Migrants’ Languages and Citizenship in Germany: a civic turn in integration policies or the persistence of an assimilationist model?

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Abstract:

This article investigates the link between language regimes and citizenship through the debate around multilingualism in Germany. Since the end of the 1990s, the organization of language-of-origin courses in German public schools has become a highly politicized issue, spurring mobilization from Turkish migrants associations, and giving rise to a partisan cleavage around a left-right axis, with opposite positions being defended by green-socialist coalitions and conservative-liberal coalitions. The argument of the article is to show that the question of language-of-origin courses is linked to the larger debate whether Germany is a country of immigration (Einwanderungsland), the (non)recognition of dual citizenship and the vision of Germany as a mono-cultural or multicultural society. The empirical demonstration builds on an analysis of different qualitative data sources, i.e. policy documents, press sources and interviews with mobilized actors (officials of the Ministry of education, teachers’ unions and associations, Turkish parents’ associations). The case of language-of-origin-courses is addressed through a theoretical framework seeking to articulate findings of the fields of language policy and the recent literature on citizenship.

Keywords: citizenship; language policy; identity; multiculturalism; Germany.
Introduction

This article aims to investigate the link between language regimes and citizenship regimes through the case of Germany. Since the end of the 1990s, the organization of language-of-origin courses in German public schools has become a highly politicized issue, spurring mobilization from Turkish migrants associations and giving rise to a partisan cleavage around a left-right axis, with opposite positions being defended by green-socialist coalitions and conservative-liberal coalitions. Placing the debate around multilingualism in the context of the citizenship reforms that have taken place in the same time frame, I will show that the question of language-of-origin courses is linked to the larger debate around the question of whether Germany is a country of immigration (Einwanderungsland), the (non)recognition of dual citizenship and the vision of Germany as a mono-cultural or multicultural society.

Theoretical framework: citizenship regimes and language regimes

In the literature on citizenship, Germany was long considered as ideal-type of an ethnocultural understanding of citizenship and contrasted to France, seen as paradigmatic example of a civic definition of nationality (Brubaker 1992). Since the end of the 1990s, this distinction has been challenged both on the empirical and on the theoretical level. On the empirical level, the adoption in 1999 of a new German citizenship law based on the ius soli territorial principle, deemed fundamentally incompatible with an ethnic understanding of nationality and citizenship based on the ius sanguinis principle of descent, has led to re-evaluate the ethnic character of the German conception of citizenship. On the theoretical level, the dichotomy between ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ conceptions of citizenship has been nuanced and criticized by some of its former advocates as ‘Manichean myth’ (Brubaker 1999, 55–71). Recent scholarship on nationalism has pointed out that all nation-states rely more or less strongly on both civic and cultural elements, and notably language, to foster a sense of belonging and identification of their citizens to the political entity (Dieckhoff 2006, 105–129).

Recent literature on citizenship has moreover criticized the culturist bias of previous works which were excessively stressing continuity and not allowing for change. These authors argue that recent citizenship reforms can only be explained when taking into account political variables, and notably partisan competition and mechanisms of agenda-setting (Hansen and Koehler 2005, 623–625; Howard 2006, 449). The concept of ‘citizenship regime’ defined by Jane Jenson as ‘the institutional arrangements, rules and understandings that guide and shape concurrent policy decisions and expenditures of states, problem definitions by states and citizens, and claims-making by citizens’ (Jenson 2007, 55) allows to overcome a static and culturist vision of citizenship by emphasizing its changing and political nature. The concept of citizenship regime refers to the idea that this institution is governed by the state through a series of laws, policies and regulations in different policy sectors. Consequently, citizenship regimes can be altered and adapted to the specific social and political context and evolve over time.

Finally, the growing literature on citizenship in the fields of political science and sociology is characterized by an important degree of heterogeneity in regard to the aspect of citizenship which is analysed. In order to solve the problem posed by the
absence by a common frame of reference, Christian Joppke suggests distinguishing between three dimensions of citizenship:

‘citizenship as status, which denotes formal state membership and the rules of access to it; citizenship as rights, which is about the formal capacities and immunities connected with such status; and, in addition, citizenship as identity, which refers to the behavioural aspects of individuals acting and conceiving of themselves as members of a collectivity, classically the nation, or the normative conceptions of such behaviour imputed by the state. With respect to the latter, citizenship addresses the unity and integration of society, and it is closely connected with the semantics of nation and nationalism’ (Joppke 2007, 38).

In a similar vein, Rainer Bauböck distinguishes between citizenship as right, citizenship as membership, and citizenship as practice (Bauböck 2001).

Conversely, language policy choices can be analysed through the concept of ‘language regimes’. Linda Cardinal and Selma Sonntag define language regimes as ‘language practices as well as conceptions of language and language use as projected through state policies and as acted upon by language users’ (Cardinal and Sonntag 2015, 5). The notion of language regimes emphasizes the fact that the linguistic diversity is governed through public policies by the state. From a perspective of historical institutionalism, these language regimes can be analysed as linked to specific state traditions, understood as ‘the dynamic context – historical, institutional, normative – in which the state chooses language policies’ (Cardinal and Sonntag 2015, 3). Finally, the concept of language regimes takes into account the systemic dimension of language policies and the coherence in which the states articulates issues related to language with other policies.

