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Language as a resource with fluctuating values: Arabic speakers in humanitarian and social work

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Abstract: This paper investigates the *fluctuating value* of Arabic when constructed as a linguistic resource for multilingual, “languageed” workers in a counselling centre for refugees in Austria and in an international humanitarian agency operating in ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Drawing on a variety of ethnographic data (observations, interviews and documents), our analyses of the institutionalised division of labour and of workers’ narrative positioning show how workers in both organisations discursively construct this linguistic resource as being of ambivalent value in their positioning vis-à-vis their colleagues, for their careers and in work interactions. Stratifying and empowerment effects are interwoven in the varying and coexisting values of Arabic.

Keywords: humanitarian work, refugee aid, Arabic, ethnography, precariousness

1 Introduction

Today, Arabic has become a sought-after linguistic skill in international humanitarian organisations whose operations are based in the ongoing armed conflicts in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA), where it is spoken as a regional lingua franca. For example, the online Global Career Fair for Middle East and North Africa (26 January 2017) offered posts requiring Arabic in several international organisations and NGOs. Similarly, local NGOs in Europe that provide services for migrants and asylum seekers are in need of a workforce that can accomplish “language work” (Boutet 2012) in Arabic (besides other languages, such as Dari, Farsi and Somali), which is crucial to the functioning of the services offered (Codó and Garrido 2010). When we each presented a paper on our independent research projects at the 11th

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International Symposium on Bilingualism in 2017, we discovered parallelisms in the discourse about the value of linguistic skills subsumed under the label “Arabic” for workers in our two research sites: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC henceforth), whose headquarters are in Geneva, Switzerland, and a counselling centre in Austria (CC henceforth) run by a refugee-support NGO. In both sites we encountered strikingly similar emic conceptions of “Arabic” as an advantage and as a burden among professionals. Redfield (2012: 364) reports analogous findings with a *Médecins sans Frontières* employee, who considers familiarity with local languages and culture a “mixed blessing” for her work. The present paper is the attempt to bring our ethnographic observations together and explore where Arabic-speaking professionals are situated in the respective institutional allocation of labour and resources and how they negotiate their professional legitimacy in these two European-based institutions. While the discourse of ambivalence is present in both sites, the consequences for the workers differ in the way this bears on the division of labour and the negotiation of professionalism under different institutional and sociolinguistic regimes. Through a wide array of ethnographic data (observations, interviews and documents), we will show which values are attributed to Arabic varieties in the humanitarian and social workers’ narratives and how these values are constructed and regulated at an institutional level. We suggest that the ambivalence of value – although it plays out in different ways under differing institutional conditions – is not random or idiosyncratic but a shared condition of “languaged”, Arabic speaking workers in European-based institutions.

In political-economic terms, the linguistic repertoires of these workers at the ICRC and in the CC become a resource that the respective organisations draw on for communicative work. It is in this context of value creation that being a speaker of Arabic has ambivalent consequences for professional careers. Arabic is a resource that is potentially convertible into job security at the ICRC and a positive distinction among the staff of the CC, though not in strictly monetary terms. The indexicalities attributed to “Arabic” as a named language, as well as to different varieties and registers, and to the “Arabic-speaking” workers encompass cultural and professional values with both positive and negative symbolic and material consequences that go beyond straightforward capital conversion. In line with this special issue, our analysis opens a window onto the various forms of inequality at work, understood here as the workers’ differential exposure to *precariousness*, as well as to empowering effects, processes which are linked to the double-sided value of “the Arabic language”. We argue that Arabic-speaking professionals in the two different European-based organisations have to navigate similar constraints and allowances linked to indexes of

“the Arabic language” and speakerhood. We show that our informants have agency over the negotiation of their professional legitimacy, through the strategic mobilisation of shibboleths and language/register choice, while having to cope with the burden of stereotypical ascriptions and problematic consequences in the institutional division of labour which both come with their categorisations as “Arabic speakers”.

In the following section, we provide an overview of our separate ethnographic projects, followed by the conceptual framework in Section 3. In order to structure our analysis around three shared axes and simultaneously allow space to examine singularities, we have decided to have separate analysis sections for each site. Section 4 presents the analysis of the ICRC and Section 5 that of the CC. Both sections are sub-divided into (1) the division of (linguistic) labour, (2) effective communication and (3) (mis-)recognition as professionals and institutional workers as common axes of analysis. This is to sketch the different ways in which being a speaker of Arabic has structural effects in the workplace (Sections 4.1 and 5.1) and in which Arabic speakers are imagined as professionals in the respective institutional contexts (Sections 4.2, 4.3, 5.2 and 5.3). The ways in which Arabic-speaking workers are imagined are strikingly similar, but there are specificities as to the material consequences on the workers, in terms of career and working conditions. The two sites are different in how Arabic is institutionally categorised, as an unremunerated asset at the CC or as a requirement that defines the post at the ICRC. The CC presents local dynamics between Arabic-speaking volunteers and employees working in the same physical site, whereas the ICRC is an international organisation with multiple delegations that differentiates between mobile and resident employees, and among communicators with different linguistic repertoires globally. In Section 6, we discuss the similarities and differences between the two sites and the interweaving of empowerment and vulnerability for these professionals.

2 Research sites and data

2.1 Communication work at the ICRC

Maria Rosa’s ethnography explored the ICRC, the oldest existing humanitarian agency, founded in French-speaking Geneva, Switzerland in 1863. In 2017, the ICRC employed over 18,000 workers worldwide, and only around 15% constituted mobile staff. “Mobile” staff are assigned to temporary missions in over 80 countries worldwide. The ICRC’s administrative languages are French and English. Other regional languages for operations, apart from Arabic, are Spanish, Portuguese,

Chinese and Russian. Yet the ICRC key operations in 2017 were mostly in Arabic-speaking designated regions, including Syria, South Sudan, Iraq, Yemen and Somalia. “Mobile communicators” are in charge of public communication with the media and on the ICRC’s webpage and social media. They are also responsible for operational communication with interlocutors and war victims in the field. This paper centres on mobile Arabic-speaking communicators whose careers are managed from the ICRC headquarters in Geneva.

