
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language as a Barrier, Bridge and Battleground: A Study of Linguistic Experiences in the Context of Moroccan Migration to Southern Portugal

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| ABSTRACT

This article explores the critical engagement of two academics who confront lived experiences with the institutional and tangible dimensions of linguistic barriers and discrimination in the Portuguese district of Faro. Centred on the challenges posed at the border, the study fits into the wider framework of mobilities between North Africa and southern Europe, and attempts to demonstrate how language, as a form of social practice, impacts access to employment, education and society at large. Portuguese emerges as a dual entity: an institutional barrier, a form of socio-spatial control that reinforces exclusion, illustrating exclusionary processes within hierarchies and structural violence; a transnational bridge that fosters belonging and, simultaneously, a battleground where identity and self-determination face the constraints imposed by the economic, social, and political order that impact Moroccan migration to southern Portugal. The research highlights the imbrications of the undervaluation of migrants' cultural knowledge, the ambivalence of linguistic identity within a globalized world, exacerbating social exclusion, and systemic discrimination of non-privileged migrants in a polarized region shaped by social and economic asymmetries and increasingly representative nationalisms. From a systemic justice perspective, this devaluation reinforces structural inequalities, marginalizing those who do not conform to dominant linguistic norms. The national languages' role as linguistic and cultural gatekeeper exemplifies the intersection of identity construction and socio-political hierarchies in the context of mobilities. This study, grounded in a collaborative project blending autobiography and biographical research, employs qualitative methods, including biographic interviews, ethnographic observation, and critical human rights studies.

| KEYWORDS

Language barrier; linguistic experience; migration; mobilities

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The migrations streams between northern Africa and southern Europe have always owed a great deal to asymmetrical socio-political and economic relations, which were established due to colonisation, geographical closeness and globalised labour market. The peculiarities of migration of Moroccan individuals to Portugal demonstrate these tendencies, too – and in these circumstances, communication is highlighted as one of the most central aspects. As for Moroccan migrants, mastering the Portuguese language is appropriate for their jobs, education, and social needs. Yet, achieving language adaptation may take place in circumstances that are often accompanied by structural violence and exclusionary measures.

This article examines the role of language as a barrier, a means of bridging the gap, and a site of struggle in the everyday-life encounters of Moroccan migrants living in Southern Portugal. From a unique combination of sociolinguistics, migration studies and critical theory, it examines the role of linguistic hierarchies in the construction of the sense of belonging and of the self. The

analysis connects life stories with lives of individuals to the structures of power and society, emphasizing the productive nature of language in processes of transcultural integration and migration.

Migrants relayed experiences which are characteristic of the history of migration – globalisation and labour force demand coupled with demand due to colonial pasts and economic disparities as well as the Schengen model. Due to the agrarian and tourist character of Southern Portugal, there is a demand for migrant workers from North Africa. However, Moroccan migrants continue to encounter obstacles upon their arrival including non-recognition of their credentials, poor employment opportunities, and limited access to social services. Language is crucial in transcending these obstacles in overcoming and exclusion at the same time.

This creates a space for acceptability that is coloured by classism as well as racism towards these migrants as they are viewed as language 'deficient' and therefore always in the margins. Such hierarchies reproduce negative images, block people from social advancement, and strengthen the social order's imbalances.

Portuguese can be viewed as both instilling a sense of belonging and a burden. On one hand, proficiency in Portuguese helps migrants assimilate into new environments, secure needed jobs, and establish personal relationships. This can often be achieved through community language programs and social interactions which are informal and expose the migrants' resourcefulness and ability to cope with new situations. Such discrimination takes a variety of forms, such as teasing or scorn directed against someone's accent, unappreciation for native speaking cultures, or even unqualified opportunities for education or career advancement. Such exclusion helps maintain the socio-economic inequality trend, with linguistic barriers adding to already existing vulnerabilities.

For most migrants, acquiring language is central to the process of defining oneself. Moroccan migrants face the challenge of cultural integration through language and the maintenance of their identity. Language, mainly Portuguese in this case, is a means of integration into society, but it is also a source of the loss of the language and the culture of the original country. This dualism emphasizes the hybrid identities created in transnational spaces. In this way, migrants are likely to engage in linguistic practices that integrate Arabic, Berber, French, and, to some extent, Portuguese, leaving space for linguistic boundaries of heterogeneity encompassing trans-culturalism. Such practices turn down the monolingualism observance and focus on the movement of identities in the space of the migrants.

Apart from being interpersonal, linguistic inequality is structural in that it exists in the framework of institutional practices and policies. For example, migrants who do not speak Portuguese fluently are likely to have access barriers to healthcare, law, and education. Furthermore, the employment market, upon arriving in Portugal constructs a discrimination framework that further places immigrants in low skilled, low paid and often vulnerable positions.

Focus on language use theory explains these exclusionary practices within the context of other broader issues of structural violence: language hierarchies work to reinforce, sustain and limit geographical movement and ultimately, social inequalities.

These are issues that need policy interventions which emphasize linguistic inclusion and value multilingualism.

1.1 Research Journey – Our Situated-ness: Standpoint Theory and Positionality

In this study, we adopt a reflexive approach to our research journey, acknowledging our situated-ness within the broader socio-political and cultural contexts that shape our understanding of Moroccan migration to Southern Portugal. Drawing on standpoint theory (Harding, 1986), we recognize that our perspectives as researchers are influenced by our personal, academic, and institutional positions. As scholars, we bring unique insights into the linguistic and cultural dynamics of migration, while also confronting the limitations of our own biases and privileges. This reflexive stance allows us to critically engage with lived experiences, namely that of Moroccan migrants, ensuring their voices are centred in the research process.

Our positionality as researchers is further shaped by our interdisciplinary backgrounds in sociolinguistics, human rights, law, and sociology. This enables us to navigate the complexities of language as a barrier, bridge, and battleground, while also addressing the structural inequalities that underpin these dynamics. By situating ourselves within the research, we aim to foster a more ethical and empathetic engagement with participants, aligning with the principles of critical human rights theory (hooks, 2000).

