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# The Hierarchization of Educational Rights of Minorities

## A Critical Analysis of Discourses on Multilingualism in South Tyrolean Preschools

Nadja Thoma

**Abstract:** The article critically analyzes sociopolitical discourses about language(s) and multilingualism in South Tyrolean preschools by combining political and discourse theory. Drawing on empirical material from a discussion on the topic broadcast on public regional television, in which representatives of politics, research, pedagogical practice and parents participated, the author describes a hierarchization of educational rights in favor of the 'German' group, which is constructed as endangered. Through references to the historical era of fascism and Italianization measures associated with it, a continuity of minorization is constructed that requires special protection of the German group and makes it possible to demand the exclusion of non-German positioned children from the educational system. Overall, the analysis reveals a reversal of linguistic majority and minority relations. The targeted monolingualization and mono-ethnicization of preschools is legitimized with a quasi-natural authority of the Second Autonomy Statute, which can be read as a strategy of depoliticization.

**Keywords:** educational policy, minorization, depoliticization, multilingualism, racism, Critical Discourse Analysis

**Titel:** Die Hierarchisierung von Bildungsrechten von Minderheiten. Eine kritische Analyse von Diskursen über Mehrsprachigkeit in Südtiroler Kindergärten.

**Zusammenfassung:** Mit einer Verknüpfung von Politik- und Diskurstheorie geht der Artikel gesellschaftspolitischen Diskursen über Sprache(n) und Mehrsprachigkeit in Südtiroler Kindergärten nach. Auf der empirischen Basis einer Diskussion, die im regionalen Fernsehen ausgestrahlt wurde, und an der Vertreter:innen aus Politik, Wissenschaft, pädagogischer Praxis und Eltern teilnahmen, rekonstruiert der Text eine Hierarchisierung von Bildungsrechten zugunsten der ‚deutschen‘ Gruppe, die als gefährdet dargestellt wird. Über Bezugnahmen auf die historische Epoche des Faschismus und der damit verbundenen Italianisierungsmaßnahmen wird eine Kontinuität der Minorisierung konstruiert, die besonderen Schutz für die ‚deutsche‘ Gruppe erfordert und es ermöglicht, den Ausschluss nicht-deutsch positionierter Kinder aus dem Bildungssystem zu fordern. Insgesamt zeigt sich im Material eine Umkehrung von Mehr- und Minderheitsbeziehungen. Die von bestimmten Gruppen angestrebte Monolingualisierung und Mono-Ethnisierung von Kindergärten wird mit einer quasi-natürlichen Autorität des Zweiten Autonomiestatutes begründet, was sich als Strategie der Depolitisierung lesen lässt.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Bildungspolitik, Minorisierung, Entpolitisierung, Mehrsprachigkeit, Rassismus, Kritische Diskursanalyse

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

With the slogan “Vorrang für deutsche Kinder in deutschen Kindergärten” (Priority for German children in German preschools)<sup>2</sup>, the right-wing populist party “South-Tyrolean Freedom Party” (Süd-Tiroler Freiheit) presented a poster campaign in 2018 aimed at expressing its demands for the monolingualization and mono-ethnicization of kindergartens in South Tyrol. Although these demands are far from representative of the political mainstream, multilingualism in early childhood education has been much debated in the South Tyrolean public and is a language and educational policy issue which has been attracting attention internationally.

Research across different countries and educational systems in migration societies has revealed that children without a so-called migration background<sup>3</sup> are still seen as the norm and standard of childhood. The distinction between children ‘with’ and ‘without’ a migration background, though often integrated into the rhetoric of enabling participation and recognition, produces children who are marked as migrants lacking crucial characteristics in opposition to normal and thus desirable childhoods (Machold/Mecheril 2019: 365). Language(s) and children’s linguistic repertoires (Busch 2012) are at the center of migration-related discourses of early childhood. From a sociolinguistic perspective, multilingual and translanguaging practices (García/Lin 2017) represent a normality in multilingual societies. However, studies have revealed a strong connection between languages and identity construction (and threat) by language policy and practice (Becker-Cavallin/Knoll 2021), and that translanguaging realities in the classroom are often interpreted as a problem that needs to be overcome (Panagiotopoulou/Kassis 2016). Researchers across different regional and national kindergarten contexts have revealed a monolingualization of communication with children (Machold 2015; Neumann/Seele 2014; Zettl 2019) and found that educators often imagine the familial linguistic practices of children as monolingual (Kuhn/Diehm 2015: 116). In addition, studies have shown that pedagogical practices often construct differentiations between migrant and non-migrant children through the use of different individual languages or registers (Knoll/Jaeger 2020; Seele 2015). However, studies have also demonstrated that preschool teachers engage in different forms of translanguaging pedagogies (e. g. Kirsch 2020).