Maria Rosa collected institutional documents, interviews and focus groups from November 2016 to May 2018. In addition to an interview with the mobile pool manager (who manages the mobile communicators in over 80 delegations worldwide from the ICRC headquarters), she conducted 11 interviews with active Arabic-speaking communicators in MENA delegations (three face-to-face and eight over Skype), as well as with the diversity officer and the former Arabic examiner in Geneva. She also organised three focus groups with communicators in Geneva and Beirut. The first one brought together four Arabic-speaking communicators in MENA to map the main issues (March 2017), while the second one counted on six Arabic-speakers (three of whom participated in the first focus group) to comment on preliminary findings. The third one sought to compare their linguistic affordances and constraints in MENA with three non-Arabic speakers.

2.2 Language work at a counselling centre for refugees

Jonas’ ethnography was in a CC for refugees in Vienna, Austria. This CC is one out of approximately 10 in Vienna alone, run by an NGO also present in all of Austria that has subdivisions depending on its clientele. Its focus is on issues related to housing, as well as offering individual counselling and support. The services are partly funded by the federal government. The staff of this particular CC consists of around ten counsellors with a heterogeneous academic background (e.g. in law, social work and social/political sciences). There are two employed interpreters (one for German–Farsi, the other for German/English–Arabic) and a larger and fluctuating number of volunteer interpreters (for Arabic, Dari, Farsi, Kurdish, Pashto and Somali, with the target languages German or English), some of whom are former clients of the CC. Apart from the interpreters, there are also some members of staff whose Arabic repertoires are used as a resource for work purposes (due to turnover, Arabic-speaking staff have fluctuated between one and three between 2016 and 2018).

Jonas regularly participated in everyday work processes at the CC as a participant observer for over 30 months (April 2016–September 2018). During that time, Jonas volunteered for 12 months, documenting his ethnographic experiences

and observations in field notes. He collected institutional documents, conducted a total of 18 interviews with staff members and (volunteer and employed) interpreters, and audio-recorded ten internal work meetings.

3 Conceptual framework

For the purpose of this paper, we understand empowerment and stratification as two sides of the same coin, both connected to the reproduction of inequality in economic (Caraher and Reuter 2017) and symbolic (Butler 1997; Shulman 2011) terms. We draw on Butler's *precariousness* (2009) as a shared human condition, based on the premise of finitude of life and its exposure to risk from its onset. A liveable life requires symbolic and economic dependency on the Other – people and institutions – to sustain itself. While precariousness is shared among all human beings, *precarity* as a politically induced condition would deny equal exposure to risks to one's life through the unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways certain racially and nationally conceived populations are exposed to violence (Butler 2009: 25). In other words, the exposure to risk is reduced through political regimes, notably the retreating welfare state, and other social institutions that address the basic needs of a defined population.

This conceptualisation of precarity as differentially distributed vulnerability (Caraher and Reuter 2017: 487) or precariousness (Lorey 2012: 24–29) has been productively applied in the literature on labour market inequalities. Tending to questions of distribution of symbolic, material and bodily risks, i.e. by investigating aspects of the institutionalised division of labour in the two organisations, allows us to better grasp the economic dimension of precarity (Caraher and Reuter 2017; *sensu* Lorey 2012) as interacting with precariousness. According to Butler (2009), there is no way to separate the material reality of precarity from the discursive orders justifying its operation; that is, which lives are recognised as valuable and thus sheltered from risks, and which ones are not and bear the burden of unemployment, differential exposure to violence, or even starvation. We look into what sorts of interactions are characterised as “risky” by the participants due to misrecognition of one's self-identity. We also explore the problematic consequences of misrecognition on the symbolic and economic conditions that sustain their lives and make them intelligible, as well as how institutionalised processes of distribution expose certain individuals to these pressures more than other people.

When discussing the symbolic redistribution of risk in processes of “languageing” workers (Boutet 2012), it is crucial to understand how and with what

consequences workers are constituted and recognised as speaking subjects. Which processes of categorisation are at work when someone becomes an Arabic-speaking worker in these organisations? When being addressed by the other, one is compelled to respond to the social categories the address carries in order to occupy a recognisable position from where to act (see Butler 1997: 24–41). An address is a constitutive selection of a certain reality and, as such, bears the risk of misrecognition: in our data, the address as an Arabic speaker often carries all sorts of assumptions about the presumed “identity” of the addressed (e.g. religion, race etc.). This produces recognisable subject positions while also forcing a label onto the subject, potentially homogenising actual differences – concerning e.g. religion and race, but also linguistic variation.

In order to understand how the value of linguistic resources is negotiated on the ground, we draw on the conceptual metaphor of *spéculations langagières* (‘linguistic speculations’) (Duchêne and Daveluy 2015). It refers to how people and institutions orient their linguistic choices and behaviour to rational logics based on interpretations of the potential economic and symbolic value of a linguistic resource (a language, variety or accent). Although their value is unstable, workers and institutions alike invest in linguistic resources as they become incorporated into capitalist logics of value production, distribution and circulation. In this paper, we investigate the negotiation of what counts as a desirable linguistic resource among social actors with different interests, and the definition’s impact on the selection and hierarchisation of workers. The label “Arabic” does not have a discrete system as a stable referent, but points to a wide range of linguistic varieties (regional “dialects”) and registers (such as “Classical Arabic” [Fuṣḥa] or “Modern Standard Arabic” [shortened to MSA]). Such differences partly materialise in language hierarchies while they are also partly disavowed in our data. Thus, on the one hand, we deal with the values that relate not to one monolithic language, but to a variety of linguistic resources constructed in diverse ways. On the other hand, the different varieties and registers are often simply referred to as “Arabic” in a monolithic language imaginary and organised in a metadiscourse on a bounded, named language (Makoni and Pennycook 2007), i.e. “Arabic” and connected to assumptions about speakerhood (see Agha 2007: 234–242), in this case Arabic speakerhood. This is similar to other instances in the data where labels are applied to languages and their speakers (German, French etc.). In particular, we will look into whether Arabic is institutionally constructed as a discrete, measurable and extractable skill that is a commodifiable trait of the worker’s self (Urciuoli 2008), and how the Arabic-speaking workers at the two sites deal with the fluctuating value of Arabic speakerhood in situated interactions. We seek to understand if and how these speculative processes might pay off, and for whom, in economic as well as symbolic terms.

