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Language learning through an intersectional lens: Gender, migrant status, and gain in symbolic capital for Syrian refugee women in Turkey

https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2020-0035

Abstract: This paper sheds light on Syrian refugee women’s negotiation strategies in language learning classrooms and in their broader social contexts from an intersectional perspective. Drawing on in-depth interviews and focus groups complemented by participatory observation in language classes, we use a post-structuralist approach to examine gendered language socialization. Our research combines an intersectional framework and a Bourdieuian perspective on symbolic capital to show how women perform gender and negotiate their roles in classrooms, within families and vis-à-vis the host society. The findings demonstrate that being a woman and a migrant presents particular challenges in learning language. At the same time, learning language allows for the re-negotiation of gender relations and power dynamics. We find that gender structures women’s access to linguistic resources and interactional opportunities as they perform language under social pressure to conform to prescribed roles as mothers, wives and virtuous, and shy women. Yet, these roles are not static: gender roles are also reconstituted in the process of language learning and gaining symbolic capital.

Keywords: gender, language, refugee, socialization, power, intersectionality, symbolic capital

1 Introduction

“The most difficult thing about living in Turkey is the language … Of course, the children learn in school, but what about the people who are not in school? How can

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we learn?” Like most Syrian women in Istanbul, 45-year-old Manal felt that language learning was extremely important for daily life and relationships with neighbours. The inability to speak Turkish has been identified by Syrian women as one of their most significant challenges along with access to housing and employment (UN Women 2018). Yet, despite their willingness to learn, the majority have not been able to do so. Lack of language ability makes women more dependent on their husbands and sometimes on their children, who pick up the language quickly and become translators for their families. Language education for migrants has long been on the agenda of policy makers in Europe and North America and has been a focus of significant academic study. Several studies have shown that language mastery facilitates access to services and the labour market while also increasing social acceptance among host communities. However, more research is needed on the learning experiences of women refugees like Manal in non-English speaking countries (Menard-Warwick et al. 2014) and outside of Europe and North America.

Turkey is a suitable place to explore refugee women’s learning as the country is currently hosting 3.6 million Syrians1 who have fled violence in the hopes of making a new home abroad. Refugees face many challenges due to their struggles to make ends meet in Turkey, mental and physical illness, and sometimes a lack of education and limited literacy in their native language. Language is identified in many reports as a key issue with regard to accessing healthcare (Cloeters and Osseiran 2019), education (Hohberger 2018), and employment (IYF 2018), especially among women (UN Women 2018). Recently, the Turkish government, with the help of humanitarian agencies, has started to provide language education opportunities. This paper sheds light on the intersectional challenges (Crenshaw 1989) that Syrian women face as migrants and women, showing how gender and migrant positions intersect to influence language learning strategies and how gender roles and relations are both reinforced and also reshaped through the learning process.

Importantly, we adopt a holistic approach that enables us to move beyond simplistic categories of patriarchy or “migrant culture,” vulnerability or resilience, to examine dynamic power negotiations. We show the complex power relations at play as women interact with the dominant Turkish society and members of their own community. In learning language, they acquire symbolic capital, which they then use to negotiate their belonging in Turkish society, maintain positive affiliations in the Syrian community, and perform their roles and identities as mothers, wives, and neighbours. By employing an intersectional approach, we go beyond most studies on language socialization of migrants to examine how gender and migrant status intersect and therefore

compound inequalities, while determining dispositions, learning outcomes, and eventually even new social roles.

The next section provides an overview of current research on gender, migration, intersectionality, and language learning. Then, we outline how we study the language socialization process and gender role negotiations among Syrian women in Istanbul. The next section provides information about the national context and the legal, material, and social situation of Syrian refugee women in Turkey. Then, we discuss our sample and method for conducting research with migrants. Next, we present our findings by looking at intersectionality in the following ways: The first two sections outline how gendered expectations and migrant positionality intersect, while both helping and also hindering learning. Specifically, we explore how women’s roles as mothers and wives within their families, on the one hand, and their roles as virtuous and shy women within the classroom, on the other, are influenced by their migrant status. We show how this, in turn, impacts on their language learning. The third section demonstrates how language learning translates into the reconfiguration of gender and migrant power dynamics within three important social contexts: families, migrant communities, and vis-à-vis the host society. The final section of the paper explores the broader implications of this research for other migrant groups and for theorizing gender and language acquisition.