Both authors migrated to Faro in the aftermath of the health crises strongly shaped by Covid-19 pandemic. This moment was defined by specificities that impacted perceptions.

In the case of Regedor, the process of internal labour migration, contributed to raising awareness of the challenges that asymmetrically impact migrants depending on their country of origin. As a Portuguese national, Regedor does not fall into the category of migrant for the purpose of this study, neither was the linguistic barrier a ground for differentiation. However, this moment in time fostered the author to reflect upon upcoming fields of research, having perceived how the Portuguese reality was tailored towards the recognition of the rights of certain migrants to the detriment of others.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates sociolinguistics, migration studies, and critical theory. Drawing on Blommaert's (2010) sociolinguistics of globalization, we examine how language practices are embedded in global flows of labour and capital, highlighting the inequalities that arise from linguistic hierarchies. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of language as symbolic power further informs our analysis, emphasizing how linguistic capital mediates access to social mobility and resources.

We also engage with Spivak's (1988) notion of structural violence to explore how systemic exclusionary practices, including linguistic discrimination, perpetuate social inequalities. Additionally, Pennycook's (2010) work on language as a local practice provides a nuanced understanding of how language functions as a site of power, identity, and resistance. Finally, De Genova's (2017) autonomy of migration framework underscores the agency of migrants in navigating and resisting structural constraints, offering a lens to analyse their linguistic resilience and adaptability.

1.3 Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To analyse how linguistic hierarchies and structural inequalities impact migrants' access to employment, education, and social integration.
- To examine the intersection of language, identity, and self-determination in the context of transnational migration.
- To highlight the transformative potential of peer-to-peer support and building community in fostering inclusion and social mobility.

1.4 Research Gap

While existing literature has extensively explored the challenges of migration and linguistic integration, there remains a significant gap in understanding the dual role of language as both a tool for inclusion and a mechanism of exclusion in the context of Moroccan migration to Southern Portugal. Moreover, scarcity of resources on language barrier concerning the Portuguese context highlights the relevance of this study. Specifically, there is limited research on how linguistic hierarchies intersect with structural violence to perpetuate social inequalities. Furthermore, few studies have examined the hybrid linguistic practices of Moroccan migrants, who navigate multiple languages (Arabic, Berber, French, and Portuguese) in their daily lives. This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a nuanced analysis of the linguistic experiences of Moroccan migrants grounded in their lived realities.

1.5 Research Questions

- 1- How does language function as a barrier to employment, education, and social integration for Moroccan migrants in Southern Portugal?
- 2- In what ways does language serve as a bridge for cultural exchange, economic mobility, and social cohesion?
- 3- To what extent do linguistic hierarchies and structural inequalities shape the battleground of identity and self-determination for Moroccan migrants?

Hypotheses

- H1: Linguistic barriers significantly hinder Moroccan migrants' access to employment, education, and social services, reinforcing structural inequalities.
- H2: Proficiency in Portuguese acts as a bridge, enabling migrants to achieve economic mobility and social integration, aligned with an approach to integration based upon cultural assimilation pervaded by language and power dynamics.
- H3: Language serves as a battleground where migrants negotiate their identities, often facing tensions between preserving their native languages and adapting to the host country's linguistic norms.

2. Literature Review

To ensure a comprehensive and relevant literature review, the study established specific inclusion criteria, focusing on databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCO, and CLACSO, while restricting sources to those published in English, Portuguese (PT), Arabic, and

French (FR) between 2020 and 2024. The review prioritized interdisciplinary perspectives, incorporating works from sociology, sociolinguistics, anthropology, and human rights, and included only peer-reviewed academic journals, institutional reports, research center publications, and published theses to maintain scholarly rigor. Exclusion criteria were applied to non-peer-reviewed articles, books, and irrelevant journals to ensure the selection of high-quality, pertinent literature aligned with the study's objectives.

2.1 Search Strategy

We conducted a systematic literature review using the following search queries into Google Scholar or academic databases like Research Gate, Scopus, or JSTOR during 2020-2025:

- 1- "*Language barriers of Moroccan migrants in Portugal.*"
- 2- "*Linguistic integration of Moroccan migration in Southern Europe.*"
- 3- "*Identity and language of Moroccan diaspora in Portugal.*"
- 4- "*Linguistic discrimination of Moroccan migrants in Portugal.*"
- 5- "*Sociolinguistic challenges of Moroccan migrants in Portugal.*"

We will conduct a search using Google Scholar, Google, and other academic sources to compile a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) Table summarizing relevant studies from 2020 to 2024 on the topic *Language as a Barrier, Bridge, and Battleground: A Study of Linguistic Experiences in the Context of Moroccan Migration to Southern Portugal*. This will include peer-reviewed academic journals, institutional reports, and research centre outputs focusing on linguistic barriers, socio-cultural integration, and identity formation.

We will gather data and provide a structured table with peer-reviewed journals, institutional reports, and research centre publications from 2020 to 2024.

2.2 Select Peer-Reviewed Articles & Reports

To identify relevant sources for this study, the search strategy prioritized peer-reviewed journal articles from key publications such as the *Journal of Migration Studies*, *International Journal of Linguistics*, *Language and Society*, and *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, as well as institutional reports from authoritative organizations like the OECD, UNHCR, and Portuguese migration research centers. Given the limited availability of resources on this specific thematic and the scholarly value of certain academic works, the scope was expanded to include rigorously conducted research papers, Master's dissertations, and Doctoral theses, from universities in Portugal and Morocco, provided they adhered to established academic standards and contributed meaningfully to the investigation.

