

# When Language Feels Like Home: The Role of Multilingualism and Discrimination for Migrants' Belonging to Sweden

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**Abstract** *Speaking multiple languages is part of many people's everyday life. Multilingualism influences how people relate to the world and emotionally attach to places. This attachment might also be affected by experiences of discrimination. While the link between multilingualism and belonging as well as that between multilingualism and discrimination has been studied previously, we do not know how multilingualism and experiences of discrimination interact and relate to feelings of belonging. Based on the 2025 Diversity and Inclusion survey, this paper examines the complex relationship between language proficiency, multilingual identity and linguistic racism. Specifically, we ask how multilingualism and experiences of discrimination influence the sense of place belonging among migrants and their children in the superdiverse city of Malmö, Sweden. The findings highlight that while speaking Swedish at home strongly correlates with feeling at home in Sweden, experiences of discrimination and lower language proficiency significantly undermine this sense of place belonging.*

## INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, speaking and being exposed to multiple languages is part of many people's everyday lives. As members of multilingual households, where several languages are used in everyday life, the authors of this paper have become increasingly curious about how this reality might influence children's sense of belonging and feeling at home in a country in which one or two parents are foreign-born.

The scholar Kevin Wong, who studies multilingual teaching and learning, conducts identity research on multiracial children and who himself is part of a multilingual family context, writes about how growing up in a multilingual environment shapes identity: "When you speak more than one language, you experience the world in a uniquely layered way. Multilingualism influences how you think, feel, and connect with the world. Each language provides a different lens that shapes identity, respect, and living".<sup>1</sup>

Multilingualism is, therefore, closely connected to how we develop our identity and attachment to different places. On the other hand, since belonging is not merely a personal matter but also a social one,<sup>2</sup> this attachment might also be affected by experiences of discrimination, which might undermine individuals' sense of belonging to communities, the broader society and places.<sup>3</sup> Individuals with a high proficiency in the dominant language of a particular social context are more likely to feel included and accepted in that environment while those who struggle with the majority language may feel marginalized or excluded,<sup>4</sup> feelings that might be exacerbated for people who experience linguistic racism.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these potentially serious consequences of linguistic racism for multilingual individuals, we still do not know how multilingualism and experiences of discrimination interact and relate to feelings of belonging. Based on the concept of linguistic racism and using the 2025 Diversity and Inclusion survey conducted by the Malmö Institute for Migration Studies (MIM), this study takes a first step in conceptualizing and empirically exploring this complex relationship among migrants, and their children, living in the superdiverse city of Malmö.

In 2025, Malmö was home to people from 187 different nationalities, among which one-third of the approximately 367,000 inhabitants were foreign-born. The largest foreign-born populations were from Iraq (around 11,500), Syria (9,500) and Denmark (8,000).<sup>6</sup> Among the residents of Malmö born in Sweden, in 2023 about 22% had at least one foreign-born parent. Therefore, the residents of

Malmö who are born in Sweden and had two parents born in Sweden – a proxy for the population who only speaks Swedish at home – are a minority in the city (42%).<sup>7</sup>

The following research questions will guide our analysis: how does speaking several languages at home relate to one's sense of belonging among migrants and their children? And how are experiences of discrimination in one's everyday life but also specific forms of discrimination directed at language and accents, that is, linguistic racism, associated with people's sense of feeling at home in Sweden?

## **FEELING AT HOME IN SWEDEN – THE CONCEPT OF PLACE BELONGING**

Based on the conceptualisations of Marco Antonsich,<sup>8</sup> we understand belonging as a multi-dimensional concept. It can be related to citizenship, nationhood, gender, ethnicity but also to more emotional dimensions like status or attachment, or a combination of those. We are mostly interested in attachments and, more specifically, in place belonging. The concept of place belonging offers a very personal aspect of belonging that is about expressing a feeling of being at home in a certain place. Home is here a symbol for something that is familiar, where you feel comfortable and secure. Home can be a flat, a neighbourhood, a city or a homeland.

