



# Language and trust: Struggles for recognition of migrant people in the political realm



Iker Erdocia

*School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies, Dublin City University, Glasnevin 9, Dublin, Ireland*

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the influence of language on the political participation of people who have migrated. It examines the ways in which language-related features shape the recognition and trust-building processes for migrant individuals during their engagement with the public in local-level political elections in Ireland. Adopting a relational approach to the concepts of political recognition and trust, the article examines data from interviews with councillors and candidates of migrant background who either speak English as an additional language or speak a variety other than Irish English. The study reveals a nuanced perspective of the impact of language on political participation, with varying viewpoints among participants. These differences can be partly attributed to the different forms of capital associated with candidates.

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## 1. Introduction

The global trends in migration and mobility have significantly reshaped the configuration of many contemporary societies. This transformative shift has profound implications for the dynamics of political participation and democratic life, particularly as it relates to migrant populations in host societies. Considering the low levels of political engagement of migrant people in their new countries (Martiniello, 2005), including the Irish context in this study, the management of diversity necessitates a more inclusive approach to collective governance, one that considers the needs, voices and representation of diverse communities.

Research in political science has identified various factors that may impinge on the political involvement of migrant populations in their host country, mostly in voting. Factors include unfamiliarity with the political system, a perceived dis-entitlement to partake in the democratic mechanisms and other prevalent issues associated with the socioeconomic conditions of their lives (Okigbo, 2014; Szlovak, 2017). Language is frequently acknowledged among these factors, primarily in relation to a lack of proficiency of migrant people in the dominant language hindering effective political engagement. However, the contribution of these studies around language is often confined to this notion of a lack of competence in English.

Experimental research has found that linguistic features such as the vocal attractiveness and accent of candidates can affect the way they are viewed by potential voters, with regional accents often leading to more negative views than unmarked accents (Amira et al., 2018). Equally, sociolinguistic research has examined the use of language and speech by women in elections and institutional settings (Cameron and Shaw, 2016; Shaw, 2020). These empirical studies, however, do not include the particular case of politicians of migrant origin. In the emerging work in normative accounts of language, accent bias is

E-mail address: [Iker.erdocia@dcu.ie](mailto:Iker.erdocia@dcu.ie).

argued to potentially threaten democratic values in political life (Peled and Bonotti, 2019; Bonotti and Willoughby, 2023). Nevertheless, the processes and experiences through which migrant candidates go during their political engagement have not been examined in detail, and more empirical data is needed to evaluate certain assumptions that are made about the impact of language-related issues on the political activity of ethnically marked speakers. We know, of course, that language plays a key role in the social recognition of subjects (McNamara, 2019). Building upon the limited evidence from previous research in the political realm (Lima, 2020; Erdocia, 2023), one might suggest that migrant candidates need to strive harder than their native counterparts to be successful. That said, there is limited understanding about the social symbolic dimension of language, understood as legitimate competence to garner recognition in public participation (Bourdieu, 1991; Piller, 2016; Kramsch, 2020) and, more concretely, about the struggle of candidates of migrant origin to make themselves listened to and taken seriously (Pavlenko, 2004) in everyday political life.

The present study aims to shed light on the influence of language and communication on the political participation of people of migrant origin. Political participation is understood in a rather narrow way and refers primarily to institutional politics through involvement in parties and electoral campaigns (Martiniello, 2005; see Erdocia, 2023 for detailed terminological remarks). Specifically, the article explores the ways in which language influences the recognition and trust-building processes for migrant individuals in their interactions with the public, particularly examining the implications of this for political representation within local institutions. The study is situated in what many characterised as the only postcolonial state in Western Europe (Carroll and King, 2003). It is set against the backdrop of an Anglo-Irish democratic electoral system, where there is a need to conduct personal and political advocacy with voters door-to-door and the boundaries between the institutional and the personal are blurred in local elections. I follow a relational approach to recognition and trust (Bourdieu, 1991; Frederiksen, 2014). The guiding research question is: How does language mediate trust-building in the struggle of migrant candidates for political recognition?

I begin by outlining the theoretical underpinnings of the research and providing background context to the study. After explaining the methodological procedure, I present and discuss the findings. The analysis reveals a nuanced picture of the influence of language on the political participation of migrant individuals, with varying viewpoints among participants that can be attributed, in part, to the influence of institutional capital associated with the standing of candidates. The article contends that language, alongside other identity features, shapes trust formation in communication and shows how situational factors can mitigate negative perceptions under certain circumstances.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. *Language and the struggle for recognition*

I frame social order through a Bourdieusian lens, conceptualising it as inherently stratified. The political arena is a field or structured system of social positions where “struggles aimed at transforming the relation of forces” take place (Bourdieu, 1991:171). Parties and politicians engage in electoral competition to capture and maintain positions of power in the field. This competition extends beyond tangible political products, such as programmes and policy proposals, to include symbolic struggles. Bourdieu’s significant theoretical contribution to political sociology lies precisely in recognising this symbolic dimension of political contestation (Swartz, 2013). His conceptual toolkits have been widely used in the socially oriented language sciences to analyse the relationships between language, communication and politics (e.g., Blommaert, 2015; Sälo, 2019; Joseph, 2020).

