Belonging through languages and language varieties in South Tyrol

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Abstract

Language and belonging are closely intertwined, particularly in language minority contexts, as language is embedded in complex historical, political, and social conditions. Focusing on German-speaking South Tyroleans, this paper examines how young dialect speakers construct their linguistic belonging within a setting of institutionalised multilingualism and regional variation, in which language carries strong social meaning, embedded in shared narratives and beliefs about language groups. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, the analysis shows how speakers draw on dialect as marker of regional identity, shared group knowledge, and linguistic practices as resources for positioning themselves. Particular attention is paid to how these processes are negotiated in the context of mobility, where feelings of (un-)belonging can be reaffirmed, contested, challenged and renegotiated. The findings highlight the importance of considering mobility in research on minority language contexts, where identities are often understood as strongly territorially anchored, even though people and societies are continuously shaped by forms of movement, thereby revealing the tension between spatial group belonging and individual, dynamic negotiation of meaning.

1 Introduction

Language is not only a means of communication but also an important part of people's identities. In social interactions, people draw on the language someone is using to form an impression about the speaker, for example to assess and categorise who belongs to the same group and who doesn't. The complex interplay between language and belonging is particularly important in multilingual spaces like South Tyrol, where the concept of separate language groups is embedded in the sociopolitical structure of society, and where the use of language varieties shape everyday interactions.

In this context, this paper explores the role of languages and varieties in constructing identities and individual feelings of belonging, the influence of linguistic practices on social interactions within and between language groups, and how these practices emphasise or regulate inclusion in and exclusion from social spaces. In work on language and identity in South Tyrol many of the newer empirical approaches are based on data from educational settings (cf. for example Leonardi 2022) or focus on multilingual families (cf. for example Colombo/Ritter/Stopfner 2020; Leonardi 2020a). The data presented in this paper offers a complementary perspective by focusing on South Tyroleans between the ages 18 and 35, that is, young people at the transition

from the Matura into higher education (most of the time abroad), entering working life or those already established in their professional careers. An important role play different forms of mobility during these life phases, and the examination of how experiences of mobility and language contact can shape feelings of (un-)belonging.

In particular, this paper explores how young dialect speakers, coming from a language minority group in a relatively stable multilingual environment, draw on and position themselves in relation to their language group's shared background and collective knowledge, and how these frameworks shape their sense of belonging through language and place. In individual life trajectories, however, this meaning can shift and be renegotiated, particularly through mobility and contact with speakers of other languages and varieties. How do such experiences encourage reflection and repositioning, and contribute to the negotiation of complex, multi-layered linguistic affiliations? Addressing these questions in the context of South Tyrol will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of linguistic belonging as a dynamic and context-dependent process.

The following theoretical chapter discusses the role of language in the formation of identity and processes of belonging (2.1), followed by a brief overview over the historical background, language management policies and sociolinguistic context in South Tyrol (2.2), as well as an embedding in the broader context of German-speaking language minorities (2.3). The third chapter lays out the research methods, followed by the analysis in the fourth and concluding remarks in the fifth chapter.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Identity and belonging

Language, identity and belonging are closely interwoven. Language plays an important role on multiple levels: while language can be an aspect of identity – among for example nationality, ethnicity, gender, age – it is also the means of constructing identity.

The concept of identity has been theorised from different perspectives. These include sociopsychological approaches, with Social Identity Theory (beginning with Tajfel 1974) that describes categorisation into and comparison between ingroups and outgroups as central for identity formation; social constructionist approaches that emphasise the interactional, discursive production of identities (for example by Davies/Harré 1990), or a poststructuralist emphasis on the negotiation of identities in the context of political and economic power relations (for example, Heller 1992) (for an overview cf. Pavlenko/Blackledge 2004). The extensive use of the concept has also led to criticism, because it encompasses such a wide range of sometimes contradictory approaches and risks of losing its meaning and analytical precision (cf. Brubaker/Cooper 2000; Anthias 2016: 174–176).

From a linguistic perspective, Bucholtz/Hall (2005) examine the production of identity in linguistic interaction, bringing together theories of identity, such as Social Identity Theory, and linguistic concepts, for example indexicality and accommodation. They describe identity as the "social positioning of self and other" (ibd.: 586), since by highlighting particular aspects of identity in interaction, speakers dynamically position others in specific ways while simultane-

ously establishing their own position in relation to them (cf. Davies/Harré 1990; for an overview on the theory of positioning cf. Deppermann 2015; Spitzmüller/Flubacher/Bendl 2017). Through this, the analysis of positionings can investigate how identities are constructed and displayed in interaction, for example in interviews on language biographies (cf. Liebscher/Dailey-O'Cain 2014; Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2002).

While belonging is part of some approaches to identity, it has also been theorised as its own concept, partly motivated by critiques on the concept of identity (cf. Anthias 2016: 174–176; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020: 117). Belonging not only focuses on multidimensional and dynamic processes but also offers an "awareness of the importance that place-belongingness can play in processes of identification" (Cornips/De Rooji 2018: 7). Through this, belonging "allows more clearly questions about the actual spaces and places to which people are accepted as members or feel that they are members and broader questions about social inclusion as well as forms of violence and subordination entailed in processes of boundary making" (Anthias 2013: 7). Belonging can be understood as "an emotionally charged social location" (Pfaff-Czarneca 2020: 215). Pfaff-Czarnecka (2020: 116; 2008: 6) further differentiates between 'belonging to' (*Zugehörigkeit*) as the relation of an individual to a group, and 'belonging with' (or 'togetherness', *Zusammengehörigkeit*) as the relations within a group. This avoids collectivising perspectives and allows a more precise focus on the position of an individual and its potential struggles with mechanisms of inclusion in and exclusion from groups and the negotiation of individuals relations towards a group.

Feelings of belonging build on commonality, mutuality and attachments (cf. Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020: 116–121). Commonality emerges through the perception of shared (cultural) aspects of life, for example language, knowledge, experiences, memories, values, and attitudes. While commonalities are shared by group members, individuals can take on individual positions. This is because, unlike (collective) identity, which presupposes homogeneity, belonging "stresses commonness, but not necessarily sameness" (ibid.: 118). Group members can negotiate meanings, new aspects can be incorporated, and relations and boundaries of social spaces can change. Shared commonalities lead to mutuality, a sense of an assumed agreement between group members over commonalities, expectations and obligations, which contribute to a sense of social commitment. Tied into this are (im-)material attachments to objects, for example to spaces, natural objects, landscapes or objects of possessions, that give a feeling of belonging and that can "often result in a sense of entitlement" (ibid. 116). Especially in connection with time, for example growing up in a place, can lead to strong senses of belonging. The interplay between commonality, mutuality and attachments "forge[s] a strong and binding sense of naturalness that is obvious to the insiders and keeps the outsiders at bay" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020: 121), strengthening internal cohesion within a group and enabling differentiation between insiders and outsiders.