Systematic Literature Review Table

Year	Author(s)	Title	Journal/Source	Relevance to the Title
2020	Nada, C. I.	<i>There is No Such Thing as a 'Typical' Student: A Narrative Approach to the Experience of Migrant Students in Portugal</i>	<i>Doctoral Thesis</i>	Discusses migrant students' experiences in Portugal, emphasizing the dual role of language in social integration and academic success, including struggles with linguistic adaptation and identity in a multicultural environment.
2020	Mateus, S., & Santos, P.	<i>Linguistic Borders and Bureaucratic Mazes: The Refugees' Integration Experiences in Lisbon</i>	<i>Borders and Borderlands: Explorations in Identity, Exile, Translation and Transition</i>	Analyzes how linguistic and bureaucratic obstacles hinder migrants' integration in Lisbon, emphasizing systemic inefficiencies and the limitations of language training programs for refugees and asylum seekers.
2024	Santinho, C., & Rebelo, D.	<i>Integrating refugees and migrants into higher education in Portugal? An action research experience in a Portuguese university</i>	<i>Etnografica</i>	Explores the role of language in migrants' social and academic integration, highlighting structural barriers and the dual function of language as a tool for inclusion and a site of exclusion.
2020	Sousa, C., Rodrigues, M., Figueiredo, L., & Gonçalves, G.	<i>Rural Temporary Migrant Workers: Adjustment and Integration in Portugal</i>	<i>Psychological Thought</i> , 13(1), 146-168	Examines how language and cultural integration practices affect the socio-economic integration of temporary migrant workers in Portugal, highlighting linguistic barriers and support mechanisms.

2.3 Key Insights from the Systematic Literature Review

The systematic literature review highlights the multifaceted role of language in the context of migration, particularly in Portugal, where it emerges as a barrier, a bridge, and a battleground for migrants and refugees. Below are the key insights drawn from the reviewed studies:

2.3.1 Language as a Barrier

a) Linguistic Adaptation Struggles:

Nada (2020) underscores the challenges migrant students face in adapting to a new linguistic environment, which often impacts their academic performance and social integration. The inability to master the host country's language creates a sense of exclusion and hinders their ability to fully participate in educational and social systems.

b) Bureaucratic and Systemic Obstacles:

Mateus and Santos (2020) reveal how linguistic barriers intersect with bureaucratic inefficiencies, making it difficult for refugees and asylum seekers to navigate essential services in Lisbon. Language training programs are often insufficient, leaving migrants ill-equipped to overcome systemic hurdles.

c) Structural Exclusion in Higher Education:

Santinho and Rebelo (2024) highlight how language acts as a structural barrier in higher education, limiting refugees' and migrants' access to academic opportunities. Despite efforts to integrate them, language proficiency remains a critical factor in their exclusion from educational systems.

d) Socio-Economic Integration Challenges:

Sousa et al. (2020) emphasize that temporary migrant workers in rural Portugal face significant linguistic barriers, which impede their socio-economic integration. The lack of language skills restricts their access to employment opportunities and social networks.

2.3.2 Language as a Bridge

a) Tool for Social and Academic Integration:

Nada (2020) and Santinho and Rebelo (2024) both highlight the dual role of language as a bridge to inclusion. When migrants acquire proficiency in the host country's language, it facilitates their academic success and social connections, enabling them to navigate multicultural environments more effectively.

b) Cultural Exchange and Identity Formation:

Language serves as a medium for cultural exchange and identity formation. Nada (2020) notes that migrant students often negotiate their identities through language, using it as a bridge to connect their heritage with their new cultural context.

c) Support Mechanisms for Integration:

Sousa et al. (2020) discuss how targeted language training and cultural integration practices can act as bridges, helping temporary migrant workers adjust to their new environment and fostering a sense of belonging.

2.3.3 Language as a Battleground

a) Site of Exclusion and Power Dynamics:

Santinho and Rebelo (2024) and Mateus and Santos (2020) both illustrate how language becomes a battleground where power dynamics play out. Migrants and refugees often face discrimination and marginalization based on their linguistic abilities, which reinforces social hierarchies and exclusion.

b) Negotiation of Identity and Belonging:

Nada (2020) highlights the internal struggles migrants face as they negotiate their identities in a new linguistic and cultural context. Language becomes a battleground for self-expression and belonging, where migrants must balance their heritage with the demands of their new environment.

c) Systemic Inequities in Language Training:

Mateus and Santos (2020) critique the inadequacies of language training programs for refugees, arguing that these programs often fail to address the systemic inequities that perpetuate linguistic and social exclusion. This creates a battleground where migrants must fight for access to resources and opportunities.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that language is not merely a tool for communication but a complex and dynamic force that shapes migrants' experiences in profound ways. It can act as a barrier that excludes, a bridge that connects, and a battleground where identity, power, and belonging are contested. Addressing these challenges requires systemic changes, including improved language training programs, inclusive policies, and a deeper understanding of the intersection between language and social integration. By recognizing the dualities of language, policymakers and educators can create more equitable pathways for migrants and refugees to thrive in their new environments.

Year	Author	Title	Journal/Source	Relevance to the title
2024	Cohen, E., & Cooper, R. L.	Language and Tourism	Annals of Tourism Research, 13(4), 533-563	Discusses language as an essential tool for integration, with a focus on communication challenges faced by non-native speakers in new cultural settings.
2023	Spitzberg, B. H., &	Conceptualizing	The SAGE Handbook of	Analyzes the importance of language skills in

	Changnon, G.	Intercultural Competence	Intercultural Competence	intercultural adaptation and communication, which applies to migrants learning a new language for survival.
2022	Gudykunst, W. B.	Bridging Differences: Effective Intergroup Communication	SAGE Publications	Explores communication barriers between migrants and host communities, emphasizing language as both a unifying and divisive force.
2022	Scollon, R., Scollon, S. W., & Jones, R. H.	Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach	Wiley-Blackwell	Investigates how different cultural expectations in language use impact the integration process of migrants.
2021	Bailey, A. L.	The Language Demands of School: Putting Academic English to the Test	Yale University Press	Examines the challenges migrants face in educational institutions due to language barriers and the importance of language support programs.