Political actors are involved in struggles over beliefs, perceptions and representations of how the social world should be organised to mobilise collective support from the public for themselves and their particular views. The analytical focus of the Bourdieusian perspective lies on the intersubjective level, whereby politicians strive to “change the categories of perception and evaluation of the social world, the cognitive and evaluative structures” (Bourdieu, 1990:134). Drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of political life as a quintessentially relational phenomenon, my account is based on the premise that the pursuit of recognition from others in the political realm, and their trust, is to a great extent waged in the symbolic domain.

Individuals possess capitals (e.g., social, economic, political, cultural and linguistic capital) or valued resources that function as a social relation of power. Political capital refers to the capacity of an agent to mobilise public support for a cause in the political field. As with any other form of capital, political capital has the potential to become symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is a power resource in the form of social authority attached to and embodied in the person. It refers to ordinary qualities and attributes available to individuals and groups based on the “esteem, recognition, belief, credit, [and] confidence of others” (Bourdieu, 2000:166). It is the credit that individuals and groups enjoy through public recognition of their capital holdings, status and positions in social hierarchies. Importantly, however, the social distribution of symbolic capital is unequal.

Political capital is a particular form of symbolic capital, one that is reputational, linked to notoriety and dependent on credit. There is a special relationship between political capital and symbolic capital (Swartz, 2013), because symbolic capital in the political realm has fiduciary value, involving the trust that the group places in the politician and in what they represent. Politicians derive their power from the credit of the political party that officially backs them and of those whom they represent through political delegation. The relational and dialogical nature of symbolic capital in the political sphere is evident in its capacity to exert a performative effect on others. Such a constitutive effect, called symbolic power, consists of shaping others’ schemata of perceptions and understandings of the social order. In Bourdieu’s terms, symbolic power is the

“power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world” (Bourdieu, 1991:170). Because it generates definitions, classifications and divisions, symbolic power in the political realm is a stratifying, and thus contested, power. It is a social form of power to construct realities but also to form collective identities, which might lead to either the inclusion or exclusion of social actors depending on, for example, their identity traits.

Speakers wield symbolic power by engaging in communicative practices. Importantly for our account, the role of language is key to understanding change in social relations and, more specifically, the process of transformation of material and physical distinctions into symbolic meaning (Kramsch, 2020). In the realm of electoral politics, symbolic power enables candidates to navigate the political landscape through the specific effects of representation, identification and mobilisation, influencing the actions of others. Importantly, however, utterances, speeches and discourses alone cannot induce such effects. What creates symbolic power is the belief in the legitimacy of words and of the people who utter them. The status, position, authority and other forms of political capital of a candidate are critical for them to secure meaningful reception, obtain full recognition and elicit interest from others. Bourdieu (1991) argues that there is an economy of linguistic exchanges where a vital part is about being recognised by others as a legitimate speaker or someone who speaks with linguistic authority. In short, authority is imposed on language from the outside (see also Butler, 1997).

Candidates cannot be successful without being considered as legitimate members of the constituency. Following (Bourdieu 1991:127), legitimation is a process that rests on cultural schemata, shared frames of reference and everyday assumptions about the social world, which often express an “original adherence to the established order”. In the political realm, the relationship between the group that elects its spokesperson and the spokesperson who in turn represents the group is complex and circular. On the one hand, the way people conceive and imagine their communities informs their political decisions and actions, including the act of political delegation through voting. On the other hand, political representatives draw on imagined representations of their communities when they stand for and speak on behalf of their constituencies. This is why Bourdieu (1991) depicts political delegation as a mechanism of group formation. To be sure, candidates need material resources and the infrastructures of parties to carry out their political activity; but they also require shared beliefs and positive identifications from the electorate. In this sense, identity is one of the factors at play in the struggle for recognition, legitimation and trust in the political realm.

Following this logic of symbolic representation as delegation, both native-born and migrant candidates need to persuade and convince voters that they are valid political actors and legitimate potential representatives of the communities in the country in which they live. However, it can be expected that candidates with identity markers – for example, a foreign accent – that do not correspond to those often considered as authentically from the host country need to strive harder to secure support from local people or are more dependent upon other sources of capital (Lima, 2020; Erdocia, 2023). For instance, migrant candidates, often viewed as racialised speaking subjects deviating from standardised language practices (Rosa and Flores, 2017), may need additional support from trusted networks such as political parties, personal connections, and migrant constituencies to obtain delegated political authority, in comparison to those whose capital includes identity features considered as authentic. This is (Bourdieu’s, 2000: 241–242) suggestion when he refers to “negative symbolic capital” or low expressions of power corresponding to potentially stigmatising markers of otherness such as foreign names and accents, visibly religious identifiers and skin colour. Linguistic hierarchies, deeply embedded in broader racialised institutional and everyday discursive practices, can result in the discrimination of people with non-dominant language varieties (May, 2023).

Note that when it comes to the tension between structure and agency in social science research, I adopt a middle-ground perspective. While acknowledging that migrants are frequently constrained by structures of social inequality, including dominant language ideologies or conceptions of the nature, use and functions of language (Kroskrity, 2004), I subscribe to the idea that they exercise their agency strategically (Duchêne et al., 2013). An underlying assumption is that certain language-related features, such as foreign accents, do not inherently equate to a disadvantage (see Erdocia, 2023 for an elaboration of this point).