The interaction between spatial and temporal dimension of belonging is particularly visible in the notion of having roots in a specific place, of being anchored in the social system of a group in a certain place, and in collective notions of shared origins within this group (cf. Vallentin 2019a). Temporal belonging links groups to a shared past, which can be important for a collective narrative of the group (cf. ibd.: 24–36). Together, those layers form a legitimisation of belonging to a community at a specific place with a certain past ("we (social) have always

(temporal) been here (spatial)" (ibid.: 37). Vallentin also emphasises how belonging emerges through shared practices ("[d]oing belonging" (ibd.: 39)). These are habitualised ways of "how to do things" (ibd.) in a community, that individuals can display in interactions, while others perceive it and recognise them as members of a certain community of practice. This is closely related to language: Practices can be displayed through linguistic means, for example when people draw on shared narratives or knowledge about the group or use categories and labels that index positions or attitudes. Practices can also pertain the use of language, for example when a regional variety is associated with a geographical space and certain social values, speakers can position themselves by using this variety as belonging to this group (cf. ibd.: 39–54; Vallentin 2019b; Eckert 2008).

Belonging is always multidimensional and diverse because people are simultaneously embedded in various social networks (e. g. family, friends, work, hobbies, religion), which can also change in different phases of life (for example through school, education, work, relocations, mobility). Individuals must navigate between various – often overlapping and sometimes conflicting – feelings of belonging. Tensions can arise between self-ascribed and externally assigned belongings, as well as between individual feelings of belongings and formal or institutional regulations (politics of belonging, cf. Yuval-Davis 2011). Navigating these affiliations can be challenging, when different belongings must be reconciled and evaluated in terms of opportunities or constrains. Previous belongings sometimes must be adapted or even abandoned if they become incompatible, while new belongings can emerge (cf. Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020: 122–125). In multilingual contexts, different languages and varieties can be dynamically associated with different feelings of (un-)belonging. The choice of language in a specific situation can signal a positioning with a particular group, while simultaneously reinforcing boundaries with others. Language can function as an instrument of power, especially in contexts with minority languages, which must assert themselves against a majority language. The framework of belonging offers an intersectional lens to look at hierarchies, inequalities and power structures (cf. Anthias 2016; Horner/Dailey-O'Cain 2019).

In sum, when combining the theoretical concepts of identity, positioning and belonging, identity can be understood as being constructed in interaction (cf. Bucholtz/Hall 2005). Belonging, as a felt sense of social location and with focus on place-belonging (cf. Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020), is indexed, enacted and demonstrated through acts of positioning, and it becomes observable in concrete interactions, particularly in narrated experiences, through ways in which speakers position themselves and others (cf. Sala 2025: 74). In these processes, categories and aspects of identity relevant to an interaction are highlighted in oneself and others. Speakers take on positions towards these aspects, thereby expressing how they relate to them, for example showing identification and a corresponding shared belonging, or a rejection or demarcation of differences. Through these acts of positioning, speakers locate themselves and others within a social space. Especially in the context of language, language attitudes are an important form of positioning (cf. Liebscher/Dailey-O'Cain 2014). By evaluating languages, varieties and the respective speaker groups (cf. Tophinke/Ziegler 2006: 207), individuals not only attribute meaning to linguistic practices but also positioning themselves in relation to them, thereby indicating their own (un-)belonging.

2.2 Languages and identities in South Tyrol

In South Tyrol, questions of language identities and linguistic belonging are particularly relevant (cf. Risse 2010: 125). The following chapter provides a brief overview of the sociolinguistic and historical background of this area as well as aspects of language policies and language practices.

2.2.1 Sociolinguistic and historical background

The Autonomous Province South Tyrol, located in northern Italy at the borders to Austria and Switzerland, is an officially multilingual area. Alongside Italian, German has the status of an official regional language, and Ladin, a Rhaeto-Romance language, is recognised as a minority language. The language groups differ in size (Italian 27%, German 68,6%, Ladin 4,4%[1]) and are unevenly distributed across the province. Italian is found for the most part in the cities and southern areas, while Ladin is mostly limited to the valleys Gardena and Badia; beyond that, German prevails in most municipalities, with the rural areas being almost completely German-speaking (cf. Astat 2024a: 6, 10).

Within the German language in South Tyrol, different varieties can be differentiated.[2] The Standard German in South Tyrol is characterised by some distinct linguistic features (cf. Ammon/Bickel/Lenz 2016: LX), however, there is a strong normative orientation towards the standard in Germany. The use of standard is mainly limited to written communication and domains such as politics, media, school and religion, as well as in official or formal situations and with Italian-speaking South Tyroleans and Tourists. While the standard is associated with values such as professionalism and comprehensibility, the actual spoken standard is often perceived rather negatively as insufficient and associated with linguistic uncertainty (cf. Abfalterer 2007: 30; Lanthaler 2007: 229; Leonardi 2020b). Hofer (2020: 82) sees this as a lack of "ownership", that South Tyroleans do not regard Standard German as their own language but as something that is "owned" by speakers of Germany. In contrast, the regional dialect, part of the Southern Bavarian dialects, dominates the oral communication, among German-speaking South Tyrolean it is socially expected to speak dialect. Furthermore, dialect is associated with highly positive attitudes and functions as an important marker of regional identity (see below) (cf. Lanthaler 2007; Glück et al. 2019: 258f., Riehl 2000). The traditional description of this relationship between dialect and standard as diglossia is being questioned due to shifts in the functional domains of these varieties and the assumed existence of further regional variation. However, empirical research has not yet been done about it (cf. Lanthaler 2007: 224; Glück/Leonardi/Riehl 2019: 256).

The current relationship between the languages and varieties is rooted in the historical background of this area. Previously part of Austria, South Tyrol was assigned to Italy after the end of World War I (1919). During fascism (1923–1939), strategies of Italianization led to oppres-

[1] For a discussion of the census of language affiliations see chapter 2.2.2.

[2] In each of the three languages different varieties play a role, albeit to varying degrees. While this paper focus on speakers of the German dialect, it is limited to giving details about regional variation in German, for Italian and Ladin cf. for example Mioni (2000) and Cordin (2002).

sion of the German language, including the prohibition of German in public and in schools, Italianization of German names and emigration of South Tyroleans to Germany. After World War II, decades of political struggle and, eventually, violent escalation in the 60ies, led to the implementation of the Second Autonomy Statute (1972) (cf. Baur 2009: 35–40). This includes language policy regulations: It guarantees the equality of German and Italian in South Tyrol, the right to use German in official institutions (e. g. government agencies, courts), the right to education in one's native language (German, Italian or Ladin), and the regulation of the distribution of public jobs and social and cultural funding based on the proportions of the language groups (cf. Südtiroler Landesregierung 2024: 169f.). Through this, the obstacles of the past seem to be overcome, and „[p]ower-sharing successfully transformed the conflict in South Tyrol because it desecuritised the relationship between the three linguistic groups" (Larin/Röggla 2019: 1035). Language policies regulate the coexistence of language groups and protect the rights of minority languages and have led to a stable constellation of multilingualism (cf. Franceschini/Riehl 2025: 290).

2.2.2. Language groups and language contact

To determine the size of the language groups, citizens of South Tyrol must declare their affiliation to one of the three official language groups. It is not possible to claim belonging to more than one language, nor to any other than the traditional three language groups; however, there is an option to claim no affiliation with any of the tree language groups (cf. Astat 2024a; Medda-Windischer/Membretti 2020: 17–19). This system impacts collective and individual identity-building processes. Through these language management policies, it is no longer only a question about language, but the affiliation with a language is automatically a politically and socially charged decision (cf. Naglo 2007: 169). Furthermore, the separation of the language groups is transferred onto the conceptualisation of languages as separate and exclusive entities (cf. Colombo/Ritter/Stopfner 2020: 66). Thus, languages function as the distinctive feature of the corresponding group, reinforcing the idea of clear boundaries between the groups based on their languages. Despite the status as a multilingual space, the language groups coexist largely side by side, with only limited interaction between them (cf. Naglo 2007: 174; cf. also Wankenhut 1999).

