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ABSTRACT

One of the global issues the world is facing today is forced migration. Millions of people are on the move due to war, persecution, and humanitarian crises. In contrast to voluntary migrants, these people face more challenges in the adaptation process in the host country due to a lack of preparation. For some of them, entrepreneurship becomes a pathway for economic participation and social integration. However, the role of language in shaping entrepreneurial activities among forced migrants remains underexplored. This work examines how forced migrants in Austria perceive the role of language in their entrepreneurial activities with special attention on the ones displaced due to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Implementing Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) as a theoretical lens, this thesis studies the role of language as a marker of identity, and its connection to inclusion, and exclusion within an entrepreneurial context. A social constructivist approach, adopted in the work as a philosophical positioning, as well as qualitative research design with the use of semi-structured interviews with forced migrant entrepreneurs, allow to capture their subjective experiences. The findings illustrate that language is hardly just a communicative tool but a strategic asset in business development, impacting market positioning, networking, and overall interaction with the environment. Furthermore, while the previous research often adopts a discourse of “language barrier”, the findings demonstrate that forced migrant entrepreneurs actively claim their agency in the decision-making and navigate linguistic diversity for their business success. Moreover, the thesis also emphasises the tensions surrounding Russian and Ukrainian linguistic identities, taking into account context-specific emotional and socio-political aspects of language use. The work extends SIT beyond the corporate environment to forced migrant entrepreneurship, thus contributing to research in International Business (IB), migration studies, and entrepreneurship. Moreover, it provides some managerial implications for policymakers and forced migrant entrepreneurs.

KURZFASSUNG

Eine der globalen Herausforderungen, mit denen die Welt heute konfrontiert ist, ist die erzwungene Migration. Millionen von Menschen sind aufgrund von Krieg, Verfolgung und humanitären Krisen auf der Flucht. Im Gegensatz zu freiwilligen Migranten stehen diese Menschen aufgrund fehlender Vorbereitung vor größeren Herausforderungen während des Anpassungsprozesses im Aufnahmeland. Für einige von ihnen wird das Unternehmertum zu einem Weg der wirtschaftlichen Teilhabe und sozialen Integration. In diesem Zusammenhang ist die Rolle der Sprache bei der Gestaltung unternehmerischer Aktivitäten unter erzwungenen Migranten bisher wenig erforscht worden. Diese Arbeit untersucht, wie erzwungene Migranten in Österreich die Rolle der Sprache in ihren unternehmerischen Aktivitäten wahrnehmen, mit besonderem Fokus auf diejenigen, die aufgrund des russisch-ukrainischen Krieges vertrieben wurden. Unter Anwendung der Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) als theoretische Linse analysiert diese Arbeit die Rolle der Sprache als Identitätsmarker und ihre Verbindung zu Inklusion und Exklusion im unternehmerischen Kontext. Ein sozialkonstruktivistischer Ansatz, der in dieser Arbeit als philosophische Positionierung übernommen wurde, sowie ein qualitatives Forschungsdesign mit halbstrukturierten Interviews mit erzwungenen Migranten ermöglichen es, deren subjektive Erfahrungen zu erfassen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Sprache keineswegs nur ein Kommunikationsmittel ist, sondern ein strategisches Instrument in der Geschäftsentwicklung darstellt, das Marktpositionierung, Netzwerke und die gesamte Interaktion mit der Umwelt beeinflusst. Während die bisherige Forschung oft das Narrativ der „Sprachbarriere“ verfolgt, zeigen die Ergebnisse, dass erzwungene Migranten aktiv ihre Handlungsmacht in Entscheidungsprozessen beanspruchen und sprachliche Vielfalt gezielt für ihren Geschäftserfolg nutzen. Darüber hinaus betont die Arbeit die Spannungen im Zusammenhang mit russischen und ukrainischen sprachlichen Identitäten, wobei emotionale und sozio-politische Aspekte der Sprachverwendung in diesem spezifischen Kontext berücksichtigt werden. Die Arbeit erweitert SIT über den Unternehmenskontext hinaus auf das Unternehmertum erzwungener Migranten und leistet somit einen Beitrag zur Forschung in den Bereichen International Business (IB), Migrationsstudien und Unternehmertum. Zudem bietet sie praktische Implikationen für politische Entscheidungsträger sowie für erzwungene Migranten.

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I. INTRODUCTION

I.1. Motivation of the study

The topic of migration has gained some increased attention in recent years. According to the report of the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2022), the number of international migrants in the world in 2020 was equal to 281 million, which, although equals to only 3.6% of the global population, still impresses, as the number went from 154 million in 1990 (IOM, 2021). The reasons for the growth seem evident – globalization and interconnection made it easier to cross borders. Not all of them were willing to move though. Unlike voluntary migrants, who relocate for work, study, or lifestyle choices, forced migrants flee their home countries due to conflict, persecution, or humanitarian crises (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008). The urgent and unplanned nature of their displacement profoundly affects their ability to navigate labour markets and integrate into host societies.