The value of linguistic resources in the work context, i.e. the way it enters processes of (re)distribution of economic and symbolic resources, hinges crucially on the way workers are imagined as speakers, and how they navigate work relationships and processes. To document these imaginaries and the speakers' positioning, we draw on Bamberg's notion of narrative positioning (1997). Following Bamberg (1997), we distinguish three narrative levels on which positioning takes place. Level 1 is the positioning in the storyworld, i.e. storyworld characters are positioned towards each other in a narrated event. Level 2 refers to the interactive positioning in the narrative event, i.e. between the participants in the research setting (e.g. interviewee[s] and interviewer). Level 3, the positioning towards higher order discursive objects, encompasses the ways in which such storytelling affects the narrator's positioning towards the above-mentioned personae in the narrated and narrative events. In our interview and focus group data, positioning is achieved in and through short narratives, often co-narrated with other colleagues. Such narratives open a window onto the negotiation of and (dis)alignment with professional personae that are connected to different meta-discourses (Spitzmüller 2013) about "the Arab" and "Arabic", understood as emblems or semiotic shibboleths. These linguistic traits or forms categorise a speaker as a member of a specific group, and their performance grants or prevents access to certain resources or spaces. Thus, the notion of positioning allows us to analyse both the indexical values attributed to the linguistic phenomena that lie behind the term "Arabic" and the performance of linguistic and professional selves by the Arabic-speaking workers in our specific research contexts.

4 The values of "Arabic" at the ICRC

4.1 Division of (linguistic) labour: Unequal labour trajectories

"Communication delegates" at the ICRC are required to have C1-level written and spoken English and "professional mastery" of an L2, i.e. Arabic, French or Russian, with any other languages as a "distinct advantage" (from job description of communication delegate, 2018). Note that the ICRC conceptualises languages as bounded systems that can be measured as skills. Given that the number of applications by candidates with suitable Arabic competence was scarce, the ICRC started to advertise for an "Arabic-speaking communications delegate" defined by this specific linguistic skill (Urciuoli 2008) in 2012. In line with the general post description, this post also requires English as an institutional language in MENA delegations. French is an asset for career advancement within the ICRC, being one of the two institutional languages used at the headquarters (see Example 1).

Example 1. Job advertisement for “Arabic-speaking communications delegate” at the ICRC (1 June 2012).

Excellent command of Arabic and English. In addition, a good command of French is a distinct asset for career development within the ICRC, as French is an institutional language.

The top-down gatekeeping for this post takes the form of in-house language tests. In our interview, Mohammed¹, a long-established Arabic language examiner and interpreter, claimed that Arabic tests were different owing to the diglossic situation between MSA and the geographic clusters or “dialects”. “Native speakers” were not exempt from the test as they were for other working languages. Mohammed sought to establish if the candidate could “speak the dialect” and if s/he could read and write in MSA. The test consisted of an oral interview in “dialect” followed by an interview in Fuṣḥa and a written piece. According to the examiner, speaking Fuṣḥa is useful to communicate with non-Arabs such as Pakistanis, Afghans or Malaysians who learned it as L2. Reading MSA is key for sensitive documents such as prison regulations, which national staff cannot access for confidentiality and security reasons. Ultimately, however, the examiner emphasised knowing which regional variety the candidate speaks so that he could evaluate intercomprehension. In his own words, “you immediately see that he is speaking in Syrian or Lebanese dialect, this already gives you an idea that this person must not work in Algeria, because he will not understand anything in Algeria” (interview, 14 February 2018). Therefore, the examiner challenged the institutional monolithic categorisation of “Arabic”: “The ICRC, they say, they speak Arabic, we send them to an Arab country, but which Arabic do they speak? They tell me, Mohammed, you have a very high standard” (interview, 14 February 2018). Given that Mohammed’s attention to varieties of Arabic was generally not factored in for field deployment, many mobile communicators initially experienced difficulties in understanding – or being understood – in the field. Fortunately, they reported to gradually develop intercomprehension strategies.

As we have seen, Arabic is not required of all communicators in the ICRC mobile pool. Arabic speakers form a differentiated group with dedicated recruitment campaigns. These professionals express that they feel they are carrying a “burden” because their ICRC careers are often restricted to the Middle East. One mobile communicator, Sophie, puts it like this: “we call it the ‘Arabic-

¹ All the names in this article have been anonymised in order to protect informants’ confidentiality.

speaking curse' is that, you will have, like, to spend most of your ICRC life being in the Middle East? which is like the area where there are the most conflicts now" (interview, 24 April 2017). Unaccompanied missions in conflict areas, known as "hardship posts" among delegates, entail strict security measures such as curfews and sheltered accommodation, as well as a higher personal risk – i.e. more exposure to violence and bodily risks to their lives – due to "security incidents".

The ICRC informants all agree that they do not have as much geographical mobility across the 80 countries where the ICRC is present compared to other communicators who do not speak Arabic. This points towards an unequal distribution of symbolic resources in their careers. There are fewer contexts in which speakers of other ICRC regional languages such as Spanish or Russian are required. Therefore, they get assigned to other contexts where these languages are not spoken, including MENA where English (and not Arabic) is the working language. Some experienced Arabic-speaking communicators claim the lack of variety in their missions, i.e. outside the region, has restricted their chances to obtain management positions. Also, Arabic is not required for mobile and management positions in the region. According to Ashem, a communicator in the region who does not speak Arabic, "knowing Arabic can just boost your work, it's not really necessarily about getting a promotion" (Focus group 3, 9 May 2018). For many informants, Arabic is a useful working language in MENA, but does not contribute to career progression in the same way as French, which is an important asset for missions outside the MENA region and for management positions (see Example 1 above).

