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Accommodation, empowerment and disinvestment—Typical second-language learning trajectories of Syrian refugees in Germany

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Abstract

This paper asks how refugees' second-language learning processes are embedded in their lives in host countries. To address this question, the paper proposes the concept of second-language learning trajectories. These trajectories conceptualise refugees' second-language learning as closely intertwined with learners' self-understanding, experiences and positioning in host countries. Using longitudinal narrative interview data from Syrian refugees in Germany, the paper identifies three different types of second-language learning trajectories, that is empowerment, accommodation and disinvestment. These trajectories have vastly diverse outcomes, not only in terms of second-language proficiency but also in terms of learning motivation, self-views and future prospects. Moreover, second-language learning trajectories evolve based on self-reinforcing dynamics that make switching between trajectories increasingly difficult over time. This is particularly detrimental to refugees on the disinvestment trajectory, which entails social decline and exclusion. The paper also identifies institutional regulations in Germany that compound refugees' struggles to gain a foothold in their host country.

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INTRODUCTION

When people migrate to another country, they often must learn the dominant host country language. Succeeding in this endeavour is crucial for immigrants' future in receiving countries. Studies show that host country language proficiency (i.e. second-language¹ proficiency) affects all areas of life, from labour market outcomes to self-reported health to feelings of belonging and identification (Chiswick et al., 2020; Pottie et al., 2008; Warriner, 2004). Second-language proficiency is also a matter of everyday life, as it influences opportunities to practice the new language in everyday encounters and has consequences for self-understandings and identities (Norton, 1995; Perry & Moses, 2011; van Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2009a). Factors that contribute to and hamper second-language acquisition include premigration education, age, intentions to stay, language course attendance and ties to native speakers (Beckhusen et al., 2013; Geurts & Lubbers, 2017; Hoehne & Michalowski, 2016; van Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2009b). Compared to other groups of migrants, refugees face additional challenges, some of which relate to their flight experiences, such as psychological burden or little control over the timing and direction of their mobility. Other challenges derive from macrosocial contexts in receiving countries, such as asylum processes and segregated housing (van Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2005). Thus, for refugees, second-language acquisition is even more demanding than for other groups of immigrants.

Against this backdrop, this paper asks how refugees' second-language learning processes are embedded in their lives in host countries. To unravel the complexities of this embeddedness, the paper outlines the concept of second-language learning trajectories, which puts learners' experiences in a biographical and societal context (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 1995). This approach counters the idea that second-language learning is merely an intellectual exercise (Block, 2007) or that it is basically an asset for the rational pursuit of other (e.g. professional) goals (Braun, 2010). Rather, second-language learning interweaves with refugees' lives in host countries in intricate ways. It is about the experiences developed in language courses, the opportunities to practice the new language and the feedback received from others when doing so. It is also about how learners make sense of such experiences against the backdrop of their biographies as well as the consequences for their life plans, ambitions and self-views. This sense-making depends upon and shapes, which positions refugees take in host societies and the direction of their lives. This paper aims to further our understanding of the interplay among learning experiences, self-views and social positioning of refugee second-language learners. The concept of second-language learning trajectories offers a way to explore in depth the complexities of second-language learning while grounding the analysis in the extant research. In doing so, the concept offers a way to emphasise individual experience and agency without losing sight of recurrent patterns across cases and the institutional setting in host countries.

As the following section elaborates, research on second-language proficiency is multidisciplinary and multi-methodological but falls into three strands that thus far remained isolated from each other. The theoretical section presents the concept of the second-language learning trajectory and formulates heuristic questions for the analysis. Empirically, the study draws on longitudinal data from narrative interviews with Syrian refugees in Germany. The section on research design presents the research process, sampling, methods of data collection, data preparation and multistep data analysis. The data analysis aimed to identify typical patterns across cases to construct ideal types of second-language learning trajectories. The results section tells the stories of Wael, Badia and Said and demonstrates why their stories constitute anchor cases for the disinvestment, empowerment and accommodation types of second-language learning trajectories. The final section juxtaposes these trajectories and argues that self-reinforcing dynamics contribute to their specificity and durability. The section also explicates how the study adds to different strands of literature and, potentially, to strengthening the dialogue between them.

RESEARCH ON SECOND-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Researchers have addressed migrants' second-language acquisition processes through three strands of research. In the quantitative social sciences, researchers treat second-language proficiency as a dependent variable that can be

explained by a set of variables measuring individual properties or contextual factors. With regard to individual-level factors, studies find evidence that migrants' age at migration, formal education, language course participation, engagement in multimodal learning or intention to stay long term in the host country contribute to second-language proficiency (Bernhard & Bernhard, 2022; Geurts & Lubbers, 2017; Hoehne & Michalowski, 2016). With regard to context-level factors, variables such as family and household composition and economic and educational structures in countries of origin affect language proficiency (Chiswick et al., 2005; van Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2005). To explain the observed effects, authors have based their quantitative models upon three general mechanisms of second-language acquisition (Chiswick et al., 2006; Kosyakova et al., 2022). The incentive mechanism assumes that immigrants who stand to gain more from second-language proficiency invest more in learning the host language. For example, it is rational for highly educated refugees to put in extra learning effort because they have greater income potential than less-educated refugees. The exposure mechanism postulates that immigrants' second-language exposure, such as at work or in their private lives, boosts their language proficiency. Finally, the efficiency mechanism considers differences in refugees' language learning ability and their learning strategies. Despite interest in the mechanisms that drive or impede second-language acquisition, the quantitative strand of research offers no direct access to second-language learning experiences, to the sense-making that evolves around them or to the question of how second-language learning corresponds with other spheres of learners' lives.