Entrepreneurship has been recognized as a pathway for economic participation, particularly for migrants who may face barriers in traditional employment markets (Rath, Schutjens, & Triandafyllidou, 2016; Williams & Krasniqi, 2018). While research on migrant entrepreneurship is well established (Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021), forced migrant entrepreneurship remains an underexplored field (Bizri, 2017). As forced migrants often lack pre-migration planning, financial resources, or established networks, their entrepreneurial experiences differ significantly from those of voluntary migrants (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006).

The role of language in this process is particularly significant. Language proficiency may impact the challenges the forced migrant entrepreneurs face in regard to market opportunities, access to entrepreneurship, human capital, social networks, and the social and institutional environment (Rashid, 2018). However, language is more than a functional tool; it is also a social construct that shapes identity, belonging, and in-group/out-group distinctions (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Giles & Johnson, 1981). While research on language in International Business (IB) has primarily focused on multinational corporations (MNCs)—examining language barriers, knowledge transfer, corporate communication, etc. (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014; Tenzer, Terjesen, & Harzing, 2017)—its role in entrepreneurship, particularly among forced migrants, remains insufficiently studied.

In this thesis, I aim to take a look on how forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language in their entrepreneurial activity – its role in motivations to choose a self-employment path, the impact on day-to-day operations, networking, etc. I concentrate on those displaced due to the Russian-Ukrainian war, as following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, more than 6 million refugees were recorded across Europe (UNHCR, n.d. – b). According to WHO

(2023), this situation can be seen as the largest movement of people in the European region since World War II. In comparison to Germany or Poland, there is a relatively small number of forced migrants, who chose to reside here after leaving their homeland, but considering Austria's size this proportion is significant. That raises the question about their economic and social participation and integration.

1.2. Research gap

Although previous studies highlight the significance of language in business (ex. Brannen et al., 2014; Piekkari & Tietze, 2011), most research focuses on corporate environments and multinational firms (Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen, & Piekkari, 2006; Tenzer et al., 2017). Moreover, the application of Social Identity Theory (SIT) in regards to language was mostly performed in organizational settings to examine, for example, language-based group formation, exclusion, and power dynamics (ex. van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010; Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016). However, there has been limited research on how forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language for their business.

The first gap in the literature concerns the limited focus on forced migrant entrepreneurs. While migrant entrepreneurship is a quite researched topic, much of the existing studies are devoted to voluntary migrants, whose experiences differ significantly from those who are forced to relocate due to conflict or persecution (Bizri, 2017; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008). Research on forced migrants in international business (IB) remains scarce, although their presence in European economies grows and the number of displaced individuals engaging in self-employment as a means of economic survival increases.

Another significant gap is the corporate-centric approach to language research in IB. Language in IB has primarily been examined in the context of multinational corporations (MNCs), where studies explore language barriers, knowledge transfer, and corporate communication strategies (ex. Brannen et al., 2014; Tenzer et al., 2017). While these studies provide valuable insights into how language operates within large firms, these experiences may vary significantly from ones made by entrepreneurs, due to other environmental structures they operate in. As a result, the way in which forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive and engage with language as part of their business strategies remains underexplored.

By addressing these gaps, this study aims to contribute to the fields of forced migrant entrepreneurship and IB language research, by shifting the focus from structural constraints to subjective experiences regarding the language impact in business contexts.

I. 3. Research question

To bridge the identified gaps, this thesis concentrates on the following research question

How do forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language in entrepreneurial activity?

For this purpose, the theoretical lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT) introduced by Tajfel and Turner (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) is adopted. SIT provides a framework for understanding how language functions as a marker of group identity, shaping inclusion, exclusion, and economic interactions. While rather adapted in IB also for studying the role of language, it was primarily used in the context of organizational studies (Tenzer et al., 2017). This question moves beyond traditional discussions of language as a constraint and focuses on the subjective experiences of forced migrant entrepreneurs.