2 Gendered language learning in a migration context

Drawing from feminist theory and gender studies, we view gender as socially and culturally constructed, learned, performed and contested (Wade and Ferree 2015). Gender is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler 2014: 24). As such, the compulsion to perform gender is collectively imposed. Gender roles and identities migrate with individuals, but also change depending on the host country context (Freedman 2016; Freedman et al. 2018; Lutz 2010; Timmerman et al. 2018; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014). Nuanced contextual studies of migrant women’s experiences are needed to understand how gender identities constitute specific fields of negotiation and power struggles.

Like gender, migrant identities are also socially constructed and have been shown to affect individual behaviour and subsequent actions and outcomes (McAreavey 2017). The way in which migrant identities are applied or enacted give migrants a particular status, which in turn impacts the way in which individuals position themselves in the host society and thus their identity. This means that the structural power of societal stereotypes about migrants is important, even where
they are rejected (Bourdieu 1984). These different identities, of gender and of being a migrant, intersect, and interact. Through the analytical framework of “intersectionality,” we explore how multiple categories of identity, including gender, and ethnicity may combine to create unique experiences of discrimination or oppression (Crenshaw 1989; Cho et al. 2013; West and Fenstermaker 1995). This framework allows us to widen our focus past classrooms to migrants’ homes and neighbourhoods in order to observe the dynamic interaction between gender and belonging to families, migrant communities and the host society. We touch on how these positions affect language learning, as well as on how learning reformulates these positions. The article mobilizes an intersectionality framework to attend to comparative, contextual, and complex dimensions of sociological analysis that are often neglected, even when gender and migrant status are explicitly brought together by analysts (Choo and Ferree 2010).

Intersectional studies are needed to understand how language is related to gender and migration because researchers of language 2 (L2) acquisition find “few clear-cut gender tendencies but rather variation across contexts” (Menard-Warwick et al. 2014). Scholars have shown that language learning is essential for improving the experiences of migrants (Nawyn et al. 2012). But, like all social processes, language learning is gendered, and its effects are thus not uniform (Pavlenko and Piller 2008). Studies have explored how gender affects investment in learning, classroom interactions, and the effect of patriarchal relations on access and outcomes (Menard-Warwick et al. 2014; Pavlenko 2008). Several studies have stressed the social, material, political, and historical conditions of language learning (Dagenais and Toohey 2016; Norton Peirce 1995). Yet, most work highlights the negative effects of patriarchy, which is simplistically linked to the migrants’ “traditional culture.” In reality, culture and gender effects on language learning are difficult to generalize requiring a more relational approach. Our perspective on gender aims to counter “neo-colonialist” feminist discourses about women in so-called Third World countries, which risks essentializing them as oppressed, monolithic, and fixed objects (Lamotte 2019).

Rather than a static approach to language and gender, we accord primacy to relations (Bourdieu 1998a), which enables us to see the objects under investigation in their context. This has also been called the post-structuralist approach to language. With this approach, we consider language learning as a way to negotiate a position in society. We explore the diversity and multiplicity of gendered social roles to analyse the relations of power and domination between majority and minority groups. Indeed, migrant women are subject to double domination as migrants and as women, which must be taken into account when evaluating their learning. In early L2 acquisition research, scholars sought to identify the characteristics of a “good learner.” Now, the focus is rather on identifying the power
dynamics involved in learning (Block 2003). This article goes beyond the study of how women learn to also understand how they use learning. We consider society to be a site of struggle for symbolic and material forces, and we use Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1977) to reconstruct the dialectic between structure and agency and to present how women gain symbolic capital through learning language.