## 2.2. *Language and trust*

To elucidate the relational dynamics between candidates and the electorate that form the basis of political processes, I incorporate the conceptual tool of trust into my theoretical framework. As shown above, the notion of recognition is paramount for Bourdieu’s theory of social capital. While he did not elaborate specifically on the concept of trust, his concepts of symbolic capital and power have been interpreted through the lens of trust. A Bourdieusian-oriented elaboration of relational trust (Sisjäinen, 2003) stems precisely from the ideas of trust as a political notion and of capital recognition, which results from intersubjective reflections through communicative exchanges. Moving away from an exclusive focus on individual subjective intentions and institutional conditions of trust (Lewin and Weigert, 2012), this approach involves an interpersonal dimension. It posits that trust is continually constituted in a process that unfolds within the situated relationships where agents interact with each other (Frederiksen, 2014). Trust is an ongoing process of building on knowledge, routine and social relations, rather than a fixed state of mind or an end product. Trust is considered a precondition for both individual action, cooperative relationships and societal order (Möllering, 2006).

Accounts of trust as an interpersonal phenomenon use relational characteristics included within Bourdieu’s framework, such as political programmes and ideologies and also community networks, group memberships and social categorisations, to account for relational processes of trust building. Trusting is part of characterising groups and defining identities. For

example, the notion of identity- or group-based trust (Stolle, 2002) rests upon identification and categorisation processes among people who do not know each other, yet share certain elements of their social identity – such as background or language variety in our case – which may serve as a cue for recognition and trustworthiness. Put differently, the absence of certain shared identity or group traits may constrain the emergence of trust where the “trustor” has no previous information on the “trustee”.

By following this theoretical orientation and, more concretely, Frederiksen's (2014) application of Bourdieu's conceptual tools to trust research, my analytical framework operationalises the relational process of trusting as a merger of both individual dispositions to trust and the social and political relations within which trust unfolds.

*Trust as disposition* resonates with a non-deterministic understanding of Bourdieu's concept of habitus, an “open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences” and affected by interactions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:133; emphasis in original). It is about the preferences by which a person orients to the social world. By adopting a diachronic perspective on trust, the analysis regards the present as being relationally constituted by the past. This dimension has two types of differentiation: familiarity and justification. Familiarity refers to an individual's previous experience in a particular situation; here, for instance, it can be expected that when one interacts with people with whom one shares pre-existing relationships, trust will be reinforced; whereas when one interacts with unfamiliar people, this can lead to bemusement, and result in lower trust in some situations. Justification for trust is the understanding, interpretation and judgement of the appropriateness of the conditions for trust. The grounds for trust are stronger in situations with formal institutional assurance, familiar transactions, group-based identification and converging interests. Such factors can predispose certain situations and individuals to be perceived as inherently more conducive to trust than others.

Second, *trust as relationship* is grounded in the Bourdieusian perspective of a network of relations defining social and political practices. Trust is neither entirely familiarity nor rational calculation or routine. It is also dynamically constituted in people's situated engagements. This social understanding of trust refers to the adaptability and responsiveness of individuals when interacting. The result of this process of aligning is variable and depends on the specific relationship within which people interact. For instance, when individuals have shared goals and strategies or belong to the same community network or identity group, the expectation is that their interaction will be more cooperative. When alignment is low, interaction breaks down or is not conducive to trust-building. Trust emerges from the relational process of aligning where the conceptions, strategies and interests of the parties involved adapt in cooperation and move towards a higher degree of alignment and even convergence.

### 3. Contextual background

Large-scale immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland, only beginning in the late 1990s (Laurence et al., 2024). According to the 2022 national census, non-Irish citizens account for 12 percent of the population, but this figure does not include many migrants who have adopted Irish citizenship. This implies that Ireland's bilingual regime of English and Irish coexists with a multilingual landscape of diverse languages; and indeed, the same census indicates that 751,507 people (14.5 percent of the population) speak a foreign language at home. Of those, 57 percent reported that they spoke English very well, while an additional 26 percent stated they spoke English well. Meanwhile, 11 percent indicated that they did not speak English well, and 2 percent that they did not speak it at all.

The political engagement of migrant communities remains notably low in Ireland, particularly in electoral politics – note that all residents of Ireland, irrespective of their nationality, can vote and run in local elections. Despite a slight increase in the number of candidates with migrant backgrounds in local elections, migrants continue to face chronic under-representation within the Irish political system. For instance, in the 2019 local elections, out of 1900 candidates, only 53 were naturalised/non-Irish citizens, nine of whom were successfully elected. Contrasting this with the demographic data from the 2016 census, one would have expected 86 “New Irish” councillors to be elected in the 2019 local elections for proportional representation (Kavanagh, 2018).

Research on migrant engagement in Irish politics has highlighted infrastructural, socioeconomic, motivational and cultural factors underpinning the disparity in political participation (McGinnity et al., 2020). Compared with native Irish candidates, migrant candidates are more prone to experience discrimination and racism, with one third of those included in a study about the experiences of migrant candidates in the 2019 local elections reporting cases of discrimination and racial harassment during the campaign (Lima, 2020). Language appears to be a potential challenge to migrant representation in politics (Erdocia, 2023).

In terms of overall attitudes towards migrants and refugees in Ireland, there is a general openness to immigration in the country (Social Change Initiative, 2018; Laurence et al., 2024). While a section of the public expresses scepticism about the suggested benefits of immigration, a majority exhibit empathy towards newcomers, with many recognising the importance of embracing greater diversity (Ciribuco et al., 2024). However, these perceptions have only been considered in terms of the social and economic aspects of migrants' integration, and attitudes towards their inclusion in politics remain unknown. Furthermore, since 2022 the country has witnessed unprecedented incidents of public hostility and violence directed at refugees and migrants (Cannon and Murphy, 2024). The topic of migration has gained exceptional prominence in both media coverage and political discourse, signifying a rapidly evolving context where a clear picture of attitudes towards the full inclusion of migrants is yet to unfold.