In this societal context, concepts of self are "firmly grounded in the idea of monolingual identity" (Colombo/Ritter/Stopfner 2020: 66) and shaped by language ideologies, which influence how speakers engage with languages and varieties (cf. Platzgummer 2021). Often, people have to find individual ways of (linguistic) practices to define their own sense of belonging. This can be challenging for various reasons, for example for people growing up with more than one language, who can feel as if their experiences are not recognized; or when multilingual parents have to decide which school (see below) they send their children to, considering also potential repercussions on language practices within these families (cf. Colombo/Ritter/Stopfner 2020; Veronesi 2010).

The contact between languages is shaped, among other factors, through the school system, which reinforces the separation of the language groups (cf. Glück/Leonardi/Riehl 2019: 269). To guarantee the right to education in one's native language, the education system is divided into three sections. In German schools, German is the language of instruction while Italian is

taught as second language (L2), and vice versa in Italian Schools. In Ladin schools, both German and Italian are used equally, with a few hours of Ladin per week. In all schools, English is taught as foreign language starting around fourth grade. Contact between the schools is minimal or non-existent (cf. Abel 2007; Glück/Leonardi/Riehl 2019: 251f.). There are efforts to increase language exposure and language contact in schools, which are particularly in demand in Italian Schools, but they also evoke a lot of resistance. Any changes regarding the education system are a highly debated topic, as they are immediately perceived as political issues touching on the relationship between German and Italian and triggering concerns about language loss and, consequently, identity loss (cf. Larin/Röggla 2019: 1036; Naglo 2007: 170).

Despite being a multilingual area, many people face challenges in second language proficiency, especially with German as L2 (cf. Vettori Ebner 2016; Abel/Glaznieks 2019; Astat 2024b: 6f.). This is also influenced by possibilities of language use in daily life: While German speakers can use the Standard Italian learned in schools in everyday life, Italian speakers can rarely use Standard German outside of school, as most communication occurs in dialect, and additionally, many of them have only limited competences in dialect.[3] Generally, communication between German- and Italian-speaking South Tyroleans takes place in Italian (cf. Lanthaler 2007: 234–235; Vettori Ebner 2016: 26f.; Glück/Leonardi/Riehl 2019: 266). The root of the avoidance of dialect use with Italian-speaking South Tyroleans can also lie deeper in the relations of the language groups. Baur interprets this as an unconscious attempt to prevent "the other" from entering into one's own linguistic private space, thus maintaining distance by avoiding the dialect (cf. Baur 2000: 68).

2.2.3 Processes of identification through languages

The three languages are significant for the identity of their speakers from different perspectives.[4] For Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans, "being Ladin" as an identity concept is relatively straightforward, as Ladin has always been a minority language under exoglossic dominant languages. For Italian-speaking South Tyroleans, it is more complex. Although Italian is the national language, Italian-speakers are a de facto minority in this province, which not only differentiates them from other Italians, but can also create a sense of being outnumbered and in a disadvantageous or inferior position in relation to the main language group, who are sometimes perceived as benefiting more from the protection of the autonomy statute (cf. Meluzzi 2014, 2017). Resentment can increase due to the challenges of social participation when the German dialect dominates daily communication (cf. Naglo 2007: 164–166; Riehl 2002).

For identity building processes of German-speaking South Tyroleans it is crucial that German is the language of other nation states (cf. Riehl 2007: 111). On one hand, the German language functions as a means of maintaining a connection to the broader German-speaking area and highlighting the cultural differences from Italy, thus serving as safeguard against (another)

[3] For self-assessments in dialect proficiency cf. Astat (2024b: 8). Generally, Italian-speaking South Tyroleans living in the cities report a lower dialect proficiency then those living in the more rural areas in municipalities with a dominance of German speakers (cf. Lanthaler 2007: 233).

[4] This paper focusses on experiences of speakers of German dialect, for a more details regarding the identity construction of Italian- and Ladin-speakers cf. Naglo (2007).

assimilation into Italian culture. On the other hand, it is not an absolute identification with Austria or Germany; differences to those countries are emphasised through the combinations of different cultural elements and multilingualism in South Tyrol. As a result, identity building processes are based on the regional level, with the dialect as a central marker of distinctiveness (cf. Risse 2010: 122f., 126; Riehl 2002). The dialect, sometimes considered the "real" native language (cf. Veronesi 2010: 88), demonstrates the differences from other German-speaking areas and the independence of this community.

Additionally, recent data of representative studies indicate shifts in patterns of self-identification: In 2025, as was already the case ten years earlier, participants identified most with the category *Südtiroler/in* ('South Tyrolean') (55%), however, the proportion of those identifying as *Italiener/in* ('Italian') has increased from 23% to 36%, and identification as *Europäer/in* ('European') from 17% to 25% (cf. Coletti/Combardo 2025: 100). This shows how the identification potential on the provincial level remains strong, while simultaneously being increasingly complemented by broader identities at the national and European levels.

2.3 Multilingualism, minority groups and mobilities

Language minority groups, such as German-speaking South Tyroleans, exist in different contexts and forms. In such groups, processes of identification can be described in terms of ethnic identity. The chapter 2.3.1 addresses aspects of ethnic identity, processes of belonging in minority groups and the various aspects that can shape the role of language for such groups. Additionally, the last chapter 2.3.2 turns to questions of mobility, as minority groups are often conceptualised as static, despite the fact that movement of people can significantly shape processes of identification and belonging.

2.3.1 Language minorities and ethnic identities

The link between language and feelings and politics of belonging is particularly visible when national borders and language borders do not coincide. This is the case for linguistic minorities, groups that differ from a societal majority through their language use, and for whom this difference carries strong social importance. In Europe, many such minorities emerged from shifting national borders after World War I, leaving German-speaking groups outside the borders of German-speaking nation states (cf. Riehl 2025: 150; Eichinger 2006).

Language minority groups can be described through the lens of ethnic identity, which highlights the membership to a group defined by ethnic characteristics (such as beliefs about shared origins, socio-cultural or historical experiences) as an important part of the concept of self. Categorisation into ethnic ingroups and outgroups, and the resulting contrast with others creates the group itself. The stability of ethnic groups does not depend on fixed cultural traits, which can change over time, but on the continuous negotiation and construction of boundaries between groups. Ethnic identities always encompass various levels on different scales, forming interlaced layers: While language, and particularly regional variation, can anchor identification to a regional level, citizenship, national or supranational belonging also come into play (cf. Riehl 2014: 174–177; Wakenhut 1999: 33–68; Barth 1969/1994).