To study the language, which is a complex phenomenon, and to have a better sensitivity to the contextual findings I decided to position my research within a social constructivist paradigm, focusing on subjective experiences. The qualitative research in general and the semi-structured interviews as a method chosen for this work allow us to hear the voice of the participant, thus capturing subjective experiences and stories. The subjective perspectives of forced migrant entrepreneurs provide rich insights into how language affects their business strategies, professional networks, and sense of belonging in Austria.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to answer the proposed research question, "How do forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language in entrepreneurial activity?" it is crucial to understand the concepts and context this question emphasises. Therefore, this section proceeds: first, I will address the role of language in International Business (IB) and give an overview from which perspectives it is analysed. Then, I will introduce my theoretical lens, namely, the social identity theory (SIT) by Tajfel and Turner (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which observes intergroup behaviour and reflects on the sense of an individual's belonging and self-esteem. In the section dedicated to SIT, I will also talk about language's role in forming social identity and mention how IB scholars use SIT to study language. The following important section will emphasise the phenomenon of forced migrant entrepreneurship – the topic will be discussed in detail, starting with the overview of migration, followed by a summary of migrant entrepreneurship, and then I will narrow down to forced migration and entrepreneurial activity among this specific group. In the synthesis section, I aim to combine all the concepts to give a clear picture of how they are intervened.

II.1. LANGUAGE IN IB

The scholars in international business (IB) research highlight the role of language in the field as a "multifaceted" one, emphasising that language serves as a fundamental cornerstone in the realm of IB (Brannen et al., 2014). As the firms operate internationally, it is increasingly evident that different language forms—national, corporate, technical, or electronic—play a pivotal role in shaping hierarchical structures, exerting power, and fostering integration (Brannen et al., 2014). Moreover, their characteristics, such as the incorporation of mixed syntax or the indication of gender, are becoming crucial elements for understanding and navigating the complexities of global business (Brannen et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, what is "language"? According to Piekkari and Tietze (2011), it is hard to give a definition of language, as there are many different perspectives from which it is studied. However, they choose to define languages as "...systems of meanings which are central to the process of constructing organisational, social and global realities" (Tietze, Cohen, & Musson, 2003, as cited in Piekkari & Tietze, 2011, p. 267). Rather than just transmitting meaning, the language itself produces it as well (Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki, & Welch, 2014). Thus, language and communication are essential parts of a human being, as how people talk and express themselves are closely interconnected to their identity and self-image (Tietze, Cohen, & Musson, 2003). Moreover, some claim that language may play an even more essential role in defining an individual's identity compared to such evident characteristics as race or age (Giles & Johnson, 1981).

Overall, although approached from various perspectives (Brannen et al., 2014), the language in IB is primarily analysed from three main points of view: English as a lingua franca for a multinational corporation (MNC) (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014), national and corporate languages in MNCs (Fredriksson et al., 2006). Some other areas of the research concern, for example, multilingual teams (Tenzer & Pudelko, 2017; Tenzer, Pudelko, & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2021), knowledge transfer (Peltokorpi, 2015; Schomaker & Zaheer, 2014), alliance formation (Cuypers, Ertrug, & Hennart, 2015; Joshi & Lahiri, 2014), translation processes (Chidlow et al., 2014; Logemann & Piekkari, 2015; Piekkari, Welch, Welch, Peltonen, & Vesa, 2013), carrier success in general (Peltokorpi, 2023) or immigrants' in particular (Fitzsimmons, Baggs, & Brannen, 2020), diversity (Summerville, Chen, Shoham, & Taras, 2024), inequality (Piekkari, Tietze, Angouri, Meyer, & Vaara, 2021) or advertising (Hornikx, van Meurs, & Tenzer, 2024).

Table 1. Chosen research areas in IB

Topic	Authors	Year	Title	Journal
Multilingual teams	Tenzer, Pudelko, and Zellmer-Bruhn	2021	The impact of language barriers on knowledge processing in multinational teams	Journal of World Business
	Tenzer and Pudelko	2017	The influence of language differences on power dynamics in multinational teams	Journal of World Business
Knowledge transfer	Peltokorpi	2015	Corporate Language Proficiency and Reverse Knowledge Transfer in Multinational Corporations: Interactive Effects of Communication Media Richness and Commitment to Headquarters	Journal of International Management
	Schomaker and Zaheer	2014	The Role of Language in Knowledge Transfer to Geographically Dispersed Manufacturing Operations	Journal of International Management
Alliance formation	Cuypers, Ertug, and Hennart	2015	The effects of linguistic distance and lingua franca proficiency on the stake taken by acquirers in cross-border acquisitions	Journal of International Business Studies
	Joshi and Lahiri	2015	Language friction and partner selection in cross-border R&D alliance formation	Journal of International Business Studies

