

## **Vienna meets the Balkans:**

### **Communicative practices and commodification of culture in the city's migrant economy**

#### *1. Introduction: Multicultural neighbourhoods and the impact of migrant businesses*

Migration is a key factor in internationalising societies. Larger cities especially attract migrants because of the opportunities they offer. At the same time, they benefit in various ways from the influx of people from other countries. These incomers add to the character of their new home cities, diversifying and culturally enriching urban life in various ways. Specifically, businesses run by incomers offer services or goods, mostly as restaurants or retailers of food products, which are culturally coined. In doing so, these migrant businesses turn the areas where they are located into sites of intercultural encounter between migrants and members of the host society (Schmatz & Wetzel 2014; Enzenhofer et al. 2007, Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2013).

Austria has a long history of cultural links with the Balkans, and Vienna – the country's capital and largest city – has a well-established community of migrants from the region. This adds to its attraction for new arrivals as it can ease the process of starting a new life. Indeed, migrants of Balkan origin today represent the largest group of incomers to Vienna.<sup>1</sup> Partly owing to problems in accessing the labour market, many of them start their own firms, thus becoming entrepreneurs (Enzenhofer et al. 2007, Schmatz & Wetzel 2014, Dannecker & Çakır 2016). Unsurprisingly, small restaurants feature prominently in the migrant economy. Although many novice entrepreneurs' have no previous experience in it, this sector is particularly attractive since neither limited knowledge of German nor even a complete lack of professional expertise seems to constitute a serious barrier to entry.

Research in various countries has shown that self-employment in the restaurant sector can enable migrants to turn their cultural identity into a key feature of their businesses. For national or regional cuisine is an important element of immaterial culture, which also includes linguacultural aspects such as oral rituals surrounding meals and the way specific occasions are celebrated (Bubinas 2003, Haberfellner 2003). Commodifying culture in this way also sparks interest among the host society, encouraging intercultural interactions in a casual atmosphere and on an everyday basis. Moreover, in a process unremarked by many in the host society, a shift tends to occur within the migrant economy. Instead of targeting their own community as a niche market, migrant entrepreneurs increasingly focus on branding and marketing ethnic cuisine and food products for the host society (Haberfellner 2003, Glick-Schiller & Çağlar 2013). By doing so, they further stimulate the emergence of sites of intercultural (and multilingual) encounter.

This development can be observed in several Vienna districts (e.g., the 5<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>), substantial areas of which are fundamentally shaped by migrant businesses. These generally provide leisure and hospitality services (e.g., cafes doubling as music venues, restaurants, snack bars) or operate as food retailers (Enzenhofer et al. 2006: 33, Schmatz & Wetzel 2014: 44), focusing in both cases on regionally or nationally coined products (Bubinas 2003). Given their generally limited financial resources, new arrivals tend to settle in relatively run-down areas, such as parts of the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> districts<sup>2</sup> (Kaufmann 1999, vgl. Enzenhofer et al 2007 and Schmatz & Wetzel 2014). By doing so, they raise the level of economic activity in these neighbourhoods and often trigger an upgrading process, thus contributing to urban development.

Occasionally, this process even results in gentrification, especially when ethnically coined businesses tailor their offers to new target groups (Glick-Schiller & Çağlar 2009, 2013, Rath (ed.) 2007,

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<sup>1</sup> According to the latest data provided by the City of Vienna (2019), Serbs rank first, Bosnians fifth and Croatians eighth (<<https://www.wien.gv.at/menschen/integration/pdf/daten-fakten-migrantinnen.pdf>> latest accessed 4/8/2021).

<sup>2</sup> According to the Wiener Diversitäts- und Integrationsmonitor 2013-2016 (2016: 158 ff.) (<<https://www.urbaninnovation.at/tools/uploads/4.WienerIntegrationsDiversitaetsmonitor.pdf>> latest accessed 4/8/2021).

Rath 2007 on migrants as *urban scale-makers*), one example being the targeting of so-called 'BoBos' in Vienna's 2<sup>nd</sup> district. Further examples of such gentrification are currently observable at Yppenplatz (16<sup>th</sup> district) and in the Sonnwend-quarter (10<sup>th</sup> district). The process is being further stimulated by a new generation of migrants. Mostly younger, Austrian-born and often equipped with a university degree, their motivations for becoming self-employed entrepreneurs frequently differ from those of the typical first-generation migrant setting up a restaurant or grocery store.