The present article aims at reconstructing sociopolitical discourses about language(s) in preschools, taking South Tyrol as an example. As in other historically multilingual regions and nation states, social and educational policy issues in South Tyrol are predominantly negotiated along ethnolinguistic affiliations. Parallel to a societal division along three officially recognized languages (Italian, German, Ladin), there are three school tracks with different languages of instruction. The distribution of children with different linguistic repertoires in German, Italian and Ladin preschools has been a socio-politically contested issue in recent decades. In respective discourses, the presence of children who are not positioned as

1 I would like to thank the editorial team, two anonymous reviewers, Anastasja Giacomuzzi and Verena Platzgummer for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

2 [https://gas.social/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/stf\\_plakat\\_deutsche\\_kindergarten.jpg](https://gas.social/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/stf_plakat_deutsche_kindergarten.jpg) (19.11.2021). In including the visual presentation in the analysis, two further aspects become apparent: First, the different font colors white and black allow for another reading, namely “German children German preschools”, a formulation that presumably comes even closer to the party’s claims. Second, the prototype of a ‘German child’ is visually represented by a blond, blue-eyed child.

3 For the German categorization “migration background” see Machold/Mecheril (2011); Stošić (2017).

‘German’<sup>4</sup> at preschools with German as the language of instruction is presented as a non-normality and as a new development which is evaluated alternately as a problem, challenge, or opportunity.

Based on empirical data from a discussion on the topic broadcast in 2019 on public regional television, in which representatives of politics, the sciences, pedagogical practice and parents participated, I will consider the following questions: What forms of media discourse and power of representation can be reconstructed? How do the participants in the discussion discursively negotiate the entanglements of migration, multilingualism, and education? What tasks, duties and responsibilities are attributed to relevant actors, what are the (corresponding) arguments, and how are these referred to?

The article first provides a brief overview on the sociolinguistic background of the present study (section 2). It then proceeds to democracy and discourse theory as a theoretical and methodological framework for the study of education and language policy discourses (section 3) and then presents and analyzes empirical data (section 4). Conclusions are presented in section 5.

## 2 Sociolinguistic background of the present study

South Tyrol is the northernmost province in Italy and shares borders with Austria and Switzerland. After World War I, the province was annexed to Italy. When the fascist regime came to power in 1922, far-reaching Italianization measures followed: These included the Italianization of place and proper names, the dissolution of German-language schools, the dismissal of German-speaking teachers and other professionals, and the introduction of an exclusively Italian school system (Alber 2012: 401; Grote 2012: 3552). The so-called ‘Catacomb’ schools, organized by priests and teachers who had lost their jobs under the fascist regime, were a form of resistance by cultural means<sup>5</sup>. After the invasion of the German Wehrmacht in 1943, the German school system was reintroduced within a broader racist framework.

Through the Second Autonomy Statute of 1972, South Tyrol became an autonomous province. The far-reaching rights related to this status also regulate power sharing between the so called ‘language groups’ which are seen as ‘autochthonous’ (for a critique, see Thoma 2018: 61), i. e. the Italian, German and Ladin language group. A main rule concerns a bilingual administration in the whole territory of South Tyrol (and trilingual in the Ladin valleys), which allows individuals to choose ‘their’ language in various domains and grants them the right to be addressed in their preferred language. The institutionalization of these three ethno-linguistic groups regulates their representation in legislative and executive organs, access to public sector jobs and social benefits. Since it follows a principle of proportionality, every Italian citizen residing in the province has to declare their affiliation to one (and only one) of

4 In South Tyrol, the terms ‘German’, ‘Italian’, and ‘Ladin’ are typically used to refer to an (ethno-)linguistic group or to the (ethno-)linguistic affiliation of an individual. The term ‘einheimisch’ (‘local’) which encompasses these three groups, is used as a distinction from migrant individuals and groups.

5 However, smuggling of teaching material from Austria and Germany was mostly organized by German nationalists, and the orientation of curricula was nationalist-völkisch (Grote 2012: 38 f.).

the three language groups every ten years<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, the institutionalization of these linguistic groups masks “the underlying equation of language with ethnicity” (Platzgummer 2021: 40).