We consider language socialization a productive intellectual tool to study how structural inequalities and power relationships shape processes of language learning in contexts of socio-political marginalization (García-Sánchez 2016) related to the migration experience (Baquedano-López 2001; Bhimji 2005; García-Sánchez 2014; Norton and Toohey 2011). The concept of language socialization brings attention to how socio-historical and macro-political dynamics shape interactions. It enables us to highlight the agency of subjects, by focussing on how they resist the roles that are assigned to them and renegotiate them within interactions (Baroni and Jeanneret 2008). Indeed, few studies have looked at the intersection of experiences of being a woman and a forced migrant, while also providing a comprehensive view of the experience of language learning. We view the relationship between gender and language learning as mutually constitutive; on the one hand, learner’s motivations, investments, choices, and options may be influenced by gender as a system of social relations and discursive practices. On the other hand, additional languages offer access to symbolic and material capital and resources to perform gender and sexuality differently than in their native language (Pavlenko 2002). In this vein, we examine how the linguistic, social, cultural, gender, and ethnic belonging of language learners structures access to linguistic resources and how these are constituted and reconstituted in the process of language learning and use.

3 Syrian refugees and language learning in Turkey

When the conflict in Syria began in 2011, refugees began arriving to Turkey in large numbers, and today there are more than 3.6 million. In Syria, most families upheld a gender-based division of labour, whereby men were the main breadwinners, and women were responsible for housework and raising children (UN Women 2018). Gendered labour divisions among Syrians have largely continued in Turkey, due to Syrians’ desire to maintain traditional arrangements as well as due to the fact that the jobs available to low-skilled Syrians (low-wage, informal jobs in

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construction, factories, and agriculture) are generally perceived as more appropriate for men. Access to language training is one of the primary needs of Syrian women in Turkey (Ozden and Ramadan 2019). The language barrier is reported by women to be the main problem in establishing relations with the host community, followed by discrimination and the absence of host community members nearby (UN Women 2018). To date, no studies have explored language-learning experiences for adult migrants (and particularly women) in Turkey.

Courses designed to teach “Turkish to foreigners” generally fall under the scope of the Ministry of National Education’s Department of Lifelong Learning or are offered by NGOs. They are limited and ad-hoc. In the absence of a national policy on learning Turkish, participation in these courses is left to individual initiative (Nimer and Oruc 2019). Actual attendance at language courses is low. For example, among those who could speak Turkish in the UN Women study, only one-fifth said that they have attended a Turkish language course; the vast majority noted that they have learned Turkish while communicating in their environment (UN Women 2018). The primary reason for not attending a language course was the lack of childcare services. Other reasons included not finding the courses useful, being unaware of courses, being unsure about how to register for the courses, and not having time. A few stated that their spouse did not allow them to attend (UN Women 2018). Our research confirms and adds specificity to many of these findings, which we elaborate via a post-structural theoretical framework highlighting social dynamics within the Syrian community and outside of classrooms, within families and with the host community.

4 Methodology

This research is based on ethnographic research on experiences of language learning among Syrian women through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. It also draws on interviews with state and non-state actors to explore institutional arrangements with regard to language instruction. All research was conducted in Istanbul, home to the largest number of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Fieldwork was carried out from June 2018 until June 2019. One author is an assistant professor and the other is a postdoctoral researcher; both authors, women, have positions at universities in Istanbul. In order to access the field, they obtained permission from the ministry of education, lifelong learning department, the Istanbul municipality, as well as multiple organizations. This process was facilitated by their affiliations and professional standing. This research was conducted as part of two separate broader studies.
examining different domains of Syrian refugee experiences in Turkey. The significance of gender emerged from the observations of both authors, which led to the development of the current paper. During field research, Author 1 worked with a research assistant, herself a Syrian national, while Author 2 is a native Arabic speaker. Observations were carried out in six different language centres in different areas in Istanbul including: public education centres, municipality centres, non-governmental organizations, commercial language centres, and language centres that are within universities. The selection of centres aimed to ensure diversity in terms of the social profiles of students as well as in terms of the type of institutions (i.e. public/private, state/non-state, not for profit/for profit). These observations were complemented by interviews with teachers, coordinators and students from the classroom. Observations were also made outside of the classroom, during the breaks or in social gatherings. Each location was visited multiple times. One class offered by the municipality was followed for the majority of the semester (~45 h) and five additional classes were observed intermittently (~20 h) in the other institutions. In addition to participant observation in classrooms, we carried out participant observation in homes and workplaces. Further, we conducted 64 in-depth interviews with migrants. These visits and interviews were arranged using our social networks, the contacts of the research assistant who worked with Author 1, and through contacts from the Turkish language classes observed. We aimed to achieve diversity in terms of gender, educational level, and marital status in the sample of refugees. We also conducted 31 interviews with representatives of NGOs, 27 with language centre administrators, and 10 with teachers. Interviews were audio recorded, when allowed by participants, and later transcribed. These interviews were supplemented with three focus group discussions about experiences with language learning, each with 10–15 student participants.