Given these various developments, there is a clear need to analyse the role and impact of Vienna's migrant economy, and specifically to answer two key questions.

1. How do migrant entrepreneurs mobilise their cultural capital and linguistic heritage in order to achieve business success?
2. How do migrant businesses shape the neighbourhoods and communities in which they operate, creating sites of international encounter and enhancing urban development?

## *2. State of the art: research perspectives on the migrant economy*

The migrant economy has attracted attention from various perspectives, from the social and economic sciences often in the context of *ethnic entrepreneurship* (e.g., Borjas 1986, Evans 1989, Fong & Ooka 2002, Waldinger et al. 1990). These disciplines distinguish between *global entrepreneurs* – well-qualified individuals who deliberately choose migration and self-employment in pursuit of a transnational career (Enzenhofer et al. 2007) – and ethnic entrepreneurs (i.e., first generation migrant entrepreneurs). The latter are viewed as suffering certain deficits that they may attempt to overcome through self-employment. Thus their motivation for starting a small business is seen as deriving from difficulties in accessing the labour market that result from poor knowledge of the host-country language and a lack of professional training or qualifications – or from problems in having these recognised. In this context, self-employment represents an attractive alternative to precarious employment since it allows for a degree of autonomy and agency, as well as the chance of social mobility and advancement in the host society (Enzenhofer et al. 2007, Schmatz & Wetzel 2014, Dannecker & Çakır 2016).

Turning to social and urban geography, these are interested in the migrant economy's impact on the development of urban space. Analyses show that newly arrived migrants play a key role in upgrading neighbourhoods since they tend to settle, and start small businesses, in those with many vacant sites and weak demand for either living or commercial units (e.g., Glick-Schiller & Çağlar 2013). In Vienna, for example, this phenomenon is attested for the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> districts (Enzenhofer et al. 2007, Schmatz & Wetzel 2014, Aigner 2012, 2019). Further steps in the process include the upgrading and general improvement of living conditions (*urban scaling*), which also facilitates and multiplies encounters between migrants and members of the host society (cf. Glick-Schiller & Çağlar 2009, 2013 using the examples of Philadelphia and Halle upon Saale).

Linguistics and cultural studies, by contrast, address the migrant economy in the context of investigations of multilingualism, and of communicative and cultural diversity, in the urban space. See, for example, the TLANG-project on several British cities, the LIMA-project on Hamburg, Hua et al. (2017) on London or Leeman & Modan (2010) on Chinatown in Washington, DC. Such research focuses on ethnic shops and market stalls (e.g., Blackledge et al. 2015, Blackledge & Creese 2019) and on other ethnic businesses such as massage parlours and mobile-phone shops (e.g., Flubacher 2020, Bubinas 2003). It analyses which languages occur in business or service encounters, and how their use is distributed (e.g., Scarvaglieri et al. 2013). Another research strand that traces visually displayed multilingualism in the urban space relies on linguistic landscaping (e.g., Mühlen-Meyer & Lützenkirchen 2017 on the Ruhr-metropolis region). Apart from Soukup (2016) on English in Vienna's linguistic landscape, however, Austria has so far attracted little attention in this regard.

These lines of research focus on ethnic businesses forming a niche economy, and on how migrants and migration influence the urban face of multilingualism as displayed on public signage. Lately,

however, scholars have also started to analyse the possibility of commodifying linguistic skills in the context of intercultural service encounters. Mostly, this research suggests that the linguistic resources with which many migrants enter such situations are not accorded the prestige necessary to make them a commercial asset (e.g., Flubacher 2020, Bubinas 2003, Gonçalves & Kelly-Holmes 2020, Duchêne et al. (eds.) 2013, Flubacher et al. (eds.) 2018). Nevertheless, there is evidence that language and culture can be commodified, especially in the form of nationally branded cuisine and table rituals (e.g., Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain 2017), in particular contexts and given two preconditions. Migrants must adopt an appropriate marketing strategy, and at least some elements in the host society must be prepared to see the cuisine concerned, not as 'what foreigners eat' but as something fun, exotic and worth trying.

Yet, especially with regard to linguistics and cultural studies, there is a dearth of research on Vienna, and especially on its large community of Balkan descent. Hardly any studies have analysed how the business activities of this group help to create multilingual and multicultural spaces in the city, turning the neighbourhoods where they operate into sites of intercultural encounter. The project's aim is to start filling this research gap.

