language Learning and Temporal Uncertainty Among Newcomers in Berlin

Leonie Schulte, University of Oxford

Abstract:

What happens when we require newcomers to learn a country's dominant language before they can work, study and become citizens?

At first blush, this may seem beneficial for newcomers and local communities alike. In fact, language proficiency requirements across Europe are often treated as innocuous components of broader immigration policies. However, recent scholarship in linguistic anthropology and related fields has demonstrated that such policies can, in practice, turn into significant sociocultural and economic barriers for newcomers. Understanding the impact of language requirements in the German context is particularly pressing: language learning is so central to German immigration and citizenship policy that it has become a core branch of a nationwide *'Integration Program'*. Since 2014, Germany has granted asylum to over 1.1 million displaced people. Five years on, over 800,000 remain in Germany, most of whom are still seeking employment. How these nationwide programs impact the everyday lived experiences and socioeconomic (im)mobility of newcomers in Germany is, however, largely underresearched.

Based on 15 months of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork within Berlin's state-funded language and integration programs for adult newcomers, this paper argues that although these programmes are designed to *accelerate* newcomers' socioeconomic incorporation, in practice they significantly *delay* their access to work, higher education and a sense of inclusion. What is more, in part because of the *slowing* effect these programmes have on their sense of progress, newcomers to Germany encounter *temporal disruptions*, which lead to acute experiences of stalling, sudden acceleration and temporal uncertainty. These findings contribute to enhancing our as yet limited understanding of the ways in which language is enmeshed in the temporal dimensions of migration and displacement, how policy-making impinges on experiences of temporal disruption, and what we can learn about newcomers' positions of (un)belonging from their experiences of time.