Despite being repeatedly assigned to "hardship posts" mainly in MENA, Arabic-speaking communicators presently enjoy a higher degree of job security compared to communicators who do not speak Arabic, owing to the many ongoing operations in the region. One of these communicators, Nour, states that "I will always find work (at the ICRC) thanks to my Arabic" after a fixed-term contract and personal breaks between missions, to the astonishment of non-Arabic speakers in the pool who might have problems of re-employment after the end of a mission or a temporary contract (interview, 2 February 2017). In humanitarian organisations, mobility and field experience (as opposed to desk jobs in headquarters) and especially postings in risky contexts are highly valued (Jansson 2016). Therefore, ICRC communicators in MENA have a marketable CV by virtue of their "hardship posts". This does not mean, however, that Arabic speakers have easier access to promotions, management positions or even posts outside MENA. To paraphrase, the interpretation of the potential economic and symbolic value of Arabic results in an ambivalent situation at the ICRC and on the humanitarian labour market: simultaneously precarious and relatively secure.

4.2 Effective communication in the field: Cultural and pragmatic knowledge

Many ICRC communicators insisted on the idea that speaking a geographical variety of Arabic allows immediate communication with Arabic-speaking interlocutors, bypassing interpreters, and evokes trust and familiarity on the basis of cultural references and pragmatic competence. They regarded non-mediated communication and common ground as advantages for effective communication with the media, authorities, armed groups and civilians in the field. Colloquial language and oral varieties seem to facilitate communication with these interlocutors in the field. This language speculation seemed to pay off.

Mobile communicator Hakim claims that the Arabic language is “an extremely important part of the culture” in the region and that it would facilitate communication in the field since “I used to, just say, *as-salāmu ‘alaikum*, everybody who would be angry would suddenly see, this peaceful and happy faces, showing up immediately, just like a switch” (interview, 23 February 2017). Following the greetings, the interlocutors typically asked him where he is from, to which he answered, “I am an Arab” and talked about his home country. In Hakim’s narrative, the Arabic greeting functions as a “shibboleth” that creates a common ground between the interlocutors and the ICRC representative, and facilitates professional communication. Another “shibboleth” creating common ground is the (limited) use of the interlocutors’ geographical variety. For instance, Sophie – another mobile communicator – concurs that “it’s like people immediately connect to you when you are speaking their own language and sometimes even if you try to use their own dialect” for jokes or for ice-breakers (interview, 24 April 2017). Being positioned as a fellow Arab by the interlocutors in the field, by virtue of certain linguistic “shibboleths”, allows these communicators to act more freely.

The informants’ narratives also revolve around the communicative effectiveness of shared cultural references, which collapse notions of language, culture, race and religion. In the second focus group with Arabic-speaking communicators in MENA, Salif claims that “Arabs” are more knowledgeable about the shared cultural references and communicative practices in the region and can analyse what is going on around them more easily than “foreigners” (i.e. non-Arabs, see Section 4.3 for L2 Arabic speakers). In his own words, “the fact that you know Islam makes it easier for you to digest what’s going [on] around you, and to analyse it through this what-what we call Arab-Islamic culture” (Focus group 2, 8 May 2018).

Furthermore, this cultural familiarity also includes pragmatic decisions about how to speak to or contact an interlocutor. In the same focus group, Salif tells a story to illustrate the professional advantages of his knowledge about appropriate

ways of speaking. During a field trip in an Arabic-majority country involved in an armed conflict, he was travelling with a “blonde” expatriate delegate when people in masks stopped their car. This narrative is co-constructed with his colleague Aida, and with other colleagues’ non-verbal approval, and explicitly addressed to Maria Rosa, recognised as a non-Arab. In Example 2, Salif reflects on the importance of doing-being an Arab (lines 1–2) in the narrated events, shown in his pragmatic knowledge of speaking “directly” (line 3), contrasted with “English” people’s less direct styles (line 7). Please note that he is unsure about how to name non-Arabs. “English person” doubly refers to English-speaking delegates like his colleague in the storyworld and probably, also, to Maria Rosa, who conducts the focus group in English within the storytelling context. Salif voices his character as someone who speaks directly and assertively to the people who stopped their vehicle in the narrated events. He comes across as both authoritative in the focus group, where he holds the floor with Aida’s backchanneling to tell a story as a knowledgeable research informant, and in the narrated events located in a conflict zone, where he avoided a security incident as an experienced Arabic-speaking delegate.

Example 2. ICRC, focus group 2 (8 May 2018)

01 SAL: (1) and u::h I think if I was not Arab at that
 02 moment # knowing the Arab culture knowing things.
 03 AID: knowing that you could say it directly.
 04 SAL: and I go-. I can I-.# because sometimes you say
 05 things very directly.-
 06 AID: yes.
 07 SAL: more than an- a- an [>]<English pe- pe- person>
 08 AID: <yes # yes> [<]
 09 SAL: I told him # y- e- t- p- p- # you know what u- like
 10 this (1) this: lady # will go with me back to
 11 www(capital city)this evening (1)and he told me (1)
 12 I promise she will # and I think the fact that we-
 13 we xxx hein # the- [>] <the xxx>
 14 AID: <that you understood that
 15 there was a risk> [<]
 16 SAL: the thing the movement very quickly # uhm avoided a
 17 kidnapping or at least a big th:ing that might uh:
 18 have happened.

Salif aligns with the ICRC delegate persona who can avoid (potential) kidnapping thanks to his embodiment and comportment, which is informed by being “an Arab” (lines 16–18). Through the narrative he imbues his “knowledge of

Arabic culture” (line 2) with value in this professional situation. Likewise, the ICRC maintains that expats’ knowledge of “the local language, values and socio-cultural customs and rule” reinforce ICRC acceptance among locals and operational security for staff (Bruegger 2009: 436). By telling stories of successful communication during our focus groups, Salif performs the successful Arabic-speaking professional in ways that show how his social categorisation through language and cultural competence is instrumental to his communications work and safety – his own and that of others – in the region. All in all, there seems to be a discursive shift from social categorisations of speakerhood (based on language speculations in a given interaction) to ethnic identity and shared membership as “Arabs”.