### *3. Research aims and methods*

In order to achieve that aim, the project focuses on the communicative practices emerging among small Viennese businesses in the leisure and hospitality sectors run by migrants of Balkan origin, practices that themselves shape the way such businesses operate. In this context, we will pay particular attention to the roles of culture and linguistic identity, enabling us to re-assess how such businesses contribute to the emergence of multicultural urban spaces in Vienna and to the upgrading of particular neighbourhoods (urban scaling), a process in which their cultural and linguistic heritage can be commodified. A fundamental feature of our approach will be its focus on mobilising resources rather than overcoming deficits (cf. Barmeyer 2018, Kunczer et al. 2019, Chu et al. 2010, Barmeyer & Franklin 2016, Wong & Primecz 2011, Primecz et al. 2011).

The project pivots on the role of language, culture and communication, investigating their deployment in migrant businesses and their impact on local urban spaces. In doing so, it adopts an explorative and ethnographic approach which relies essentially on participatory and documentary methods. It thus aims at reconstructing members' methods, and their perspectives on the three factors mentioned, in order to learn more about their conceptualisations, which also affect their ideas about integration and what contributes to it. Here, 'members' include all potentially relevant participants: that is, not only migrant entrepreneurs but also their employees and customers, as well as other people living or working in the neighbourhood. The intention is to analyse these groups' concepts of locally constructed multicultural urban spaces and of the roles played in them by language, culture and communication, as well as their actual communicative practices during service encounters.

This approach presupposes a triangulation of both methods and data. In a further perspective, that will enable a richer understanding – one that incorporates the perspectives of all stakeholders – of how these neighbourhoods are constructed communicatively, linguistically and culturally as sites of intercultural encounter. Moreover, triangulation also forms the basis of the project plan, which distinguishes three major parts, each of which includes collection and preparation of a particular dataset to be analysed using a particular methodology.

The various parts will build on a pilot phase in summer 2020, in which we conducted initial interviews with the owners of several snack bars, a sports bar and a deli in the 12<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> districts. This has helped us to identify relevant hotspots in the last three of these districts (namely Märzstraße, Ottakringer Straße, and Klosterneuburger Straße, respectively), to learn more about the communities concerned and to gain access to the field. Moreover, some interviewees have already signalled their willingness to participate in the project by allowing encounters on their premises to be recorded.

The first part is devoted to the communicative practices characterising interactions in the migrant economy, combining participant observation with multimodal analysis of interaction data. It will also involve a series of recordings on the premises of small migrant businesses, which will lend immediate insight into the communicative practices involved and the linguistic resources mobilised. That, in turn, will enable us to identify the recurrent communicative activities, such as service encounters, staff meetings and gossip with customers, characterising these social spaces (cf. Liebscher & Dailey O-Cain 2013) and to analyse the role and distribution of languages (e.g., Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, German) across these activities. The recordings will also allow us to trace the strategies employed to achieve understanding and to bridge linguistic or communicative gaps, strategies that can be expected to combine various linguistic resources such as translanguaging, brokering or code switching (cf. Wei 2011, Hua et al. 2017). The results of this package will thus point to possible ways in which language may be commodified in the context of selling culturally coined goods or services (e.g., by using iconic phrases in service encounters, or in the context of brokering when presenting regional deli/fancy foods).

The aim of the second project part is to complement the picture obtained from the first with the subjective perspective of stakeholders. It will therefore involve semi-structured narrative interviews with stakeholders of all types (business owners, their employees and customers, and ideally some local residents). An updated interview-guide will integrate not only experience from the pilot phase, but also results and observations from the first package. Structured interviews will encourage interlocutors to disclose how they conceptualise their roles (e.g., employer, entrepreneur, migrant and promotor of cultural heritage) in their neighbourhood and the host society, and their contributions to both of these. These guidelines will help to elicit migrants' perspectives on linguistic and other skills, which they may or may not be able to capitalise, while inviting them to construct an identity including and relying on acts of social and cultural positioning. Consequently, interview data will allow members' perspectives and concepts to be reconstructed, and so enable tracing of a self-presentation and image which the interviewee deliberately constructs, and which to some degree also reflects specific expectations on the part of the host society (cf. Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2004). Narrative interviews with entrepreneurs, for example, may reveal how these frame their route to self-employment and thus construct an image that supposedly differs from the one held by the host society or promoted in the media. Furthermore, interviews may help to reveal more about the ethno-concept of integration, and the social or cultural categories relevant for the construction of identity (e.g., de Fina 2006, de Fina & Georgakopolou 2008, Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain 2013). These various findings will assist in arriving at a richer understanding of the migrant economy's contribution to the emergence of sites of multicultural encounter in Vienna.