Building on previous conceptualizations of belonging that differentiate between belonging, as a personal and private sentiment of place attachment (a sense of belonging), and the more social, formal and public aspects of belonging (the politics of belonging),<sup>9</sup> Antonsich<sup>10</sup> cites five factors that influence place belonging: autobiographical factors, relational factors, economic factors, legal factors and cultural factors. Auto-biographical factors include personal memories of past experiences linked to a location. Relational factors are social networks and ties, such as family and friends, that anchor an individual to a place. Economic factors refer to material security within a given environment. Legal factors describe rights of

residence and citizenship that offer a sense of safety and permanence. Among cultural factors like shared language, religion or traditions that provide a sense of familiarity, language is pointed out as the most important component influencing place belonging.

Considering the multidimensional nature of belonging, this set of factors often interacts to develop a place attachment. Furthermore, Antonsich reminds us not to forget about the social or public dimension of belonging since feeling rejected or not welcomed – that is, feeling discriminated – in our place of residence will affect our sense of belonging.

## **LANGUAGE – A FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT OF HUMAN INTERACTIONS**

Language is important for our everyday human interactions and for the relationships we build in our everyday life. Through language we can communicate what we think and participate in conversations, but it also allows us to express our emotions. Consequently, these actions are important for us to develop a sense of feeling at home.<sup>11</sup>

For multilingual individuals, who have to navigate different linguistic and cultural environments on daily basis, this development of feeling at home or belonging is often more complex than for people who speak one language. For them, belonging tend to be related to the development of multilingual identities. For example, someone who speaks multiple languages at home in their childhood might develop a strong multilingual identity. However, learning additional languages later in life might also alter our sense of identity. In turn, a strong multilingual identity that includes the majority language and comes with exposure to multiple cultural contexts strengthens one's sense of belonging.<sup>12</sup>

However, the role multilingualism plays in shaping social belonging is often "intertwined with power, privilege, and inequality issues".<sup>13</sup> Multilingualism might not in itself help us develop an attachment to our place of residence if the

languages we speak do not allow us to communicate effectively in our everyday life. In other words, language proficiency in the majority language or languages spoken in our social context is also closely related to a sense of personal belonging. People with a higher language proficiency in these languages are more likely to have a stronger sense of belonging. Struggle with language in everyday life can, on the other hand, evoke feelings of isolation and exclusion. They might feel vulnerable, devalued or even experience emotions like shame or anxiety.<sup>14</sup> These feelings are very much influenced by external validation or the social dimension of belonging and, therefore, to discrimination as we discuss in the next section.

## **DISCRIMINATION AND LINGUISTIC RACISM**

In this paper we attempt to link experiences of discrimination among migrants and their children to multilingual identity and belonging. Discrimination can be defined as the “unequal treatment of similar individuals placed in the same situation, but who differ by one or several characteristics such as race and ethnicity”.<sup>15</sup> One can be discriminated when looking for a job or experience unequal treatment when seeking services, such as health care. One can also experience unequal treatment in the form of racial micro-aggressions in their everyday life, for example, at work. Micro-aggressions can be defined as subtle forms of discrimination that are experienced in everyday actions in the form of unconscious putdowns, such as ignoring corrections on pronunciation of someone’s name.<sup>16</sup>

There is a specific body of literature that links language studies to the field of discrimination where ‘linguistic racism’ and ‘linguistic micro-aggressions’ are central concepts. Linguistic racism is defined as experiencing discrimination in people’s daily lives related to the way they speak: “the concept of ‘linguistic racism’ focuses on the central role that language plays in the enduring relevance of race/racism, institutional/interpersonal discrimination in the lives of people of colour, ethnic minorities, international students and Indigenous

people, who experience linguistic disparity as an everyday lived reality”.<sup>17</sup>

Zhu and Weng, on the other hand, define linguistic micro-aggressions as subtle insults embedded in everyday interactions, which, unlike overt linguistic discrimination, are challenging to detect and address. These can be dismissive remarks about accents or assumptions regarding language proficiency. Forms of micro-aggressions are micro-assaults (to ridicule one’s accents), microinsults (unsolicited language corrections), and microinvalidations (exclusion from conversations at work due to dialect or language skills). Despite their subtle nature, linguistic microaggressions “reinforce linguistic hierarchies, perpetuate systemic marginalization, and erode individuals’ sense of belonging, contributing to broader social inequities”.<sup>18</sup> In relation to this idea, Atobatele and Mouboua<sup>19</sup> highlight the importance of language proficiency in shaping how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others, and, ultimately, in the development of a multilingual identity. Based on this idea, we argue that linguistic racism could have a negative effect on the development of a strong multilingual identity and therefore, in place belonging.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