4.3 “Neutrality” and unequal speakers of Arabic

The ICRC adheres to the fundamental principle of “neutrality”, defined as follows: “In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature” (statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 1986). Arabic-speaking delegates are sometimes perceived as “too close” to interlocutors and thus not neutral enough in the conflicts in which they work. During the first focus group of Arabic-speaking communicators (22 March 2017), Zaara questioned this institutional concept of “neutrality” in MENA because “it’s not really it’s- it’s- it’s not there in the Arab world e:h, because for us, it’s either you w- you have to have an opinion, and your opinion it should be either with me, or against me, then-, then neutrality is even worse for us to explain”. In this focus group, Salif agreed with Zaara. He contrasted his personal identity as an Arabic speaker and as an Arab which informs his (non-neutral) political stance in ongoing conflicts in the region (“In [country] you know who’s right and who’s wrong”) and his role as an ICRC delegate who has to be “neutral” and “impartial” in his work. In accordance with the fundamental principle, he claimed that “[the ICRC] is not treating this, and we’re [ICRC representatives] not doing, dealing with who’s right and who’s wrong and this is all impartiality and neutrality”.

In order to overcome this perception of non-/lesser “neutrality”, the institutional role foregrounds expatriate nationality: mobile communicators cannot be nationals of their country of destination. This outweighs linguistic competence in Arabic, which is the result of different linguistic socialisation paths. Additionally, the host countries impose a ban on certain nationalities by virtue of alliances and conflicts. As an illustration, Egyptian nationals cannot work in Israel, Yemen, Libya, Sudan and Iran, but they are accepted in Syria (mobile pool manager, personal communication). At an institutional level, these considerations relate to

the unequal exposure to threats to one's life owing to a misrecognition of certain (professional) personae owing to nationality.

For those with a recognisable regional accent in Arabic, foreign nationality seemingly mitigates the perception of closeness to the local interlocutors as “Arabs” and enhances the perception of them as “neutral” representatives. This is Alex's case, a communicator of Lebanese origin. In our informal interview (22 February 2017), he claims that the Arabic-language media does not challenge his professional identity because he is primarily perceived as an ICRC representative despite a recognisable Lebanese accent. Alex claims that his regional accent is not sufficient to identify him as a Lebanese national, given that many delegates (15 out of 42 active mobile communicators in 2016) have dual nationality and can be perceived as heritage speakers of Arabic. For the ICRC, “neutrality” depends more on nationality than language, which Arab mobile staff have to manage and perform in situated encounters.

For those who are recognisable speakers of Arabic as an L2, called *arabisant.e.s* at the ICRC, it is more important to have an “easy” nationality for working in operational delegations, i.e. passports that allow holders to work in a variety of MENA contexts, than to have full competence in written Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). For example, Adam is an EU national who can communicate in a regional variety but who is not fully literate in Arabic. He claims that being a non-Arab who has learned Arabic actually earns him “a sort of respect, understanding and you have the appreciation that I came to this region and I work here and I speak their language” with the Arabic-speaking media (interview, 8 March 2017). Adam also makes the point that the media treat non-Arabs more gently: “coming from outside of the region, you know, unless you are an American, British or French? (laughs) you're either always considered as neutral”. “Neutrality” is linked to being heard as a guest in the region, whose linguistic investment is appreciated and translates into a recognition of their professional persona. This contrasts with the potential misrecognition and precariousness of certain Arabic speakers as less “neutral”, like Alex, owing to their MENA nationality and accent.

5 The values of “Arabic” at the CC

5.1 Division of labour: The institutionalisation of language work

At the CC, there is little overt regulation of language on an institutional level. As a competence, “Arabic” does not appear to be treated so much as a bounded,

homogeneous system and measurable skill, but as a continuum of varieties where intercomprehension is possible to varying degrees. Hence, the value of a variety and its speakers is rationalised with reference to more or less *ad hoc* notions of intercomprehension. Apart from this, the unequal values of varieties of Arabic, as well as speaker stereotypes, circulate in jokes and stories among staff and volunteer interpreters. Since there are no standardised language requirements for the posts, individual repertoires among employees vary greatly in terms of competence in different varieties, registers and literacy. One Arabic-speaking counsellor in particular, Yasmin, seems to play the role of an *ideology broker* (Blommaert 1999) in the microcosm of the CC in the sense that, by virtue of her expert status as a “native”, she selects, reproduces, circulates, contests and adheres to discourses on “Arabic”. As one of the longest-serving staff members at the CC and as manager of the pool of volunteer interpreters, her voice is consequential as to the ambivalent values of the linguistic varieties of Arabic. It resonates with more general discourses on the different varieties of Arabic circulating at the CC, which Jonas was able to record: the alleged scarce intelligibility of North African varieties, the pop-cultural importance of Egyptian varieties, the boldness of Iraqi varieties, and the closeness to the “standard” (which may refer to Fuṣḥa and/or MSA) of some (but not all) Levantine varieties. A standard variety is sometimes invoked as a common ground in counselling situations, e.g. when an interpreter says to a client “We’ll speak Hoch-Arabic [German–English “high Arabic”, probably a translation of Fuṣḥa] since you are from Iraq” (the interpreter’s English/German back translation of his own turn – which was directed to the client in a variety of Arabic – for the counsellor and Jonas, field notes, 3 April 2016).

Within the division of labour at the CC, the position of the “Arabic-speaking counsellor” constitutes a differentiated category which circulates among the staff and serves as a point of reference for them in the organisation of work tasks. The position is not, however, institutionalised on a formal level, i.e. there is no position of an “Arabic-speaking counsellor” in the staff hiring scheme. Language competences (of any sort) do not constitute a formal requirement – no tests nor diplomas are mandatory for counselling posts. However, they do appear in job advertisements for counselling posts (Example 3): German is listed as a requirement and other (“foreign”) languages as an asset. These other languages are specified as “Farsi/Dari and/or Arabic” which reflects the two most prominent language categories into which speakers were grouped at the time (2016) as they became clients of the CC.

Example 3. Extract from a job advertisement for the position of a counsellor at the CC, September 2016; Jonas' translation from German:

- Very good German and computer knowledge (MS Office).
- Capacity for communication and teamwork and the capacity to work autonomously.
- [...]
- Knowledge in foreign languages (Farsi/Dari and/or Arabic) an advantage.

English does not appear in the job advertisement (Example 3), but in internal communication the head of staff repeatedly categorised it as a fundamental competence for contact with both clients and interpreters. In sum, speaking Arabic as a foreign language is an asset, a cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) highly valued at the CC, but not a requirement for becoming a counsellor at the CC.