Both language and citizenship will be analysed as the object of governance, and consequently as subject to change and evolution in regard to the changing political and institutional context. These moments of language regime and/or citizenship regime change or adaption are likely to be characterized by important tensions and give rise to political conflict. Adopting a theoretical framework in terms of language regimes and citizenship regimes implies to develop the analysis around an actor-centred approach in order to analyse moments of ‘critical juncture’ (Gourevitch 1986; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007) where the existing language and citizenship regimes are being debated, contested and redefined.

Prior literature on the German case

Issues related to language and citizenship regimes in the case of Germany have given rise to two distinct bodies of literature:

On the one hand, the recent citizenship reforms in Germany have been the object of scholarly attention. A detailed account of the different reforms has been provided by Simon Green in his various articles dedicated to the subject (Green 2000; 2001; 2012). Different authors have emphasized the role played by partisan dynamics not only in the elite-driven process of citizenship liberalization but also in the subsequent backlash on questions of migration (Howard 2008; Cooper 2002). Adopting a long-term perspective, other authors have analysed the evolution of the German citizenship regime as reflection of changes in the conceptualization of the nation and belonging (Palmowski 2008). A third strand of literature stresses on the contrary the importance of the specific
institutional context and venue rather than national traditions as explanation for citizenship regime change (Hansen and Koehler 2005). In this body of research on citizenship, issues related to language are only touched upon as far as they intervene directly as conditions in the access to citizenship, such as the language requirements introduced to obtain citizenship status (Michalowski 2010). The same stands true for the literature on multiculturalism (cf. for instance Triadafilopoulos 2012): here again, the focus lies almost exclusively on the status dimension of citizenship, according to the distinction operated by Joppke (2007).

The literature on multilingualism and language-of-origin classes has on the other hand remained the preserve of educational sciences, whereas political science works on issues related to language remain rare on the German case. As a consequence, political dynamics, especially in the partisan political sense are taken into account only marginally. While certain authors analyse language as part of ‘institutional discrimination’ mechanisms by the German school system (Gomolla and Radtke 2009), these works link the ‘monolingual habitus’ (Gogolin 2008) of German schools to the nation-building process at the end of the 19th century (Krüger-Potratz 2010). However, more contemporary political dynamics regarding issues of language are not addressed in this literature. Even the recent ‘bilingualism controversy’ (Gogolin and Neumann 2009) is almost exclusively analysed in reference to the cognitive and educational aspect of language policies, rather than in relation to the question of the political recognition of multilingualism and multiculturalism (Fürstenau 2011; Gogolin and Neumann 2009; Esser 2006).

Given this division of scientific labour, the link between issues related to citizenship and language-of-origin courses has so far hardly been explored. One exception is a chapter by Nikola Tietze comparing the politics of language as means of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the definition of citizenship in France and Germany (Tietze 2005, 203–235). However, here again the party-political dynamics leading to the politicisation and the increased saliency of language in the German case are not systematically taken into account.

Statement of the problem

This article seeks to show that the debate around the recognition of multilingualism, and namely the right of migrants’ children to have access to language-of-origin classes, taking place on the level of different Länder, is linked to the larger debate on citizenship polarizing politics on the national level since the 1980s. Since the early 1980s, discourses on immigration and citizenship in Germany have become highly polarized when ‘the Greens, parts of the SPD, individual CDU and FDP politicians, and certain churches and unions introduced a debate on multiculturalism, stressing the reality of immigration, supporting cultural pluralism, and advocating a “post-national” rather than an ethnically defined identity’ (Cooper 2002, 93). This polarization can be observed in regard to the three dimensions of citizenship distinguished by Christian Joppke: status, rights and identity (Joppke 2007). The polarization around the status dimension is visible in the debate whether Germany should be considered a country of immigration or not and in the debate around the liberalization of access to citizenship to the introduction of the ius soli principle. The opposition on the dimension of rights is visible in the debate around whether to allow the possibility of dual citizenship and on the question of granting specific cultural and linguistic rights to migrants. The division on the dimension of identity is finally visible in the debate around the role of language
and culture tests for the acquisition of citizenship and around the question whether Germany should be considered as a culturally homogeneous country or not.

Drawing on an analysis of policy documents, press sources and interviews with mobilized actors (officials of the Ministry of education, teachers’ unions and associations, Turkish parents’ associations), I will demonstrate that the politicization of the language-of-origin courses at the beginning of the years 2000 is directly linked to the reform of the German citizenship regime. I will show that in the federal structure of the German state and the competence of the Länder in the domain of education and culture, the national debate on citizenship is fought regionally through the question of language-of-origin classes and multilingualism at the level of the different Länder. The in-depth actor-centred empirical analysis will focus on the Land of North-Rhine-Westphalia¹, one of the four Länder alongside Hessen, Lower-Saxony and Bavaria where language-of-origin courses are taken in charge directly by the Ministry of Education. NRW is characterized by a particularly important percentage of migrant population: According to official school statistics, 27% of pupils have a ‘history of migration’ and 15% of pupils speak a language other than German at home (Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 2013).