The specific meaning attributed to language depends on the language minority group's geographical, historical, political and social position. The historical context, in particular, can function as the conditions of origin of language groups, forming part of a shared culture of remembrance and memory discourse, which constitute a central element in the construction of group identity (cf. Pavlenko/Blackledge 2004; Naglo 2007: 46). Furthermore, the situation of a language minority group also depends on the political background, the status and hierarchies of the languages involved at national and European levels, the existence of language policies and minority rights, and the institutional embedding and use of languages in different domains (cf. Volkmer 2019; Franceschini/Riehl 2025; Riehl 2025). Additionally, regional variation also affects the situation of German-speaking minority groups. This includes the existence of dialectal, regiolectal and standard varieties, their development and vitality, linguistic competences within the group, communicative function and sociolinguistic status in everyday life, and normative beliefs about correctness (cf. Franceschini/Riehl 2025: 295f.; Kim/Koppensteiner/Lenz 2025).[5] To fully understand the meaning of language in a minority setting, it is important to not only consider the languages and the regional variation, but also the dynamic interaction between them.[6]

In such contexts of language minority groups, a shared language indexes difference from the majority group and strengthens feelings of togetherness. The use of languages, varieties, or mixed forms of languages are then not merely a matter of neutral linguistic alternatives but socially charged ways of positioning. Hereby, the perspective of belonging "disentangle[s] collectivizing notions such as ethnicity" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020: 122), because it allows, among other things, to look at a collective level while not losing the individual, embedded in those multidimensional social relations, out of sight. Through this, it focuses on how belonging is "created by individual persons in negotiated collective constellations" (ibd.), for example through positionings in concrete communicative situations.

[5] The status and institutionalisation of language in different historical and political contexts can vary widely. This can be seen in various European German-speaking minorities, ranging from a strong institutional foundation, as in South Tyrol and East Belgium, to a lack of official recognition, as in Alsace. On the level of regional variation, differences in the existence of varieties range from a higher level of dialect use across generations, as in South Tyrol and partly East Belgium, to a decrease or loss of dialectal varieties, as in Alsace, or a more or less stable regiolect, as in minority groups in Romania. This variation shapes the symbolic meaning of those varieties for the respective groups (for an overview cf. Franceschini/Riehl 2025; Kim/Koppensteiner/Lenz 2025).

[6] For example, in South Tyrol, the German language stabilises the connection to the wider German-speaking area and is used to maintain the difference from the Italian-speaking space. At the same time, the standard language is associated with Germany and strongly shaped by normative beliefs. The dialect, in direct opposition to the standard, functions as marker of identification and demonstration of regional belonging to a specific group perceived as autochthonous (see also chapter 3.2). In contrast, for German-speaking East Belgians, identification is strongly tied to a regional language shaped by regional variation and linguistic features resulting from contact with French. The speakers identify with this particular form of multilingualism, the mixture of cultural elements, and their Belgian nationality (cf. Rasp/Rivera Cosme 2023; Möller 2025; Volkmer 2019: 46–48).

2.3.2 Linguistic belonging in the context of mobility

Minority communities are often conceptualised as relatively stable social spaces: They are historically established and territorially rooted, which can serve as a central element of self-understanding within the group, providing strong narratives of collective belonging. However, the world is far from static, and mobility shapes societal structures and the relationship between language and space (cf. Hannam/Sheller/Urry 2006; Auer 2013: 6 f.). Mobility can take various forms, ranging from global movement of population groups to the daily commutes of individuals, it can take place across multiple countries, within borderlands or within one country. This not only affects the people on the move, but also those who are not mobile themselves, through the movement of others within their social environment. Besides geographical movement, social mobility is at play to. For example, this is the case when mobility for educational purposes entails shifts in status, networks, or habitus, which can have repercussions on feelings of belonging to a place of origin. Mobility can be experienced as a disruption of established patterns of belonging, destabilising what was previously taken for granted. In such situations, belonging often becomes contested when these attachments are placed under tension and become subject to negotiation. This can lead to feelings of alienation from previously self-evident attachments, or feelings of belonging in-between, but it can also create space for new affiliations (cf. Britain 2015; Britain 2016; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012; Horner/Dailey-O'Cain 2019).

This, of course, also affects members of language minority groups, when belonging is already very strongly tied to place. Mobility into new linguistic spaces, and encounters with speakers of other languages and varieties can move questions about (un-)belonging through language to the foreground. For example, normative beliefs of other people in new spaces regarding how to "correctly" or "authentically" speak a language can lead to experiences where one's own linguistic affiliation is denied or linguistic categories are attributed form the outside. For individuals, this raises questions not only about their own affiliations, but also about their linguistic practices, often leading to questions about accommodation or dialect levelling. Additionally, this can also open space for critical reflection about the relationship and power between languages in the multilingual constellation in one's place of origin, and institutionalised and habitualised language practices. Mobility can thus create conditions under which the meanings and values attributed to particular languages and varieties can be reflected, reevaluated and renegotiated in the light of changing social and spatial contexts (cf. Horner/Dailey-O'Cain 2019; Beamann 2021; Pavlenko/Blackledge 2004).

As chapter 2.3 has shown, the construction of identity in language minority groups is shaped by multiple dimensions, by the historical, political, institutional and social context of the area, by the involved languages and regional varieties, and it involves several dimensions on a regional, national, and supranational scale. Language minority groups draw upon these resources to construct shared knowledge and narratives that constitute their self-understanding. However, as people are on the move, mobility can reshape the meaning of language for individual speakers, bringing questions about (un-)belonging that were previously taken for granted to the forefront. To analyse this in the context of German-speaking South Tyrolean's, the next chapter outlines the research design.

3 Methods

In order to explore the role of language in constructing identity and belonging, this paper draws on 18 interviews from a dissertation project that examines the perspective of dialect speakers on regional variation of German, combining language attitudes research (cf. Soukup 2019) and perceptual dialectology (cf. Purschke/Stöckle 2019). The semi-structured interviews contained questions on different varieties and their relevance on an individual and collective level, the situational use of varieties and associated evaluations. A particular focus was on the mobility of the participants within South Tyrol and other German-speaking countries and the resulting contact with other languages and varieties (cf. Jeszenszky/Hasse/Stöckle 2023: 159f.). Additionally, audio samples were used to elicit further attitudes (cf. Preston 2010: 1–3).

Interview participants were between 18 and 35 years old and lived either in the city Meran, the surrounding area of the Burggrafenamt, or the adjacent valley of Passeier. These areas were chosen to compare speakers from urban and more rural areas. The age group allows a focus on young dialect speakers in the phases of life directly after the Matura, while pursuing higher education or entering and establishing their professional careers, which also enables a focus on different forms of mobility during these life phases. Furthermore, participants had to have proficiency in the German dialect, independent of native language. Accordingly, this paper focusses on the role of language in social processes from the perspective of German dialect speakers, it is based on data from participants embedded in a predominantly German-speaking environment,[7] with only a few participants with more multilingual backgrounds (for example through family and friends or experiences abroad). Since this research follows an emic approach, dialect was used to establish contact with the participants as well as during the interviews, positioning the interviewer as an ingroup member. The potential influence of this on the interviews and the interactional construct ion of attitudes must be taken into account (cf. König 2014).

As this data stems from a research project on language attitudes towards, perception of, and use of regional varieties of German in South Tyrol, the main topics discussed in the interviews were the different varieties and languages and their use in various situations. Accordingly, for the data analysed in this paper, it is important to note that the focus was not on participants' explicit self-categorizations in response to direct questions about nationality. Rather, this analysis focuses on implicit emergence of the meaning of language for processes of belonging when participants talk freely about their languages and varieties. Thereby it was possible to capture this symbolic meaning of language even if it emerges in unexpected places in narrations of the participants. In these passages, identification and belonging become visible not as fixed labels, but as enacted in discourse, often without speakers being fully aware of the meanings and positioning conveyed through their statements. It is therefore always necessary to take the broader context of the interview as well as the overall situation of the participants into account when interpreting the data. The meaning of language for identity and belonging is always embedded

[7] Accordingly, this data is limited on the perspective of a language minority group, that, at the same time, represents the majority group on a provincial level. In order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic reality in South Tyrol, the perspective of not only German- but also Italian- and Ladin-speaking South Tyroleans as well as speakers of languages beyond the traditional multilingualism (cf. Colombo/Stopfner 2018) would have to be considered.

in this broader narration, often building on previously mentioned aspects in an interview (cf. Arendt 2014).