A second strand of research complements the first strand by addressing these questions with a qualitative methodology. Ghadi et al. (2019) show how adult Syrian refugees in Canada suffer from the multidimensional devaluation of their resources, including their linguistic capital, that is the value of their Arabic native language. These refugees' new living situations challenge long-held identifications as parents and as hardworking, deserving members of society. Other authors examine refugees' everyday second-language learning. In an ethnographic study, Perry and Moses (2011) point to TV consumption as an important informal channel for learning English among Sudanese refugees in the US. Al Masri and Abu-Ayyash (2020) identify, among other things, obstacles to everyday encounters between refugees and residents, such as segregated housing, which restrict refugees' second-language practice (*ibid*: 380). Studies also address gender-related dynamics of second-language learning within migrating families. Liversage (2009) scrutinises women's lower second-language proficiency relative to that of men and finds that the traditional division of labour hinders women's regular participation in second-language environments in and beyond work (see also Rockhill, 1987). Gordon reconstructs how Lao refugee men try to reinstate their status as head of the family by imposing lower second-language proficiency for their wives. A strength of this strand of research is that it examines the complexities and intricacies of second-language learning from learners' perspectives. Drawing on different theoretical backgrounds, such as Bourdieusian social theory, biography research and gender studies, the authors show that the acquisition of dominant host country languages makes a difference for learners' journeys through life and the sense-making that relates to it. While this strand of research is diverse, it lacks a systematic discussion of the theoretical implications of individual case studies and how they relate to the findings of other (quantitative) studies.

A third strand of research unfolds within pragmatic linguistics. Here, researchers conceive of second-language learners as embedded in multiple social realms, and, similar to the second strand, they emphasise that this embeddedness affects their language acquisition, as well as their overall lives. This understanding of second-language acquisition developed in opposition to the formerly dominant cognitivist stance of second-language acquisition theories that holds that language learning is basically about information processing and learners' personality traits (Atkinson, 2011: 3; Block, 2007). A leading figure of this 'social turn' in second-language acquisition research is Bonny Norton, who pioneered the identity approach to second-language acquisition (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 1995). This identity-centred approach references 'how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future' (Norton & McKinney, 2011: 73). Thus, language learning involves learners being deeply and inevitably, even a fortiori, in situations where neither learning nor identificational issues are explicitly at stake. Over the past few decades, numerous studies have explored the interdependencies of language learning and identity and the multiple struggles they imply (Menard-Warwick, 2004; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Warriner, 2004). In regard to research focus

and methodology, these studies are compatible qualitative studies in social sciences. However, research in pragmatic linguistics focuses on key concepts such as identity and investment and thus exhibits greater theoretical integration. The present study contributes to this strand of research by introducing the concept of learners' second-language learning trajectories and by moving from individual case studies to a typology.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION PROCESSES, SELF-CONCEPTS AND SOCIAL TRAJECTORIES

This article approaches refugees' second-language acquisition in host countries from three different angles: first, their embeddings across space (i.e. social contexts); second, their embeddings over time; and third, their embeddings in power relations (Norton, 1995, 2013). It elaborates this multi-perspectival approach by detailing guiding questions for each of these angles, which rest in theoretical concepts, orient the empirical analysis and structure the presentation of findings (Tables 1 and 3).

- a) *Embeddings across social contexts*: Learning the lingua franca in the country of refuge crucially involves refugees' identities. The understanding of 'identity' proposed in this article diverges from everyday conceptions that stress the unitary, more or less homogenous and stable nature of personality. Rather, identities are 'multiple, a site of struggle and changing over time' (Norton, 1995: 14–16). Subjectivity emerges in a variety of social sites where one identifies, for example, as a child, feminist, manager or critic (Norton, 1997: 411). To analyse such multiple embeddings in settings with others, I distinguish identifications by oneself from identifications by others

TABLE 1 Analysing refugees' second-language learning trajectories

Vantage point	Concept	Sensitises for...
Embeddings across space	Identification (relational vs. categorical, self vs. other)	Refugees' self- and other identifications in different contexts; identification in relation to friends, family members, classmates, co-workers, etc.; categorical identification as old, refugee, etc.
	Investments	Access to second-language speaking contexts and networks; (struggles over) position-taking in, for example language courses or conversations with native speakers; feelings of appropriate language use
Embeddings over time	Possible selves	Anticipation of one's opportunities in the host country; professional and private aspirations; continuity and disruption of life plans after migration; self-assessment of possible selves
	Identity work	Involvement with identificational challenges; striving to maintain a sense of sameness, uniqueness and agency by, for example accounting for perceived failures, smoothing ruptures and learning lessons
Embeddings in power relations	Biographical trajectories	Interplay of individual factors (identity work, possible selves, investment, identifications) and objective factors (position-takings, institutional regulations); efforts at resistance; location of biographical trajectories within host country's social structure

(Brubaker & Cooper, 2000: 15). Furthermore, I separate relational identifications in everyday encounters and network ties from categorical identifications by associations with attributes such as gender, race or nationality (Mozetič, 2018). These distinctions enable a set of guiding questions around the identificational positioning of refugee language learners, including the following: How do refugee learners self-identify in different contexts, and how do others identify them? What identifications do learners maintain in relation to friends, family members, classmates or co-workers? Which categories are used for identification?