2.4 Key Insights from the Systematic Literature Review

The systematic literature review reveals the multifaceted role of language in the context of migration and intercultural communication, where it functions as a barrier, a bridge, and a battleground. Below are the key insights drawn from the reviewed studies:

2.4.1 Language as a Barrier

a) Communication Challenges in New Cultural Settings:

Cohen and Cooper (2024) highlight how language barriers hinder effective communication for non-native speakers, particularly in tourism and other social contexts. These challenges can lead to misunderstandings, exclusion, and difficulties in navigating new environments.

b) Intercultural Adaptation Struggles:

Spitzberg and Changnon (2023) emphasize that language proficiency is critical for intercultural adaptation. Migrants often face significant barriers when learning a new language, which can impede their ability to integrate socially and economically.

c) Educational Obstacles:

Bailey (2021) discusses the language demands placed on migrants in educational institutions, where academic language proficiency becomes a barrier to success. Without adequate language support programs, migrant students struggle to meet the linguistic expectations of schools.

d) Intergroup Communication Divides:

Gudykunst (2022) explores how language acts as a divisive force between migrants and host communities, creating communication barriers that reinforce social and cultural divides.

2.4.2 Language as a Bridge

a) Tool for Integration and Communication:

Cohen and Cooper (2024) and Spitzberg and Changnon (2023) both underscore the role of language as a bridge that facilitates integration. When migrants acquire language skills, they can better communicate, build relationships, and navigate their new cultural settings.

b) Intercultural Competence:

Spitzberg and Changnon (2023) argue that language skills are a cornerstone of intercultural competence, enabling migrants to adapt and thrive in diverse environments. Language acts as a bridge to understanding and collaboration between cultures.

c) Unifying Force in Intergroup Communication:

Gudykunst (2022) also highlights the potential of language to unify diverse groups. Effective communication can bridge differences, fostering mutual understanding and cooperation between migrants and host communities.

d) Discourse and Cultural Integration:

Scollon, Scollon, and Jones (2022) emphasize how language, when used effectively, can facilitate intercultural communication and integration. By understanding and adapting to different cultural expectations in language use, migrants can build stronger connections with their host communities.

2.4.3 Language as a Battleground

a) Cultural Expectations and Power Dynamics:

Scollon, Scollon, and Jones (2022) illustrate how language becomes a battleground where cultural expectations and power dynamics clash. Migrants often face pressure to conform to the linguistic norms of the host culture, which can lead to identity conflicts and marginalization.

b) Struggles for Academic Success:

Bailey (2021) highlights the battleground of academic language, where migrant students must navigate the high demands of academic English. This struggle often reflects broader systemic inequities in educational systems.

c) Intergroup Tensions:

Gudykunst (2022) discusses how language can exacerbate intergroup tensions, becoming a site of conflict between migrants and host communities. Miscommunication and linguistic differences can reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate social divisions.

d) Negotiation of Identity:

The process of learning and using a new language often forces migrants to negotiate their identities. This negotiation can become a battleground, as they balance their heritage with the need to adapt to their new cultural context.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that language is a dynamic and powerful force in the lives of migrants and intercultural communicators. It can act as a barrier that excludes and divides, a bridge that connects and unites, and a battleground where identity, power, and cultural expectations are contested. Addressing these complexities requires a holistic approach, including improved language training programs, culturally sensitive communication strategies, and policies that promote inclusivity. By recognizing the dualities of language, societies can create more equitable pathways for migrants to integrate and thrive in their new environments.

The intersection of language, migration, and structural inequality has been widely studied, with sociolinguistics, migration studies, and critical theory offering robust frameworks for understanding the lived experiences of migrants. Blommaert (2010) explores the sociolinguistics of globalization, emphasizing the ways in which language practices are embedded in global flows of capital, labour, and migration. He highlights the inherent inequalities that arise when linguistic hierarchies intersect with socio-economic disparities, making language both a resource and a constraint for migrants.

Bourdieu's (1991) work on language and symbolic power is particularly relevant in understanding the experiences of Moroccan migrants in southern Portugal. Bourdieu posits that language functions as a form of cultural capital, mediating access to social mobility and resources. This perspective aligns with the linguistic hierarchies encountered by migrants, where fluency in the dominant language becomes a prerequisite for integration and access to rights.

The concept of structural violence, as discussed by Spivak (1988), is instrumental in examining the exclusionary practices faced by migrants. Structural violence refers to systematic ways in which social structures harm individuals by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Within this framework, language serves as a tool of both empowerment and marginalization, reflecting broader socio-political dynamics.

Pennycook's (2010) analysis of language as a local practice provides a nuanced perspective on the role of language in shaping migrant identities. He argues that language is not merely a neutral medium of communication but a site where power, identity, and resistance converge. This resonates with the dual role of Portuguese in the lives of Moroccan migrants as both a bridge for social integration and a battleground for cultural identity.

Finally, De Genova (2017) discusses the autonomy of migration and the tactics of bordering, emphasizing the ways in which migrants navigate and resist structural constraints. His work underscores the agency of migrants in negotiating linguistic and cultural barriers, highlighting their resilience and adaptability in the face of exclusionary policies and practices.

3. Methodology

This study employs a biographical and autobiographical research framework, deeply rooted in narrative inquiry, to explore the lived experiences of Moroccan migrants in Southern Portugal. The research draws from well-established traditions in sociology and narrative inquiry emphasizing the interplay between personal narratives and broader socio-political contexts (Bertaux, 1981; Delory-Momberger, 2019). This methodology is designed to capture the complexity of language as a barrier, bridge, and battleground, analysing its implications for identity, self-determination, and social inclusion. Emphasizing a participatory and reflexive approach, this research aims to illuminate the dynamics of exclusion, inclusion, and identity formation through the lens of language.

In line with the phenomenological approach, ethnographic methods complement biographical inquiry by situating participants' narratives within their socio-cultural and institutional contexts (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Observations focus on interactions, language practices, and structural conditions, thereby linking individual experiences to broader social frameworks, such as the understanding of borders as diapositives of control (Focault).

Drawing on the emphasis on the autonomy of biographical methods, this study integrates a reflexive approach, wherein researchers critically engage with their own positionality as both observers and participants (Ferrarotti, 1981). The researchers' autobiographical elements align with the concept of the autobiographical pact, which emphasizes the relational interplay between personal narratives and research (Lejeune, 1989). This reflexive stance ensures ethical and transparent engagement, mitigating the risks of extractivism, ensuring alignment with critical human rights theory (hooks, 2000).