Topic	Authors	Year	Title	Journal
Translation	Chidlow, Plakoyiannaki, and Welch	2014	Translation in cross-language international business research: Beyond equivalence	Journal of International Business Studies
	Logemann and Piekkari	2015	Localize or local lies? The power of language and translation in the multinational corporation	Critical perspectives on international business
	Piekkari, Welch, Welch, Peltonen, and Vesa	2013	Translation Behaviour: An Exploratory Study Within a Service Multinational	International Business Review
Carrier success	Peltokorpi	2023	The “language” of career success: The effects of English language competence on local employees’ career outcomes in foreign subsidiaries	Journal of International Business Studies
Immigrants’ work outcome	Fitzsimmons, Baggs, and Brannen	2020	Intersectional arithmetic: How gender, race and mother tongue combine to impact immigrants’ work outcomes	Journal of World Business
Diversity	Summerville, Chen, Shoham, and Taras	2024	Speaking of diversity: Can linguistic structural differences explain cultural values toward equity, diversity, and inclusion across the globe?	Journal of World Business
Linguistic inequality	Piekkari, Tietze, Angouri, Meyer, and Vaara	2021	Can you Speak Covid-19? Languages and Social Inequality in Management Studies	Journal of Management Studies
Advertising	Hornikx, J., van Meurs, F., and Tenzer, H.	2024	Foreign languages in advertising: Theoretical implications for language-related IB research	Journal of International Business Studies

Source: made by author

As team formation is a relevant approach in work organisation in MNCs today, research on multinational teams regarding language emerges. Thus, Tenzer and Pudenko (2017) study the influence of language on power dynamics in such teams, highlighting the importance of relative proficiency in the context, while the study of Tenzer et al. (2021) addresses the multinational teams and language from a different angle, pointing out the impact of hidden language barriers – such as "pragmatic and prosodic transfer between mother tongues and working language" – on the knowledge transfer.

Knowledge transfer is often studied in terms of language. Peltokorpi (2015) focuses on the reverse knowledge transfer from the subsidiaries to the headquarters, highlighting that not just proficiency in corporate language alone but also this proficiency combined with the richness of communication media eases the reverse knowledge transfer. Schomaker and Zaheer (2014) adopt a different perspective, observing the knowledge transfer from the perspective of linguistic relatedness, and thus find that lower linguistic relatedness increases knowledge transfer effort but enhances

comprehension in different language contexts, as units anticipate challenges, fostering vigilance and potentially pre-emptive actions for improved understanding.

On the inter-firm level of analysis, Cuypers, Ertrug and Hennart (2015) observe the lower equity stakes taken in the foreign targets when the linguistic distance and differences in lingua franca proficiency are high concerning acquirers and targets, thus emphasising the language distance still matters in the time of active use of English as lingua franca. This is supported by Joshi and Lahiri's (2014) research, which highlights that language friction, as a form of cultural friction, influences collaboration in alliance formation, prompting partners to rethink solutions and enhance collaboration, but excessive friction may impede it.

The language is relevant not only for firms or other actors involved in international business. Scholars researching this topic also encounter language issues in the phenomenon they analyse and in the research process. Many IB studies are cross-language, and translation requires additional attention as it may obtain knowledge from the translation process itself, which should not be viewed as a technical procedure but as a process of intercultural interaction (Chidlow et al., 2014). As the studies demonstrate, translation is relevant for businesses, and language and translation serve as tools for executing power (Logemann & Piekkari, 2015). Another perspective on organisational translation behaviour shows that the ability to handle the translation timely and effectively is an advantage. Thus, different approaches might be utilised, starting with self-translation and finishing with utilising social ties and contacting even relatives. This demonstrates translation's vital role in the company's performance (Piekkari et al., 2013).

Furthermore, there is literature focusing on studying the influence of English proficiency among employees in foreign subsidiaries on their career success (Peltokorpi, 2023). The findings demonstrate that job promotions, wage increases, and career satisfaction are directly linked to English language competencies (Peltokorpi, 2023). The study, concentrating on the immigrants also demonstrated the impact of language among other factors on their workplace outcome, illustrating that working in not a mother tongue has a negative influence on the pay and the acquisition of supervisory jobs (Fitzsimmons et al., 2020). Another topic which gains attention concerns diversity and inequality and has implications for diversity management in organisations, as it studies the link between linguistic grammar structures and cultural values toward diversity, such as collectivism, power distance and masculinity, and concludes that language shapes the beliefs towards diversity (Summerville et al., 2024). One of the examples the authors provide is that languages requiring politeness expressions based on status are connected to social dominance orientations and, thus, to inequality patterns and hierarchical structures (Summerville et al., 2024).

The influence of Covid-19 pandemic can be also noticed in the research in the IB field with emphasis on language. As such in their essay Piekkari et al. (2021) highlight, that the study of languages in management becomes even more relevant because of this crisis, as the language barriers substantially limit access to “knowledge, safety, justice, and voice” (Piekkari et al., 2021, p. 590). Thus, as a future research agenda the authors emphasise the following essential areas: the role of non-global languages and associated with their use social and power dynamics, focus on translation, equal access to technology, which enables communication, and the way of knowledge production in multilingual settings.