Interviews with refugees were conducted in Arabic and lasted on average 1 h. Interviews aimed to examine the biographies of participants, namely their lives in Syria and current experiences in Turkey, including relations with neighbours and experiences with the labour market, education, healthcare, and other institutions, as well as their perception of their language knowledge, opportunities to learn and interactions. Interviews with stakeholders were carried out in Turkish. Interviews and focus groups were analysed using the thematic method of content analysis, detecting and isolating the most recurrent themes in interviews and comparing with other interviews using NVIVO. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The next three sections explore the intersections of gender and migrant status with regard to language learning within the family, the classroom and the community.
5 Playing the mother/wife role in the family and barriers to language learning

This section examines how structural inequalities and power relations in families shape processes of language socialization based on Bourdieu’s theory of practice (1977) and focuses on learners’ motivations, investments, choices, and options. We found that women perform gender (Butler 2014) while navigating intersecting roles as mothers, wives, and members of a migrant community. The performance of gender is compounded by the status of being a migrant, which interferes with the ability to attend courses and learn the language.

Women refugees are more likely, in principle, to have time to attend language-learning courses in comparison to their male counterparts, because they are less likely to join the workforce. However, women have to employ different strategies of making time to do so, as they are often responsible for caring for their children and can only rely on themselves, as they have generally been separated from extended family due to displacement; they either have to wait until their children go to school, bring them to the course or rely on a relative or neighbour for childcare. Many women postpone learning until after their child goes to kindergarten. A young woman, Lamis, expressed her difficulty with childcare as follows:

Living here without studying the language is very difficult, but for women like me who have children, it is a problem. Going to any centre is not easy for us. For example, when I first came, my daughter was two years old. She used to cry a lot, it was impossible to take her to the class; that’s why, there should be a unit to look after the kids. Let it be paid even .... That’s why I learned at home, from television series, from songs. Then, when my daughter grew up a bit, I registered her in school, and I started to study.

Most women we met seem to have internalized their ultimate roles as mothers and the idea that motherhood is a priority at all times. Many stated that they prioritized their children’s learning over their own. For example, Abeer, a 26-year-old mother of two young children living in the district of Fatih, claimed, “I am not doing anything for myself. I didn’t learn the language or complete my studies, because I always say, ‘my children are the priority now.’ Maybe after they become older, I will focus on myself.” Many are forced to drop out of courses due to childcare obligations. An illness of someone in the family could also negatively impact women’s ability to learn, as migrant women were often rendered the main caregivers. Indeed, as migrants, most women did not have the social support (close relatives and extended family) that they might have had, had they been in Syria. Many related that most of their family members were living in a different location (sometimes even a different country) and could therefore not be relied upon for
care assistance. Their role as a woman and as a migrant thus intersects, creating hindrances to attending courses that men do not typically face. Migrants in urban contexts especially do not tend to be part of dense and close communities (Dekker and Engbersen 2012), meaning that families face additional pressure as they lack the support of co-ethnics. Furthermore, the difficult economic situation faced by migrants usually does not allow for seeking paid care.

Other types of customary family duties can also come in the way of course attendance for women. For example, one of the women in a class in Fatih arrived late and looked exhausted. During the break she explained that some relatives of her husband had come for dinner and left very late. After their departure, she had to put her daughter to sleep and take care of the cleaning of the kitchen. NGOs working with women that we spoke with often point to these “routines in their homes” as hindering women’s attendance.

Relationships with husbands can also play a role in inhibiting women’s education, as they may directly or indirectly hinder women’s access to language courses. Even a husband’s presence at home may hinder his wife from attending language courses. This was the case for a 40-year-old woman and mother of six with an 11th-grade education living in Sancaktepe. She explained that because her husband was always home, due to a health issue, and he was also not working, her movements were limited. She could not easily attend courses: “Firstly, because of the time; secondly, because my husband is not working. He stays at home, and I can’t leave him and go out.”

