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Nation-state construction in textbooks targeting migrants to Germany: A critical multimodal analysis

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1. Introduction

In Germany, non-European migrants with limited German language proficiency can – under threats of cuts in social benefits – be required to enroll in the so-called integration courses. This federal integration program consists of two sections. Language courses are designed to facilitate learners' German language proficiency to reach the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Following the language courses, learners proceed to the orientation courses, which introduce content on Germany's legal system, history, and culture, and whose curriculum explicitly calls for the development of a positive image of Germany (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2017, p. 7). This curricular goal arguably signals a broader ideological function of promoting socialization into a normative notion of German identity and statehood (Brown, 2014; Embeywa, 2025; Wolbergs, 2024; Zabel, 2016).

Despite notions of refugee and migrant integration dominating much of public and political discourse, integration courses have received relatively little scholarly attention. Existing research has primarily focused on the perspectives of instructors, who see them as necessary (Fornoff, 2018) or classroom interactions that highlight instances where some learners challenge some cultural representations (Zabel, 2016), leaving the textual and visual materials used in these courses underexamined. Our study seeks to address this gap by investigating the ideological underpinnings of the textbooks approved by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) for use in the integration course, with a particular focus on how textbook social actors are represented and how their sociological agency is distributed, how imagined learners are (dis)invited to engage cultural content, and how national identity is constructed through multimodal and pedagogical content.

2. Research aim and questions

Our central aim is to examine the ways in which German national identity, cultural norms, and sociopolitical values are conveyed through textbook representations targeting migrants. Specifically,

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we ask: How are social actors/figures in textbook representations portrayed? What models of culture and ideologies are conveyed in pedagogical activities and multimodal texts?

3. Methodology

Our analysis draws on critical multimodal discourse analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis. These theoretical and analytical frameworks relate to the growing field of critical textbook analysis, which emphasizes the need to treat textbooks not merely as conveyors of content but as cultural artifacts that position learners ideologically (Höhne et al., 2005; Weninger, 2021). We individually analyzed two modules: (a) history and (b) people and society from all five federally approved textbooks. For our current collaborative study, however, we focused on one illustrative example from the module on history in the textbook *100 Stunden Deutschland* (Butler et al., 2017) to exemplify our findings. This example was appropriate because it shows both the thickness of the discourse element and explicitly mentions the country of origin of the social actors (e.g. Samir from Syria).

4. Findings

Our analysis yielded two central findings regarding how national identity and learner subjectivity are constructed in the textbook: first, imagined learners are portrayed as possessing constrained sociological agency; and second, culture is constructed through a nation-state framework in which learners are positioned as uncritical recipients of dominant narratives.

5. Constrained sociological agency of imagined learners

Social actors with similar backgrounds to imagined learners, such as the textbook representation of Samir from Syria, are mainly positioned as having constrained sociological agency. More than grammatical agency, typically realized through transitivity structures (doer/recipient of an action), sociological agency explores the capacity of individuals to act beyond what is expressed through linguistic realizations to include their capacity to make choices, take actions, or have knowledge. As the dialogues below show, Samir struggles to understand some historical knowledge, such as the division of Germany into East and West, and the postwar labor migration that saw many workers come to Germany. To help him navigate these questions, Samir is paired up with various family members. In these dialogues, Samir consistently serves the role of the inquirer, while the family members appear as the ones who hold knowledge. This dynamic establishes an asymmetry in epistemic positioning: Samir is portrayed as the learner, whereas the family members are constructed as epistemic authorities. Particularly prominent in this context is the son of the family, Paul, who emerges as a central figure of knowledge. He is repeatedly foregrounded through visual and textual cues – most notably in explanatory elements labeled 'Paul knows for sure' – which underscore his authority. Such textbook interactions reproduce a framework in which the migrant subject (Samir) is positioned as perpetually unfamiliar with German history and social norms. This suggests a symbolic marginalization that constrains imagined learners' capacity to act as knowledgeable or critical social agents.

In one dialogue, Samir enters into a conversation with the family member Cem, an interlocutor with Turkish heritage:

> "Cem, why do you have a Turkish name and speak German so well?" (p. 64)

This marks a subtle shift in Samir's position: he is offered a slightly expanded sense of agency. It becomes apparent that the domain of familial belonging – and by extension, the position of epistemic authority – is not exclusively reserved for individuals with ethnically German names. Instead, it also includes members who may bear so-called 'Turkish' names. This gestures towards a more inclusive understanding of belonging and knowledge authority within the family structure.