#### 4. Methodological approach

This study draws on data from interviews with six people involved in mainstream politics in Ireland. The data presented here is a subset of a larger project that includes 13 migrant individuals with varying degrees of engagement in politics (Erdocia, 2023). In that overarching project, individuals had to be first-generation migrants in Ireland and demonstrate substantial involvement in institutional politics at the local level, such as holding official positions in local government, running as candidates in previous or upcoming elections, or having initiated processes towards such political candidacies or formal engagement with political parties.

The selection of the six participants in the present study, out of the total of 13, was done following two criteria. The first is concerned with the depth and nature of political engagement: the six participants are either actively serving as councillors (four participants) or on the verge of contesting local elections (two participants). This selection aligns with the focus of the study on scrutinising political participation, particularly through the lens of active engagement in elections. The second is a thematic criterion: the choice of participants was based on the pertinence of the experiences of the interviewees in terms of the study's focus on the concepts of recognition and trust.

The participants include four female and two male individuals. While most participants are situated in cities and county towns throughout the country, two are located in rural areas. All migrated to Ireland at least 15 years ago, from a diverse range of countries across Asia, Europe and Africa. Two have a variety of English other than Irish English as their first language, while the other four are multilingual speakers for whom English is an additional language. All participants are affiliated with or are considering becoming affiliated with political parties that hold varying ideological orientations. Due to the small number of migrant candidates who stand for election in Ireland and the sensitivity of the information disclosed by the participants, the description I provide here is intentionally limited and presented in an unsegregated manner to guarantee their anonymity and confidentiality (and, of course, using pseudonyms). This is in line with the ethical approval granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dublin City University.

The six in-depth, semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of predetermined questions designed to open up topics and allow respondents to share their perceptions and experiences, as well as to steer the conversation in new directions. The questions were clustered as follows: overall views on social and political integration in Irish society; personal involvement in political matters both in Ireland and in countries of origin; barriers to political engagement, with a focus on language-based challenges; experiences of bias, particularly instances of discrimination related to language; and relationship between language, culture and identity in political activity. While the Irish language was brought up in the interviews, it does not play a significant role in the political activity of the participants, so the focus primarily remains on English (for the use of Irish by activists of migrant background see Posocco and Watson, 2024). Interviews had an average duration of 50 min. They were digitally recorded and transcribed. The author conducted the interviews in Spring (2023), before the unprecedented xenophobic and racist events witnessed in Dublin in November 2023 (see Power, 2023).

The resulting data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). The critical and constructivist paradigmatic underpinnings of this approach are particularly well suited to the orientation of the present research. In RTA, themes are not superficial or ready to be discovered; instead, they are generated by the researcher's engagement with theory, data and subjective interpretation, in a constant, iterative process between data and theory (Braun and Clarke, 2021). I followed (Braun and Clarke's 2021:331) set of steps to conduct the analysis, first familiarising myself with the data, coding the data, and generating initial themes, then reviewing, refining and naming the themes, before concluding with a written description.

In this procedure, I first identified units of meaning from the data. My initial coding was primarily inductive, but I also used deductive searches from my own previous knowledge of how language-related issues shape social and professional advancement (Erdocia, 2023) to find additional patterns in the data in more detailed readings. After establishing a set of a priori codes, I scrutinised their interconnections, including those with the analytical framework employed to operationalise the relational processes of recognition and trust (Bourdieu, 1991; Frederiksen, 2014) and the research question. This examination aimed to derive themes that encapsulate a higher level of abstraction in the data, capture the fundamental underlying meaning in the interpretation of the content and reach conclusions (see Table 1). The presentation of the findings is structured around the two resulting themes.

**Table 1**

Codes and themes used in the analysis, and their interrelationship.

Themes	Codes
Underlying conditions for the impact of language on trust	Initial encounters Lack of familiarity Language and other identity-related categorisations as negative markers
Factors mitigating the influence of language on trust	Institutional assurances Management and problem-solving Interaction of forms of capital Beliefs about language

While interpreting the data, I had regard for the fact that an interview is a discursive practice and a meaningful exchange between the researcher and the interviewee. Thus in the analysis and interpretation of the findings, attention has been paid to the role of the interviewer in the generation of the data and in shaping the participants' talk. I have also taken into account the contextual circumstances of the political settings in which the data were produced, as well as the conditions surrounding the interviews. In interpreting the data, my paradigmatic assumptions and personal standpoint as a researcher who has migrated to Ireland played an important role. In sum, while I have endeavoured to maintain an epistemic reflexive perspective throughout the entire research process, I acknowledge that the outcome of this study may be influenced by my subjectivity; this, of course, aligns with [Braun and Clarke's \(2021\)](#) rationale for RTA.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Underlying conditions for the impact of language on trust

I start the presentation of the analysis with an example of a general, diachronic overview based on the experience of one migrant candidate in three consecutive electoral campaigns. Mariana ran in local elections in 2009 but was not elected as a councillor until the following elections in 2014. In 2019 she was re-elected. Extract 1 illustrates the reactions of the constituency to the presentation of her candidacy and how the interest of the electorate in the candidate and their disposition to trust her evolved over the campaigns.