Although her husband may not have directly forbidden her from leaving the home, she felt that being a “good wife” required being by his side. This type of restriction came up several times, whereby women adjusted their behaviours to accommodate the demands of their family members. In Bourdieusian terms, each of the sexes integrates a habitus (conduct, judgements, habits) that are inscribed in their bodies. They thus unconsciously take part in their domination through submissive practices even in the absence of coercion (Bourdieu 1998b). In some cases, coercion might occur. For example, one national Turkish NGO reported, “Because of the situation of giving or not giving permission, women have to be extra creative. Or you have to specify that it is just a women’s place, otherwise they cannot get permission.” While it was sometimes at the demand of their husbands or other family members, often women would opt out of attending courses themselves. Again, being a migrant plays a role here as husband and wife may be relatively isolated from extended kin who could take up care and housekeeping roles and also potentially support women’s independence (Timmerman et al. 2018; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014). In sum, a variety of structural barriers and systems of power influence access to language education. In particular, roles within families strongly shape language socialization (Bourdieu 1998b). Syrian women’s
intersectional position as migrants and women compounds to create specific challenges related to class attendance.

6 Playing the “shy and virtuous” role in the classroom

Following scholars who have examined the interactional effect of gender on teaching and pointed to experiences of women’s added marginalization in comparison to host communities (Heller, 2001; Miller, 2003), in this section, we show how gender influences learning in the classroom and examine the way in which women navigate social control mechanisms within their communities. Migrants, in particular, struggle with social control, which may in some cases even lead them to distance themselves from co-ethnics (Wessendorf 2019). On the other hand, co-ethnic networks can be vital for immigrants’ survival as they are a primary source of information, social support, and economic networking (Ager and Strang 2008; Wessendorf 2019). This tension between sometimes oppressive control and the need for social support from co-ethnics can be challenging to navigate and has both positive and negative impacts on learning.

Women face challenges in language learning classrooms that men do not, namely, pressure to uphold customary norms for gender propriety, which includes performatively producing gender (Butler 2014) by not socializing with men and appearing shy. This is a key way in which control from co-ethnics is manifested (Wessendorf 2019). The implication for language learning is that women are less likely to feel comfortable participating if men are present in the classroom. Observations of classrooms showed that men and women generally sit separately, and women repeatedly expressed feeling intimidated being in a classroom with men. In every mixed class observed, women participated less than men and openly expressed dismay about their inability to participate. As students introduced themselves at the beginning of language classes, it was observed that men exuded more confidence and spoke in louder voices, while women seemed insecure and spoke more softly.

Women openly admit that this is a problem for them during interviews and when discussing with each other. For example, during a discussion between class sessions, one woman, Walaa, related, “I do not participate much, because I am shy in a mixed class. Men laugh a lot when someone makes a mistake.” Another woman, Fatma, a Turkish language student who dropped out because she struggled in her course, claimed, “I was in a class in which the students were separated
by sex, and I used to participate much more. Now, in these [mixed gender] classes I participate less.”

Some institutions offer partially gender segregated courses. One school director explained, “Syrians asked for genders to be separate. Men preferred to be alone, and women also preferred to be alone.” According to the representative of a local NGO that offers Turkish courses for women only, the participation is very good: “In women only classes, participation is very high. They even cut each other off. The teacher struggles to get them to wait for each other”.

One reason that women prefer sex-segregated courses is that they may face stigma if they are seen speaking with men in their courses. If women do not maintain an appearance of shyness, they are subjected to judgement and social policing. This, in turn, may lead them to miss out on useful interactions and social support. A 41-year-old mother of five, who was divorced and living in Sancaktepe, shared her experience of being judged by other women for interacting with men:

In the Turkish course, a lot of people told me, ‘You can’t speak with the students like this so openly. They are men.’ But I told them, ‘No, I am old. I deal with them as if they are my sons. I advise them like a mother.’ Sometimes they were calling me mother. A man was helping me a lot and visiting me. Then, people told me, ‘You shouldn’t do that.’ But really, he was like my son. I am old. But because of the gossiping, I blocked him on my phone and stopped talking with any men from the courses.