The interview data was analysed and structured using qualitative content analysis (cf. Kuckartz/Rädiker 2024) with MAXQDA. In addition, positioning analysis was used to deepen the content analysis by focusing on how belonging is produced through claiming and ascribing of positions during the interview. It offers the framework to systematically analyse which positions the participant ascribe to themselves and others (positions within their narrations, positions to the narration, positions between participant and interviewer), how changes of perspective lead to different positionings, which evaluations are associated with those positions, and how these positionings are constructed at the linguistic level (for example through pronouns and deictica, lexical choices, reformulations) (cf. Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2002).

The data analysed in this paper was categorised and structured along the following dimensions:

- For each instance it was categorised which language or variety was made relevant by the participant (for example dialect, Standard German, Italian), and if it was an assessment regarding the general linguistic situation of South Tyrol and ascribed to the collective group of German-speaking South Tyroleans or seen at a more individual level.
- When participants described their individual use of varieties and languages, those situational factors were further categorised systematically regarding the place of communication and the communicative partner(s), the latter were described regarding perceived autochthony, native language/variety, and social role.
    - For communicative situations within South Tyrol, autochthonous groups encompass German South Tyroleans, Italian South Tyroleans and Ladin South Tyroleans, which were respectively associated with their first language. The occurring social roles were mainly family, friends, partners, coworkers. Other relevant groups in South Tyrol were categorised as allochthonous German speakers (for example, tourists from Germany or Germans who have moved to South Tyrol) and allochthonous speakers of other languages (for example, Spanish-speaking friends or Italian-learning migrants).
    - Further spaces were categorised as Italy (outside of South Tyrol), other German-speaking countries (Austria, Switzerland and Germany) as well as non-German-speaking countries (for example Spain). For these settings, the communicative partners were categorised, too, regarding their languages/varieties (for example Austrian dialects, Standard German, Italian, English) and their social role (for example friends, colleagues, coworkers).
- Especially for those communicative situations abroad, the different forms of mobility to this place and the time frame of this stay were annotated too, such as commuting, short travels for holidays abroad, longer stays abroad through higher education, practical training or work.

The interviews were conducted in dialect and transcribed in a standardised version to facilitate computer-readability, but untranslatable dialectal passages were retained, and potentially misleading standard-formulations were avoided. All analyses of relevant passages were conducted with reference to the original audio recordings and thus to the actual linguistic realization, including additional interactional notation in dialect where necessary. To present the examples in

this paper, the quotes were transcribed close to the dialect in order to demonstrate salient linguistic features, but while still remaining readable. An English translation is provided throughout.

4 Analysis

In South Tyrol discussions about languages inevitably invoke notions of distinct monolingual identities. This analysis examines where notions of separate, static language identities become visible and how linguistic practices actively shape social interactions, regulate social participation or mark exclusions and, overall, enable feelings of belonging.

4.1 Language groups and monolingual identities

Names and categories speakers draw on carry specific meaning within a group and the use of such words and (self-)categorisations can index positionings and attitudes towards other languages and language groups, solidifying the notion of separate language groups and reinforcing their boundaries. For example, when referring to German-speaking South Tyroleans, mostly the term *Südtiroler* ('South Tyroleans') is used, less frequently *deitschsprochige Südtiroler* ('German-speaking South Tyroleans'). Other terms like *deitsche Südtiroler* ('German South Tyroleans') or *Deitsche* ('Germans') are mostly avoided or immediately followed by a correction.[8]

This avoidance can be seen in the following quote from the participant P4 who described how others categorised them when they lived in Berlin and Rome:

(1) *dass niamend drun gezweifelt hot, dass i in Rom italienisch bin, Italiener bin und in Deitschlond dass i äh deitscher Muttersproche bin*

(P4, 1:17:05)

'Nobody doubted that in Rome I am Italian and in Germany that I am, äh, a German native speaker'[9]

In this example, the participant recounts how others (Italians in Rome and Germans in Berlin) positioned them. The sentence structure suggests that the speaker meant to use a parallelism (*Italiener bin* ('am Italian') and *Deitscher bin* ('am German')), but the hesitation *äh* indicates that they consider their choice of words and then opt for the category *deitscher Muttersproche* ('German native speaker') instead, thus avoiding the dispreferred category of German for themselves, even if it is in a description of an assumed perception attributed to them by others.

In contrast to the category *deitschsprochige Südtiroler* ('German-speaking South Tyroleans'), the members of the other main language group are mostly referred to as *Italiener* ('Italians'). This is visible in an example where the participant B11 talks about a friend:

(2) *väterlicherseits isch sie italienisch und die Mama isch a Dosige*

(B11, 25:30)

'on the father's side she is Italian and her mother is from here'

[8] This can also be seen in results to the question of identification asked in the representative survey *Language Barometer* (cf. Coletti/Combardo 2025: 100).

[9] For a more detailed discussion of this example see chapter 4.3.

The dialect word *dosig* is a derivation from the deictic adverb *do* ('here'), which is used in this sentence as a noun, meaning 'someone from here', e. g. from South Tyrol, but particularly a South Tyrolean dialect speaker. This is used in contrast to *Italiener*, referring to an Italian-speaking South Tyrolean. Someone living in South Tyrol and speaking Italian is in this utterance not included in this concept of *dosig*. Instead, the affiliation with the Italian language becomes the main point of identity, where a further differentiation between Italian-speakers from South Tyrol and from other parts of Italy doesn't seem to be worth mentioning.[10] Through this, clear boundaries are drawn, based on the underlying notion "of group labelling as taking sides" (Colombo/Ritter/Stopfner 2020: 66). However, these ways of referring to others differ when participants have a more linguistically diverse background, for example with multilingual families or mixed friend groups. They often use both terms *deitschsprochige Südtiroler* ('German-speaking South Tyroleans') and *italienischsprochige* Südtiroler ('Italian-speaking South Tyrolean'), thus marking the equal belonging and the equal status of both groups (cf. for example also Vezzali et al. 2007: 78).

Another relevant aspect is the self-categorisation of the participants. Before the interview, each participant completed a short sociodemographic survey, where all participants reported German as their only first language, with Italian and English (among others) as additional languages. However, the interviews showed that three participants grew up in bilingual German-Italian families and are using both languages frequently. Despite this linguistic background, in the survey they categorised themselves as having just one native language. This shows how self-categorisation might not always be a simple act but can be influenced by various factors, for example a general habit in the South Tyrolean context of being able to claim just one language as one's own, or the impact of having an education that is centred on just one language. Furthermore, the context of such categorisations must be considered. Because the participants knew that the interview topic was the South Tyrolean dialect, they could have deemed identifying as having German as only L1 as important to position themselves as better and more knowledgeable interviewees.