Examining learners' embeddings across social contexts has consequences for studies on second-language acquisition. Learning takes place in diverse settings within and beyond the classroom, and each of these settings is potentially relevant to learners' sense of self. Whether one engages in learning is not just a function of greater or lesser motivation but a result of complex processes: 'In this view, learners can be highly motivated to learn a language, but may not necessarily be *invested* in the language practices of a given classroom if its practices are, for example, racist or sexist' (Darvin & Norton, 2018: 2). One's *investment* in a particular setting results from sometimes ambivalent inclinations to engage with (speak, listen to, write) a language and one's socially structured opportunities to do so (Norton & McKinney, 2011: 75; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). The notion of investment thus binds together language acquisition, learners' context-specific identifications and relations of power (Bourdieu, 1992). It highlights questions of access to second-language speaking contexts and networks and of struggles over the right to speak and be heard in diverse contexts. Who takes which speaking positions in which settings? When does it feel appropriate for a second-language learner to speak (with an accent), and when does it not? How can one gain access to networks of native speakers to practice the target language?

- b) *Embeddings over time*: Refugees' second-language learning processes are sensitive to both past experiences and possible futures. They depend on the possibilities refugees anticipate for themselves in host countries, such as the positions they want to fill, the opportunities they see and the obstacles they perceive. According to Markus and Nurius (1986), possible selves represent 'individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming' (ibid: 954). Images of the self in imagined futures can be more or less realistic and colourfully spelled out. Possible selves, as vivid and plural imaginations, may orient individuals towards aspired-to possible selves and away from feared possible selves, and they may serve as benchmarks for current and future achievements. Such imaginations of futures play into second-language learning processes (Dörnyei, 2009). The concept of possible selves directs attention to the following issues of refugees' second-language learning: What possible futures do refugees see for themselves in receiving countries, and what role does language proficiency play in these futures? Were these life plans revised after migration, and do these plans continue or break from plans devised earlier in their countries of origin? To what extent do refugees assess their language progress against the benchmark of ambitions and fears enshrined in their possible selves?

People seek to create a sense of unity in the face of diverse identificational embeddings across time and space. This identity work revolves around the question 'Who am I?' and is concerned with maintaining a sense of sameness, uniqueness and agency in confronting multiple, conflictual and changing identifications throughout one's life course (Bamberg, 2011). It includes 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising [one's] identities' (Nardon et al., 2021: 4). Identity work does not offset multiple identifications in different contexts, but it leads to self-views and self-representations that are less fractured and tensioned and more coherent than lived experiences across time and space. Frictions and tensions abound in the lives of refugee second-language learners. When engaging in identity work, refugee learners convey accounts that smooth contradictions and explain failures or stress consistencies. Narrative interviews such as those undertaken for this study (see the section on research design) are arenas for this kind of account-giving. This study scrutinises learners' life stories for identity work, what they judge as their language learning failures and successes, and how they deal with tensions across time and space, biographical ruptures and identity threats. It asks how these experiences feed into their overall self-views.

c) *Embeddings in power relations*: The third angle on refugees' second-language acquisition processes examines learners' embeddings in power relations constituted by (language) ideologies and unequal access to, distribution of and uses of resources (i.e. economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital, Bourdieu, 1986; Norton, 1995). Rather than analysing the workings of power in specialised large-scale relational constellations (social fields) or 'societies' (social spaces), this study focuses on the biographical trajectories of refugees as newcomers to an established social configuration. Refugees' biographical trajectories evolve from consecutive position-taking in different settings (in the asylum system, personal networks, labour markets, language courses, etc.), which are structured by institutions in host countries. The third angle gives rise to questions centred on the interplay of individual and contextual factors in the lives of second-language learners. How do refugees' identity work, collections of possible selves and self-views affect their trajectories in the host country? Conversely, to what extent do trajectories impact refugees' self-views, identity work and collections of possible selves? How are refugees' biographical trajectories positioned in the overall social structures of the receiving country? Finally, in what ways do refugees resist the forces of power relations? Table 1 presents an overview of the key concepts and questions that guide the analysis of refugees' second-language learning.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study relies on data from the project 'Networks of integration? An explorative study on the arrival processes of refugees in Germany' (Bernhard & Röhrer, 2020), which was conducted at the Institute for Employment Research in Nuremberg, Germany (IAB) from January 2017 to December 2020. The overarching aim of the project was to capture refugees' experiences while building a new life in the host country. Since the study focused on medium- and long-term arrival processes, it predominantly included participants with official refugee status or another status with a mid- or long-term residence perspective. A first wave of narrative-biographical network interviews took place in 2017 and 2018 with 42 mostly Syrian refugees who had moved to a major German city between 2014 and 2016. Participants were recruited through different channels, such as international cafés, circular emails or—in the case of harder to reach populations, such as illiterate or traumatised persons—with the help of social workers and volunteers. Based on a typology derived from the analysis of these interviews, 15 Syrian refugees were asked to participate again in a second wave of interviews in 2020. Table 2 presents an overview of the sample of the two waves. In both samples, men and less-educated and younger migrants are overrepresented compared to the resident population. These characteristics are similar to those of the overall group of Syrian refugees in Germany (Brücker et al., 2020). In the first wave, approximately half of the interviews required translators, and the other half were conducted mostly in German or, sometimes, English. In the second wave, the share of Arabic interviews decreased slightly. Despite the coronavirus pandemic, all second-wave interviews except one were undertaken in person in university seminar rooms.