#### EXTRACT 1 (Mariana)(1)

The initial conversations [while canvassing], especially when doing the first round [in the 2009 elections] ## were focused on my background again. So people would have seen, for example, the posters with the photograph, I don't look like Irish. And then my accent ... my name was quite unusual [...] but then when I went the second time [in the 2014 elections] around knocking on doors, obviously the people knew my background already and # we got to discuss local issues and issues of interest to the people. And then in the next local election in 2019, obviously people in the area already knew me #, so the focus was different. If in 2014, people were asking "What are you going to achieve for us? What are you going to do for us if you get elected?". Then in 2019, people were looking, "What actually have you done all these years as a councillor?" So they would look at my work, at what I would have achieved. # So it was a completely different focus.

Here we can see the two dimensions of trust as disposition ([Frederiksen, 2014](#)), namely familiarity and justification, at play. First, people's lack of familiarity with the candidate was an important factor during the first interactions in the 2009 campaign. However, the curiosity or surprise from first encounters disappeared in subsequent elections, and people diverted their interest from Mariana's migrant background to the political specificities of her agenda and actions. Issues related to the cultural background or accent of the candidate did not seem to significantly influence the reception of her endeavours after the first campaign. Second, Mariana believes that the institutional assurance of her being a councillor and not just an unknown, first-time runner for office impacted on the way constituents saw her, leading to a shift of focus in interactions in the 2014 and 2019 elections. I will return to this point in Extracts 5 and 6.

The previous extract shows how the public's lack of prior knowledge about a migrant candidate may make it challenging for them to be recognised as a legitimate representative, at least in first encounters. This scenario applies to all candidates, of course, regardless of whether they are migrants or Irish-born. Indeed, some participants recognise that it was the political and ideological discrepancies between their proposals and the views of the electorate, and not so much their accents or migrant condition, that led to a dismissal and lack of consideration from part of the electorate. This means that political allegiances and preferences play a role in the way candidates are perceived and, therefore, in the construction of trust by the voters. On this issue, Extract 2 provides more context to understand the particular struggle for recognition with which migrant candidates must engage. More concretely, it shows how the biased perception of the normative listener, in this case white listening subjects ([Rosa and Flores, 2017](#)), impinges on the meaningful reception and full recognition of migrant candidates. Roshan, who is planning to run for office in the next election, shares his own experience and that of other migrant candidates engaging with community members in the context of electoral politics.

#### EXTRACT 2 (Roshan)

*Author:* Are migrant candidates more likely to face challenges when running for election compared to Irish-born candidates?

*Roshan:* For migrants themselves it's difficult. Then racism starts. Then when [migrant] people knock on somebody's door and they ask them, "I am standing for election". So people are strange-faced, like ... "You are standing for election in here? Are you okay?" Like, some people are too harsh. I know a lot of people who ran for election from migrant backgrounds (and I have first-hand experience # canvassing as well door to door) and people are saying: "Oh, you are black and you are running here, you won't represent us". Like, that's not # gonna work. Well, the question mark is: if they know you well in the community, if they saw you in the community centre sitting with older people, doing service there < ... >[?], or Tidy Towns people or the gardening groups or bike group, then it's different. Then you're knocking

on the door, then they greet you, they'll be happy. They'll say "okay". But if they'll see [xxx] straight away some person standing on the door with a flyer and saying, "I am going to run for election", it's difficult, very difficult.

Some migrant candidates, notably non-white ones, suffer blatant cases of overt and covert discrimination and derogatory racial remarks from some people. Elections in Ireland are not immune to structural racism: in a report on the experiences of migrant candidates in the 2019 local elections, one third of the candidates reported instances of discrimination and racial harassment occurring during the campaign (Lima, 2020; see also Erdocia, 2023). Skin colours other than those (traditionally) associated with white Irish(2) can be considered in some cases as a stigmatising marker or a form of negative symbolic capital in Bourdieu's (2000) terms. Yet, following the argument in the second part of the excerpt, when voters have seen such "space invaders" (Puwar, 2004: 144) interacting with the community in positive ways, this can help mitigate the impact of some electors' racialising practices (Dovchin and Dryden, 2022) and change their unfavourable dispositions towards racial Others.

Thus while Extract 1 shows the impact that language and other attributes of foreignness – such as non-typical Irish accents and names and visual representations – can have in the initial reception of a migrant candidate, in situations where the voters are unfamiliar with them or lack prior information, Roshan in Extract 2 goes further by suggesting that a necessary condition for trust-building is for voters to know that a migrant candidate is an active member of the community; this allows a migrant candidate to obtain what we might call their "missing credit", making them more likely to be elected. This idea resonates with the Bourdieusian characterisation of community networks and institutional support as defining practices in the political field. Catalina, another participant, puts this idea in a nutshell: "local people don't know us, they don't trust us".

Political bias seems to arise from misperceptions of foreignness and otherness (Erdocia, forthcoming), which are triggered by specific features of migrant candidates, such as their non-standard accents, skin colour or other markers not traditionally associated with the host country. These forms of negative symbolic capital have a particular impact on trust. Extract 3 captures the candidates' struggles to gain the respect of a certain portion of the public and the linguistic adjustments that political agents make in their interactions with potential voters during canvassing. Catalina, who is contesting the upcoming elections for the first time, refers to her previous involvement with other collaborators in a campaign for another politician; recall that all residents, regardless of nationality, have the right to vote in local elections.