The Autonomy Statute, more concretely Article 19, regulates the languages of instruction. Since the introduction of the Statute, the South Tyrolean educational system has had three different school tracks with respective administration, education policy and languages of instruction. In the Italian school track, Italian is the language of instruction while German is taught as a second language and vice versa. In preschools, the language of instruction is German or Italian<sup>7</sup>. The question of whether such a separation is still appropriate is the subject of debate. Since enrollment can freely be chosen, families who have Italian as one (or the only) family language are increasingly bypassing the language-related assumptions associated with the three-way division and enrolling their children in the track with German as a language of instruction. In addition, families with languages other than Italian or German do not fit the normality assumptions of any of the three tracks. They also increasingly enroll their children in the ‘German’ system<sup>8</sup>.

### 3 Theoretical-methodological framework

The theoretical framework of this article is inspired by democratic, discourse, and educational theory which allow the linking of issues of language(s) and education to political membership. More specifically, I combine theories that are appropriate for analyzing how discourse participants are given an arena to speak, how they view participation in education and what relevance language(s) have in this regard.

Throughout the history of democracy, the socio-historical movement towards ‘more democracy’ has always been interwoven with a counter-movement of limiting and restricting democratic participation. As such, the history of democratization can be read as a history of “participation through exclusion” (Lessenich 2019: 17) which has entailed the opening and closing of spaces of empowerment (“Berechtigungsräume”; *ibid.*: 19–38), including the right to participate in education (*ibid.*: 45, 47). This ‘dialectic of democracy’ (*ibid.*: 15) involves various paradoxes, such as the fact that serious accusations of injustice are repeatedly voiced against the school system, while individual behavior perpetuates injustice rather than breaking it up (Rosanvallon 2017: 14 f.), thus excluding certain groups from educational participation. With reference to Parkin (1974), Lessenich describes exclusion as the dominant form of social

6 In the last census in 2011, 69.64% of the people who made a declaration identified as part of the German language group, 25.84% as part of the Italian language group and 4.52% as members of the Ladin language group. These languages and their users are very differently distributed in the region, which results in different forms of multilingualism in educational institutions. While in the capital Bolzano, 73.80% declared their affiliation to the Italian language, in some villages in the Ladin valleys more than 90% declared Ladin as ‘their’ language, while in many other villages, German, with up to 100%, is the dominant language (ASTAT 2012). Individuals whose linguistic repertoire is other than the officially recognized languages may state that they do not belong to any of the three groups, but must decide which of these three groups’ rights and obligations apply to them.

7 For the Ladin track see Verra (2016).

8 Currently, there are two ethnographic projects conducted at EURAC Research involving interviews with parents to learn more about their ideas and perceptions related to the language of instruction in kindergarten: [www.eurac.edu/mebik](http://www.eurac.edu/mebik); [www.eurac.edu/kidili](http://www.eurac.edu/kidili).

closure, which is staged through “the striving of a social group to maintain or improve its situation or position by subordinating and thus putting another group in a worse position” (2019: 32), thus limiting their political membership.

In her normative theory of deliberative democracy, Benhabib approaches political membership and its norms from the standpoint of discourse ethics. She identifies a key problem of exclusion in political discourse, wherein “those who are affected by the consequences of these norms and, in the first place, by criteria of exclusion [...] cannot be party to their articulation. Membership norms affect those who are not members precisely by distinguishing insiders from outsiders, citizens from non-citizens” (Benhabib 2012: 15). Benhabib’s conception of citizenship and practices of political membership<sup>9</sup>, through which the nation is reproduced spatially and in time, is an interesting starting point for the analysis of political membership in sub-national regions where questions of minorization<sup>10</sup> are even more complex. Her concept of “democratic iterations” which she defines as “complex processes of public argument, deliberation, and learning through which universalist right claims are contested and contextualized, invoked and revoked, throughout legal and political institutions as well as in the public sphere of liberal democracies” (Benhabib 2012: 19) provides a framework for analyzing in what way inclusion and exclusion processes are talked about and by whom, and especially how orders of belonging in linguistically contested regions are challenged or perpetuated.

Another theoretical strand concerns the relationship between politics and education. With the results of the first PISA study, early childhood education became a focus of educational policy interests (Stenger 2015: 55). This led to the increased importance of evidence-based knowledge based on technocratic understandings of educational processes (ibid.: 57). Educational policies, which attempted to minimize migration-related educational inequality, led to a dominance of language observation, assessment, and documentation (Machold 2015). Such a focus on effectiveness and measuring can be understood as a one of the main current phenomena of the depoliticization of science which does not sufficiently consider the political contexts of its evidence production<sup>11</sup> (see Bellmann 2015: 47).