The link between the party-political polarization on language of origin courses and the cleavage on citizenship reforms

The definition of German as national language and its imposition as sole language of instruction in schools as well as language of justice and administration goes back to the creation to the Second German Empire in 1871. The efforts of linguistic homogenization characterizing the end of the nineteenth century particularly target the Polish speaking minorities in Prussia (Wenning 1996; Krüger-Potratz 1994). In the absence of numerically important autochthonous linguistic minorities, the monolingual language regime and the collective self-understanding of Germany as monolingual nation-state have barely been challenged since. It is only with the arrival of different waves of migrant workers since the 1960s, and the subsequent migration of their families that the increased linguistic and cultural diversity inside the German territory and especially in large cities has become a political issue. While the introduction of language-of-origin courses between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s was largely uncontroversial, the combined effect of a changing legitimation of these language-of-origin courses and the project to reform the German citizenship law triggered an intense debate. In this section I will show that the polarization on language-of-origin courses and that around citizenship reforms follow similar lines. What is at stake is the question whether Germany should continue to be conceived as a monolingual and mono-cultural nation-state into which migrants should assimilate or integrate themselves, or whether both the German language regime and citizenship regime should be adapted to take into account the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity.

¹ The fieldwork in North-Rhine-Westphalia was conducted in spring 2013.
² Interview with a representative of the teachers’ union Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und
Changing legitimization of language-of-origin courses as Germany acknowledges becoming a country of immigration

The increased linguistic diversity characterizing German society since the second half of the twentieth century is linked to the arrival of migrant populations following the conclusion of labour migration agreements in the 1960s. After a first agreement with Italy in 1955, Germany concluded labour migration agreements with Spain, Greece, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia and Yugoslavia between 1960 and 1968 (Woellert et al. 2009, 12). With migrants initially being perceived as a temporary work force, as illustrates the German term of Gastarbeiter [guest workers], the introduction of specific language courses for migrants’ children in the official language of the country of origin of their parents followed the objective of facilitating their return. This original legitimization of language-of-origin courses as means to allow children the reintegration into the society of their country of origin did not give rise to controversies but was largely supported by different political parties and actors on the federal and regional level. Thomas Faist thus notes that ‘symbolic politics that promoted the return of guest workers to their countries of origin in the early 1980s offered a way to avoid discussions of membership and citizenship of settled migrant labour’ (Faist 1994, 51). Facilitating the return of migrants’ children through the teaching of the language-of-origin was also explicitly encouraged by different measures adopted on the European level in the 1970s (European Council 1977).

Following a decision of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs in 1971, courses in the mother tongue could be taken in charge directly by the school authorities of the Länder (KMK 1971). However, only in a minority of Länder language-of-origin courses were directly organized by the public authorities: this was the case in North-Rhine-Westphalia, in Hessen, in Lower-Saxony and in Bavaria. In the other Länder, language-of-origin courses were on the contrary ensured by teachers trained and paid by the country of origin. The original legitimation of language-of-origin courses remains visible until the end of the 1980s in the official texts regulating their organization. In North-Rhine-Westphalia, the program ‘Muttersprachlicher Ergänzungsunterricht’ [complementary course in the mother tongue] adopted in 1984 describes the organization of Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish and Turkish courses for primary and lower secondary school level as having the aim to help pupils acquire not only written and oral skills in these languages but also attitudes allowing ‘an understanding of the society and the culture of the country of origin’. Overall, the objective of the language-of-origin courses is to contribute ‘to facilitate pupils’ return and the reintegration in the homeland of their parents’ (Quoted in Neumann, Gogolin, and Häberlein 2001, my translation).

This context of legitimization of language-origin-courses changed at the beginning of the 1990s: this change can be linked to the German reunification on the one hand, and the realization or acceptance that many of the migrants might not return to their country of origin but spend the rest of their lives in Germany on the other hand. The acknowledgement that children with migrant origins may not return to their country of origin or to that of their parents marked the end of the denial that Germany has indeed become a country of immigration. Consequently, the issue at stake behind language courses for migrants’ children was no longer ensuring the return to the country of origin, but favouring their integration into German society. The changing perception of language-of-origin courses, which became seen as standing in conflict to the acquisition of German language skills by migrants’ children, is therefore directly linked
to issues of citizenship, and more specifically to its status dimension (Joppke 2007). Nicola Tietze notes that

‘the greater prominence given to German language skills is linked to the establishment of a policy of integration that the former Federal Republic (before the reunification in 1990) had refused, by declaring that it was not a country of immigration. This change of paradigm changes the representation of migrants’ difference. They are no longer foreigners by essence and immutable into nationals as in the 1970s and 1980s, but they become potential German citizens with evolving differences and specific problems of integration’. (Tietze 2005, 210–211, my translation)