4.2 Importance of South Tyrolean dialect

As shown above, the dialect is a core marker of German-speaking South Tyroleans (cf. Riehl 2002), it leads to a strong sense of togetherness and is used to distinguish this area from other spaces. The dialect is seen as the "normal" and "natural" way of speaking, sometimes even described as *meine wirkliche Muttersproche* (M5, 21:10) ('my real mother tongue'). It is considered as special and unique, it is an exclusive ability of speakers who not only have their roots in this place, but in this group in this place. This shows the connection between the different dimensions of belonging: The dialect marks a social belonging to a group, with a specific

[10] In such cases, nationality must also be considered. Maybe for this participant it doesn't seem necessary to differentiate between categories of Italians, because – from the perspective of German-speaking South Tyroleans – for Italian-speakers national and linguistic belonging align. In this sense, *Südtiroler* is reserved for 'someone with Italian citizenship who speaks German/dialect'. When asked to explicitly describe one's own identity, those individual facets can also be named specifically (cf. Veronesi (2010: 97)). However, when a short categorisation such as *Südtiroler* is used, it doesn't always have to be a deliberate rejection of an Italian affiliation but can also be just a matter of linguistic economy.

regional location (spatial belonging), linked with the notion of autochthony of this group, and dialect as a legacy of those who were here before (temporal belonging) (cf. Vallentin 2019a: 37). Risse describes this as the "conceptualisation of South Tyroleans as a 'grown' collective possessing a multitude of 'grown' dialects and thereby documenting the 'rootedness' in this area" (Risse 2010: 123, own translation).

Furthermore, the significance of the South Tyrolean dialect becomes visible in conceptualisations of the geographical scope of this dialect area. The borders of the province, particularly the northern border to Austria, mark the area which is the main reference point when talking about one's own dialect. An embedding in a broader space, for example together with the very similar dialects of North and East Tyrol (cf. Lanthaler 1997: 373f.), is generally not relevant for the participants, highlighting the impact of political borders in the conceptualisation of dialect areas (cf. Auer 2004; Schwarz/Stöckl 2017). While dialectal differences within South Tyrol are perceived, they don't outweigh the overarching sense of belonging shared by all those speakers. Other speakers of South Tyrolean dialect, even unknown people, are immediately perceived as members of the ingroup. When looking at a smaller scope within South Tyrol, participants perceive smaller dialect areas, which primarily align with valleys and cities (as shown also by Schwarz/Stöckle (2017)). The participants share the assumption that all dialect speakers, and thus members of this group, share knowledge about dialectal differences within South Tyrol as well as the ability to identify and to localise different speakers:

(3) *weil man sie iatz als Südtiroler schun sehr guat unterscheiden konn und glei mol auser heart wo jemand herkimp*

(B1, 5:16)

'because as a South Tyrolean one can differentiate them and can hear quickly where someone comes from'

This shared knowledge reinforces the sense of collective belonging.

The importance of dialect is also emphasised in contrast with Standard German, that carries associations like unnatural and inauthentic, something less familiar. While dialect dominates the daily life, the standard is manly limited to conversations with people who are in some way perceived as foreign (e. g. tourists, Italians) or who act in a specific social role (e. g. in media, as teachers). Situations that do require the use of standard are conceptualized as something temporarily limited. For instance, when talking to a tourist from Germany, the use of standard is considered necessary and polite, although as unauthentic, but it is necessary for this specific situation, while afterwards one can switch back to the normal way of speaking. This distinction between dialect and standard is also reflected in the way participants position those categories relatively towards each other: While some participants see the dialect as a variation of German, more often both are positioned opposingly. This is the case when the word *Deitsch* ('German') is mostly used to refer to Standard German rather than the entire German language, thus *Deitsch* and *Dialekt* are used as contrasts:

(4) *dass i schun nocher Deitsch red, net in Dialekt*

(P2, 27:40)

'so that I then speak German, not dialect'

This reinforces the dichotomy between dialect and the language spoken in other German-speaking areas.

When participants describe the South Tyrolean dialect, it shows that they view it as particularly strong and therefore different than those outside of this area. Part of this difference is also attributed to the influence of Italian. Despite the embedded habit of a need to keep German and Italian separate, Italian elements within the South Tyrolean dialect (e. g. *magari* ('maybe'), *targa* ('car licence plate'), *tipo* ('like')) are not only seen as normal, but are also evaluated positively, as a unique feature. While those linguistic characteristics are in sum regarded as the reason that make the dialect special, at the same time, they are assumed to render the dialect incomprehensible outside the province and to hinder communication with speakers from other German-speaking countries:

(5) *I konn nit gonz hundert Prozent Südtirolerisch mit ihmene [in Wien] reden, weils sies monchmol überhaupt nit verstian […] sondern i schwächs so bissl oi, net gonz Hoachdeitsch, sondern es isch so bissl a Mischmasch.*

(B1, 8:25)

'I can't talk to one hundred percent South Tyrolean with them [in Vienna] because they sometimes don't understand it at all […] but I soften the dialect a bit, not fully High German, but it is a bit of a mix.'

Such communicative situations, in which the dialect is considered incomprehensible, can lead to different communicative strategies, especially in the context of mobility to other German-speaking countries. Some participants resort to accommodation, for example by avoiding certain dialectal features, levelling distinctive dialectal features, mixing dialectal and standard elements or switching completely into Standard German. Such levelling or incorporation of other dialectal or even standard variants into one's own dialect does not seem to be possible for every participant. While the participant B1 in the quote above shows a rather positive attitude regarding such mixtures of varieties, others show more ambivalent or disapproving attitudes.

4.3 Knowledge about language use

Shared knowledge of a group is part of the commonalities that constitute and consolidate the group from within (cf. Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012: 30f.). This can encompass the habits within a group of using certain names and categories (see chapter 4.1.), but also knowledge about the past and the origins of a group, linked to language use. In the case of South Tyrol, this includes the particular socio-political and linguistic developments that continue to shape the reality of South Tyroleans today. Such collective memories can be narrated from a perspective of "we", in which the individual is absorbed in, even if the events occurred so long ago that the narrator did not experience them firsthand (cf. Vallentin 2019b: 115f.).

The importance of knowledge is also evident in interactions with people who don't have knowledge about the history of this province and the resulting linguistic characteristics. In interactions in South Tyrol, people without this knowledge are immediately marked as outsiders, and when being abroad, it can highlight the otherness of one's own belonging. Such interactions then always require a decision about what and how much to explain to them, in alignment with the context of the specific interaction. Explaining becomes an act of sharing and of allowing the outsider insight into aspects that might be deeply relevant for the speaker's identity. In

contrast, deciding not to explain emphasises the status of the other person as not belonging or not important enough to explain.

The dilemma about deciding for or against an explanation frequently arises when participants are abroad in a situation where they must state their origin. While the self-nomination as South Tyrolean is seen as accurate, it would often – depending on the interlocutor – require a lot of explanation about what it means to be South Tyrolean, which many participants find rather tiring. Therefore, it is carefully considered whether this effort is necessary. In certain situations, some participants use alternative self-categorisations such as Italian or even Austrian, even if they might not feel right on an emotional level, because they are less marked, require less explanation and can therefore be used when it is situationally of no further importance. But such self-categorisations also depend on the context and (assumed) origin of the interlocutor, they are influenced by the decision of the speaker if aspects of similarities or differences with the hearer should be emphasised. For example, when talking to someone from Germany, referring to oneself as Italian can underline that the speaker may speak German but doesn't share the nationality and spatial belonging with the hearer; these differences are then considered more important than the shared language. Depending on the individual and the context, a variety of differences and commonalities can be emphasized or played down through the choice of a label (cf. also Riehl 2002: 121).