#### EXTRACT 3 (Catalina)

It [canvassing] wasn't so easy, because when I see the Irish person, they are "What? What are you doing? Why are you doing this [politics]?" They don't # take me seriously. But when I see a migrant open the door, I ask straight away: "Do you speak Russian? Lithuanian? What language?" And a lot of migrants were just, "oh, where are you from? Are you migrant? [with a positive tone]" And they became more trustful and more friendly and joking [with me] [xxx]. When my [Irish] colleague X [name] was doing [canvassing] with me the first time and the same way. When migrants opened the door, she started to talk but it wasn't a lively conversation < ... >[?]. But when Irish people opened the door, they started chatting lively and "oh, how are you? [with a tone of interest]". So then she decided: "Okay, if you see a migrant [opening the door], you talk; if I see an Irish [person], I talk [%]."

The process of aligning in relational trust consists of taking into consideration the other parties' conceptions of the situation and adapting accordingly (Frederiksen, 2014:179). In Extract 3 we observe how the candidate's team adjusts their strategy to enhance the conditions for trust. The choice of language and leading speaker depending on the voter's background is deemed essential for engaging and meaningful exchanges. What we can see in this experience is that language serves as a foundation for shared categories of perception and appreciation (Bourdieu, 1991) within the trustor-trustee relationship (namely that between electorate and politician), ultimately contributing to the potential alignment of the parties.

In Extracts 1–3, we have seen that language reflects social distinctions, turning them into symbolic distinctions in the realm of politics (Kramsch, 2020). Embodied attributes of foreignness such as accents, names and race may be detrimental to a migrant candidate being considered an appropriate candidate by Irish-born electors. In contrast, while Catalina sees herself as delegated by a political party that claims to represent all constituents, not only migrants, Extract 3 suggests that a shared migrant background can induce mutual affinity and reciprocity among migrant people. It follows that being migrant can become a form of symbolic capital to attract attention and interest from the migrant electorate. However, it is worth noting that a higher migrant population in a given community does not automatically correlate with heightened electoral backing for migrant candidates (Lima, 2020). As we see in Extract 3, group or identity-based trust can act as a signal for recognition and reliability among those within the community (Stolle, 2002) but there are many other factors involved in translating that recognition into votes. Party affiliation, political agenda and personal and community connections are among the factors most invoked by participants. Furthermore, candidates make clear that they strive to reach every person in their various communities. As Catalina says later in the interview: "it's not only the migrants I want to represent. I want to represent all the community, all the society."

#### 5.2. Factors mitigating the influence of language on trust

We have observed how language can be used strategically to engender a relationship of trust between a voter and a candidate. Extract 4 provides a different context where language has a role in the process of alignment towards trust. As in the previous extract, here language is also the prompt by which a migrant candidate – in this case Fatima, an acting councillor – is represented and characterised in the first instance. However, the intentional or unintentional bias that arises from the

linguistic and cultural features that form part of the political capital of this participant tends to diminish as her interactions with others unfold.

#### EXTRACT 4 (Fatima)

*Author:* Have you ever felt negatively judged on linguistic or cultural grounds perhaps?

*Fatima:* ##I won't say yes. And I won't say no either. Because I can sometimes sense where there is the impression that I may not be as culturally competent at the initial stage of a dialogue or an engagement. But I think # perspectives often change from when I'm engaging because once they realise, "okay, she is # her English is clear and understandable, and she's able to hold a conversation, she's able to articulate herself properly, and we can find common ground". The perception changes straight away, and it's like a level playing field [...] [but] sometimes even if you're being understood, you have an accent. Straight away it's like, "oh, this person is not one of us, what do we do?" It's intrinsic that you will be attracted to somebody who sounds like you at the first instant before you listen to the message, so that # like it's unconscious, I suppose. I think those are barriers that can be overcome, because once you have a message, it's clear you can get it across. Once you get your message across, you can win people over to believing and trusting in you as a political representative. So language plays a huge role in the work of politicians, for sure.

This passage shows that the public's preconceived notions of foreignness can play a role in their assessment of the trustworthiness and competence of a migrant candidate (or politician), based on the stereotypes that such candidates evoke in some listeners. Language-based prejudice is tied to language ideology, which involves conceptions about the use and social functions of language (Kroskrity, 2004). This can manifest in many forms, including "accentism", discrimination against non-standard accents, often from transnational migrants, that leads to judgement, penalties and even marginalisation (Lippi-Green, 2012; Dovchin, 2022). However, Fatima considers that she generally only experiences this bias during the initial stages of a conversation, after which the social distance (Goto, 1996) or perceived dissimilarity between speakers disappears. Fatima is a first-language speaker of an English variety other than the generally recognised prestigious forms, such as British, American, Australian or Irish English. In her view, language is not a barrier for migrant candidates as long as they have a strong message or proposal to offer and can effectively communicate it. It is at that point that the alignment between the interacting parties is high and is conducive to trust in migrants as political representatives.

Extract 4 can also be interpreted by following Bourdieu's notion of interplay of different capitals and, more specifically, how one form of political capital (a compelling political agenda) in migrant candidates can compensate for a perceived lack or deficit in another form of capital (linguistic and cultural competence; see Erdocia and Soler, 2023 for a similar example of this in the context of academia). Fatima returns to this very idea at a later stage in the interview (Extract 5), this time referring to competence and efficacy in serving the community as a determining component of political capital.

#### EXTRACT 5 (Fatima)

To be honest, in my role as councillor, people are more focused on their issues rather than my accent. If I can help them solve their problems, they're happy. So they come to me regardless of my migrant background, and they come to me with their problems and I represent them, get their issues addressed, and that's it.