And although the topic of language in IB is studied from multiple perspectives, there are calls to further integrate theoretical lenses, which gained more attention in other research fields. As such Hornikx et al. (2024) argue, that the IB scholars could enrich the field integrating linguistic theories. This approach is already successfully implemented by the scholars in regards to the foreign languages in advertising, which shows its relevance for the business setting. Thus, for example, by utilising the cluster of theories, which the authors address as “language as symbol”, the scholars in IB can gain new insights on foreignness in IB or on emerging markets (Hornikx et al., 2024).

The language in IB is studied chiefly in connection to a multinational corporation. Moreover, even in this context, questions arise, as while being a pretty complicated construct, the concept of language is silent in much international management research (Karhunen, Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen, & Piekkari, 2018). The authors analyse the articles on language in multinationals, identify three categories that embrace the different understandings of language, and scrutinise them under different linguistic lenses (Karhunen et al., 2018).

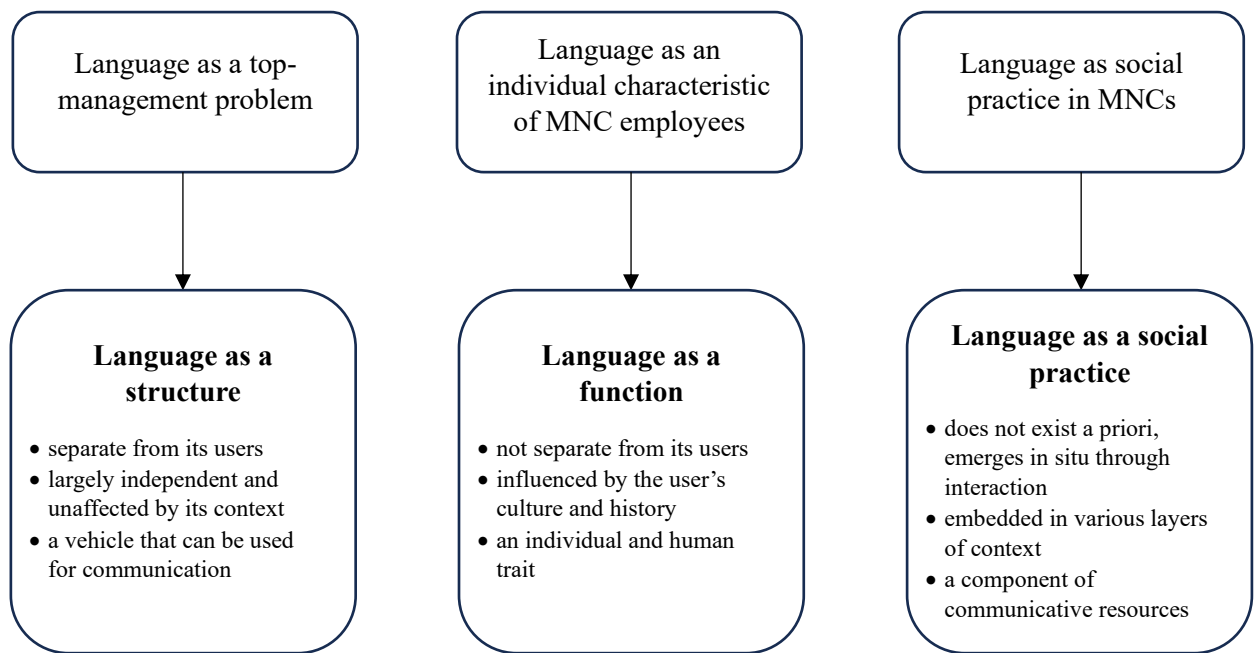


Fig. 1. Three language categories in IB and their underlying assumptions

(Source: author, based on Karhunen et al., 2018)

Being less presented in the research, the social practice view will be considered the most promising one by the authors (Karhunen et al., 2018). As an example, this approach is adopted by Janssens and Steyaert (2014). As they highlight, much research on language in IB primarily focuses on the benefits of adopting a common language or lingua franca, which transcends the linguistic barriers in an MNC. At the same time, a growing body of research scrutinises the imperialistic and hegemonic consequences of employing such a lingua franca, often English, and its impact on local actors in subsidiary offices (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014). Thus, the authors draw attention to human-centered multilingualism, the approach which sees language as a social activity and considers the practice of mixed language use as a beneficial one.

As noted, there are different levels on which language can be studied. Tenzer et al. (2017) highlight four dimensions—individual, group, firm, and country level—as well as their intersection, as summarised in Fig. 2. The master thesis considers the influence of language in the context of forced migrants' entrepreneurship and thus will also contribute to the literature on the individual level of analysis.