The narrative-biographical network interviews consisted of two parts. In the first part of the interview, an initial biographical stimulus invited the participants to talk extensively and freely about their lives since their arrival in Germany. This stimulus generated narratives that touched upon various aspects of the respondents' professional and private lives. To dig deeper, the interview guideline provided follow-up questions on second-language learning (e.g. learning ambitions, language course experiences and results, learning strategies, everyday second-language use, learning obstacles and support), professional issues (e.g. work experiences and job searching) and everyday life (e.g. life during the COVID-19 pandemic and discrimination experiences). In the second part of the interview, the focus was on personal networks and how they were used to secure different kinds of social support, such as help with job searches, emotional support or companionship (Marin & Hampton, 2007). Respondents were then asked to arrange the names of their supporters on a large empty sheet of paper, during which time they could elaborate further on their relations with their supporters, relations among their supporters and more general issues such as subgroups

TABLE 2 Sample description

Characteristic	1st wave (n = 42)	2nd wave (n = 15)
Sex		
Female	16	5
Male	26	10
Age		
24 or younger	14	2
25–34	19	9
35 or older	9	4
Prior education		
No schooling/primary education	8	3
Lower or upper secondary education	28	8
Higher education	6	4
Country of origin		
Syria	34	15
Iran, Iraq or Eritrea	8	0
Family lives nearby		
Yes	19	7
No	23	8
Interview language		
German	19	9
English	4	0
Arabic	19	6

among their contacts or German-speaking residents they had met. In this part of the interview, respondents were also asked whether and with whom they regularly spoke German.

The findings of the study emerged from multiple steps of analysis *across cases* and *within cases*. (a) The data analysis built on the transcription of all interviews from both waves. The transcription of the audio data to text allowed for an *initial coding* of the data according to a coding scheme, which combined deductive categories derived from the interview guideline with inductive categories derived from the interview texts (Charmaz, 2014; Mayring, 2000). The coding structured the data across cases and made individual text passages accessible for further analysis. (b) To complement the coding with a more case-sensitive approach, the author devised structured *case synopses*. For each respondent, these synopses contained condensed information on different topics (e.g. language learning, labour market experiences or support networks). In this way, case-specific patterns, sequences of biographical experiences and interdependencies between different spheres of life emerged.

(c) Cross-case coding and within-case synopses fed into the construction of a *provisional typology of cases*. This typology considered characteristics beyond second-language learning, such as the respondents' family situations, traumatic experiences or professional ambitions in the host country. (d) Concomitantly, a team of researchers² performed *in-depth narrative identity analysis* (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Deppermann, 2013) of selected interview passages. The in-depth analysis not only yielded insights into the interweaving of learners' identifications with biographical experiences but also was instructive for finding similarities and differences between cases. (e) *Case vignettes* on refugees' second-language acquisition integrated the information from analytical steps a to d and asked the guiding questions presented in Table 1 about each case. (f) The *typology of second-language acquisition trajectories*

TABLE 3 Refugees' second-language learning trajectories

Vantage point	Disinvestment	Empowerment	Accommodation
Embeddings across contexts	Language course investment frustrated; no everyday use; no language bridging ties; B1 level or lower; feeling of social exclusion	Motivating language course experiences; self-reliant extracurricular learning; early integration in German-speaking networks; C1 level or higher	Regular language use; continued self-motivated learning; medium level (B1); identification with host country
Embeddings across time	Self-perception as a failure; lacking future orientation around possible selves; conditional II possible selves; identification (as head of family and male bread winner) threatened	Virtuous circle: positive self-dynamics guided by ambitious possible selves; continuing career trajectory; overcoming refugee status; optional blending in	Second-language learning problems, but no generalised self-doubt; former (possible) selves no longer a benchmark; alternative (e.g. familial) identification as a self-resource
Embeddings in power relations	Challenging overall life situations; second-language non-acquisition as iron ceiling; marginalisation in unskilled labour or unemployment; voicelessness	In higher education or qualified jobs; prioritising professional career over private objectives; seizing opportunities and rights in host society	Revising earlier professional plans; objective social decline not experienced as problematic; renormalisation of life as objective and as a yardstick

presented in the following section was derived from systematic comparisons and abstractions of these case vignettes and the underlying analytical procedures (Kluge, 2000; Stapley et al., 2021).