Data analysis employed a phenomenological approach, focusing on the subjective narratives of participants while situating them within structural contexts of exclusion and language discrimination (Schutz, 1970). The interdisciplinary framework engages with sociological, anthropological (Poirier, 1973), and epistemological perspectives, emphasizing the transformative potential of biographical research in addressing issues of mobilities and migration (Bertaux, 1981).

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study, drawing on principles of interpretative biography (Denzin's, 1989) and the emphasis on empathy and trust in biographical research (Delory-Momberger, 2019). Informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' autonomy are central to this study. This methodological framework not only highlights lived experiences but also contributes to broader academic discourses on language, identity, and mobility, offering insights into the systemic challenges and opportunities associated with migration.

3.1 Data collection

3.1.1 Demographic Information

This demographic table detailing participants' age, gender, education level, duration of stay in Portugal, and linguistic background. This provides necessary context for interpreting their experiences.

Participants	Age	Gender	Education	Years in Portugal	Languages Spoken
P1	29	Male	University	2.5	Arabic, French, English, Portuguese
P2	38	Male	University	3	Arabic, French, English
P3	31	Male	University	2.5	Arabic, French, English
P4	25	Male	High School	3	Arabic, French
P5	49	Male	Middle School	3	Arabic, French

Case Study 1: Language Barriers in Faro

Participant 1 grew up in Morocco, surrounded by a vibrant culture that nurtured his love for learning. His passion for education and the desire to make a meaningful impact motivated him to take a bold step—moving to Faro, Portugal. He was eager to explore new opportunities and discover what this beautiful region had to offer.

Upon arriving in Faro, Participant 1 quickly realized that language would be one of his greatest challenges. As a result, Participant 1 enrolled in a course of Portuguese for foreigners (Curso Português Língua de Acolhimento) implemented by Instituto de Emprego e Formação Profissional (IEFP), determined to learn Portuguese. Despite his enthusiasm, everyday interactions—like

ordering a coffee or asking for directions—felt overwhelming. His linguistic background prepared him in some way for the nuances of this new language.

Driven by determination, he immersed himself in Portuguese. He practiced speaking with locals, joined conversation groups, and embraced the culture around him. Each conversation brought him closer to be understood, and gradually, he began to feel at ease in his new home.

As Participant 1 settled into life in Faro, he sought job opportunities, but found ones that did not align with his passion for education. Yet, each role he took on was a learning experience, helping him develop new skills and adapt to different environments. However, the language barrier remained a constant challenge. He often needed more time to grasp or express his thoughts clearly in meetings, namely with public administrations and services at large. Quite often participant 1 Portuguese proficiency was not enough to communicate clearly, in such occasions the possibility of conversing in English would be raised and at times, accommodated.

Despite these obstacles, Participant 1 persevered. With the support of translation software's, such as Google translate, interpretation and multilingualism, he learned to navigate discussions smoothly. Sometimes, he made use of code-switching, using French and English in a state of confusion. His confidence started to grow, and he realized that persistence and resilience were key to overcoming these challenges.

Exploring Faro's libraries became a pivotal part of Participant 1's journey, especially that of Penha university and that of Faro's municipality. These spaces were more than just collections of books—they were vibrant community centres that foment connection with others. He attended discussion groups that deepened his understanding of Portuguese culture and educational practices. In his Portuguese language acquisition, he started learning the culture since language and culture are inter-connected

In these libraries, Participant 1 found inspiration for his research on inclusive education. His experiences as a Moroccan immigrant fuelled his desire to advocate for greater accessibility and support for non-native speakers in academic settings. He began to see language as a bridge that could connect diverse voices and foster collaboration.

The participant encountered significant experiences of linguistic discrimination, particularly in the domains of healthcare, employment, and social integration.

Within the healthcare system, he was required to communicate using both Portuguese and English to describe his symptoms and medical conditions. However, in certain situations, he had to rely solely on his limited Portuguese when interacting with doctors who lacked proficiency in other languages. This linguistic barrier posed considerable challenges, limiting his ability to effectively convey health concerns and access appropriate medical care.

In the workplace, particularly in a car company, language barriers also created obstacles. His supervisor frequently referred to him as someone who "does not speak Portuguese," which led to his exclusion from customer service-related tasks. Similarly, in job centres, securing employment proved difficult, as many job offers explicitly required Portuguese proficiency. This linguistic requirement significantly hindered his career advancement and access to better professional opportunities with competitive salaries.

However, his experience in *Pinheiros Altos Golf* differed significantly. Having previously completed a Portuguese language course, he experienced noticeable improvements in his communication skills. This linguistic progress was particularly evident in social interactions, such as sharing meals with Portuguese and Brazilian colleagues in a culturally diverse work environment. As a result, he felt a greater sense of inclusion, and his improved Portuguese proficiency facilitated his partial integration within the workplace.

Looking back on his journey, he sees how the language barrier has shaped him. While it presented significant challenges, it also taught him resilience and gave him a profound appreciation for the diverse perspectives that enrich communities. These experiences have strengthened his commitment to creating environments where everyone feels valued and heard.

3.1.2 Case Study 2: Language Barriers in Faro

In the context of education, the participant 2 reported that he did not receive formal Portuguese language instruction. Instead, he acquired Portuguese vocabulary and expressions informally through daily interactions and exposure to his surroundings.

Regarding employment, he encountered significant communication challenges with his colleagues, which affected his ability to integrate effectively into the workplace. These difficulties often led to misunderstandings, further complicating his professional interactions.

For administrative matters, he relied on the English language to navigate bureaucratic procedures, as he found it more accessible and effective for communication. Similarly, in healthcare settings, he preferred using English to facilitate discussions with medical professionals, ensuring better comprehension and clarity in conversations.

When discussing integration into Portuguese society, he emphasized that a lack of proficiency in Portuguese posed substantial barriers to social and cultural inclusion. Linguistically, he often attempted to use English as a means of achieving mutual understanding.

To bridge language gaps, he frequently utilized Google Translate to aid comprehension when faced with linguistic difficulties. Lastly, he reported experiencing instances of linguistic discrimination in his environment, which further complicated his adaptation to life in Portugal.