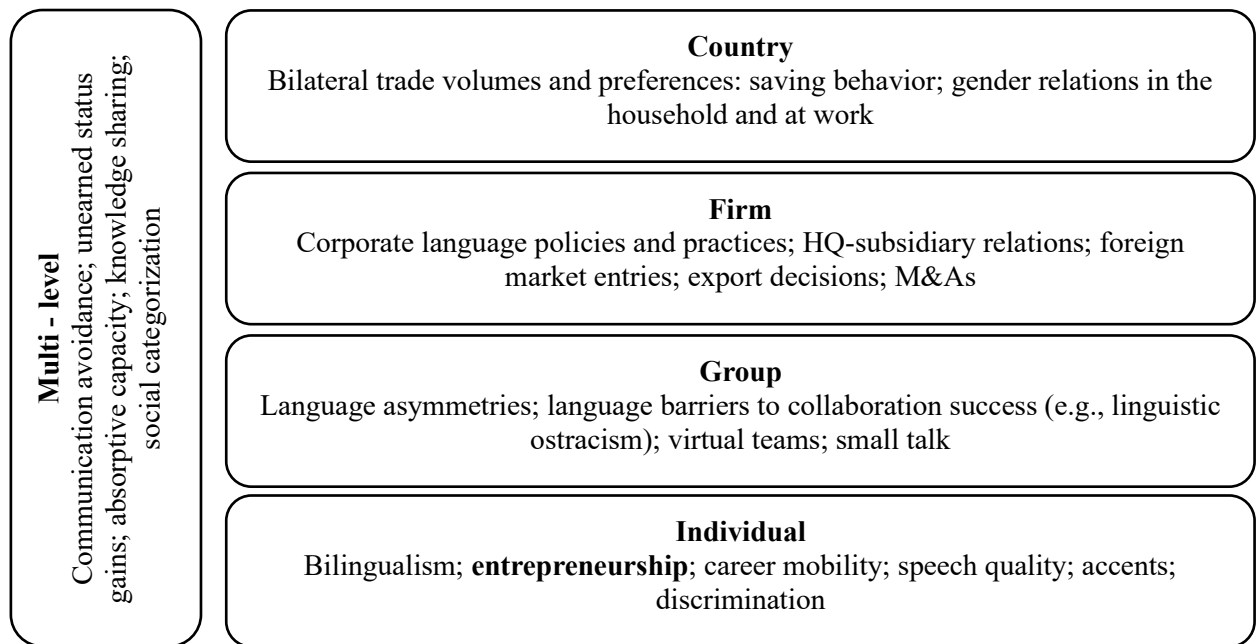


Fig. 2. Examples of Language Research phenomena in IB on different levels of analysis

(Source: author, based on Tenzer et al., 2017, p.827)

Thus, being a complex construct, the IB's linguistic element must be considered from different perspectives, including integrating various academic areas, to better understand the phenomenon (Tenzer et al., 2017). Thus, to adopt the view of language as a social practice and observe its impact on the individual level, I will adapt the social identity theory as a theoretical lens for the study, to which the next section is dedicated.

II.2. THE THEORETICAL LENS: SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

II.2.1. The Social Identity Theory in general

Given that the phenomenon I am studying is language, I need a theory that allows me to understand it. Considering that language is essential for a human being, I will proceed with the social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

First, SIT is a general theory of intergroup behaviour (Brown, 2020). The SIT also regards “...the psychological process of identification and its motivational basis” (Deaux & Martin, 2003, p.101). According to SIT, there are times when people see themselves as individuals, and there are times when they see themselves as group members (Brown, 2020). The theory claims that social categorization can enhance an individual’s self-esteem and maintain a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, arising from such group memberships, the concept of social identity is understood as “...that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p.63). Alternatively, later Tajfel and Turner (1986) use the term as “It [social identity] consists, ..., of those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging” (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p.16). Social identity can be positive or negative (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), depending on the results of the processes of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. All three are presented in the Figure 3 below.