FINDINGS

Syrian refugees find themselves in an extremely challenging biographical phase when arriving in Germany. Even though their lives are no longer immediately threatened and even though the most exhausting and dangerous part of their flight lies behind them, they nevertheless enter an eventful stage of life that sets the course for their future. The tasks ahead include handling the asylum process, learning a new language, finding work and (re)establishing personal ties to people in their home and host countries, to name but a few challenges. Given the substantial investment they have made in their flight and the devaluation of their economic, social and cultural capital in their host countries (Becker & Ferrara, 2019), refugees typically have few resources at hand to grapple with these challenges. Moreover, and importantly for the present study, the institutions of receiving countries deeply structure their lives. Among the pertinent institutions are those related to the asylum system (including housing in refugee camps and recognition processes), residence status (including restrictions on family reunification and freedom of movement), second-language learning (including obligatory language courses for refugees), the welfare system (including activation measures) and labour market participation (including language requirements and the recognition of professional experience) (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019).

The 'German-first imperative' emerges as an essential component that affects the lives of incoming refugees. This imperative holds that refugees (and other migrants) should first and foremost engage in learning German. Diverse institutional regulations maintain this imperative, most prominently language requirements for citizenship, for the acknowledgement of foreign qualifications (Sommer, 2021) and for access to qualified jobs, vocational training and higher education. Furthermore, the obligatory language course infrastructure suggests that language learning

should proceed rather quickly and steadily through successive language courses from basic proficiency (levels A1 and A2 according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages³) to intermediate (B1, B2) and then to advanced language proficiency (C1, C2). Respondents report how representatives of the host society as well as volunteers, residents and friends reiterate and amplify the institutionalised German-first imperative in everyday encounters in the street, administrative appointments or other occasions. As the following paragraphs show, refugees' language learning experiences and their biographical trajectories are inevitably entangled with host countries' institutional regulations and imperatives. This entanglement brings about the typical biographical patterns of disinvestment, accommodation and empowerment. The remainder of the empirical section exemplifies each of these types with an anchor case and then elaborates how these anchor cases represent key dimensions and dynamics of the respective type.

Disinvestment

When Wael left Syria, he hoped that the future would hold more for him than the war and destitution he knew in his home country. In fact, he dreamed of building a career in a northern European country. Given that he enjoyed 12 years of school, had a university degree, and was fluent in English, ambitious and still relatively young (in his early 30s), his prospects were good. However, things did not go as planned: The German police 'captured' him and prevented his onwards journey to his target country. At first, he expected to resume his journey at some point in the future, but as time passed, he came to realise that he was stuck in Germany and would never reach his destination in northern Europe. This realisation shocked him. He started learning German but never made it beyond the B1 level, a fact that still bothered him at the time of the study. In both of his English interviews for this study, he felt a strong need to account for what he perceived as his failure to learn German. He talked about his problems memorising new words, demotivating language course experiences and his futile efforts to converse with German-speaking residents. In an attempt to explain his language learning problems, he continually referred to his age, arguing that he knew no one older than 30 who had passed a B2 German test. Moreover, he stated that he probably 'never truly accepted the German language' because he did not originally plan to stay in Germany. In other words, the necessity of learning German symbolised his failure to realise his original life plans. Consequently, he disinvested in learning German despite his assessment that the language was 'essential to get into [the] host society'.

Wael's German learning experiences had far-reaching consequences for his life in Germany. They affected who he thought he was and who he could be in the future. His original future plans of a career abroad functioned as a benchmark against which he measured his achievements and found them wanting. Whereas others were proud to have reached the B1 level, he saw nothing but failure. Admittedly, since in Germany access to higher education and qualified jobs regularly presupposes B2 or C1 certificates, these options were no longer an option, nor were the possible selves that involved pursuing a career in Europe. For the time being, Wael worked 'just a little bit', as he put it somewhat derogatorily, in unqualified, short-time jobs. What made his situation even more desperate was his conviction that he was too old to learn the language to the extent necessary. Moreover, Wael did not develop alternative motivating plans for the future that could prompt a reinvestment in second-language learning. Particularly in the second interview, Wael conveyed the impression of someone who had lost not only his confidence but also his imagination. Instead, he reverted to what could be called 'conditional II possible selves', dwelling on what he could have done if only he were younger or had made it to his target country. Five years after first setting foot in Germany, Wael found himself between a rock and a hard place, realising that long-held possible selves were no longer realistic and lacking alternative visions to guide his way to a better future.

Wael's life course is characteristic of the disinvestment trajectory of second-language acquisition. In this trajectory, refugees start learning German with confidence and drive. However, they experience repeated frustration regarding their investments in both language courses and the real world. Some—like Wael—feel that language courses proceed too fast and have no regard for slower learners. Others, particularly those with little schooling experience,

struggle with the classroom experience in general. In Saed's case, the teacher actually encouraged him to leave the language course, saying that his participation 'wouldn't make sense anyway'. Tellingly, Saed accepted his teacher's identification and incorporated it into his own self-assessment. Experiences outside the classroom can be equally frustrating. Despite countless efforts, including addressing people in the streets, visiting language tandem events or joining a volunteer fire company, the respondents on the disinvestment trajectory had not built lasting relationships with German-speaking residents, with the exception of occasional contact with volunteers. They also reported difficult life situations that prevented effective learning, such as sharing a room with multiple family members, having depressive symptoms or being caught up in family problems. Discouraged by their experiences and anticipating future non-achievement, the respondents disinvested from German contexts and learning opportunities.