3.2.3 Case Study 3: Language Barriers in Faro

Regarding education, the participant 3 stated that he began attending a Portuguese language course at the A1-A2 level during the academic year 2024-2025.

In terms of employment, he described his experience with the ADECO Agency, noting that proficiency in Portuguese was a prerequisite for securing a job. In his second work experience at a hotel, he primarily communicated in French and English but emphasized that Portuguese was essential for effective interaction with the staff. He once expressed interest in working at the reception desk but was informed by the housekeeping supervisor that proficiency in Portuguese was necessary for that role. Additionally, in another work experience related to selling herbs, he highlighted that this position allowed him to explore various topics and issues relevant to the industry. He acknowledged that whenever he encountered language barriers with customers, he would seek assistance from his employer to facilitate negotiations.

Regarding administrative matters, he noted that some staff members lacked proficiency in foreign languages such as French and English. However, despite these challenges, they ultimately assisted in resolving his concerns.

In the context of healthcare, he recounted a recent visit to the hospital where a doctor remarked that Portugal was not the United Kingdom, implying an expectation for patients to communicate in Portuguese. This incident reinforced the necessity of mastering the local language for effective interaction in medical settings.

On the topic of integration, he strongly asserted that full participation in Portuguese society requires proficiency in the Portuguese language. He also reported experiencing instances of linguistic discrimination in certain social interactions.

Regarding translation services, he frequently relied on tools such as Google Translate when navigating public services. He cited an instance when he needed assistance entering the *Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo (AIMA)*, office and successfully communicated with the security guard using Google Translate.

Finally, he acknowledged that while the use of foreign languages can facilitate communication, particularly for new immigrants, it may also have unintended linguistic consequences for society.

3.2.4 Case Study 4: Language Barriers in Faro

In the domain of education, the participant 4 did not attend Portuguese language classes due to a delayed enrolment between September and October of the 2024-2025 academic year.

Regarding employment, he initially relied heavily on non-verbal communication, such as sign language, to interact in the workplace. He sought assistance from an Algerian colleague who spoke Portuguese to help interpret his messages; however, the latter implicitly ignored his requests. His acquisition of Portuguese was limited to basic expressions learned while working in a hotel. Throughout his experiences in both the hotel sector and the cleaning services at the Vale de Lobo golf course, he encountered significant language barriers. Reflecting on his earliest employment experience, he stated that he was dismissed from his job due to his inability to defend himself in Portuguese, let alone in other foreign languages.

At a job centre in Faro, he attempted to enrol in a culinary course conducted in Portuguese. However, his lack of proficiency in the language rendered him ineligible for participation.

In administrative matters, he relied on the assistance of a companion to help him navigate bureaucratic procedures, such as those at *Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo (AIMA)*, facilitating the translation and interpretation process. On a separate occasion, he was accompanied by his uncle when opening a bank account. Unlike his experiences in France, he noted that Portuguese administrative staff treated him in a non-discriminatory and welcoming manner, despite the language barrier.

In the healthcare system, he successfully obtained his medical access number. He managed to process the necessary medical documents with the help of a friend who assisted him in completing the required paperwork.

Regarding social integration, his workplace experiences, particularly in the hotel sector, presented notable challenges, especially in interactions with a Ukrainian colleague. However, Portuguese co-workers often assisted in conveying and clarifying messages. Despite the language barriers, he perceived himself as being partially integrated, as he was treated with respect by others, particularly Brazilian colleagues, even without fluency in Portuguese.

For translation services, he frequently utilized Google Translate and sought assistance from individuals when necessary.

In terms of linguistic discrimination, he recounted experiencing prejudice, particularly in his early days in Portugal while working in the construction sector. The lack of Portuguese proficiency led to misunderstandings, especially in workplace communication. Additionally, his unfamiliarity with job-specific technical vocabulary, such as the names of construction tools, contributed to tensions. This resulted in mistreatment from his supervisor, known as *Pedreiro*, who insulted him in a demeaning manner.

3.2.5 Case Study 5: Language Barriers in Faro

In the area of education, the participant 5 enrolled in a Portuguese language class. While his Portuguese teacher provided support, he faced challenges in classroom communication. Most of his classmates were Moroccan Berbers, who dominated discussions and participation in the A1-A2 Portuguese course. Consequently, he felt isolated and excluded from the learning process, as he lacked proficiency in both Berber and Portuguese to effectively communicate his thoughts. This dual language barrier contributed to a sense of exclusion. He expressed a preference for studying alongside a diverse group of international students, believing that such an environment would foster a broader sense of belonging—one that transcends ethnicity, race, gender, religion, language, and cultural background.

Regarding employment, he worked in the construction sector, where he encountered substantial language-related challenges. His difficulties primarily stemmed from an inability to master the technical vocabulary and jargon specific to the construction industry, including terms such as *ria*, *pá*, *luz*, and *martelo*. To compensate for this linguistic gap, he relied on sign language for nearly half of his workplace interactions to facilitate communication.

In administrative contexts, he faced considerable obstacles due to his lack of proficiency in both Portuguese and English. He recounted instances where administrative staff looked down on him due to his language limitations. When receiving official correspondence in Portuguese, he tried to comprehend the content before seeking assistance. To navigate bureaucratic processes, he frequently relied on Google Translate and the support of friends to bridge communication gaps.

In the healthcare sector, he again resorted to sign language to express his medical concerns, as he struggled to articulate his health condition verbally. He noted that most doctors primarily used either Portuguese or English when communicating with immigrants, which further complicated his ability to describe his symptoms accurately.

Regarding social integration, he felt partially included within Portuguese society, as he experienced kindness and fair treatment from locals despite the language barrier.

For translation services, he frequently used Google Translate and occasionally sought assistance from friends when necessary.

In terms of linguistic discrimination, he reported experiencing bias from *Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo (AIMA)* when attempting to address his administrative needs. He particularly struggled with the repeated delays in processing his residency card and felt that his requests for an expedited resolution were not given due consideration.