This example shows how women are under social pressure to perform certain roles of being ‘shy’ and reserved in order to be accepted by others as respectable.

The pressure that women face to uphold customary norms for gender propriety, which includes not socializing with men and an appearance of shyness, may interfere in their participation and improvement of speaking skills. However, being accepted in the community of women is also a way to develop useful ties and receive social and learning support. This was demonstrated by interactions in the course breaks. For example, before a teacher came into class on the first day to administer a proficiency exam, the women immediately started speaking in Arabic, asking each other about their experiences, sharing their knowledge about the exam, what they had prepared, and what they felt were the most useful topics. During course breaks it was observed that women shared information about which universities do not require weekly attendance so that children may be cared for, or they discussed how to use social networks for finding employment. In other words, while their gender performance negatively impacted their ability to learn in mixed gender classrooms, performing gender according to community standards also helped them to establish relationships
that mattered given their condition as migrants. Through positive co-ethnic networks they accessed information and benefited from each others’ experiences while navigating their new host country. Research has shown that during the early stages of settlement, such co-ethnic networks can be crucial for accessing vital resources and information (Cheung and Phillimore, 2013).

Women’s limited access to the public sphere (as women and as migrants) also impacts their speaking ability as compared to their male counterparts. For instance, Reem described the level of fluency of her husband as greater than her own. She explains the reason as being, “because he’s been speaking with a lot of people. He always speaks with Turkish people and has Turkish friends.” While men are most likely to be part of the labour market and interact with Turkish speakers at work, women are less likely to do so.

However, some women may be able to reach out, interact with their neighbours, and improve their Turkish skills as a result. This was the case for Nour, mentioned above, who was living in Beykoz and had a neighbour with whom she was getting along well. She reported that this neighbour would teach her when she first arrived, as she did not know about Turkish language courses: “I sat at home for one and a half years. I couldn’t do anything. I only learned from a neighbour…. Allah Razi Olsun [may God be content with her], she taught us a bit. Our neighbour used to ask a lot ‘ne’ [what], or ‘niye’ [why]; that’s how I learned.” Having common interests with people who are interested in Arabic or religion may help women to bond with locals and learn Turkish. Hoda explained her situation as follows: “In the beginning, I was staying in my house and didn’t go out so much. Then, I was going around my region to learn the language more, especially to Qur’an courses, and the people there were welcoming me.” She explained that she later formed positive relationships with neighbours: “I started with learning Turkish, and when my language became better the situation became better, because you can join a conversation with Turkish people.” Women who get along well with their neighbours are able to practise and become fluent.

In sum, women are limited in terms of the development of speaking skills due to gender socialization and the simultaneous necessity of finding belonging in their community of migrants, which helps them to confront the difficulties of rebuilding their lives in the host country in general. But, co-ethnic networks can also positively benefit learning: women find critically necessary support from co-ethnic women, which assists with their language learning. Their gender and their expected roles in the Syrian communities intersect in complex ways to affect their learning (Crenshaw 1989). The next section explores gender and migrant roles further, and instead of placing stress on conformity to social roles, we explore the
potential for transformation of social relationships in homes and neighbourhoods.

7 Reconfiguring power dynamics through language learning

While gender roles and performances strongly impact language learning, language learning, in turn, acts as symbolic capital and can re-shape relationships both between host communities and migrants and within migrant families. Thus, while the intersection of being subjected to double domination as women and as migrants inhibits learning (as we explored in the two sections above), it is also the navigation of these dominations and achievement of learning that then helps to re-configure the structures. Structure and agency are in a mutually constituted relation, and while each actor is constrained by habitus, each action is also an opportunity to re-configure the relation, if only slightly (Bourdieu 1977). Individuals resist the roles that are assigned to them and renegotiate them within interactions (Baroni and Jeanneret 2008). Reconfiguring the relation affects the process of language socialization as it relates to the migration experience (Baquedano-López 2001; Bhimji 2005; García-Sánchez 2014; Norton and Toohey 2011).