The previous theoretical positions are closely linked to concepts of discourse linguistics which share an interest in discourse “as concrete, and always historically and locally contextualized social practice” (Blasch 2020: 31). More concretely, my analysis is based on the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA; Reisigl/Wodak 2009) in the broader theoretical-methodological framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA; Wodak/Meyer 2009), a problem-oriented, interdisciplinary research program. Discourse, in CDA, is considered as a social practice and thus socially constituted and constitutive (Reisigl/Wodak 2009). It is consequential for the reproduction or transformation of power relations (Wodak 2014: 303). The term ‘critical’ in CDA relates to the Frankfurt School and represents a perspective on theory which does not just aim at understanding and explaining society, but at critiquing and changing it (ibid.: 6) by revealing power structures and ideologies (ibid.: 8). With this aim, researchers have examined, among many others, topics that are highly relevant to the present

9 Benhabib refers not only to citizenship, but to any form of political membership.

10 Following Patrick, I understand minorization as “a social process [...] that constructs minority groups with less political, economic, and social power than some dominant group. Dominant or minority status is thus attributed not on the basis of numbers of speakers, but rather on the basis of the social positioning of particular social groups within a hierarchical social structure” (Patrick 2010: 176).

11 Among these phenomena, there are also a one-sided focus on effectiveness, the assumption of a mono-dimensionality of educational goals, and individualization effects of accountability and competition.

article, such as the construction of national identities (De Cillia et al. 2020), nationalist, racist and exclusionary discourse (Rheindorf/Wodak 2019), and the discursive construction of language in the context of language politics (Dorostkar 2014). Among the numerous characteristics of racist discourse described in CDA, the following are most relevant to this article: the negative portrayal of ‘Them’, often combined with a positive representation of ‘Us’, the denial or mitigation of racism, an in-group–out-group polarization, and the characterization of the Other as deviant, and as a threat (see van Dijk 2004).

CDA has also proven to be particularly interesting for educational research (see Rogers et al. 2005) and has been used to analyze a variety of issues at different levels of education such as the construction of teachers in educational policy documents (Thomas 2005), racism in public administration and scholarship (Trochmann et al. 2021) and school and district leaders’ responses to racial violence (Bridgeforth 2021). With its emphasis on the historical dimension, DHA is particularly well suited for the present study, as it allows for a comprehensive, multi-perspective interpretation of texts by enabling intertextual, interdiscursive, diachronic as well as synchronic cross-connections.

#### 4 The empirical data

In this study, I refer to a subset from a discourse-analytical preliminary study for an ethnographic project on multilingualism in preschools in South Tyrol. While the project “Multilingualism and language education in preschools in South Tyrol” (MeBiK) focuses on linguistic practices in preschools, the discourse-analytical study creates a basis for the ethnographic study by reconstructing socio-political discourses on multilingualism in preschools. In addition, the study concerns how these discourses become relevant in the linguistic interaction and pedagogical practice in preschools and in what way educators refer to them in their work. In this paper, I draw on a discussion on multilingualism in South Tyrolean preschools broadcast in March 2019 on the regional public television channel *Rai Südtirol*, in which representatives of politics, research, pedagogical practice and parents participated.

The television discussion in March 2019 focused on a phenomenon that has been intensely discussed in South Tyrol in recent years, namely the fact that many parents who are positioned as ‘Italian’ enroll their children in the German-language education system. Consequently, in places where many Italian-speaking and migrant groups live children who are referred to as ‘German’ are no longer in the numerical majority in preschools with German as the language of instruction. This fact has been repeatedly constructed as a problem by two right-wing populist parties – the Freedom Party (*Die Freiheitlichen*) (e.g. Peterlini 2017: 341 ff.) and the South Tyrolean Freedom Party (*Süd-Tiroler Freiheit*) through different channels (e.g. in the form of questions to the provincial parliament and on their respective websites).

Many contributions in the televised discussion show parallels to discourses on language and (preschool) education in other countries: they are characterised by the idea of a ‘natural’ monolingualism, a deficit perspective on multilingualism (Amirpur 2010) and on the pedagogical practices of migrant families (Braband 2019: 118). Moreover, they imply that children naturally group themselves according to linguistic criteria and that they (can) only commu-

nicate via one language (Gouma 2020: 144). In addition, language becomes a differentiation feature through which groups are constructed and hierarchized in relation to each other and through which inclusion and exclusion are legitimized (Dirim/Knappik/Thoma 2018). Another topic is the competition of care needs, which, given the scarcity of pedagogical resources, is constructed as disadvantaging children who are positioned as ‘German’.