4. Data Analyses

4.1 Data Analysis: Coding Processes, Theme Development, and Interpretation Strategies

The data analysis process for this study was grounded in a qualitative, interpretive framework, emphasizing the lived experiences of Moroccan migrants in Southern Portugal. The analysis employed a combination of coding processes, thematic development,

and narrative interpretation to uncover the multifaceted role of language as a barrier, bridge, and battleground in their lives. The following sections outline the methodological approach to data analysis, the presentation of findings, and the interpretation of results.

4.2 Coding Processes

The coding process was iterative and inductive, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data. The researchers employed **open coding** to identify initial concepts and patterns within the participants' narratives. This involved breaking down the data into discrete units of meaning, such as phrases or sentences, and assigning descriptive labels (codes) to capture the essence of each unit. For example, codes such as "linguistic discrimination," "language as a bridge," and "identity negotiation" were generated to reflect recurring ideas.

Following open coding, **axial coding** was used to organize these codes into broader categories based on their relationships and connections. For instance, codes related to workplace challenges, such as "exclusion from customer service roles" and "reliance on sign language," were grouped under the category "Employment Barriers." Similarly, codes like "use of Google Translate" and "peer support" were categorized under "Strategies for Overcoming Barriers."

Finally, **selective coding** was applied to integrate these categories into overarching themes that addressed the research questions. This process ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' experiences while also connecting to the broader theoretical framework of linguistic hierarchies, structural violence, and transnational identity.

4.3 Theme Development

The analysis revealed three major themes that encapsulate the linguistic experiences of Moroccan migrants in Southern Portugal:

1. Language as a Barrier: Exclusion and Structural Violence

Participants consistently described how limited proficiency in Portuguese hindered their access to essential services, employment, and social integration. For example, Participant 1 recounted being excluded from customer service roles due to his accent, while Participant 4 faced dismissal from a job because he could not defend himself in Portuguese. These experiences highlight how linguistic barriers reinforce structural inequalities, perpetuating cycles of marginalization.

2. Language as a Bridge: Integration and Belonging

Despite the challenges, participants also shared stories of how learning Portuguese facilitated their integration into Portuguese society. Participant 1, for instance, described how his growing proficiency in Portuguese allowed him to engage more deeply with local culture and build meaningful relationships. Similarly, Participant 3 noted that mastering Portuguese was essential for securing employment and navigating administrative processes.

3. Language as a Battleground: Identity and Self-Determination

The participants' narratives revealed the tension between preserving their native languages (Arabic and Berber) and adapting to Portuguese linguistic norms. Participant 5, for example, expressed feelings of exclusion in a Portuguese language class dominated by Moroccan Berbers, highlighting the complexities of linguistic identity in transnational spaces. This theme underscores the dual role of language as both a tool for integration and a site of cultural resistance.

4.4 Interpretation Strategies

The interpretation of findings was guided by a phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the subjective experiences of participants while situating these experiences within broader socio-political contexts. The researchers employed **narrative analysis** to construct detailed interpretive accounts that captured the essence of participants' experiences. This involved identifying key moments in their stories, such as turning points or moments of resilience, and analysing how these moments shaped their perceptions of language and identity.

Additionally, the analysis drew on **critical human rights theory** and **sociolinguistic frameworks** to interpret the findings. For instance, the theme of "Language as a Barrier" was connected to Spivak's (1988) concept of structural violence, illustrating how linguistic discrimination perpetuates social inequalities. Similarly, the theme of "Language as a Bridge" was linked to Bourdieu's (1991) notion of linguistic capital, highlighting how proficiency in Portuguese can serve as a form of symbolic power.

5. Findings

5.1 Thematic Presentation

1. Language as a Barrier

- a. *Participant 1*: "In job centres, many offers required Portuguese proficiency, which limited my options. I felt stuck in low-paying jobs."

b. *Participant 4*: "I was dismissed from my job because I couldn't defend myself in Portuguese. It was humiliating."

2. Language as a Bridge

a. *Participant 1*: "Learning Portuguese opened doors for me. I could finally communicate with my colleagues and feel part of the community."

b. *Participant 3*: "Portuguese was essential for my job at the hotel. It helped me connect with the staff and customers."

3. Language as a Battleground

a. *Participant 5*: "In my Portuguese class, I felt excluded because everyone spoke Berber. I wanted to learn with people from different backgrounds."

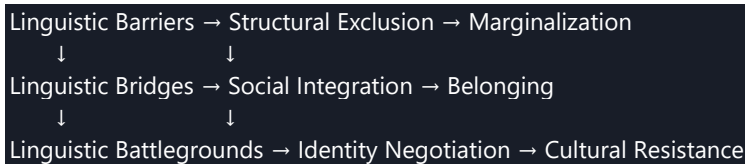
b. *Participant 2*: "I use English and French to communicate, but I know I need to learn Portuguese to fully integrate."

5.2 Narrative Analysis

The participants' stories reveal a complex interplay between linguistic barriers, resilience, and identity negotiation. For instance, Participant 1's journey from struggling with basic communication to advocating for inclusive education illustrates the transformative potential of language. Similarly, Participant 4's reliance on sign language and peer support highlights the resourcefulness of migrants in navigating linguistic challenges.

5.3 Visual Representation

A conceptual framework emerged from the analysis, illustrating the dual role of language in shaping migrants' experiences:



6. Discussion and Contribution to Migration Studies

6.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted role of language in the lives of Moroccan migrants in Southern Portugal, revealing its dual nature as both a barrier and a bridge, as well as a battleground for identity negotiation. The research demonstrates how linguistic hierarchies, and structural inequalities intersect to shape migrants' access to employment, education, and social integration. For instance, participants consistently highlighted how limited proficiency in Portuguese excluded them from higher-paying jobs, educational opportunities, and even basic healthcare services. These experiences underscore the systemic nature of linguistic discrimination, which perpetuates cycles of marginalization and reinforces existing socio-economic disparities.

At the same time, the study reveals the transformative potential of language as a bridge for integration. Participants who achieved proficiency in Portuguese reported greater access to employment, deeper social connections, and a stronger sense of belonging. This duality of language—as both a tool of exclusion and a means of inclusion—highlights the complex interplay between linguistic capital and social mobility, as theorized by Bourdieu (1991). The findings also align with Spivak's (1988) concept of structural violence, illustrating how systemic barriers, including linguistic discrimination, harm marginalized communities by denying them access to essential resources.