There is no fully institutionalised differentiation between Arabic-speaking and non-Arabic-speaking counsellors. Formally, Arabic-speaking counsellors have the same tasks as the other counsellors: individual counselling with clients (speakers of various languages, including varieties of Arabic), communication with administrative bodies from e.g. the city of Vienna, thematic workshops for larger groups of clients (external and in-house) etc. Nevertheless, a differentiation among the staff based on linguistic competences is present and consequential. More so as its presence destabilises another boundary, which in turn becomes more openly negotiated and affirmed: that between (paid) Arabic-speaking counsellors and (mostly volunteer) interpreters. As Jonas observed, Arabic-speaking counsellors tend to assume and/or be asked to perform *ad hoc* tasks that they are not originally paid for and which overlap with those of the interpreters, i.e. translation of documents, phone calls to clients, or even interpreting for their colleagues. In the employment structure, the boundaries between the two positions are firmly institutionalised: counsellors are employed full- or part-time; interpreters are in most cases volunteers, except for two, who hold a so-called 'minimal employment' (*geringfügige Beschäftigung*). However, boundaries are blurred in the division of tasks, leading – whether it be at their own initiative or not – to extra work for the Arabic-speaking counsellors. In the documentation of a closed staff meeting (May 2016), this situation was openly labelled “exploitation” as a reminder to abstain from the practice of recruiting Arabic-speaking counsellors for (unpaid) interpreting tasks.

Sami, a counsellor, once said in the presence of Jonas and some of his colleagues that he regarded his knowledge of Arabic partly as a 'curse' [*Fluch*].

His colleagues asked him about the implications of this as they pertain to the distribution of tasks. Sami explained that he felt burdened by the fact that since the number of Arabic-speaking clients had increased, he could no longer work according to his professional function, i.e. work on his own cases, because he was always concerned with everyone else's cases. His arguments were about setting boundaries and about professional fulfilment, which is subordinated to his role as a mediator. Staff members are aware of and recurrently draw these boundaries between the roles of (Arabic-speaking) counsellors and interpreters. The contingencies of everyday work practices, however, regularly lead to their transgression and, as a consequence, to their re-affirmation. For example, Jonas observed a scene where Yasmin was called to interpret for the reception desk. Afterwards, another colleague rhetorically asked her "you did not really translate now, did you?", basically sanctioning her willingness to fill in for the missing interpreter. However, a sedimentation of these boundaries does not prevent or even address all of the implications of being a speaker of Arabic within the CC. Arabic-speaking counsellors fill in with their linguistic labour whenever interpreters are absent or scarce, or when the interpreters' expertise – as the untrained volunteers they are – is deemed insufficient for the task at hand, as is often the case with the translation of documents. The professional position of a counsellor being categorised as speaker of Arabic is hence a precarious one. It is characterised by an unequal distribution of labour, namely extra, language-related tasks with respect to colleagues who do not have specific language resources in "Arabic". In addition, this exposes these languaged counsellors' professional position to the symbolic risk of slipping across the fuzzy boundaries to unpaid language work done by volunteers.

5.2 Precariousness and misrecognition: Being addressed as an Arabic speaker

At the CC, Arabic as part of a counsellor's linguistic repertoire is regarded as a vulnerable point, one that potentially undermines the counsellor's professionalism. This issue comes up in narrated episodes (e.g. at staff meetings) of Arabic-speaking counsellors' encounters with their clients. Here, the attribution of an affiliation with "the Arab world" on the basis of their linguistic repertoires was perceived to come with an invitation to transgress defined institutional roles, for instance to offer preferential treatment and extra services. In these narrated

episodes, being recognised as a speaker of an Arabic variety often explicitly points to a geographical origin or even religious affiliation which can be used by the other to ground their claims for acts of solidarity. To a certain extent, this is part of these languaged counsellors' everyday work and they have developed counterstrategies of *Abgrenzung* ('setting boundaries'). For example, at times, a routine task such as contacting a presumed real estate broker for a client may turn out to be problematic. The following extract exemplifies an incident where strategies of setting boundaries are institutionally regarded as necessary for the Arabic-speaking counsellor and how this is intimately connected to the positioning of the counsellor with regards to language (see Example 4).

Example 4. Extract from field notes, participant observation at a staff meeting at the CC (7 February 2017)

At the staff meeting, Sami tells the others that making a phone call for a client, Mona, a colleague, unexpectedly had a man on the phone who is well known to the staff as a large-scale fraudster on the housing market. The guy soon figured out that she was a speaker of Arabic and tried to continue the conversation in Arabic. Mona continued in German though. He then said things like "we are all Muslims", why she would not want to speak Arabic with him. He said he wanted to meet with representatives of the CC and ask them why they complicated his life by suing him. Sami says Mona had behaved "correctly". He says the behaviour of the man – his wish to make contact with the CC and the sense of threat – was indicative of their ways of dealing with him in general being fruitful.

The episode that is told during a staff meeting constitutes – and is presented as – a critical moment for the professional integrity of the institution and its representative Mona. While the event is delicate per se, even independently of the counsellor being languaged as a speaker of Arabic, this aspect becomes central in the way the event is entextualised in the narrative. The man on the phone, who is categorised as a fraudster with victims among the clients of the institution, is attempting to establish cooperation with the CC. The encounter is recounted by Sami, who is Mona's colleague and, as the deputy head of staff, her superior. As such he ratifies her response to the man on the phone as appropriate. "Arabic" figures here in a scene both of recognition and misrecognition. He narrates how the man identifies "Arabic" (i.e. no specific variety but a bounded, named language) as part of Mona's linguistic repertoire and tries to achieve a switch of language. The fact that Mona does not comply with this becomes an effective counteract in Sami's