In the following, I first analyze the presenter’s introduction and the selection of guests for the panel. Then, I analyze the discursive strategies<sup>12</sup> by which a) the ‘German’ group in South Tyrol is portrayed as particularly in need of protection, b) a hierarchization of protection needs and related educational rights is constructed, and c) possible dissenting counter-arguments are excluded.

#### 4.1 Constructing multilingualism as a threat

In this section, I discuss the context and outline how the topic of multilingualism in South Tyrolean preschools is introduced by the presenter and which actors were invited to participate in the discussion. After the opening sequence, the presenter starts the discussion:

Good evening and welcome to The Round Table. A few children with – German mother tongue, but also many more who speak – Italian or a language from the Balkans or Asia. This exists in even some, – mind you, German preschools in South Tyrol. Some say this is a problem, – others say it is a challenge, still others see it as an opportunity. We want to discuss this today and these are my guests (1/1–6)<sup>13</sup>.

On the one hand, the presenter takes over the function of giving pre-structured, orienting information on the topic under discussion (e.g. Burger/Luginbühl 2014: 332). By offering three possible interpretations of the phenomenon (either a “problem”, a “challenge”, or an “opportunity”), he explicitly constructs himself as neutral. On the other hand, his account of the social reality in kindergartens also has an interpretative function (ibid.: 333): The increase from “a few” (children whose mother tongue is German) to “many more” (who speak Italian or another language) includes an opposition of quantifiers. With these formulations, the presenter ties in with right-wing populist discourses, according to which the number of children who don’t have German as a ‘mothertongue’ is troublesome and a threat that could lead ‘us’ “to become a minority in our own country” (Peterlini 2017: 342)<sup>14</sup>. In addition, the climax suggests an increase in linguistic-geographical distance (first “German mother tongue”, then “Italian”, and then “a language from the Balkans or Asia”), and the absence of linguonyms constructs the latter languages as foreign, unknown, and distant. Equally interesting is the claim that the described distribution of children and languages, which follows the assumption that children basically speak only one language, occurs especially in ‘German’ preschools in South Tyrol. The emphasis on the adjective ‘German’ hides the statistical fact that the percentage of children from migrant families in kindergartens with Italian as the language of instruction is significantly higher. Thus, the presenter echoes the scenarios of threat imagined by right-wing populist parties which are concentrated on the system with German as the language of instruction. In sum, the presenter’s ‘intro’ can be read as a “strategy

12 By ‘strategy’, I refer to “a more or less intentional plan of practices [...] adopted to achieve a particular [...] goal. Discursive strategies are located at different levels of linguistic organization and complexity” (Reisigl/Wodak 2009: 94).

13 The German original texts were translated by the author.

14 For similar strategies in discourses about refugees and asylum seekers see Baker/McEnery 2005: 202 ff.



of calculated ambivalence” which “serves to convey at least two contradictory messages in one utterance which address different audiences” (Engel/Wodak 2013: 79) with differing ideologies.

The selection of the invited guests presented in the show represent a broad spectrum of professional approaches to the topic, namely: a preschool teacher, a university professor, a member of the provincial parliament, a parent representative and a preschool association (*Kindergartenverein*) board member. However, the panelists’ natio-ethno-lingual belongings are homogeneous as they are all positioned as ‘German’. Therefore, the experiences, opinions and questions of individuals and groups positioned as Italian, Ladin or migrant cannot be heard and viewers are left to speculate about such views. The same applies to political positions and affiliations. Three out of five persons belong politically to the center/center-right spectrum: The political positioning of the parents’ representative and the board member can be reconstructed from speeches and other public appearances. The provincial councillor for education, culture and integration holds an expert position, while at the same time, his affiliation with the SVP (*Südtiroler Volkspartei*), the South Tyrolean People’s Party, positions him on a Christian-conservative spectrum.

After the introduction of the guests, an offstage voice describes the discussion topic again:

In 17 German preschools in South Tyrol, the proportion of foreigners is more than 30 percent this year. In preschool B in town A and in preschool G in city B, even more than 60 percent of the children do not have EU citizenship. And in these statistics some preschool associations are missing. In the preschool of G-village, for example, only just under a third of the children are actually German native speakers. This is because many Italians also enroll their children in German preschools so that they can learn German there. In some of these preschools, the children then speak Italian or Urdu, the language of Pakistan, with each other (2/11–18).