By learning how to meet their needs in language courses, women also gain skills that enable them to access other services and even work. For example, after she reached an advanced level of Turkish, Nisrine found a job at the Istanbul governorate as a translator. This job allowed her greater independence to leave the house and a sense of value from earning her own money. She explained that she felt that her Turkish was not at a high level, but it was enough for her to become a professional translator. She found the work fulfilling and “a very nice experience.” Learning the language is particularly important for women as they may be limited by Turkish and Syrian community social expectations to certain types of work in which language is essential (i.e. translators, teachers, etc.). Thus, by learning the language, women can take advantage of the (still rather limited) opportunities for employment that are available to them in their cultural context.

Women repeatedly mentioned that learning language allowed them to forge relationships with neighbours. As discussed above, Hoda explained that after she learned Turkish, her neighbours became friendlier. This point came up among several women interviewed. As such, language learning is a particularly important gain for them. For others, the issue was less about improving relations with neighbours and more about increased confidence and independence from them. A student in a language course related, “My neighbours, for instance, before I learned Turkish,
no one wanted to talk to talk to me. They said, ‘Learn the language, then come and talk to us’ [laughter in the class]. That’s why I learned a lot, but now I don’t want to talk to them. Especially with my neighbours, because when I needed them, they didn’t help me.” Language learning also allows women to choose whether or not to associate with neighbours. Thus, they achieve greater independence and autonomy, as a migrant, from the sometimes unfriendly reception of the host community.

Language mastery also seems to influence family relations, because it offers access to symbolic and material capital and resources to perform gender differently (Pavlenko 2002). Learning the language allows women to better transmit their capital to their children. In fact, the main motivation to learn Turkish for many Syrian women was to be able to help their children with their homework and to save face, as children can quickly start to speak better than their mothers. Nisrine explained,

My children go to school. To be able to help them, of course, it is very important to learn Turkish. My oldest son is in fourth grade. How can I help him? … I get embarrassed now. I studied but I don’t know. I sit like this; I look for a translator on my phone.

Women also want to interact with the school director and teachers at the schools of their children, and they want to attend parent–teacher meetings. One woman related her relief that she no longer needed to rely on her child for communication after taking a Turkish course. She said,

The situation has changed now a little bit since I started to recognize the words and understand a little when I’m out shopping. I started to learn many more new things, which helped me to solve my own issues, even when my daughter is not around!

Learning the language thus appears to constitute a gain in symbolic capital (Pavlenko 2002) which allows women to reconfigure and regain control over the family dynamics disrupted by migration. It provides resources to perform their roles as mothers, which have been negatively impacted by the fact of their being migrants in a foreign linguistic and social context.

Relationships with husbands may also change as women develop a sense of pride, superiority, and partnership through learning Turkish. In some of our interviews, women pointed out that their Turkish is becoming superior to their husband’s because they had taken language courses whereby they were able to learn grammar, unlike their husbands. For example, one student at a course offered by the municipality explained that she takes pride in correcting her husband, helping him to get by when needed. Although her husband speaks more fluently because of his exposure to the language at work, he never learned it properly. In a focus group at a school that offers language courses to mothers, a woman related the following:
We now do better than our husbands in speaking. We now tease them… We are better. We are now speaking [Turkish]. There are some words, given that my husband works, for example, in a restaurant… normal words, the words as spoken are different than what we are learning in terms of grammar. I go to my husband, what is this word? He says I don’t know it, so I say ‘I know it’… [laughs].

Being able to speak the host language better than their husbands can give them a bigger say in daily decision-making processes in some cases. Women thus resist the roles that are assigned to them and renegotiate them within interactions (Baroni and Jeanneret 2008). We observed that some can progressively become the ones to communicate with the administrators and teachers in their children’s schools, with the landlords of their apartments and with other key contact figures in the host society. This enables them to take a more active role in household management in the host country, taking on tasks they used to do in their home country and possibly even new tasks.