The third part of the project includes documentation and analysis of the semiotic landscapes (cf. Hua et al. 2017, Flubacher 2020, Reichertz 2020) characterising the hotspots selected for the study. This part of the project will adopt the point of view of passers-by and analyse their impressions. This is broader than the perspective of urban linguistic landscaping studies (e.g., Blommaert 2013, Shohamy et al. (eds.) 2010) and relies on diverse semiotic resources including not only signage, but also images (e.g., pictures, design features), smells and sounds that contribute to a place's unique cultural imprint. These resources will be classified by communicative function (e.g., informative, appellative, expressive), discourse (e.g., official, transgressive, economic), language (e.g., German, English, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian) and on other dimensions. The classification will reveal how those who shape the landscape (e.g., local business owners, the city government) conceive of their audience (customers and guests, local residents, tourists, etc.). With regard to local economic spaces, the results will point to the group(s) targeted by migrant businesses and show whether and how language and cultural heritage are utilized for marketing purposes. In turn, these pointers will serve as indicators of the hotspot's position and role in the urban scaling process.

#### 4. Additional benefit and implications for practice

The city of Vienna has already recognized the role and significance of migrant businesses in its 2011 Local Action Plan<sup>3</sup>. The proposed project will add new findings about how such firms, specifically those from the hospitality sector, influence cultural diversity in the districts and neighbourhoods where they operate and also – at least in the medium term – the upscaling of these sites of international encounter. The expected results will thus also entail implications for practice with regard to several stakeholders, *inter alia* the city of Vienna, business development agencies, further and adult education colleges, and migrant-supporting NGOs or NPOs.

As mentioned, the project will foreground resources rather than on deficits. This approach, specifically as applied to real interaction in migrant businesses, will provide insights into the practices which are applied, from the bottom up, to manage intercultural and multilingual communication. These lessons can help to ensure that courses in German as a second or foreign language (DaF/DaZ) are adapted to the actual needs of migrants, and so empower these either to prosper on the labour market or to pursue self-employment.

The outline of the project incorporates, and explicitly adopts the migrants' own perspective: that is, the way they conceive of their role as entrepreneurs and employers in the neighbourhood and the host society. It also considers internal differences, and ongoing processes of differentiation within the migrant economy. These include the advent of a new generation of entrepreneurs, with different skill sets, professional qualifications and motivations for self-employment, who address new target-groups and commodify their cultural heritage. An empirical analysis will enable us to properly assess the challenges they face as entrepreneurs and their impact on the development of urban spaces and the host society. It can also be fundamental in further improving existent support and funding schemes, or other instruments that target migrants and enhance their local business engagement in Vienna. Tailoring support schemes to migrant entrepreneurs' actual needs will also make it easier to release their potential to create sites of multicultural encounter in the city.

In a further perspective, the results may also suggest a re-evaluation of migrants' choice of self-employment. Entrepreneurs that commodify culture and address new target-groups are especially well-placed to re-tell their story of migration and their route to entrepreneurship as a one of success. In doing so, they raise the visibility of migrants' potential and their contribution to diversifying Vienna's local business landscape.

Including the perspectives of other stakeholders (customers, local residents, etc.) will lend us insights into perceptions of the migrant economy. It should also raise awareness of ongoing processes through which migrants' cultural heritage and their contribution to urban scaling are re-evaluated. As a result, it can justify and underpin a reframing of the identified sites in the context of city marketing: for example, by foregrounding the diverse flavour lent to them by migrant businesses and by highlighting migrant businesses' contribution to urban development.

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<sup>3</sup> City of Vienna (2011) – OPENCities Local Action Plan (URBACT II) <[https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/import/Projects/Open\\_Cities/outputs\\_media/Vienna.pdf](https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/import/Projects/Open_Cities/outputs_media/Vienna.pdf)> (latest accessed 4/8/2021).

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