This second problem definition explicitly operates with the topos of numbers<sup>15</sup> by giving concrete numbers and percentages to underline a problem’s gravity. Hiding children behind the expression “percentage of foreigners” is part of a dehumanizing rhetoric which is typical for right-wing discourses (Rheindorf/Wodak 2018). Children who “do not have EU citizenship” are constructed as a particularly significant challenge. This hierarchizing distinction between EU and non-EU citizens is in line with differing legal frameworks for language learning in the context of testing regimes in migration societies (see Printschitz 2016). In addition, the normal case in migration societies, namely institutions with multilingual children, is presented as a special case in G-village. Even the fact that children normally speak those languages which are familiar to them is constructed as a deviation from a monolingual norm.

After the presenter has introduced the discussion and drawn a threat scenario emanating from the presence of non-German-speaking children in ‘German’ preschools, he poses the first question to the parent representative:

Ms [name], what are the – concerns and problems of the parents of German-speaking children in these preschools? (2/23–24)

Here, the focus is on “concerns” and “problems” of the numerically strongest group in South Tyrol, the ‘German’ group. Despite the restriction “in these preschools”, it suggests that parents of “German-speaking” children are a homogeneous group with the same concerns. In addition, the absence of representatives of other parents who ultimately become the object of

15 This is one of the main topoi in discriminatory discourses about migration (Wodak 2015).

discussion, leads to a prioritization of the “concerns” and “problems” of the German-speaking group.

Overall, both the TV station’s invitation policy and the questions and problems posed by the presenter perpetuate the image of a threat to the educational system posed by the presence of children who are positioned as non-‘German’. In addition, the program becomes a stage for exclusionary arguments which are rhetorically dressed up as “concerns” of a parent group who are constructed as a minority, despite the fact that, statistically, they form the majority in the region<sup>16</sup>.

## 4.2 Re-Telling stories of oppression

Since preschools in South Tyrol are de facto multilingual, the presenter asks the preschool association board’s head what he thinks about opening a multilingual preschool. The latter says:

Well ((clearing the throat)) we simply must not forget that we are in South Tyrol, that we are a minority in a foreign state, and that we are not in Berlin, where we have 80 million German people in the background. We can never afford a mixed-language preschool or school ahm to go into it. We have fought for decades, ahm that we have achieved what we have, namely the German school and the German preschools, and we simply must not give that up. (22/12–20)

The speaker first constructs difference, more concretely a homogeneous ‘we’ as a minority in a “foreign” state, which he portrays as a dehumanized administrative unit with which there are no social and cultural relations. Furthermore, the different minorities (e. g. the Ladin minority and many migrant minorities) are made invisible<sup>17</sup>, and the ‘German’ group is presented as a special ‘case’. In the next step, the speaker constructs a situation of contrast: his argument of “80 million German population” constructs Berlin as a place where migration and multilingualism is normal. However, by referring to “80 million German people”, he hides the fact of migration in Germany and does not justify how the linguistic composition of the population outside Berlin could influence multilingual preschools in Berlin. Subsequently, with a “historical we” (Wodak et al. 1998: 101), the speaker joins the ranks of those who fought for a German-language education system before the Second Autonomy Statute. As common for right-wing populist discourses (De Cillia et al. 2020: 176), a narrative of a shared past<sup>18</sup> presents the “us” as victims and heroes. The rationale against a multilingual preschool is constructed as a quasi-natural consequence of a historical struggle, the outcome of which must not become the subject of political dissent. Interestingly, the speaker gives no pedagogical, didactical, or linguistic justification at this point.

In the main, this passage shows how decades of official historiography after World War II in South Tyrol continue to be relevant in the maintenance and legitimization of a ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ and in a historical consciousness centered on the perception of the ‘German’ group as a victim (Hartungen et al. 2006; Pallaver/Steurer/Verdorfer 2019). In relation to the language(s) of instruction, the needs of one’s own group are placed in a historical context of

16 Peterlini points out that a statistical registration and political recognition of multilingual families is still a taboo, since they cannot be classified in the grid ‘German’, ‘Italian’ or ‘Ladin’ and thus in three separately conceived language groups (Peterlini 2020: 370).

17 Also the fact that the ‘Italian’ group is a numerical minority in most parts of the province is hidden here.

18 In this case, the Second Autonomy Statute is at the final point.

oppression and the (actual or possible) needs of non-German-speaking individuals and groups are ignored.