While the period of the beginning of the 1990s represented a change of paradigm, the question of immigration was already beforehand the object of political polarization around a left-right axis. Jan-Werner Müller underlines that the Christian Democrats (CDU) ‘tended to repeat, “Germany is not a country of immigration” like a mantra of exclusion during the 1980s and 1990s’ and ‘almost ritually denounced the “naïve multiculturalism” that Greens and Social Democrats allegedly dreamed about’ (Müller 2006, 22–23). Attempts of liberalizing migrants’ access to German citizenship were already formulated by the coalition government of social-democrats (SPD) and liberals (FDP) led by Helmut Schmit in 1982, but blocked by the Christian-democrat (CDU-CSU) majority in the upper house, the Bundesrat (Howard 2008, 47). After the change of majority and the accession to power of a conservative-liberal (CDU-FDP) coalition government under the chancellor Helmut Kohl in 1982, claims in favour of the introduction of the jus soli principle were expressed by the social-democrats in the opposition in 1989. Demands for allowing the possibility of dual citizenship were formulated by the Green party in the same year. As a result of these pressures, a first law liberalizing access to citizenship for younger immigrants aged between 16 and 23, as well as for older immigrants residing in Germany for at least 15 years, was adopted by the FDP-CDU government in 1990 (Green 2000, 110). In 1993, an addition to the 1990 Ausländergesetz further liberalized access to German citizenship by transforming the discretionary nature of the disposition of the law into a permanent right. Finally, after the German reunification and the stabilization of the territorial borders, the structural reasons for maintaining a citizenship law based on the principle of descent became less central.

In this context, three evolutions in regard to language courses for migrants can be noted: first, the original legitimization for language-of-origin courses disappeared, as the latter were no longer necessary to prepare migrants’ children for a return to the country of their parents. As a consequence, the relevance of these courses became increasingly questioned. Second, migrants’ languages were progressively incorporated into regular foreign language curricula, which were until then essentially limited to standard Western European languages. In the mid-1990s, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) began to overcome the division between the sectors of foreign language learning and the teaching of languages-of-origin and to address the question of cultural and linguistic diversity in general, i.e. as result of both internal and external transformations (Krüger-Potratz 2005, 68). In its 1996 decision on intercultural education, the KMK explicitly expressed itself in favour of the recognition of and the enhancement of the bilingualism of pupils with a migrant background and the incorporation of the languages-of-origin into the general objective of the promotion of multilingualism – beforehand circumscribed to the European linguistic diversity:
‘Organisationally, these language [of origin] classes should be – as far as possible – interlocked with the general curriculum: for example through their inclusion in regular school hours and the possibility for other pupils to participate in these classes. The goal should also be, to preserve and create multilingualism’ (KMK 1996, 5, my translation).

In the same vein, in 1995 the Standing Conference issued for the first time recommendations for the recognition of Turkish in the German high school degree Abitur. This inclusion of language-of-origin courses into general foreign language education applied however essentially to higher secondary education, while the traditional language-of-origin courses were maintained at the primary school level. Third, the acknowledgment that migrants may not return to their country but become long term residents or even German citizens also entailed an increased salience of discourses underlining the importance for migrants to learn German in order to integrate into German society. These three partially contradictory trends in regard to language courses for migrants were all closely linked to the acknowledgement that Germany had become a country of immigration.

Although the principle that migrants are going to stay in Germany was admitted by political parties and social actors at the beginning of the 1990s, the citizenship status of these first, second and third generation migrants, the cultural and linguistic rights to be granted to migrants and the collective identity of German society remained a divisive issue. As Randall Hansen and Jobst Koehler put it, the ‘narrowing of the terms of the discourse has not eliminated political debate over concepts of nationality, belonging and integration, but rather shifted it to a narrower sphere’ (Hansen and Koehler 2005, 625). The following section will show that the different political parties have continued to give diametrically opposed answers to these questions.

**A liberalization of the citizenship law in 1999 and a subsequent backlash on language-of-origin courses**

The party-political polarization on the issue of citizenship and language became particularly visible shortly after the accession of power of the social-democrat and green coalition (SPD-Grüne) led by the chancellor Gerhard Schröder in 1998. The new coalition envisaged a fundamental reform of German citizenship law as one of its most important reform projects (Oers 2010, 70). The main points of the citizenship reform proposal consisted in a reduction of the residence period required for entitlement to naturalization, the introduction of the territorial principle jus soli for children born on the German territory of non-German parents, and the introduction of the principle of dual citizenship. Frank Eckardt notes that ‘with this juridical initiative, it was intended to introduce a general shift in integration policies towards a multicultural approach that defines the basis of German nationality’ (Eckardt 2007, 242). While the law initially appeared as largely uncontroversial, as the SPD and Green benefitted from a comfortable, newly elected majority, and a backing from unions, churches and most of the press, ‘the law’s passage through parliament during 1999 had been marred by controversy, when the opposition conservative Christian-Democratic Union (CDU) ran its now notorious petition campaign against the SPD-Green government’s original plans to allow dual citizenship on an unrestricted basis’ (Green 2012, 174–175). The CDU opposition, and above all its Bavarian sister-party the CSU, managed to politicize the issue of citizenship through ‘switching the venue’ and taking the debate out of
parliament to the streets (Hansen and Koehler 2005, 638–639). The head of the CSU, Edmund Stoiber’s call for a plebiscite on the issue of dual citizenship and the launching of a campaign collecting signatures against the SPD-Green government’s reform project contributed to an increased saliency of question related to citizenship beyond the realm of the parliamentary arena and lead to an unprecedented mobilization of civil society and the population at large. Until this moment the debates around citizenship policies were confined to the elite level and characterized by little popular involvement (Howard 2008, 47). Within six weeks, the petition against dual citizenship launched by the CDU thus gathered over five million signatures. Among the opponents to the reform project, supporters of the CDU/CSU and of far-right parties were the most strongly represented: while in January 1999, 53 per cent of all Germans opposed unlimited dual citizenship, this was the case of 71 per cent of the supporters of the CDU/CSU and of 82 per cent of supporters of right-extremist parties (Cooper 2002, 91). During the debate, the opposition framed dual citizenship as impeding the integration process of migrants and creating ‘segregated communities’ (Hansen and Koehler 2005, 640) – a framing visible also in the debate around language-of-origin courses and more largely in debates around multiculturalism. The debate around dual citizenship was fought primarily at the level of the Landtag elections in Hessen around the CDU candidate Roland Koch: As a victory of the CDU in this traditionally social-democratic Land would give them a veto position in the Bundesrat and block the citizenship reform project, the election itself was turned into a referendum around the SPD/Green coalitions’ reform project. After Koch’s and the CDU’s victory in the 1999 Landtag elections, the SPD-Green government needed to find a compromise allowing the passage of the reform in the Bundesrat, and abandoned their initial project of the introduction of unlimited dual citizenship. Public opinion surveys showed that the concept of dual citizenship was opposed by an increasing part of the population (Howard 2008, 52).