Additional evidence for the changing roles of wives is our finding that some husbands have increased anxiety about the roles of their wives. Some women are becoming more independent in terms of how they spend their time. For example, one group of women taking a Turkish class together at a local NGO started to organize theatre activities. They went to see a play at the Fatih Şehir Tiyatro (a local theatre) and then to Vefa Bozaci (a well-known café). According to an NGO representative, at the beginning, nobody would come to such events. They would all give excuses like “my husband, brother, or father doesn’t let me come.” With time, and as their confidence in their language ability grew, they started to attend such activities. When asked “what does your husband think?”, they now answer, “hallettim”: “I solved this.” It thus appears that the longer women attend language courses, the more they are able to start negotiating the conditions of their new lives in their host countries with their husbands. Through their involvement in the Turkish courses, they also gain access to new activities, such as watching plays in Turkish. The opinion given by the NGO mentioned above should be viewed in terms of its position as a ‘secularized’ humanitarian organization that carries a particular perception of feminism common among western elites and thus ‘representing a form of neo-colonialism’ (Ager and Ager 2015, p. 457). Nevertheless, from our own observations and discussions with women, we did find that language played a role in women being able to better negotiate their positions in families and navigate daily life in their host country. They reconfigure their relations in the process of language socialization as it relates to the migration experience (Garcia-Sánchez 2014; Norton and Toohey 2011).

In sum, Syrian women migrants are not permanently “vulnerable” and trapped in static roles or positions due to their culture or patriarchal positioning. As
they master Turkish, they transform their relations with their neighbours, children, and husbands, finding increased independence and a feeling that they are better mothers and helpful wives. Their experiences with language learning impacts host community relations not only because women can use the language to access services and work but also because women gain autonomy, confidence, and a sense of belonging through language use. Through language learning, women appear to gain symbolic capital that allows for negotiations of power relationships and changes in gender and migrant-based social conditions. In other words, women gain agency vis-à-vis patriarchal and also host community structures.

8 Conclusion

This article looks closely at Syrian women’s language learning experiences to understand how it is influenced by incorporated gendered roles and the struggles for social acceptance in the Syrian community and in the neighbourhood (host community). While most previous work focuses on migration and gender only, or alternatively, language learning and gender only, we use an intersectional framework and take up all three via a holistic account of women’s lives. We refrain from identifying straightforward effects of patriarchy or culture, but rather explore the intersections of a variety of categories of identity. We understand learners in the full context of their lives, and we find that language is not only used to negotiate new social positions, but also to maintain positive affiliations within the group of migrant women. The originality of this work lies in its fruitfulness for pointing out the dual importance of gender and migrant experiences in terms of language education practice in classrooms and communities. Further, the research addresses an important gap in our understanding of L2 acquisition processes by looking beyond classrooms and outside of North America or Europe.

We found that women face difficulties attending courses and simultaneously performing their roles as wives and mothers. Their participation in classrooms is influenced by pressure to conform to gender roles of being shy and virtuous in mixed-gender situations, as well as discomfort due their inability to practise in the public sphere. At the same time, conforming to these roles allows women to benefit from positive social support, which enhances their access to learning. In turn, language learning changes relations with the host community, increasing their autonomy and confidence, and facilitating employment. Within the family, some women take pride in correcting and guiding their husbands and manage to become less dependent on their children as translators. We argue that the study of language learning requires a comprehensive look at women’s experiences and roles and how they negotiate according to their dispositions, which also changes their
positions in their communities and families. This paper thus is a contribution to work transitioning from a focus on which types of women learn (i.e. focusing on their characteristics) to also address “the power dynamics involved in learning” (Baroni and Jeanneret 2008; Block 2003).

Our post-structuralist approach leads to the observation that refugee women language learners are individual agents, with diverse, contradictory, and dynamic goals and identities. Instead of evaluating Syrian women’s experiences solely in terms of patriarchal positioning, we present a more nuanced look at their experiences and roles. Combining Bourdieu’s approach of looking at how language can play the role of allowing for power relations to be reshaped, with attention to gender performance (Butler 2014) and an intersectionality framework (Cho et al. 2013) contributes a more precise look at the gain in symbolic capital in relation to roles, such as wife, mother, neighbour, and friend.

In a short research period, we observed women subtly resisting the domination that results from intersecting gender and migration structures. In the future, these women’s trajectories will certainly evolve depending on the geopolitical, economic, and social situations in the host country and country of origin. Therefore, further research is warranted. In particular, a longitudinal approach would enhance our understanding of the permanence of these transformations and shed light on possible additional changes to gender and social relations.

References


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