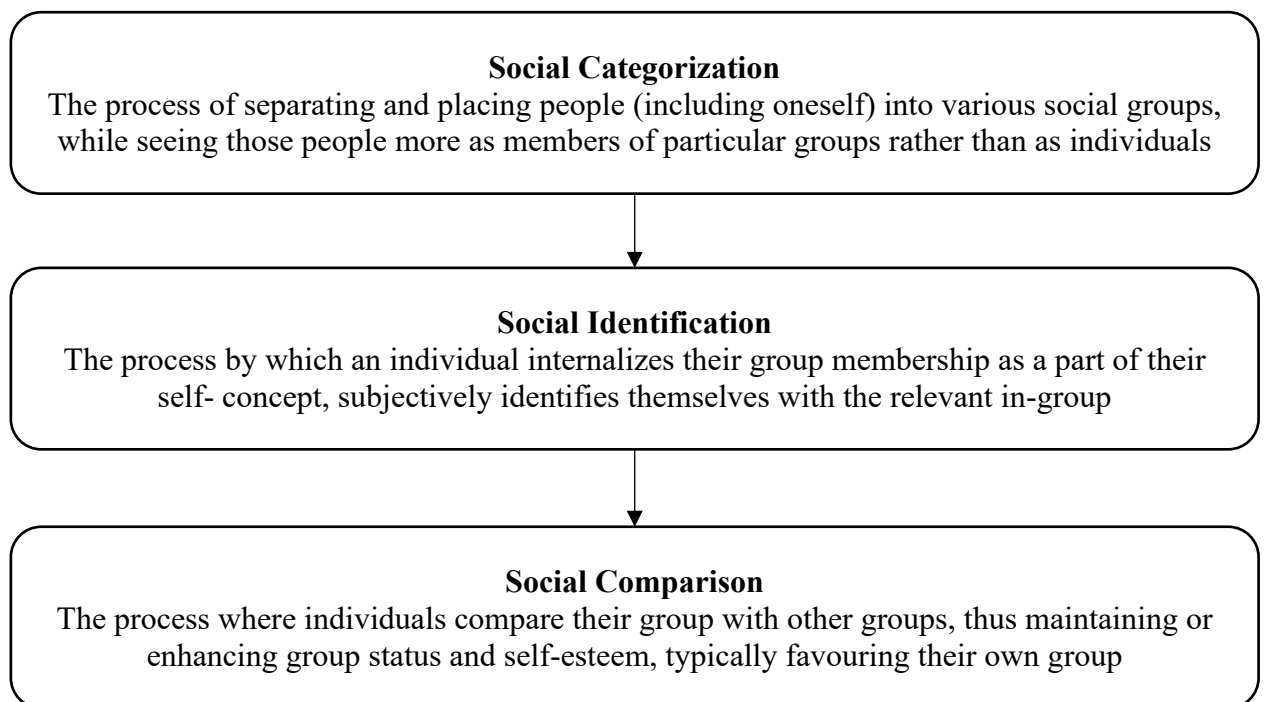


Fig. 3 Social identity development process

(Source: author, based on Tajfel & Turner, 1986, Tajfel, 1987)

Such differentiation of the social environment based on concepts such as "similar to" or "different from" leads to the establishment of in-groups and out-groups, respectively. Thus, self-esteem and self-concept are influenced by affiliations with in-group memberships. This categorisation into various groups of themselves and others also plays a role in establishing one's self-esteem (Abrams & Brown, 1989; Brown, 2000), such that group membership can serve as an essential foundation for building a positive self-identity (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2007). That means that the positive or negative social identity is formed by comparing one's own in-group with the relevant out-group, the result of which may be positive or negative for the groups in question. The negative result of comparison would harm the individual's social identity and self-esteem, which is avoided, assuming that people strive to enhance (or at least maintain) a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, to enhance one's self-esteem via social identity, the comparison between the in-group and the out-group is made while using the characteristics that benefit the in-group with which the individual associates themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Kulik & Ambrose, 1992).

All of these mentioned lead to so-called "in-group bias", which is used to describe an individual's tendency to evaluate their own in-group more positively than other out-groups (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000). Connected to that are also the shown favouritism towards one's in-group and discriminatory behaviour towards out-group members (Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016). The consequences of the differentiation result in in-group members being associated with positive beliefs and feelings (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2007), enjoying higher levels of support, interaction and trust, and thus receiving generous advantages (Lauring, 2008), while the out-groups members are denigrated and viewed as less trustworthy (Barner-Rasmussen & Björkman, 2007), cause negative emotions and attitudes, and thus are not granted valuable opportunities (Lauring, 2008), while they are also perceived as less attractive and less cooperative via negative stereotyping and receive less information (Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004, as cited in Peltokorpi & Pudelko, 2021).

As an individual seeks to maintain or enhance their self-esteem, there are several ways to cope with the negative social identity if an unsatisfactory comparison results. These strategies include individual mobility, social creativity, and social competition (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The first one is implemented on the individual level, while the other two are the group solutions. The implemented strategy depends on several variables, such as the permeability of group boundaries (is it possible for an individual to move to another group?), the stability of the social system, and the perceived legitimacy of the status differences (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Brown, 2020).