The citizenship reform and the debates on migrants’ integration accompanying its adoption led to a politicization of the question of language. While the citizenship law itself is generally presented as a major step in the liberalization by the involved actors themselves – by those defending it as by those opposing it (Green 2012, 176) – certain scholars are more critical: on various points the 1999 citizenship law has imposed new restrictions, such as the institutionalization of new requirements for German language competence. These language requirements have not been standardized at the federal level, but it is the competence of the different Länder to administer language testing for applicants to German citizenship. More generally, ‘the discussion surrounding the adoption of the Immigration Act has taken the requirement relating to the knowledge of the German language out of the context of naturalization: knowledge of the language became the “key to integration” in general’ (Oers 2010, 74).

The politicization language in the context of the citizenship reform debate in 1999 did not only have an impact on the status of the German language in the naturalization procedure but it also led to the emergence of a cleavage around the suppression or the maintenance of language-of-origin courses for migrants. In the wake of the citizenship reform and the petition campaign against dual citizenship, a general backlash led by representatives of the CDU at the level of the different Länder became visible around questions related to immigration and identity. In Hessen, language-of-origin courses for migrants were abolished after the CDU’s accession to power. In the same way, during the election campaign in North-Rhine-Westphalia in 2000, language-of-origin courses were criticized as promoting a multicultural idea instead of integration by the CDU candidate Jürgen Rüttgers. Rüttgers was also the author of the ‘integration concept’ adopted by the CDU in 1999 and advocating increased state funding for
German language courses for immigrants, opposing dual citizenship and calling for a stricter controls on new immigration (Cooper 2002, 96). The CDU project of abolishing language-of-origin courses is sharply criticized by the state working group of the municipal migrant representations in North-Rhine-Westphalia LAGA (Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Ausländerbeiräte) who condemns the prejudicial nature of such measures:

‘If the CDU North-Rhine-Westphalia through its chief candidate Jürgen Rüttgers announces the abolition of language-of-origin courses for children with migratory background in case of his election into government, it does not contribute to an objective discussion on education policy, but leads an unfair election campaign at the expense of the politically weaker in our society. The unspeakable slogan “Kinder statt Inder” [children instead of Indians] also goes in this direction. This way, right forces are being strengthened – the peoples’ party CDU should not need that’ (LAGA NRW 2000 my translation).

The NRW election campaign led by Jürgen Rütters in 2000 continued indeed ‘both the anti-foreigner theme and the use of plebiscitary instruments’ seen earlier in Hessen by Roland Koch (Cooper 2002, 99). The CDU in North-Rhine-Westphalia notably launched a postcard campaign against the government’s Green card project granting five-year residency permits to computer experts – mainly from India – with the slogan ‘children instead of Indians’. The declaration by Tayfun Keltek, president of the LAGA in NRW further establishes a clear link between the questions of language-of-origin courses on the one hand and migrants’ citizenship rights on the other:

‘The climate for the readiness of migrants to integration on the one hand, and the readiness of the majority society to accept migrants, has been considerably disturbed. […] Mister Rüttgers and the CDU should know that educational achievement and consequently the professional future essentially depend on the fact that all children are taken into consideration with their social and cultural capabilities and competences, and that the latter are being encouraged. This includes also language competence. Bold and non-factual claims and declarations of intent do not contribute to the peaceful and equitable coexistence of majority- and minority-society’ (LAGA NRW 2000, my translation).

The 1999 debate on citizenship reform thus led to a polarization around questions related to the integration of migrants and the role played by language in this process. While the increased emphasis put on the necessity for migrants to learn German was shared by almost all political actors – although it was framed in a more communitarian way by representatives of the CDU/CSU and in a more liberal manner by politicians from the SPD and Greens (Oers 2010, 72–75) –, the question of language-of-origin courses gave rise to the formation of a left-right partisan cleavage on the rights and identity dimension of citizenship. This partisan cleavage was visible in the implementation policies varying according to the political colour of the governments of the different Länder at the beginning of the years 2000.