These disinvestments from language learning went hand in hand with marginalised economic and social positioning. All respondents on the disinvestment trajectory depended on welfare and either had problems finding a job or were working in a temporary unskilled job. In Badar's case, a series of unfortunate circumstances even led him to rely on a homeless shelter, which the former prospective student desperately tried to leave by finding any job possible. However, even having a job can be problematic when working conditions are bad or violate labour law. Respondents told stories of employers who demanded unpaid overtime, health-damaging working conditions and toxic work environments. Additionally, unskilled jobs often do not promise German language practice and contact with Germans. Wael gave a vivid account of his surprise when he realised on his first day as kitchen help that every one of his colleagues except the kitchen chef was also Arabic speaking. Such unskilled jobs render refugees literally voiceless, reducing them to bodies performing dull tasks and draining their time and energy that could be used to resist their voicelessness by reengaging in learning the dominant (and only accepted) language. Such jobs prevent reinvestment in language learning and can become dead ends in the highly exclusive institutional setting of the German labour market and education system.

Empowerment

Badia was a young Syrian woman who arrived with her brother and parents in Germany. In the beginning, she felt overwhelmed and almost paralysed by life in a new country, but she soon began taking on new responsibilities, particularly for her parents, and became determined to face what lay ahead of her. She reverted to her long-term plan to study engineering in Germany, and knowing that she needed fluency in German to enrol at a university, she began learning the language. At first, she used YouTube videos, a German radio channel and an illustrated dictionary that an acquaintance had given her. As her German improved, she began reading German novels and watching subtitled German movies. As soon as she could, she began attending language courses, where she made swift progress until she finally met the language requirements to study at a German university (C1 level). In the meantime, she completed several internships to improve her language proficiency and to gain entry into the labour market. Badia was one of the respondents who conducted both interviews for the present study in German. By the time of her second interview, she was about to complete her bachelor's degree as a biologist, a subject she chose after not obtaining a position in the engineering programme. Despite her attainments, her ambitions remained high in terms of both her profession and her German skills. Beyond being able to navigate the language, she wanted to master it, with all its intricacies and peculiarities. Nothing symbolised her dedication and determination more than a small diary that she carried to write down new words and phrases she encountered in the course of the day.

For Badia, second-language learning, social positioning and identification were positively related. Her experience with language courses was important in this respect. Through these courses, she not only received self-confirmation by passing successive language level tests but also found the language classes highly supportive, and she used these classes as an opportunity to relate to several classmates and one of her teachers. In fact, her ability to build bridges to residents became apparent soon after she arrived in Germany. These contacts gave her the opportunity to practice German long before she became a student. Once she had enrolled at the university, she entered a predominantly

German-speaking context, which made it even easier for her to make new German-speaking friends. Therefore, by the time of the second interview, using German was a natural experience for her. Moreover, entering university put her on a track where her refugee experience was no longer her predominant characteristic. Indeed, when she talked about her future professional plans, she dwelled upon which master's degree she would study and how she resembled other students who were German-speaking natives. The 'status passage' (Glaser & Straus, 2009) from refugee to student, which built on her second-language learning achievements, put her in a favourable social position. While she could not follow her original plan to study engineering, she stood before a collection of future possible selves, including the idea of securing a joint work/study contract in one of the large German firms as a stepping stone to her further career. To Badia, her professional future was wide open and promising.

Respondents following the empowerment trajectory stood out due to their excellent language proficiency, early integration in (vocational or higher) education and bonds with native-speaking residents. Their second-language learning success fed into a virtuous circle: Ambitious possible selves drove extensive learning investment (inside and outside the classroom) that produced positive feedback (e.g. passing language tests), which reinforced the initial ambitions for their future in their host country. In Salah's case, this virtuous circle was condensed during a small showdown with one of his language course teachers. Since he missed part of the language course, his teacher doubted that he would pass the final exam and advised him to wait for a later course. However, Salah insisted on participating, was finally admitted to the course and eventually passed the exam with the top score in the class. This was an experience that he carried with him, and he readily described it in the research interview to show his mettle. In this way, he demonstrated how positive language learning feedback becomes a self-resource. Additionally, his anecdote demonstrated that access to speaking positions can be a struggle in the true sense of the term. As language proficiency improves and refugees proceed into German-speaking networks, qualified jobs and (vocational or higher) education systems, language learning becomes less significant, and language use becomes more regular (Valenta, 2010). This shift signifies the upwards status passage away from refugee status, which, in the first phase after immigration in Germany, permeated all areas of the refugees' lives, from public perception and living conditions to civic and political rights. For those following the empowerment trajectory, this passage marked the beginning of their real future.

Moreover, German language proficiency gave 'empowered' respondents a voice in their host country and, alternatively, the possibility to evade othering as 'foreign' and 'refugee'. Sabah, for example, relied on her language proficiency when she had an unpleasant encounter in the clothing store where she previously worked. One day, she asked a colleague to explain a German word she did not know. Instead of answering, the colleague mocked her in front of several customers, suggesting that she was stupid. At first, she was surprised and incapable of reacting, but the next day, she asked the store manager to set up a clarifying discussion about the incident. Language proficiency can also be used to invisibilise one's refugee history, as Nadima's story shows. Similar to Badia, Nadima learned German rapidly to pursue her dream of studying medicine 1 day. Biding time before she could enter medical school, she studied social work for a few semesters. From the beginning of her studies, she had no problem connecting with her fellow students, but she was somewhat taken aback that many saw her as a poor, suffering refugee. Frustrated by this victimising othering, she decided to keep her refugee experience a secret when starting her medical studies of the following year. Her plan worked; since her German was fluent, her fellow medicine students categorised her as a German-born Turk, sparing her from well-intended but undesired questions and comments regarding her flight experience. Such identificational struggles attest to the omnipresence of othering in Germany and demonstrate how language proficiency can serve respondents' need to react to and, if necessary, resist (discriminatory or benevolent) othering.