#### 4.3 Academia meets politics – dealing with politically non-negotiable issues

Another discussion topic is the demand to test children's German language skills and to make a 'sufficient' level a prerequisite for enrollment in a German-speaking preschool. In this context, the university professor states:

Ahm, I really take all concerns seriously, and they are to be taken seriously, just [...] So we simply have the language acquisition, which should have reached a certain level at the age of six or seven, so that the children can then simply cope at school and then it really starts, I always say hardcore, because then comes reading, writing and everything that goes with it, and then we can really start talking about language assessments. So excuse me for saying this so massively, it's nonsense to want to do language assessments for two and a half year olds. That's not possible. Or the person who has done it before, please tell me how. I would be very surprised. I can only make recordings, observe children for a long time, and ask the preschool teacher. So that's simply not possible. (15/19–37)

By way of introduction, the professor emphasizes that she takes "all concerns" seriously. From a pragmatic perspective, this form of consent can be read as an avoidance of dissent, a production of common ground, and overall, as a strategy of politeness, face-saving and de-escalation (see Fraser 2001; Holly 2001). In terms of content, she adopts a theoretical perspective of language acquisition, within which she takes a critical stance on language testing at preschool entry. However, in doing so, she limits the issue to the technical or methodological feasibility of language testing and does not consider that tests have been used as "instruments of social and cultural exclusion" (McNamara 2000: 68) and are strongly linked to the "assertion of authority and power" (Spolsky 1995: 1). By doing so, she argues from an evidence-based logic characterized by a form of complexity reduction (e. g. Biesta 2010a) that validates specific parts of linguistic repertoires (their 'German' parts) while invalidating others (parts of other languages). This argumentation is in line with a more general focus on paradigms of 'evidence-based education' (for a critique, see Bellmann/Müller 2011; Biesta 2010b; Thompson 2014), a political strategy that comes with promises of impact. In line with Bellmann (2015), the professor's argumentation can be read as a depoliticization of language testing and language assessment. Pragmatically, the professional argument of 'impracticability' can be read as a discursive strategy to circumvent a topic which seems politically non-negotiable, thus avoiding counter-arguments and implicitly contributing to equality in the context of linguistic heterogeneity.

#### 4.4 Disciplining parents – the politics of "demanding and supporting"

As the (ascribed) lack of German language skills of 'Italian' and migrant parents is problematized in the discussion, the presenter asks for 'solutions'. The provincial councillor responds:

We have passed a provincial law that requires that migrants, third-country nationals who take advantage of additional benefits from the province, that they must complete language courses namely in the language of the preschool or school the child attends [...] They will have to complete language courses in order to claim the additional benefits. [The law h]as been much criticized, but is a concrete measure of demanding and supporting. We require the language skills to be able to accompany the child. (14/17–28)

The provincial councillor for education, culture and integration refers to the integration policy of “demanding and supporting” according to the Austrian model which was previously positively mentioned during the TV discussion. In addition, the preschool association board member had demanded that the Austrian model should be applied to the South Tyrolean context. This policy, which was advanced by former Austrian Chancellor Kurz, has already been widely criticized (Hofer 2016; Taubald 2018), especially because the aspect of support is much less developed than that of demand, which systematically disadvantages certain groups of migrants. Similar hierarchizations are also evident in the South Tyrolean provincial law enacted in 2019 (Autonome Provinz Bozen Südtirol 2019)<sup>19</sup>: Only so-called third-country nationals are obliged to attend language courses, which implicitly portrays this group as unwilling to learn languages. What the law calls “additional benefits” are the so-called “provincial family allowance” (*Landesfamiliengeld*) and the “provincial child allowance” (*Landeskindergeld*), which EU citizens receive without proof of language skills. This form of disciplining parents is based on the neoliberal ‘merit turn’ (Grimaldi/Barzanò 2014) and the neoliberal transfer of responsibility (Seyss-Inquart/Smolka 2020) and fulfills the function of keeping preschools with German as the language of instruction as ‘migrant-free’ and as ‘German’ as possible.

#### 4.5 Constructing a competition of rights

In addition to the invited guests, the TV-viewing public was permitted to take part in the discussion through e-mails. One person, who introduced herself as a “mother from town A”, writes:

We parents only want to claim our rights, which are guaranteed to us by Article 19 of the Autonomy Statute. The right to free enrollment must not erode the protection of minorities (23/34–36).

Article 19 of the Autonomy Statute states that the language of instruction must be the students’ ‘mother tongue’ (either Italian or German), and that the respective language is to be the teachers’ ‘mother tongue’<sup>20</sup>. In her e-mail, by using the particle ‘only’, the mother constructs her demand as a ‘minimal’ and modest request. She then constructs an incompatibility of two distinctive rights: “our rights” and “[t]he right of free enrolment”. “Our rights”, which she demands, refer to the right of German as the language of instruction. She places this right in the context of minority protection, which is historically correct, since the Autonomy Statute provides the protection of Italy’s German and Ladin-speaking minorities. However, the right does not have to be claimed because it is not at risk: the language of instruction in preschools is German, regardless of students’ linguistic repertoires. In addition, although the *right to mother-tongue education* is stipulated in the autonomy status, there is no *right to form a linguistic majority* at an educational institution. The physical metaphor of ‘erosion’<sup>21</sup> reveals how minority protection has come to be seen as at risk by some German-speaking political actors and how the rhetoric of disappearance is used to shut down criticism and silence dissenting views.