Based on previous studies as presented above, we formulate the following empirically testable and conceptual propositions:

- (1) *Language proficiency in Swedish is positively correlated to belonging to Sweden.* Previous research shows that having a higher language proficiency in the local languages increases people’s sense of place attachment. In the absence of self-reported information on linguistic racism, language proficiency might be used as a way of proxying micro-aggressions in everyday life experiences with language: the higher the proficiency, the lower the likelihood of experiencing linguistic racism.
- (2) *Multilingual identity is related to belonging to Sweden.* As explained above, when Swedish is

one of the languages spoken at home, which could be considered a proxy for a high proficiency in that language, this correlation is expected to be positive. However, when Swedish is not one of the languages spoken at home, the correlation will be negative. In this case, multilingual individuals not only are exposed to different cultural and linguistic contexts at home, but they might also be more prone to experiencing linguistic racism, depending on the language spoken at home, as well as their accent and proficiency in Swedish.

(3) *Discrimination is negatively associated to belonging to Sweden.*

*Data and key variables*

This paper is based on the Diversity and Inclusion survey conducted by MIM.<sup>20</sup> Data was collected during 2025 among a randomly selected representative sample of the population of the city of Malmö.

Out of the full sample (N=5644) we only included migrants and their children and excluded everyone that immigrated after 2020 based on the premise that developing an attachment to a new place of residence and a sense of belonging to a wider and more abstract concept of a nation takes time. This resulted in a sub sample of 2472 respondents.

Our dependent variable is *Place belonging*. This variable was measured by asking respondents if they *Feel at home in Sweden* with answer options ranging from Not at all (1) to Completely (4).

As for our focal independent variables, these are: *Multi-lingual identity vs. Swedish-lingual identity*, which was measured by asking respondents if they speak (1) "Only Swedish", (2) "Swedish and other languages" or (3) "Only other languages at home". The category Swedish and other languages included several languages, such as English, Arabic, Persian, Turkish and other European languages. The category "only other languages at home" included Arabic and English and these households were either monolingual or multilingual. It is important to note that the sample only includes migrants and

their children (including mixed families where one parent is foreign-born and one parent is Swedish born). This means that respondents answering 'only Swedish' are migrants or mixed families that speak Swedish at home. We also include *Discrimination*, based on a self-reported question about experiences of *discrimination* related to skin colour, ethnicity and religion when searching for work.

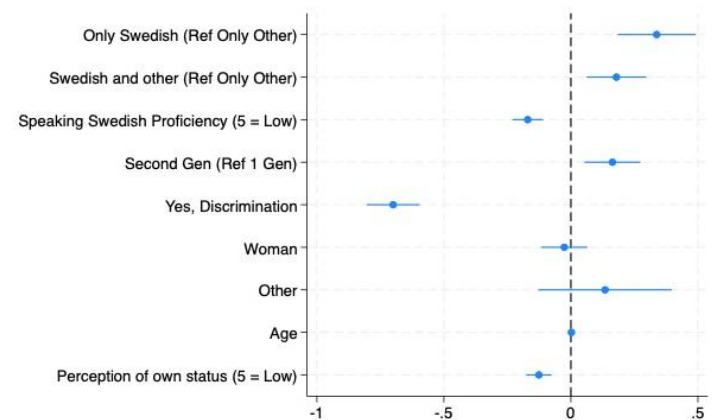
*Language proficiency* in Swedish was also self-reported and possible answers ranged from "Very good" (1) to "Very bad" (5). We also differentiated between respondents who were foreign-born people or born in Sweden with at least one foreign-born parent (born in Sweden to two foreign-born parents + born in Sweden to one Swedish-born and one foreign-born parent). Additionally, we added the respondents' gender (male/female and other that includes non-binary and preference of not being categorized), age and class operationalized through perceived own status with answer options ranging from "High" (5) to "Low" (1).

We applied a series of OLS regressions<sup>21</sup> with place belonging as the dependent variable.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

We start our explorative analysis in the form of an OLS regression with *Feeling at home in Sweden* as the dependent variable. The results are shown in Figure 1 as point estimates (regression coefficients represented as dots) and their confidence intervals.