The implications of not sharing this knowledge are illustrated in the following quote[11]. This participant grew up with both German and Italian and lived later on some years in Berlin as well as a few months in Rome. They compare those experiences:

(6) *Berlin oder Rom isch genau, genau die gleiche Situation für mi gwesen, lei in zwoa verschiedene Sprochen. Im Sinne von, dass niamend drun gezweifelt hot, dass i in Rom italienisch bin, Italiener bin und in Deitschlond dass i äh deitscher Muttersproche bin. Ober für mi persönlich, i hon nor nia Lust des zu erklären, des dauert mir zu long, ober für mi isch holt gonz klor, es hobs beade kuane Ohnung, weil meine Situation isch holt so speziell irgendwia und i kear weder zu enk no zu enk sozusogen, woasch, des isch nomol gonz eppes Eigenes.*

(P4, 1:17:05)

'Berlin or Rome was exactly, exactly the same situation for me, just in two languages. Nobody doubted that in Rome I was Italian and in Germany that I am, äh, a German native speaker. But for me personally, I never want to explain it, it takes too long, but for me it's clear, you both have no clue, because my situation is just so special somehow and I don't belong neither to you nor to you, so to speak, you know, it is something quite unique.'

Despite being perceived by other people in Rome as well as in Berlin as belonging, for this participant this emphasised the differences to others and the feeling of foreignness and un-belonging to those spaces. As a result, it highlights the particularity of growing up in the South Tyrolean entanglement with different languages – visible also in the use and avoidance of certain linguistic categories (see chapter 4.1) –, a uniqueness that not necessarily is regarded positively. This participant deliberately decides against explanations because *des dauert mir zu*

[11] Part of this was discussed above in chapter 4.1., the full quote here shows how different aspects are closely interwoven.

long ('it takes too long'), but perhaps also because this feeling of otherness in this space is something that can't easily be put into words.

4.4 Participation through language use

The participants show a clear understanding of when to use dialect and when not to, depending on the formality of the situation or the origin of the interlocutor. However, only a few of the participants are aware of the potential impact of their dialect use on the social participation of other people. This can be relevant when speakers of Standard German become part of the social network of dialect speakers. For example, some of the participants have friends or coworkers who moved from Germany or Austria to South Tyrol, here dialect is regarded as important for their social integration. However, it is not considered necessary for these new residents to learn to speak the dialect themselves. In fact, opinions vary among the participants about whether it is possible to become a "new speaker". Some consider learning the dialect as difficult and maybe attainable with enough effort, while others only deem it achievable for children who move here with their parents, whereas for adults it would always be audible that they originally come from somewhere else, emphasising the conceptualisation of dialect as an ability closely linked with origin and autochthony.[12] Besides an active competence in dialect, the receptive ability is considered far more important for social participation, as it enables to understand and to participate in social spaces. For this reason, most participants consider exposure to the dialect to be important, most of them claim that they would try to speak dialect with new speakers to help them get used to it.

Some participants reflect on the necessity of speaking Standard German to include standard speakers into a social interaction; however, this can be challenging and is highly depended on the context. The following example illustrates overlapping attitudes and practices. This participant recalls how they brought their partner, who speaks German as L2, from Germany to South Tyrol to introduce them to their South Tyrolean friends. To include the partner in conversation, the friends would have had to speak standard, but didn't do so:

(7) *In meine Kollegen isches brutal unangenehm gwesen, mit ihr Uanzelgespräche zu führen, weil sie zem hattn Hoachdeitsch reden miasen, und in dr Gruppe isch souwieso nit gwechselt worden*. […] *sie* [isch] *eher ignoriert gworden* […], *damit man nit in a komische Situation kemmen muas.* (P4, 1:09:00)

'My friends were extremely uncomfortable to speak alone with her because they would have had to speak High German, and in the group there was no switch anyway. […] she [was] largely ignored […], so that they wouldn't have to come in a weird situation.'

The unease of speaking standard in this constellation can be influenced from different factors, like the perception of standard as distant and not appropriate for informal communication with friends. Another reason can be a sense of embarrassment and inhibition when speaking standard among South Tyroleans, or as Lanthaler describes it, the "typical socio-psychological inhibitions on the part of dialect speakers when they have to use Standard German in the presence of

[12] Opinions on whether or not "new speakers" can or should learn the dialect are closely interwoven with language attitudes and ideologies of the respective (national or regional) context, as is also shown by Auer/Røyneland (2020).

other dialect speakers" (2007: 234; cf. also Lanthaler 1990: 73–75; Riehl 2007: 109). In this example, this led to such a great discomfort that it exceeded the need of social integration of the partner. By refusing the standard, the friends were able to continue speaking like always, but at the same time drew a clear line between those who were and were not included in the social interaction.

The interview participants only rarely applied this awareness of language varieties as a factor for social participation to Italian-speaking South Tyroleans. For those interactions, participants reported to mostly switch to Italian (cf. Glück/Leonardi/Riehl 2019: 246f.; Ciccolone 2016: 30f.), seldomly to Standard German.[13] The participants assume it as general knowledge that Italian-speaking South Tyroleans have difficulties with both dialect and Standard German, so the switch to Italian is seen as a social norm. An insisting on dialect would be considered rude or disrespectful, whereas the switch to Italian is the polite option for a communication without misunderstandings, even if those participants themselves admitted to having only mediocre Italian competence or feeling uncomfortable in Italian. Most participants were unaware that their linguistic choices are part of a mechanism preventing Italian-speaking South Tyroleans from learning and practicing dialect, thus reinforcing group boundaries and denying Italian-speaking South Tyroleans access to a way of speaking that determines a big part of everyday life.

A more nuanced perspective comes from participants who grew up with more languages than just German or who have a more linguistically diverse friend group. This can be seen in the following quote from a participant with a lot of Italian-speaking friends:

(8) *Es isch ziemlich schwierig, in Südtirol integriert zu werden, wenn man nit Deitsch als Muttersproche hot, weil viele Italiener erzählen mir holt, meine Freunde, sie lernen in dr Schual Hoachdeitsch ober kennens nia praktizieren, weil mir olle lei Dialekt reden. Und deswegen isches für sie volle schwierig, sich zu integrieren oder Dialekt zu verstian.*

(B3, 47:00)

'It is really difficult to be integrated in South Tyrol if you don't speak German as a native language, because a lot of Italians tell me, my friends, they learn High German in school but never can practice it, because we only speak dialect. That's why it is difficult for them to integrate themselves or to understand dialect.'

They are more frequently confronted with such experiences and the social consequences it can have when someone is not able to learn dialect, not only in the private, but also in the professional life in South Tyrol.

4.5 Awareness for the role of language for belonging

Belonging is a tacit feeling "that is taken for granted […] when things go without saying" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020: 125), but people can be confronted with their own ties of belonging (cf. ibid.:

[13] The fact that Standard German is not chosen more often when speaking with Italian-speaking South Tyroleans can be influenced by a lack of standard proficiency among them, but other factors could be at play too, such as the before mentioned inhibition of German-speaking South Tyroleans when speaking standard. Maybe the association of standard with foreign people (such as tourists) could be relevant too, so the avoidance of using standard with Italian-speaking South Tyroleans also could mean that, while they are not considered as part of the (dialect-speaking) ingroup (see chapter 4.1), they are at least regarded "less foreign" that people from other countries.