Citizenship and languages-of-origin: A national debate fought at the level of the different Länder

The policies on language-of-origin courses conducted on the level of the different
Länder following the adoption of the 1999 citizenship reform varied significantly according to the majority and coalition government in power. The national debate on citizenship continued to be fought regionally through the issue of language-of-origin courses at the level of the different Länder. This section will demonstrate how at the beginning of the years 2000, policy change on language-of-origin courses in the different Länder was characterized by attempts of suppressing these courses launched by CDU governments on the one hand, and projects for their revalorization and integration into a framework of the promotion of multilingualism by SPD/Green governments on the other hand. Finally, different migrants’ associations tried to overcome this partisan division on language-of-origin courses by reframing the issue in terms of claims for equal opportunity in education instead in reference to questions of identity.

Different policies on language-of-origin courses are conducted in Länder governed by CDU/FDP or SPD/Green coalitions

The case of the Land of Hessen, which had been the stage of the debate around dual citizenship is the most paradigmatic in this respect: after Roland Koch’s victory at the 1999 Landtag elections, and the accession to power of a new CDU/FDP coalition government, a radical policy change on the question of language-of-origin classes was implemented: although curricula and pedagogical material for these courses had been previously developed at the level of the Land, the new government rowed backwards on the development towards the promotion of multilingualism conducted by their social-democrat predecessors: first, starting from the school year 2000/2001, language-of-origin courses were no longer counted as credits for pupils’ promotion requirements. Second, in the 2002 education bill, the objective to promote bilingualism, contained in the previous law, was deleted and the government withdrew its responsibility for language-of-origin courses, which became seen to be taken in charge by the consulates of the countries of emigration and no longer by the public authorities of the Land. As a consequence, the number of students learning their language-of-origin as a second foreign language decreased dramatically, as pupils with migrant background no longer had the possibility to have their language skills recognized as a competence by the education system (Bender-Szymanski 2005, 3).

Around the same period of time, in 2002 in the Land of Rhineland-Palatinate, a proposal of the CDU to abolish language-of-origin courses for migrants was rejected by the SPD-Green majority in government. The question arose again during the 2011 election campaign, with the CDU opposition criticizing the cost of language-of-origin courses for the Land and the tax payers, as well as the political priorities on multilingualism set by the SPD government. CDU opposition leader Christian Baldauf condemned that the social-democrats in Rhineland-Palatinate

‘consider it more important that children with a foreign background get language-of-origin courses paid by the Land, rather than language support in German. This is grotesque! What do Turkish children need more for their integration? German or Turkish? Knowledge about German history or the history of East-Anatolia?’

(quoted in swr.online 2010, my translation)

This statement illustrates again how German language skills and skills in the language-of-origin were seen as standing in opposition to each other by representatives
of the CDU, and how language-of-origin courses were considered an obstacle to migrants’ integration

In North-Rhine-Westphalia, at the beginning of the years 2000 the SPD-Green government expressed on the contrary its commitment to maintaining and strengthening the language-of-origin courses organized by the Land. This is visible in the introductory statement to the new programs for language-of-origin courses by the Minister of Education of North-Rhine-Westphalia, Gabriele Behler, member of the Green party, adopted in 2000:

‘today language-of-origin classes are an offer for pupils who grow up bilingually in German and in a different language. It contributes to maintain their multilingualism and ensures young people’s bond and connection to the country of origin of the family. In the language-of-origin courses pupils experience the public recognition of their linguistic and cultural origin. Pupils who master their language-of-origin both written and orally will also quickly and thoroughly learn German. Language-of-origin courses promote the linguistic richness, which should not be underestimated – neither as cultural nor as economic factor – in North-Rhine-Westphalia’. (Ministerium für Schule, Wissenschaft und Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 2000, 3, my translation)

Contrary to the vision defended by the CDU according to which the teaching of languages-of-origin were an obstacle to migrants’ children’s integration, the position expressed by the SPD-Green government consisted in a recognition of the bilingualism of language-of-origin and German, which amounts to a certain extent to a recognition of the possibility to have multiple identities and cultures. In their survey of the education policies directed towards minorities adopted by the different Länder, Ingrid Gogolin and Ursula Neumann note that the programs adopted in North-Rhine-Westphalia consisted in ‘a recognition of the condition of linguistic and cultural plurality as consequence of migration and set a clear signal in favour of the revalorization of migrants’ specific linguistic competences’ (Neumann, Gogolin, and Häberlein 2001, 91, my translation). In the same way, a 2002 proposal by the SPD and the Greens on the need to develop and strengthen language-of-origin courses states that ‘finally, what is at stake is not only the promotion of bilingualism, but also a lived bi- and interculturality’ (Landtag Nordrhein-Westfalen 2002, my translation). In a joint declaration the Minister for Education of NRW, Gabriele Behler, and her Turkish homologue, Metin Bostanciglu further ‘reaffirm the importance of a school offer in Turkish language and in intercultural education and encourage families of Turkish origin to register their children in language-of-origin courses and ensure their regular participation’ (Ministerium für Schule und Weiterbildung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 2002, my translation).