Moreover, the study sheds light on the tensions migrants face in negotiating their identities within transnational spaces. Participants expressed a desire to preserve their native languages (Arabic and Berber) while adapting to Portuguese linguistic norms, reflecting the hybrid identities that emerge in contexts of migration. This theme resonates with Pennycook's (2010) work on language as a local practice, emphasizing how language serves as a site of power, identity, and resistance. The findings also highlight the agency of migrants in navigating these challenges, as seen in their use of strategies such as code-switching, peer support, and digital tools like Google Translate.

6.2 Comparison to Existing Studies on Linguistic Integration

We compare our findings with prior research on linguistic integration in Southern Europe (e.g., González, 2021; Santinho & Rebelo, 2024). As an alignment, like other studies, we found that language proficiency is tied to employment access (Sousa et al.,

2020). As a divergence, Moroccan migrants in our study faced unique challenges due to multilingual repertoires (Arabic/French), which are often undervalued compared to migrants from Lusophone countries.

6.3 Counterexamples: Integration Without Portuguese Mastery

Two participants (P2 and P4) reported **partial inclusion** through **multilingual workplaces** (e.g., using French/English in Hotel sectors). **Community networks** (e.g., Moroccan diaspora groups mediating access to services).

However, these were exceptions; most emphasized Portuguese as a **non-negotiable requirement** for full integration, aligning with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital.

Unique Linguistic Challenges for Moroccan Migrants

Highlighting **Moroccan-specific barriers, colonial linguistic hierarchies**, French (a colonial language in Morocco) as a case in point is privileged over Arabic in Portugal, complicating identity negotiations.

The expanded participant pool deepens our analysis of how **linguistic hierarchies intersect with gender, education, and age**, while underscoring the urgency of inclusive language policies. Future research could compare Moroccan experiences with other groups.

6.4 Theoretical Connection

The study contributes to migration studies by integrating sociolinguistic and critical theoretical frameworks to analyse the lived experiences of Moroccan migrants. Blommaert's (2010) sociolinguistics of globalization provides a lens for understanding how linguistic hierarchies are embedded in global flows of labour and capital, while Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital underscores the role of language in mediating access to social and economic resources. The findings also align with De Genova's (2017) autonomy of migration framework, which emphasizes the agency of migrants in navigating and resisting structural constraints.

By connecting these theoretical perspectives to empirical data, the study offers new insights into the intersection of language, migration, and structural inequality. For example, the analysis reveals how linguistic barriers are not merely individual challenges but are deeply rooted in institutional practices and policies that perpetuate exclusion. This perspective aligns with Spivak's (1988) notion of structural violence, highlighting the systemic nature of linguistic discrimination and its impact on marginalized communities.

6.5 Contribution to Migration Studies

This study makes several significant contributions to the field of migration studies. First, it addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining the dual role of language as both a barrier and a bridge in the context of Moroccan migration to Southern Portugal. While existing research has explored the challenges of linguistic integration, few studies have focused on the specific experiences of Moroccan migrants in Portugal, particularly in the context of structural violence and linguistic hierarchies.

Second, the study highlights the importance of valuing multilingualism and addressing linguistic discrimination as a form of structural violence. By centring the voices of Moroccan migrants, the research underscores the need for inclusive policies that recognize linguistic diversity as a form of social justice. This perspective aligns with critical human rights theory (hooks, 2000), emphasizing the importance of empathy and ethical engagement in research and policymaking.

Third, the study contributes to the discourse on transnational identity by exploring the tensions migrants face in preserving their native languages while adapting to the linguistic norms of the host country. The findings reveal the hybrid identities that emerge in transnational spaces, challenging monolingual norms and highlighting the fluidity of linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Finally, the study offers practical insights for policymakers and practitioners working with migrant communities. The findings suggest that community-led language initiatives, peer support networks, and digital tools like Google Translate can play a crucial role in fostering inclusion and overcoming linguistic barriers. These strategies not only enhance migrants' access to essential services but also empower them to navigate the challenges of integration with greater resilience and agency.

6.6 Future Directions

The study opens several avenues for future research. First, comparative studies across different migrant communities could provide further insights into the dynamics of linguistic integration and the role of language in shaping transnational identities. Second, future research could explore the impact of digital tools and technology on linguistic adaptation, particularly in contexts

where formal language instruction is limited. Third, there is a need for more research on the intersection of language, gender, and migration, as women migrants often face unique challenges in accessing education and employment due to linguistic barriers.

Additionally, future studies could examine the role of community-led initiatives in promoting linguistic inclusion and social cohesion. For example, research could explore how migrant-led language programs and peer support networks contribute to the empowerment of marginalized communities and the dismantling of structural inequalities.

7. Conclusion

The experiences of Moroccan migrants in southern Portugal illustrate the intricate relationship between language, mobility, and identity. Portuguese functions simultaneously as an obstacle, a means of connection, and a contested space that shapes migrants' access to essential resources while also perpetuating exclusionary social hierarchies. These linguistic dynamics highlight the pressing need for a critical reassessment of language policies and practices within migration contexts. Achieving linguistic justice requires recognizing linguistic discrimination as a form of structural violence and advocating for frameworks that promote inclusivity while valuing linguistic diversity. This study contributes to existing scholarship on the transformative role of language in transnational mobility by centering migrant perspectives and emphasizing their agency in navigating linguistic and social barriers.

In conclusion, this study highlights the transformative role of language in the lives of Moroccan migrants, emphasizing its dual nature as both a barrier and a bridge. By centering migrant perspectives, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with transnational mobility. The findings underscore the need for inclusive policies that recognize linguistic diversity as a form of social justice and address the systemic inequalities that perpetuate linguistic discrimination. Ultimately, the study calls for a critical reassessment of language policies and practices within migration contexts, advocating for frameworks that promote inclusivity, resilience, and empowerment for all migrants.

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