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However, this expansion is simultaneously constrained by the addition of a qualifying clause: 'and speak German so well'. This phrase introduces a conditional aspect to epistemic inclusion, implicitly suggesting that full participation in the role of the knowledgeable subject requires language proficiency in German. In doing so, the narrative constructs German – not merely as a communicative tool – but as a gatekeeping mechanism for epistemic legitimacy and social integration. The standard for inclusion is thus raised to linguistic performance, which reinforces hierarchies based on educational capital and language ideology.

6. Culture constructed through a nation-state framework and imagined learners positioned as uncritical

Our analysis shows that cultural content in the textbooks is framed using a nation-state framework, which presents German culture as a stable, homogenous, and behavior-based phenomenon. This framework is further reinforced in the way imagined learners are invited to comparatively reflect on any similarities or differences between their home countries and Germany. As the examples below show, pedagogical prompts ask learners to describe how particular freedoms or rights (e.g. gender equality) are practiced in Germany and how these compare to their countries of origin:

> "What kinds of family and way of life are common in your country?" (p. 94)

> "Compare children in Germany with those in your country" (p. 105)

While the invitation to engage in reflection may initially appear as an open and dialogic offer, a closer analysis reveals that the knowledge presented about Germany is positioned as a normative framework, whereas the contributions made by the learners – often based on their own experience – are implicitly marked as derivations from this norm. Moreover, imagined learners are rarely asked to critically engage with representations of German values.

Consequently, learners remain positioned as representatives of a supposedly coherent and homogeneous 'own' culture or nation. This reinforces a reductive understanding of both nation and culture, suggesting that cultural identity is static and bound to national borders. Moreover, the linguistic construction of phrases such as 'your country' further highlights the perceived otherness of the learners and underscores their exclusion from the imagined cultural community in Germany. In this way, inclusion is offered only on the condition of comparison and differentiation – not as a shared space of negotiation or mutual transformation.

7. Discussion

Our findings are consistent with broader critiques of emphasizing linguistic and cultural conformity over pluralism and critical engagement in civic integration practices in Germany. The orientation course, while framed as a practical educational initiative of cultural, civic, and historical knowledge, arguably functions as a site where national identity is actively produced and performed through pedagogical choices. Evidence of constrained sociological agency among textbook social actors raises questions about the emancipatory potential of adult education in integration contexts. Rather than enabling critical reflection and mutual learning using bidirectional engagement of cultural content, the materials often include top-down models of cultural learning. Such an approach risks reinforcing rather than challenging hierarchies of knowledge and belonging. Furthermore, the construction of culture through a nation-state lens obscures the complexities of lived multicultural realities. By presenting German values as fixed and unproblematic, which is not only false but also narrows discourse in Germany, the textbooks also foreclose opportunities for learners to bring their own experiences and perspectives into the learning process.

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8. Conclusion and implications

Deconstructing the ideologies that underlie textbooks, as demonstrated in this illustrative example, highlights how textbooks present both ideas about the world and also how learners are invited to engage with the socio-cultural content. Our analysis reiterates what scholarship working in critical textbook analysis has consistently found: textbooks are not neutral carriers of language and civic knowledge but are deeply ideological texts that play a role in shaping learner subjectivity and reinforcing ideas about worldly representations (Risager, 2018). We suggest that this research has implications for language and culture pedagogy in any context that uses a textbook. Any curriculum that uses state-sanctioned textbooks to define 'integration' must reckon with the representational choices embedded in those materials. This is especially relevant when textbook users want to understand ideologies imbued in these pedagogical materials and how they facilitate or constrain learner subjectivity. Social actors such as Samir are not merely fictional figures but mediums through which particular assumptions about knowledge, belonging, and identity are conveyed. We argue that it is crucial to critically engage with such materials, especially given their wide-reaching impact on adult migrants navigating the process of legal and social integration. Our analytical approach – combining critical discourse analysis with multimodal methods – offers one possible analytical framework for unpacking these ideological dimensions. These analytical and systematic tools can be adopted by other researchers to analyze other language textbooks because it is crucial that researchers, educators, and policymakers attend to how such choices shape learner engagement, identity formation, and conceptions of citizenship.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444825100815.

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