However, as in the case of Hessen, policies in favour of multilingualism and language-of-origin courses in North-Rhine-Westphalia changed after the CDU’s victory at the 2005 Landtag elections. The 2005 coalition agreement between the CDU and the FDP foresaw the following:

‘The mother tongue in Germany is German. Nevertheless we agree that the languages migrants brought with them are a richness given the context of increased globalization and international interconnectedness on the labour market. They represent an additional qualification that we want to support. The existing language-of-origin classes will become superfluous in so far as we succeed to develop language competence through early childhood education’ (CDU und FDP des Landes NRW 2005, 53, my translation).
A similar position was expressed by the more conservative teachers’ union Philologenverband. While the Philologenverband recognized the importance of language-of-origin courses, it underlined that these courses ‘may lead to contribute to a further ghettoization of children with migration background. … [They] exemplify the difficulty of striking a balance between multicultural tolerance and the forging of identities on the one hand, and the necessary concentration on the language of communication (Verkehrssprache) German and integration on the other hand’ (Philologenverband NRW 2005, my translation).

This position shows how language-of-origin courses continued to be seen as obstacle to the integration of immigrants into German mainstream society, an integration which was implicitly understood in terms of linguistic and cultural assimilation. The more progressive teachers’ union, Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW), defended on the contrary the maintaining of language-of-origin courses as well as the recognition of migrants’ languages as foreign languages by the education system and supports the claims made by different Turkish associations who mobilize against the suppression of these courses.

Claims-making and attempts to depoliticize the issue by migrants’ associations in North-Rhine-Westphalia

While debates around language-of-origin courses had been conducted in a first stage essentially at the elite-level and between established political parties inside the parliamentary arena of the Landtag, migrants’ voice and position on these issues was increasingly taken into account, after different Turkish associations mobilized on the issue in different Länder. This evolution was part of a wider trend, visible at the federal level and going beyond the question of language-of-origin courses. Jan Palmowski notes that ‘what started in the late 1990s as an essentially German discourse about integration has become a much more multifaceted debate in which non-citizens have found a political voice’ (Palmowski 2008, 559). Criticizing the radical policy changes implemented by the successive governments, different Turkish and migrant associations tried to depoliticize the issue of language-of-origin courses through framing it in terms of equal opportunity in education instead of conflicting visions of identity.

The position of migrant organizations was taken into account during the public hearing around the question of ‘Promotion of multilingualism’ organized in May 2003 by the migration committee of the Parliament of North-Rhine-Westphalia. The voice of the migrant communities was represented through the state working group of the municipal migrant representations in North-Rhine-Westphalia, LAGA (Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Ausländerbeiräte). The LAGA representatives underlined the detrimental nature of the conventional wisdom on language-of-origin courses, according to which migrants’ languages are considered as a disturbing element for their acquisition of the German language and their integration into the mainstream society (LAGA NRW 2003):

2 Interview with a representative of the teachers’ union Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW), conducted in Düsseldorf, February 28, 2013.
‘Mother tongues are a central element of individuals’ identities. If migrants’ languages do not appear in schools, this favours a development where these languages are nevertheless being kept alive outside school, but as an element of distancing from the society of the Federal Republic of Germany, as a means of segregation and the formation of parallel societies. This is something we should prevent together’ (LAGA NRW 2003, my translation).

This statement shows that migrant organizations positioned themselves clearly in favour of an integration of language-of-origin courses into general school curricula and demanded public recognition of the importance of their languages. The recognition of migrants’ languages and intervention of the public authorities of the Land in the organization of language-of-origin courses was presented as a way of preventing the latter from becoming a means of differentiation – a fear repeatedly expresses by the opponents to those courses.

In March 2008, more than a thousand representatives and members of different Turkish organizations demonstrated in front of the Landtag in Düsseldorf against the suppression of language-of-origin courses. The umbrella organization NRW Initiative Türkisch at the origin of the demonstration groups different types of Turkish associations: organizations of Turkish students, academics, lawyers, parents, teachers, entrepreneurs, etc. The claims of the Turkish organization were also supported by the teachers’ union Gewerkschaft für Erziehung und Wissenschaft (GEW) as well as by the state working group of the municipal migrant, LAGA. The LAGA representative Tayfun Keltek underlined in his speech at the demonstration that

‘we cannot convince people with a migration background that they are welcome and benefit from equal rights in our society, if we convey them at the same time the idea that their language and their culture are not equally worthy, or even inferior. Those who deny or have to deny their origins cannot develop a healthy identity. But only an individual with a healthy identity and self-esteem has the capacity to open up to new ways of life and cultures, and accordingly to integration. Therefore it is a precondition for a successful integration to treat and promote migrants’ language, religion and culture on equal footing following the provision of our constitutional law’ (Keltek 2008, my translation).

This statement shows how migrants’ associations tried to present an alternative framing of language-of-origin courses, according to which the latter are not only compatible with integration in the German society, but also a precondition for a successful integration and the learning of German. In the same way, Dr. Emel Huber, Professor for Turkish Language at the University of Essen emphasized in her intervention that

‘the time in which Turkish courses aimed at preparing children for a return to Turkey is over. Today, Turkish classes must serve to prepare children for their life in Germany. This implies educating them to become Turkish-German bilingual individuals’ (Huber 2008, my translation).