19 After several political interventions, the law is currently being amended.

20 For the underlying language ideologies see Platzgummer 2021.

21 For the study of metaphors as part of critical discourse analysis see Musolff 2012.

## 5 Conclusion

Italianization measures in place during Italy's fascist period and their aftermath play a central role in many South Tyroleans' collective memory and are deemed important in the handling of educational questions. Some groups still refer to victim narratives related to the historical epoch (Pallaver/Steurer/Verdorfer 2019), although equality of the three recognized language groups has been achieved for some time and the 'German' group can be considered the dominant group in the province.

The analysis of empirical data has revealed that the broadcaster's invitation policy strengthened certain discourse positions while omitting others by inviting only social actors positioned as 'German'. In addition, multilingualism and multilingual children are constructed as a threat while children positioned as 'German' are constructed as potential victims. The analysis also identified several discursive strategies centered on the nomination 'minority' – as referring to the 'German' group – which perpetuate a threat scenario that may affect this group while at the same time making other minorities' positions, experiences and stances invisible. More concretely, the data point to a *hierarchization of educational rights*, headed by the 'German' group, and followed by the other two groups categorized as 'local', namely the Italian and Ladin group. The migrant group at the bottom of the hierarchy can be divided into two subgroups: those with EU affiliation and those without.

Moreover, the analysis has shown how multilingualism and participation in education are discussed against the background of the 'German' group's linguistic minorization prior to the Autonomy Statute, thus implicitly constructing a *continuity of minorization*. By focussing on this historical epoch, possible counter-arguments are excluded from political dissent. Some of the requested measures in the education system, namely the monolingualization and mono-ethnicization of preschools, are legitimized through a form of quasi-natural authority connected to the Autonomy Statute's Article 19. Similar strategies have been described as part of far-right discourses in Germany (Feustel/Spissinger 2019). In these discourses, the authority of law offers protection against possible accusations of racism. Thus, racist positions are excluded from political debate because they no longer appear as a matter of opinion but as a legally established fact (ibid.: 292). The same strategy seems to work particularly well in South Tyrol, since the reference to the status of the 'German' group as a minority whose continued existence must be protected by German-language education offers additional protection against counter-arguments. In line with Feustel and Spissinger, I read these arguments, which aim at excluding 'non-German' children from educational opportunities, as *strategies of depoliticization*. However, given that the 'German' group's minority status only applies to its position on a national level, while within the province it is a majority and has its own educational system, this argument is flawed. In other words, the victim narratives represent a *reversal of linguistic majority and minority relations* in the educational system at the regional level and lead to a *hierarchization of protection needs* which subordinates members of other groups and their languages. Overall, the weakening of natio-ethno-linguistically coded demarcations through migration phenomena in South Tyrol, which are perceived as a threat to the privileges guaranteed by the Autonomy Statute, contributes to racist discourses on education that can be understood as an attempt to restore a phantasmatic (monolingual) order (see Mecheril 2003, as cited in Machold/Mecheril 2019: 367). Interestingly, absent from the discussion is a competing South-Tyrolean right-wing discourse which might argue that many

migrants orient themselves to the Italian language (group) or that children from migrant families who are socialized within the educational system in Italian language strengthen the Italian group in South Tyrol (see Peterlini 2017: 342 f.).

If we follow Benhabib’s conception of democratic iterations as “legal, cultural and political debates in which inherited norms, concepts and legal views are criticised and defended, cited and varied” (Benhabib 2012: 19), and if we take into account that political debate which informs decisions in government related to education is based on encounters with others, then, discussing the languages, multilingualism, and educational practices of ‘others’ in (linguistically) homogeneous spaces does not achieve much. Rather, it is necessary that ‘the others’ are neither absent nor framed as mute objects, but regarded as subjects who put their positions forward for discussion. This demand also fits with Rosanvallon’s perspective, who considers equality “not only as a measure of wealth distribution”, but as a democratic quality (Rosanvallon 2017: 18 f.), which – also in South Tyrol – should not be restricted to the nation-ethno-lingual majority.

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