121). This can happen through mobility and contact with people from other communities or other cultural contexts, for example when moving abroad, which can lead to opportunities for reflection and negotiation of meaning. For many of the interview participants movement into other (German-speaking) countries sharpened their awareness for the relevance of language for their individual self and led to a re-negotiation of the meaning of South Tyrolean specific aspects of their linguistics belongings.

For some participants this concerns the dialect, as can be seen in the next quote from P3, who moved to Vienna to attend university.

(9) *In so Gruppensituationen, wou i donn sou bin, zum Beispiel, (…) wenn i noch der Uni a Freindin getroffen hon, de wos von Südtirol isch, ober a Kolleg von mir wor dabei, der Österreicher isch, (…), weil irgendwia, wenn i donn Dialekt red, wirkts so, als tat i ihn so ausschliaßen wellen aus der Konversation. Oder eben, so hoachdeitsch reden, ober hell isch eigentlich a ned natürlich für mi, wenn i do mit der Freindin red. Und sem isch holt vielleicht eher so, dass i mir überleg: „Okay, wia soll i iatz reden?“*

(P6, 25:20)

‘In group situations, when I’m like, for example, (…) when after university I met a friend, who is from South Tyrol, but a colleague of mine was there as well, who’s Austrian (…), because somehow, if I speak dialect, it seems like I want to exclude him from the conversation. Or, well, speaking Standard German, but that doesn’t really feel natural to me either when I’m talking to my friend. So, it’s maybe like I’m thinking, “okay, how should I speak now?”’

This quote illustrates how, in the context of living in Austria, a change in communicative partners can lead to a heightened awareness of one’s own linguistic practices. The participant describes a situation in which different practices of variety use, associated with distinct attitudes, come into conflict. In this conversation between friends, the presence of another South Tyrolean friend would normally trigger the use of dialect. However, an Austrian interlocutor was also present, and speaking with “others” (e. g. non-South Tyroleans) is for this participant, like many others, linked to a switch to the standard language, because dialect is assumed to be unintelligible and the use is assumed to exclude the Austrian friend from the conversation. This situation thus brings together competing practices, expectations, and language attitudes, suddenly highlighting the potentially excluding effect of dialect. It prompts a reflection on their own linguistic repertoire and self-image, and leads to the explicit question of how to speak and considerations on how the expression of oneself, in alignment with one’s identity and social group, can be combined with the accommodation of new interlocutors. Moments like these are particularly significant for reflections on regional varieties beyond dialect and an exploration of the linguistic space between dialect and standard, which many participants hadn’t perceived as relevant before going to other German-speaking countries. Exposure to other communicative contexts and speakers of other dialects can shift those priorities and lead to negotiation of one’s own linguistic repertoire.

Of course, not only dialect but also other languages can become the focus of attention. In the example presented in chapter 4.3, the participant P4 living in Berlin and Rome showed that, despite the acceptance of others, feelings of otherness can prevail. For P4, limitations surfaced and the particularity of the meaning of being South Tyrolean became central, narrowing down their perspective on notions of belonging. However, going abroad can also lead to other

experiences and evaluations. The participant P2 visited a South Tyrolean friend in Spain, where they both noticed the relief it brought being able to speak together *wia drhuam* (P2, 13:10) ('like at home'). This made them realise the emotional impact of speaking dialect, and it deepened the appreciation of the feeling of not being alone they gained through this. For P2, another experience – when living for some months in Tanzania – broadened their understanding of what aspects contribute to their sense of belonging:

(10) *Olle hom mit mir Englisch geredt außer uane, [de] wor Italienerin und i bin uanfoch jeden Tog zu ihr hin, weil i hon volle Huamweah kop und i hon hem erst gemerkt, dass i mi einglich schun viel mehr mitn Italienisch a identifizier als wia ins a ollm oft in die Täler so gsogt wert.*
(P2, 1:07:04).
'Everybody spoke English with me except one, [she] was Italian, and I just went to her every day because I was really homesick and there I realised that I identify more with Italian than what is said about us in the valleys.'

Here, one aspect of language use that previously seemed less important gained new value for this person, their sense of belonging and finding connections in a foreign country. Additionally, in the last part of the sentence, this participant (who comes from a valley) draws on the common stereotype that people from valleys dislike Italian more than South Tyroleans from bigger towns, and they reject this position ascribed to them by others. Based on their own experiences narrated in this section, they reflect that, regardless of 'what is said about us in the valleys', in their time far away from home they realised the importance of the Italian language for their personal self.

5 Conclusion

This paper examined the role of language in constructing identity and processes of belonging in the multilingual context of South Tyrol, with a particular focus on the perspective on young dialect speakers and their experiences with languages and varieties, particularly in the context of mobility and language contact.

The sociolinguistic context of South Tyrol, shaped by historical events, language policy regulations and regional variation, reinforces the concept of separate language groups and influences how people perceive languages and categorise themselves (cf. Naglo 2007; Risse 2010; Colombo/Ritter/Stopfner 2020). Furthermore, the dialect functions as a core marker of regional identity, distinguishing South Tyroleans not only from other Italians but also from other German-speaking countries (cf. Riehl 2002). In this context, this paper applied the concept of belonging (cf. Pfaff-Czarnecka 2020; Vallentin 2019a) to gain insight into social processes, offering a nuanced perspective on different dimensions of belonging (social, spatial, temporal belonging) and highlighting the role of shared practices that enable group members to create togetherness with each other. This allows for a nuanced perspective on the negotiation of meaning and the enactment of belonging by individual people embedded in broader social structures, but also shaped by their own, often mobile life trajectories.

The data analysed in this paper – 18 interviews with young mobile speakers of South Tyrolean dialect – shows notions of distinctive language identities and language as a marker of group boundaries, leading to seemingly clear distinctions between in-group and out-group members, and structuring of social spaces through language use. In this field of linguistic and social

tension, individuals act and position themselves through linguistic practices. This can encompass various linguistic aspects, for example the use of varieties, the use of certain words and categories, or the role of shared knowledge regarding language. Moreover, linguistic practices play a crucial role in determining who can participate in an interaction and who cannot, as, for example, the use or the refusal of a language or a variety can establish clear boundaries. Considering not only the different languages and the regional variation, but especially the interconnectedness of those aspects, the analysis shows how young dialect speakers are embedded and socialised in the shared broader background of the language minority group and how they reproduce shared narratives, beliefs about monolingual identities and linguistic practices.

However, speakers are also negotiating their own individual positions within this language constellation. The analysis showed how, in particular, mobility and contact with other varieties and languages can increase the awareness of the role of language for individual belonging. This can lead to reflection about linguistic affiliations, can highlight social boundaries or reinforce linguistic particularities, it can also open space for shifts the emergence of new attachments, broadening the sense of belonging through language. This paper shows the importance of considering the mobility of people and the role of language and variety contact especially in research on language minority groups. This not only allows insights into how speakers relate to the shared historical and linguistic background, but also how they individually bring those aspects with them and how they actively negotiate the meaning of language for their feelings of belonging in new and shifting contexts.

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