narrative as he subsequently explains how the man connects the overt request to speak a linguistic variety qualifying as “Arabic” with figures of identity (such as being a Muslim, an Arab). Denying linguistic alignment becomes thus a way to maintain a professional distance, with language constructed as the site of performance of a shared ground. Such shared ground is perceived as an entry point for undermining the counsellor’s professional position. Episodes of this type are recurring in Jonas’ observations of Arabic-speaking counsellors’ self-presentation at staff meetings: the counsellors recount how they are recognised as speakers of Arabic. This recognition is met with attempts by their interlocutor to deploy it towards their own ends (at odds with institutional procedures) – attempts that the counsellors manage to contain. This seems to function as a re-affirmative positioning of the counsellor’s professionalism while, of course, reiterating the presupposition that the presence of Arabic in an individual’s linguistic repertoire jeopardises their professional persona. This assumption is a recurring element of the institutional discourse on counsellors who are constructed as Arabic speakers. It systematically exposes the languaged counsellors’ professional personae to a misrecognition risk. Primarily, this leads to precariousness in the symbolic dimension, i.e. concerning the negotiation of professional positions. As such, it has no direct effect in terms of precarity – that is to say, job (in)security and conditions – but only as long as the counsellor may be able to contain the imputed risk. In spite of efforts among colleagues to support them, the onus to do so falls on the languaged counsellors. Jonas witnessed a case where the imputed inability to set boundaries in the ways expected ultimately led to a contract termination. This is a case where the unequal distribution of symbolic risk results in an unequally secured access to resources and thus precarity.

5.3 Effective communication: Being a (good) counsellor

In an interview with Jonas, Yasmin, a counsellor, constructs “Arabic” and a familiarity with “the Arab world” (see above) as an effective resource when communicating with her clients. In her accounts, she takes a professional distance from her role (cf. Goffman 1972: 88–98), decoupling her Arabic-speaking biographical self and even “Arabic” as a named language from the communicative resource in use.

Consider for instance how she organises her communication in Arabic into registers. She explains that she speaks with certain clients – the ones she categorises as “conservative” – in a specific form of Arabic. This register she characterises by naming its emblematic words “Allah” and “Muhammad” as well as idiomatic phrases containing them (e.g. 'in ša' allah). She says she would not use these phrases in her private life – her mother, she says, “would not believe it”. In the interactive context of the interview, she achieves thus a complex (dis)alignment with this “conservative” register (positioning levels 2 and 3, sensu Bamberg 1997). Namely, she connects positionings in at least three narrated interactive scenes where she tells Jonas how she performs the register (1) with clients (alignment), though not (2) with interlocutors in her “private life” or (3) with her mother (disalignment, positioning level 1). In her description, she distinguishes two registers to which contrasting personae are attached, a “conservative” one, which is characterised by religious terms and expressions, and an unmarked one characterised by their absence (and thus probably a “secular” one). While she aligns more intimately with the secular register/persona (positioning level 3) that is characterised by the absence of the emblematic expressions, she attributes a specific (twofold) effectiveness to them. It serves to induce the clients to accept the limited scope of action she has as a counsellor, and it also serves to give them “at least”, she says, some “hope” as they leave “even without a result” from the counselling, describing the – as she terms it – somewhat “magical” effect of these expressions on the psychological state of the clients (interview with Yasmin, Jonas’ translation, 10 October 2016). The two registers allow her to play with distance and closeness: She distances herself from the persona attached to the register she uses at work, a register she uses to achieve common ground with a subset of her clients.

Moreover, she expands the scope of this register beyond linguistic boundaries. In what precedes the following extract of an interview with her (Example 5), Jonas asks her if it makes a difference to conduct counselling in Arabic or in German. She hesitates but finally rejects that idea, as it would rather depend on the individual. As an example, she describes how she engages with young Afghan and Iranian clients through non- and paraverbal gestures – using body language, speaking more gently – saying they understand her because they had a “similar mentality”, although they are not Arabs. She goes on to explain the verbal dimension of achieving “understanding” (Example 5).

Example 5. Interview with Yasmin, staff member at the CC (10 October 2016)

- 01 YAS: aber # i- i- ich mach es so:-? dass ich:- ich weiß:
 02 zum beispiel # die afghanen wenn sie: # sie haben #
 03 immer wieder so ## arabische begriffe?
*but # I- I- I do it like tha:t I:- I don't know: for
 example # the Afghans when they:- # they have #
 again and again such ## Arabic terms?*
- 04 JON: mhm?
mhm?
- 05 YAS: und ich kenne s:- diese arabische begriffe die sie auch
 06 genau verwenden-. +^und die: sag ich [die].
*and I know th:- these Arabic terms exactly which they also
 use-? +^and the:se I say [them].*
- 07 JON: [>] <mhm>
 [>] <mhm>
- 08 YAS: ich <sag > [<] diese wörter. nicht-? +^und sie freuen
 09 sich-. +^ah die is- das spüren sie-. +^aha die is von
 10 xxx-. sie ist näher-. sie kommt näher ja?
*I <say > [<] these words. right-? +^and they are happy-.
 +^ah she is- they feel it-. +^aha she is from xxx-. she is
 closer-. she comes closer right?*
- 11 JON: mhm
mhm
- 12 YAS: nicht so wie:- # die macht [irgendwie]-. also sie fühlen
 13 sich dann wohler?
not a:s- # she does [somehow]-. so they feel more at ease?

The communicative effectiveness as described by Yasmin is not tied to the comprehensive use of a shared language (as implied by the interviewer's question), but more to specific word forms and concepts which index a shared ground on which she can positively align with the clients. She introduces these forms – the “Arabic terms” – to her interlocutor Jonas as part of a specific knowledge about her clients' language practices. In the storyworld, they act as a shibboleth: she describes their effect (“they are happy”, line 08–09). Then, embodying the voice of a client persona (lines 09–10 and 12), she attributes an affective stance to the client persona (line 08–09) that results in positive alignment (line 12–13) with her in the storyworld. On the interactional level, this narrative elaborates the dimension of “understanding” she focuses on in her answer to Jonas' question about potential differences between counselling in Arabic and German.