Judgements of appropriateness and competence are more robust in situations where there is either a formal community attachment or institutional validation (Frederiksen, 2014). We have seen examples of the former in Extracts 1 and 2. Extract 5 illustrates the latter case: here political capital in the form of the status and credit derived from holding a position in the local government is what the participant believes contributes to a shift in people's focus from group identification (or lack thereof) to more tangible and conventional matters in community life. Simply put, when it comes to solving problems, foreign accents matter less or no longer matter. The focus of interactions is now on effectiveness, not identity.

In addition to the favourable impact of institutionally mediated transactions on the conditions for trust in interactions, the strategies and interests of people are also part of the alignment process. As any interaction involves consideration of both the interests and the identities of others (Bourdieu, 2000), interests – understood from a rational calculus perspective – become even more important when identity-related conceptions are no longer deemed relevant (as seen in Extract 5). In this vein, the next excerpt (Extract 6) focuses on the public's perceptions of migrant politicians and connects and compares the influence of doing politics in English with that of other more mundane matters of everyday political activity. Unlike the previous participant (Fatima), who was first-language speaker of a variety of English, in this case the comment comes from Aman, a councillor for whom English is an additional language.

#### EXTRACT 6 (Aman)

*Author:* How do you think your accent influences the way you are perceived by others? Does it play any role in the way you are perceived as a politician or representative of an Irish community?

*Aman:* You see ## basically as a politician, as an elected public representative # once you can bring a good idea for the city, once you can bring the betterment for the city from your idea, then people are not too worried about how you speak, how is your accent. I think people see more what you can do #. The English language is a barrier because it's not my first language < ... >[?] I have a very strong X [continent] accent because I am always talking in X [foreign language] at home [...] but I don't think it's a big barrier because as a politician, the most important thing is < ... >[?] your ideas as

a public representative, how you serve, how you think about local communities. Once you can bring a good idea, once you can serve your community, that's more important. I don't think you can think too much about the language. Language is only to communicate.

A relationship of trust takes shape as the interests and conceptions of the interacting parties start to converge (Frederiksen, 2014). Here trust in a political representative – whether migrant or Irish-born – is said to be based on whether the representative succeeds in advancing ideas that are in the best interest of constituents. In line with the remarks in the previous excerpt, in Extract 6 the participant considers that the usual sorts of transactions in everyday local politics that meet the needs of the community are more important in establishing the conditions for political trust than the role of language or other identity features. This is despite the councillor acknowledging the challenges of doing politics in English and, as shared in another part of the interview, some instances where he was racially abused on social media. In short, this councillor does not seem to associate this with language, which he views as a neutral tool of communication.

At this point in the analysis, it is important to note that not all participants have had experiences that they connect with language-related prejudice. This is the case of Deborah, for example, the councillor interviewed in Extract 7. In response to the same question included in the previous fragment, she disassociates language from discriminatory practices.

#### EXTRACT 7 (Deborah)

*Author:* How do you think your accent influences the way you are perceived by others? Does it play any role in the way you are perceived as a politician or representative of an Irish community?

*Deborah:* ##I don't think so. I don't think it [speaking English with a foreign accent] matters to anyone, to be honest ##I've never even seen someone being biased because of their English accent or the way they speak, right? Because obviously, coming from different countries ## and # you have other languages as well, your accent might not be the same as the country that you're living.

Unlike the participants included in Extracts 1–4, Deborah and some of the other councillors (Extracts 5 and 6) see language as having little or no significant impact on their political involvement. Perhaps most importantly, Deborah appears genuinely surprised by the idea that she might face discrimination based on having a foreign accent. This view appears to be influenced by her consideration of English as one of her first languages, although it is noteworthy that her variety of English is not generally regarded as prestigious. It is also shaped by other forms of capital, including her successful academic and professional credentials. Such perceptions deserve more exploration, as they provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of language and politics and their influence on individual experiences in the institutional context, as will be taken up in the following section.

## 6. Discussion and concluding remarks

In this article, I have set out to explore the role of language in the struggles of migrant people for recognition in the political sphere. The findings show that language affects the process of building trust, particularly in certain circumstances of situational uncertainty. As is the case in other social domains (e.g., Piller, 2016; Dovchin and Dryden, 2022; Kirilova and Angouri, 2017), in the political realm candidates' language-related features, in conjunction with racialised distinctions, are notorious marks of perceived foreignness. These identity-related categorisations, based on such indices as English variety, foreign accents and non-typically Irish names, may be regarded as structural barriers (see Erdocia, 2023) and negative forms of embodied symbolic capital because they can adversely affect trust-building in some situations. For example, initial conversations in which Irish-born constituents (but not in the case of migrant constituents) are unfamiliar with, have no prior knowledge of migrant candidates seem to be particularly prone to low levels of trust. In such situations, pre-existing perceptions of migrant people, including racialised language perceptions and stereotypes associated with group characterisations (Puwar, 2004), can lead to negative evaluations of the competence of candidates and a devaluing of their political capital more generally.