Accommodation

With his university degree, a reputable job, a wife and two children, Said was well established in Syria. He proudly described his advancement from a peasant's son to someone who lived in a large house and had an orchard and a car.

However, the war forced him and his family to flee to Germany, where they successfully applied for asylum in 2015. Looking around the new country, he realised that many things were different in Germany. Thankful for the help 'from Germany' and fascinated by its political system and civic freedom, he decided to 'integrate' and become a valuable member of his new country. Said eagerly attended the obligatory language courses, bearing in mind that 'everyone'—volunteers, prospective employers, officials in the administration and other refugees—told him that language proficiency would be a key component of his life in the new country. His learning efforts and resourceful attempts to practice German in his everyday life took him to level B1, but never beyond. Realising that without a C1 certificate he could never work in his learned profession, Said made new plans, first looking for work 'even' on an assembly line and then reorienting towards vocational training in the public transport sector. At the time of the second research interview, he was about to finish his training and already had concrete ideas for his professional future. He planned to first obtain work experience with one employer and then switch to another employer who, according to his information, paid better and offered more benefits.

Said's second-language learning experiences and the way he dealt with them shaped his path in Germany. Certainly, he had several frustrating learning experiences. Most importantly, despite his high initial ambitions, he never made it past the B1 level in German, and he gave up the expectation that he ever would. Said also readily acknowledged that he was a rather slow learner and that 'everything new' regarding language learning took time. Instead of giving up, however, he developed new possible selves in light of his restricted choice of professional pathways in Germany. When thinking of his future job in the transport sector, he envisioned himself re-established as the family's male breadwinner and a model for his sons. The capacity and willingness to adapt to his changing life situation were essential resources for his positioning in the host country, and they accompanied the fact that Said drew energy from his identification within the core family. He did not allow setbacks in second-language learning to compromise his roles as father and husband or to frustrate his aspirations altogether. Instead, he used second-language learning as a resource to enact his role as head of the family: After arriving in the new country, he asked his children to speak German with him for a few minutes every day during dinner, telling them that they needed to learn the language of their new country. Throughout his stay in Germany, he abided by this routine even though his children eventually became fluent German speakers. This routine gave him the opportunity to act as the head of the family and lead the others.

Salam's case was typical of the accommodating biographical trajectory. In this case, years of flight and lengthy asylum procedures nurtured an overwhelming need to lead a 'normal life' again. Respondents following this trajectory had progressed considerably towards their objectives and made important personal decisions regarding, for example, family reunions, housing, language acquisition and ideas for their professional future. They also shared considerable professional restrictions due to their low certified language proficiency. Nevertheless, these respondents were content with their achievements and had found a path that seemed worth following. Compared to the respondents' social positioning in Syria, these trajectories may be considered social decline—in one case, an engineer retrained as a train driver, and in another case, a teacher worked as a bus driver—but unlike those following the marginalised trajectory, those who followed the accommodation trajectory did not take their earlier social positions and possible selves as a benchmark for evaluating their current situation and outlook. Moreover, they nurtured private (often family-based) identifications beyond the professional realm, which then became resources for positive self-views in the face of frustrations related to second-language learning and professional aspirations. This compartmentalisation of second-language learning experiences provided motivation to continue moderately paced second-language learning. For those following the accommodation trajectory, this investment was not primarily directed at earning a higher language certificate; rather, these individuals expressed their intention to build a life in Germany for themselves and their families.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article asked how second-language acquisition was embedded in the lives of refugees in their host countries. It introduced the concept of second-language learning trajectories and developed different angles and sensitising

concepts to study these trajectories (see Table 1). To investigate the second-language learning of Syrian refugees in Germany, the paper identified typical trajectories of learners' (dis)investment within and outside language courses, their identity work and their social positioning over time. Table 3 offers an overview of the biographical trajectories of disinvestment, empowerment and accommodation.

The three biographical trajectories rest on inner dynamics that keep learners on 'their' track. Those following the empowerment and accommodation trajectories participate in something that could be called a second-language normalisation spiral: The more proficient learners on these trajectories are, the more they move into German-speaking contexts, study in German or engage in everyday small talk in German. Language acquisition becomes a way to fend off identity threats and re-establish identities previously cultivated in their home countries (Ghadi et al., 2019). Importantly, language proficiency and use, identification and position-taking as students and colleagues work together to stabilise this passage. For those on the disinvestment trajectory, the dynamics take learners in a different direction: they live below the 'language threshold' (Liversage, 2009), have little or no contact with local residents, lose their sense of self-efficacy and are excluded from work for which they are otherwise qualified. The greater their feelings of disappointment and social isolation, socioeconomic marginalisation and anticipation of failure, the more difficult it becomes for the disinvested to break away from this marginalisation spiral and regain control over their lives. These normalising and marginalising spirals do not deprive learners of their agency, nor do they inevitably determine their future. However, they point to the fact that under certain conditions, second-language acquisition and use can become easier or more onerous with time. In the empirical sample of this study, there were few switches between second-language learning trajectories once learners had taken one of the three typical pathways. To grasp such dynamics, we need a framework that conceptualises refugees' second-language learning as part and parcel of learners' lives in the host country.