This way, the effect of her using the shibboleth in the storyworld (positioning level 1) serves to construct an effectiveness of her approach on the level of the interaction with Jonas in the interview (positioning level 2) which helps to construct a legitimate professional persona (positioning level 3). In the underlying logics of linguistic difference and miscommunication, Yasmin is able to position herself as someone who commands the creation of cultural and linguistic closeness as a resource or skill. While she constructs her knowledge of

the register as somehow connected to her own “cultural” knowledge (viz. the argument of the “similar mentality” above), she does not explicitly position herself as really “culturally close”, but leaves this ascription to the reported voice of her Afghan clients (lines 09–10, 12). Thereby she positions herself as a professional who deploys her knowledge (whether constructed as based on her biography or not) to create intimacy as a favourable condition for her work, in order to make her clients “feel more at ease”. Compared to Example 4, being languaged has the same effect but with reverse intentionality: linguistic display, which comes with all sorts of indexical meanings, can serve to construct intimacy. The difference is that in this instance, such recognisability is desirable – even if Yasmin risks being misrecognised to a certain degree as the religious “conservative” person she is claiming not to be. Her professional positioning is thus characterised by a tension between a “private” self and a “professional” performance. The indexical meanings associated with what is constructed as Arabic can thus be reformulated as a resource. This is, however, at the expense of “buying into” reified notions of Arabic speakerhood, which in other instances – as seen in Section 5.2 – jeopardise the counsellors’ professional position, constructing them as more vulnerable.

6 Final discussion

The goal of this paper was to ethnographically investigate the value and negotiation of Arabic as a linguistic resource for multilingual workers in two sites: a counselling centre for refugees in Austria and a major international humanitarian agency. We investigated calculations over the value of Arabic in linguistic repertoires and performances and the resulting social differentiation based on multilingual repertoires. For both organisations, “Arabic” has no stable value, as it fluctuates according to linguistic needs in the field of refugee assistance and humanitarian operations. Instead, it has a wide range of values, as “Arabic” is currently an asset for employment in the humanitarian sector. Certain varieties and registers facilitate communication with interlocutors, while simultaneously creating institutional expectations linked to Arabic competences.

Our informants have to negotiate and navigate the affordances and limitations of Arabic speakerhood with their enabling and hindering potential. Their agency and empowerment stem from their ability to strategically align and disalign with these personae for the purposes of communication with Arabic-speaking clients. In this way, they negotiate a legitimate, efficient professional identity through linguistic indexes. However, speaking a recognisable variety of Arabic and being recognised as “Arab” – but not necessarily being recognised

as an L2 Arabic speaker – can be burdensome. This is because their sought-after linguistic “skills” relegate Arabic speakers to more precarious work conditions than their non-Arabic speaking counterparts. This includes extra linguistic work in the division of labour, and an (imputed) vulnerability to indexical meanings attached to constructed notions of Arabic speakerhood undermining their professional positioning. ICRC communicators also experience the more concrete vulnerability of their bodies in “hardship posts” located in conflict zones.

Concerning the division of (linguistic) labour in both institutions, the ICRC institutionalises Arabic as a skill that is tested and evaluated for mobile posts, some specifically designated for Arabic speakers such as the communicators in this paper. Meanwhile, the CC lists it as an asset – and thus an unremunerated skill – for a counsellor post. In both cases, Arabic forms part of multilingual repertoires with English and another institutional language, German at the CC and French at the ICRC. Linguistic repertoires become a dimension for the differentiation of workers in both institutions. At the ICRC this entails consequences on career trajectories in terms of geographical and hierarchical mobility, whereas at the CC it impacts the position within the team and the professional order, adding extra linguistic work and blurring the boundaries with the volunteer interpreters’ tasks. There is a largely differential distribution of symbolic and material insecurities between volunteer interpreters and counsellors at the CC, between mobile and resident staff at the ICRC, and, more generally, within the same institutional category (e.g. counsellors or mobile communicators) between Arabophones and those who do not speak Arabic.

Being recognisable – whether one aligns/becomes aligned or not with a persona in a moment of address – emerged as a key issue of the workers’ positioning both in the context of the interviews (positioning level 2, Bamberg 1997) as well as in their narratives (positioning level 1). Being recognised as a geographically situated speaker has an impact on professional tasks and relationships with interlocutors. The speculative processes of value creation and negotiation pay off for Arabic speakers who use their colloquial and regional varieties to establish rapport and successfully communicate with those who (partly) share these resources. At the same time, doing-being an Arab as part of professional practice can be at odds with workers’ personal stances. Labour precarity, and even life precariousness in cases of asylum and work in conflict zones, relates to a variety of issues at the two research sites. Being recognised as an “Arab”, often through regional varieties as shibboleth, is a potential index of non-neutrality or lack of professionalism. At the ICRC, the Arabic-speaking expatriates’ “neutrality” as institutional representatives was potentially questioned, while the Arabic-speaking counsellors struggled with

keeping clear boundaries as social workers – and not interpreters – at the Austrian CC. The analysis revealed institutionalised (e.g. the constraints on the workers' nationalities at the ICRC) and individual (language choice at the CC) "strategies" to cope with this situation. Such strategies may reproduce the observed indexical values of Arabic that proved problematic for the Arabic-speaking workers.

In sum, the ambivalent value of performing and/or being recognised as an Arabic speaker reinforces social agency and professional identity in some situations, tapping into discourses of cultural similarity and awareness. By the same token, it might also undermine the workers' agency and professional selves in other situations, especially vis-à-vis institutional representatives who may doubt their allegiances and "neutrality". These workers have agency over their negotiation of professional legitimacy, through the mobilisation of shibboleths and language/register choice, while distancing themselves from potentially problematic consequences of Arabic speakerhood via alternative categories such as "expat", "*arabisant'e*" or "counsellor". Simultaneously, they are subject to the ambivalent negotiation of positioning in hierarchies of precarity and vulnerability, with burdens like excess work, unpaid mediation or limited geographical mobility. Navigating the constraints of symbolic and life precariousness as well as job precarity, and the affordances of agentive presentation are two sides of the same coin for the Arabic-speaking humanitarian workers in our ethnographies.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions for excerpts.

Conventions adapted from LIDES (LIPPS Group 2000).

xxx	unintelligible material
www	untranscribed material because of confidentiality issues or irrelevance
[word]	inferred material
#	short pause
##	longer pause (shorter than 1 sec)
(1)	pause in seconds
.	falling contour
?	rising contour
-.	intra-turn falling contour
-,	intra-turn fall-rise contour
-?	intra-turn rising contour
-	self-interruption, fragment
:	lengthened segment
[>]	overlap follows
[<]	overlap precedes
<>	scope symbols
+^	latching

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