During the demonstration, migrants associations in NRW expressed themselves again in favour of an integration of language-of-origin courses into regular public schools and into the objective of multilingualism promoted by the latter.

The necessity of the promotion of the Turkish language by the German education system had also been emphasized by the LAGA after a call of the Turkish
President, Tayyip Erdogan in favour of the creation of Turkish schools in Germany. Opposing the vision defended by Erdogan, LAGA representatives had indeed underlined at this occasion that ‘we do not need separate Turkish schools. But the systematic promotion of natural multilingualism is a concern that the LAGA NRW fully supports’ (LAGA NRW 2008, my translation). Overall, the LAGA as well as the different Turkish parents’ and teachers’ associations criticized the politicized nature of language-of-origin courses and the fact that the fate of the later depends on the political colour and orientation of the government. In a 2009 position paper on language-of-origin courses, the Association of Turkish teachers (Türkischer Lehrerverein Nordrhein-Westfalen e.V.) underlines that ‘the right of immigrated children and youths to an adequate promotion of their multilingualism and the use of this potential for the German economy should not be neglected’ and invited the government of North-Rhine-Westphalia to ‘take into account the factual situation independently of changing political currents’ (Türkischer Lehrerverein Nordrhein-Westfalen e.V. 2009, my translation). In the same way, a representative of a Turkish parental association (Elternverband Ruhr) deplored that language-of-origin courses are ‘dependent on party-politics’. Speaking of the example of the Land of Hessen after the arival of power of Roland Koch, he noted that ‘it’s politics that makes this nonsense, only because they want to satisfy their political clientele, politicians lay the tracks for society in a very, very wrong way… and in this case, we have lost ten years’ 3. In order to overcome the partisan cleavage which emerged on the issue of language-of-origin courses in the wake of the citizenship reform of 1999, migrants associations have in recent years tried to frame the issue in terms of equal-opportunity in education rather than as the defence of a particular cultural interest of a given migrant groups. In their educational reform proposals, the LAGA underlines that ‘whoever wants to improve migrants’ educational achievement, needs to act on the general development of our educational system. He does not defend in a lobbyist way the particular interests of ethnic or cultural minorities, but he works on the conception of a learning-oriented educational reform for the entire society’ (LAGA NRW 2010, 3, my translation).

The calls for the integration of migrants’ languages in general foreign language programs and the recognition of migrants’ natural multilingualism by the education system formulated by the LAGA go in the same direction:

‘The multi-ethnic society is a reality; migration and an orientation towards Europe constitute Germany as multicultural country of immigration. The mono-cultural orientation of publicly steered education of children and youth fails to address actual life-reality. […] Through the incorporation of migrants’ mother tongues in the regular foreign language program migrants’ languages will be given a higher status and will no longer be viewed as a “problem”. The natural multilingualism will even be recognized as a valuable resource for the foreign language learning of monolingual German children and youth’ (LAGA NRW 2010, 7–9, my translation).

3 Interview with a representative of a Turkish parents’ association, Elternverband Ruhr, conducted in Essen, North-Rhine-Westphalia, March 8, 2013.
These claims show how the question of language-of-origin courses has moved from the status dimension to the rights dimension of citizenship, with citizens with a migrant background expressing claims for equality and equal opportunity in education, through the taking into account of their specific linguistic situation. At the same time, the claims for the recognition of migrants’ children’s multilingualism as a competence, as well as the recognition of the possibility to have multiple cultural identities that do not necessarily stand in conflict with each other, show that the polarization relating to the identity dimension of citizenship remains omnipresent in the debate.

Conclusion

I have shown that the politicization and saliency of language-of-origin courses in Germany at the beginning of the years 2000 is closely linked to the debate around the citizenship reform at the end of the 1990s. The debate around the suppression or maintaining of language-of-origin courses for children with a migrant background follows the acknowledgment that Germany has become a country of immigration and that migrants and their children will not return to their country but stay permanently in Germany. Discourses presenting language-of-origin courses as obstacle to migrants’ integration into German society and the learning of the German language are part of a larger backlash reaction on the language and identity dimension following the liberalization of the citizenship regime in 1999. Polarization on both issues thus runs along the same left-right axis of political conflict: A mono-cultural and monolingual definition of citizenship defended by the conservative Christian-Democratic CDU opposes a more multicultural definition of citizenship advocated by the progressive forces, namely the Social-Democratic party SPD and the Greens. Despite the attempts of migrants’ associations to depoliticize the issue through presenting an alternative framing emphasizing the compatibility between language-of-origin courses and integration, as well as their contribution to equal opportunity in education, the polarization around issues related to language in relation to the identity dimension of citizenship remains strong. In the absence of a large consensus allowing to overcome the mono-cultural and monolingual self-understanding that is still dominant in certain parts of German society, and especially in supporters of parties situated at the right spectrum of the political spectrum, language remains a ‘field of negotiation of differences and their political regulation’ (Tietze 2005, 235, my translation), in a context where differences between citizens and non-citizens are more and more difficult to operate.
References