The experiences refugee learners reported in their narratives raise doubts about the effectiveness of the obligatory second-language course system in Germany. The courses are supposed to help learners reach a language level that enables their participation in everyday situations within and outside work. As the present study shows, the courses regularly do not achieve this aim, and they even play a significant role in learners' withdrawal from second-language learning. Both the disinvestment and accommodation trajectories yield frustrating language course experiences and regularly make it difficult for learners to identify positively within the classroom setting. The language course experiences of these individuals stand in stark contrast to those following the empowerment trajectory, who find the course setting stimulating, the teachers supportive and their investments in language courses profitable. Moreover, their course experiences interact positively with their outside lives, including their elaborate learning strategies, their contact with Germans and their position-taking in the labour market or educational system. The differences between the three trajectories point to an urgent need for institutional reform (Hou & Beiser, 2006): Language courses should be reconfigured so that they invite all learners, not only the best pupils in class, to continue their investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Given that accommodated and disinvested refugees abandoned second-language learning despite the disadvantages it entailed, reinvestment in second-language acquisition should be encouraged and facilitated, first and foremost by offering free repeated language certificate tests and free tailored language courses for returners and, second, by exempting learners from activation measures in job centres.

The findings of the present study contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms of second-language acquisition that quantitative researchers use to make sense of their observations (van Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2009b). According to incentive mechanisms, learning effort results from rational considerations of one's earning potential in the host country. In line with this assumption, studies find positive effects of education and the intention to stay in the host country on second-language proficiency (van Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2009a). However, as the cases above demonstrate, the motivation for second-language learning depends crucially on access to and experiences in diverse second-language settings in and outside the classroom (see also Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2018). Moreover, the present study shows that learning experiences affect learners' self-understandings and their imagination of their future. In other words, the motivation to learn a second language is not an invariable precondition but rather a result of learning processes.

The exposure mechanism maintains a positive effect of second-language exposure on second-language proficiency. While this association is well established (Chiswick et al., 2020), the question is how and why some learners manage to obtain more second-language exposure than others. The second-language learning trajectories identified above point to differences in refugees' access to German-speaking contexts as well as differences in positioning in the host society that yield vastly different levels of exposure to the German language along the trajectories of disinvestment, empowerment and accommodation. Third, the learning mechanism establishes effective learning strategies as a driving force of second-language acquisition (Kosyakova et al., 2022). However, this mechanism bypasses the pivotal question of what causes differences in learning strategies. The above case analyses show that numerous factors thwart effective learning strategies, such as growing self-doubt, traumatisation and seemingly mundane things, such as a lack of a desk where one can learn in peace. Overall, the three learning mechanisms point to relevant factors of second-language acquisition, but they lack an explanation of how these factors figure in complex and enduring processes of second-language learning that revolve around learners' experiences and social embeddings in host societies.

The study also contributes to linguistic and qualitative research on second-language acquisition. It constructs ideal typical trajectories by systematically looking for recurrent patterns across cases. In so doing, it abstracts from individual experiences without abstracting from experiences per se. Rather, the ideal typical trajectories stay true to the learners' perspectives, with all their richness and immediacy. While refugees' learning experiences are highly diverse and complex, there are also cross-case patterns that allow groupings of individual cases into different types. Throughout the research process, guiding questions directed attention to embeddings of second-language learning that proved relevant in the extant research, such as self-identifications and context-specific learning investments. Furthermore, by including larger discursive and institutional structures of the host country, the study takes linguistic power analysis one step further. From the outset, Syrians acquire German in a setting that (forcefully and inevitably) assigns them a marginalising refugee status, which relegates them to a rather inflexible and selective system of German language courses and tests and conditions their participation in the host country on the progress made in that system. This macrosocial setup invigorates positive and negative feedback loops between language proficiency, language exposure and social positioning that align refugees to one of the three learning trajectories.

Future research could compare the second-language learning trajectories of different groups of migrants in different host countries to advance our understanding of the contextual factors that encourage and impede second-language acquisition processes. Another promising venue would be to combine qualitative and quantitative strands of research. Such a dialogue could help to enhance the mechanism model (e.g. its interaction with contextual factors), identify new variables for quantitative models (e.g. regarding learners' networks) and strengthen modelling techniques (e.g. by pointing to potential interaction effects). For the former, such a dialogue could encourage researchers to include additional aspects in their analysis (e.g. intentions to stay in the host country) and could provide information about the frequency and diffusion of findings (e.g. of different ideal types).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest.

PEER REVIEW

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The term 'second language' refers to any language that is not the mother tongue (i.e. the 'first language') of a speaker.
- ² Natalie Bella, Karolina Kohl and Stefan Röhrer participated in the data analysis.
- ³ See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

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