*Figure 1. OLS regression coefficients on the dependent variable Feeling at home in Sweden*



As expected, the sense of belonging to Sweden of respondents who only speak Swedish at home, is higher compared to people who do not speak Swedish at home. The same is true for respondents with a multi-lingual identity, that is, people who speak multiple languages at home including Swedish, relative to those who speak one or multiple languages at home excluding Swedish.

The correlation between language proficiency and place belonging is also statistically significant, with respondents who reported lower language proficiency in Swedish having a lower sense of place belonging than their counterparts. This finding confirms our expectations as well as previous studies<sup>22</sup> who report higher social integration and sense of belonging among non-native students with greater languages skills.

Besides language, our second focal variable of interest is experienced discrimination when looking for work and the results show a strong relationship between this variable and place belonging. Not surprising, respondents who have experienced discrimination showed a lower sense of place belonging compared to respondents who reported not having been discriminated. This is in line with previous studies that show that perceived discrimination is negatively correlated to the sense of belonging among immigrants while also highlighting the importance of belonging for overall social cohesion in society.<sup>23</sup>

Our results also show that, as expected, Swedish-born people with one or two foreign-born parents feel more at home in Sweden than foreign-born respondents.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper theorizes the complex relationship between multilingualism, linguistic racism and belonging, and empirically explores the correlation between multilingualism, discrimination and place belonging to Sweden. We find that only speaking Swedish at home, or speaking Swedish and other languages, is positively related to place belonging when compared to respondents who only speak other languages at home. Our results also confirm

that discrimination is negatively associated to belonging.

While oral language proficiency is not a perfect measure of accents, they are often closely related. If we accept language proficiency as a proxy for accents, we can also relate our findings to similar ones in the US context. A survey study conducted among international students in American higher education institutions shows that participants with nonnative accents had a lower sense of belonging than those with a regional American accent.<sup>24</sup> The mechanism behind this relationship might be connected to feelings of fear and vulnerability but possibly also to shame and isolation in the students' everyday life, which would in turn result in a weaker sense of attachment to their social contexts as noted in previous studies.<sup>25</sup>

Languages influence the way speakers think, feel and connect with the world.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of the specific backgrounds, people who grow up in multicultural and multilingual households are likely to develop more comprehensive understanding of the world, and more diverse or complex group and place attachments. On the other hand, multilingual individuals might also experience conflicts in their identities, especially if they speak minority languages at home and struggle to reconcile multiple identities and belongings. In some contexts, multilingual individuals may feel insecure about their language abilities and even face linguistic racism. In such cases, multilingual individuals are likely to feel pressure to assimilate into dominant linguistic and cultural norms, which might lead to the loss of their linguistic and cultural heritage.<sup>27</sup>

In this respect, previous research highlights the importance of the recognition of multicultural contexts for immigrants to be able to develop a sense of belonging to their country of residence and not to have to conform to dominant values and ideals through assimilation.<sup>28</sup> We relate this argument to also specifically valuing multilingual identities as a way to increase the sense of belonging among migrants and their children. The current survey data does not include any

measurements of the value of specific languages and multilingual identities in schools, at work or any other societal contexts. Therefore, we are not able to account for the recognition of respondents' multilingual identities in such contexts or if, on the contrary, certain languages and multilingualism are stigmatized. The former can lead to increased feelings of belonging while the latter may decrease one's sense of feeling at home.

In a future analysis, we would like to investigate the potential moderating effect of discrimination and, more specifically, of linguistic racism in the correlation between multilingual identity and belonging. These potential effects might take different direction depending on the context and public attitudes towards different minorities. While multilingual identity can be a source of pride and resilience, it might also increase multilingual people's vulnerability in contexts where certain languages are stigmatized. When multilingual identity is recognized and valued, belonging might increase but when it is stigmatized, belonging might decrease.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, language composition constitutes a key factor in the recognition or stigmatization of multilingual identities. To empirically test this proposition, future studies should compare the experiences of native-born multilingual individuals who speak Swedish at home and those who do not.

This article is accompanied by a [visualisation](#) that conveys its main message. The visualisation was created by Ida Bennrup, BA student in Visual Communication at Malmö University, in collaboration with the authors.

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