Interestingly, particular sets of circumstances appear to contribute to overriding any such negative social valuations. Political bias decreases or disappears when the capital of migrant candidates includes validations from within the community, support from established networks or institutional assurances from them having a position as an elected representative. These situational sources of trust (Goto, 1996), which are integral to the notion of proximate politics in local elections, empower candidates to receive appropriate consideration from potential voters. Consequently, candidates themselves are afforded the essential legitimacy required to effectively convince others of their suitability to represent the community. This legitimacy enables them to contest elections under conditions equivalent to those applicable to Irish-born candidates. From an agency perspective, this means that migrant candidates must actively seek ways of obtaining public sanction before and during their engagement in political activity. In other words, for their message to have authority, migrant candidates need to gain validation of their authoritative standing not only from the political party they represent or the institution that has delegated its authority but also from constituents.

Under these conditions, the process of alignment between candidates and those who will potentially vote for them needs to consist of discussions about pragmatic factors, like shared interests and goals for local communities, so that these replace identity-related identifications in initial encounters as the primary driving force in building trust. This shift in focus and

priorities does not imply that migrant candidates have to relinquish their identity traits while undertaking a campaign, nor that they need to convey an exclusive managerial image based on attributes such as instrumental capacity or charismatic leadership to run a successful campaign in the host country (see Erdocia, 2023). It means that a relationship of trust is greatly enhanced when those interacting can articulate and develop shared conceptions and goals. This enhancement is what sustains trust (Frederiksen, 2014). Unfortunately, however, this is not always the case; as shown in Extracts 2 and 3, systemic discriminatory practices of some electors towards migrants – often rooted in racist and xenophobic attitudes – can make it impossible for these candidates to establish common ground with these voters to obtain legitimacy. That said, most candidates emphasise that, in their interactions, only a small minority of individuals display overtly derogatory attitudes.

Speakers seek not only to communicate but to be granted the “right to the legitimate language, the authorized languages, the language of authority” (Bourdieu, 1977: 645, cited in Thompson, 1984:46–47). These aspects of language are probably even more relevant in a symbolic domain such as the political field. As we have seen in Extracts 1–4 (e.g., “they don’t take me seriously” in Extract 3), the biased perception of the normative listener, often manifested in subtle forms, seems to act as a barrier to effective political integration. Some participants need to strive to find means to be listened to, seriously considered and respected, particularly in their electoral campaign and interactions with the public. This additional effort required of migrant candidates reflects a political dynamic in its own right, one that impacts the broader political landscape and warrants serious consideration by political parties and public authorities to ensure that migrants are not excluded from political life.

However, it is important to note that participants do not share a unanimous perspective. Some elected councillors believe that foreign accents and other language issues have little impact in the realm of political representation (“language is only to communicate” and “I don’t think it [speaking English with a foreign accent] matters to anyone” in Extracts 6 and 7 respectively). Instead, these councillors (Aman and Deborah) emphasise the importance of pragmatic matters around competence and problem-solving, thus moving the focus of language away from its identity-related dimensions. It follows that viewing language as simply a tool for communication prevents language features from being translated into symbolic differences or perceptions of varying amounts of political capital held by migrant candidates. Moreover, it reinforces the overly simplistic strategy of reducing the integration of migrant politicians to an issue of linguistic competence alone.

*Migrant* is not a fixed category and the participants’ trajectories are far from homogeneous. *Foreign accent*, likewise, will in many places have very different implications depending on where the accent indexically points. What accounts for these varying perspectives on the role of language in political participation among the participants? Aman and Deborah’s example shows that differing personal experiences and language ideological frameworks among participants contribute to the divergence of opinions. While the data contains only limited evidence with which to offer a definite response to this question, the analysis does provide some clues to help us interpret the role of the political capital associated with the institutional standing of candidates in shaping some of the individual viewpoints. As illustrated in the presentation of the analysis, institutions are guarantors of legitimacy and can contribute to trust-building (Frederiksen, 2014). Political representation is a form of delegated power by institutions, that is, an invisible source of authority that gives legitimacy and recognition to delegates (Kramsch, 2020:52). Following Bourdieu, this power does not come from the utterances or actions of candidates alone but also from the institutional legitimacy conferred on those holding institutional appointments – and Aman and Deborah currently hold appointments as councillors. Consistent with this unequal distribution of institutional power among participants, the results of this study suggest that language might play a more significant role in the struggle for recognition of migrant candidates without institutionally attached capital than those with accumulated capital stemming from their institutional position. Unlike those who succeeded in becoming councillors, unsuccessful or first-time candidates seem to have to strive harder for recognition, partly because they cannot avail themselves of the symbolic institutional power only available to elected representatives.

More empirical research – particularly research focusing on the impact of discriminatory practices on political outcomes, the gender- and racial-specific dimensions of politics and the voices of other actors such as electors, parties and civic society – is needed to sustain this suggestion and to understand the impact of recognition and trust in other forms of political participation beyond mainstream politics and institutions. Likewise, we have seen that contesting elections as a migrant candidate comes with a level of uncertainty about how one will be received and recognised as an appropriate representative, as well as requiring a capacity for resilience to vulnerability; this is worth exploring in more detail (see Erdocia, forthcoming). This study contributes to opening up new avenues for research into the intricate dynamics of language in the political and civic spheres and will, hopefully, encourage further empirical studies on the role of language and communication in democratic inclusion (Council of Europe, 2014).

- (1) Transcription conventions: #, short pause; ##, long pause; [xxx], uninterpretable speech; [%], laughter; < ... >[?], unclear speech; [...], ellipsis of text; [TEXT], the author’s clarification of the interviewee’s words; X, where words or phrases have been omitted to anonymise the data.
- (2) This category does not include the Irish Traveller community, an indigenous ethnic minority group.

## Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Iker Erdocia:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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