However, not all possible social groups are subject to comparison, only the relevant ones. The following aspects determine the comparability of the groups (or the relevance):

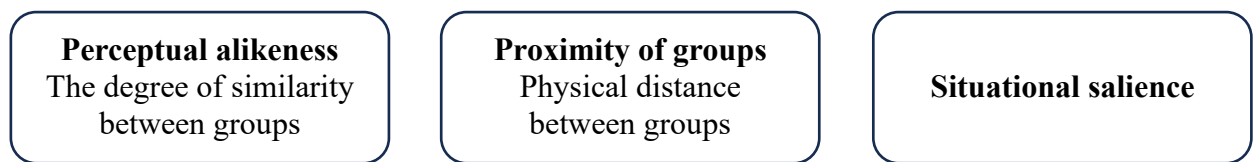


Fig. 4 The variables, determining out-group comparability

(Source: author, based on Tajfel & Turner, 1986, Jetten et al., 2004)

These aspects are not the only ones that determine the relevance of the out-group, as comparability encompasses a broader spectrum of characteristics and connections in many social situations rather than just "similarity" (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

However, language is one of the most distinctive characteristics used to categorise people into groups. It is even mentioned that categorisation based on language usually occurs quickly and instinctively, frequently operating outside of conscious recognition (Kinzler, Shutts, & Correll, 2010). There is also an argument that "social identity and ethnicity are in large part established and maintained through language" (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1983, p.7).

Thus, the absence of a common language is a predictable factor contributing to communication complexity. Nevertheless, the SIT, which addresses intergroup behaviour, adds another layer to the phenomenon. In this context, shared language can transform into a factor contributing to language diversity, delineating individuals into distinct groups and accentuating linguistic boundaries (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010).

While it may be evident that visible factors like age or underlying diversity such as beliefs can be utilised for social categorisation, specific arguments within sociolinguistics, grounded in social identity theory, emphasise that language plays an even more pivotal role in delineating an individual's identity compared to age or gender (Giles & Johnson, 1981). Moreover, some claim that language plays a substantial role in both the formation and preservation of social identity and ethnicity and while parameters such as gender or class, although often accepted as the boundaries in which social identities are built, it would not be correct to regard these as constants as they are also affected by language and constructed via communication (Gumperz, 1982).

Communication is vital for the success of society, and social identity functions as an essential factor influencing the quality of the communication process due to two significant aspects (Greenaway, Peters, Haslam, & Bingley, 2016). According to Greenaway et al. (2016), the message sent from the in-group to the out-group tends to be of poorer quality than one designated to the in-group members. At the same time, the out-group recipient of the information is often less likely to put much effort into understanding the message from outside their in-group (Greenaway et al., 2016). Language is a communication component, and its specific nuances can frequently signal a sense of familiarity and cultural identification among speakers (Chong, Guillen, & Rios, 2010),

which also influences groups' formation and social identification. Thus, it has been observed that individuals typically exert less effort in the perception of non-native speakers (Lindemann, 2002), which may result in the worse comprehension of the speech of those having a non-native accent and a negative attitude towards them (Gluszek & Dovidio, 2010).

As SIT provides an excellent foundation for understanding social behaviour in an intergroup setting, it is no wonder that many disciplines found SIT a suitable theory. According to Brown (2020) from more than 13 200 records of citations of SIT theory works – the most citing discipline was social psychology with 32%, while the second place took business and management with 27% (Brown, 2020). The topics which gained attention through the lens of SIT are loyalty and commitment, institutional socialisation, intraorganizational conflict, workgroup diversity and group performance, customer/client identification, work-family balance, mergers and acquisition, and leadership (Brown, 2020).

II.3.2. Language aspect of SIT in IB

As already mentioned, the language aspect of the social identity theory gained some attention in the field of IB. However, it is observed predominantly in organisational studies and the context of MNCs (Tenzer et al., 2017). The Table 2 presents some studies, using SIT as a theoretical lens while studying language.

Table 2. The studies, utilising SIT as a theoretical lens for observing language in IB

Authors	Year	Title	Journal
van den Born and Peltokorpi	2010	Language Policies and Communication in Multinational Companies: Alignment With Strategic Orientation and Human Resource Management Practices	The Journal of Business Communication
Lauring	2008	Rethinking Social Identity Theory in International Encounters: Language Use as a Negotiated Object for Identity Making	International Journal of Cross Cultural Management
Zhang and Peltokorpi	2016	Multifaceted effects of host country language proficiency in expatriate cross-cultural adjustments: a qualitative study in China	International Journal of Human Resource Management
Barner-Rasmussen and Bjorkman	2007	Language Fluency, Socialization and Inter-Unit Relationships in Chinese and Finnish Subsidiaries	Management and Organization Review
Chong, Guillen, and Rios	2010	Language Nuances and Socioeconomic Outcomes	The American Journal of Economics and Sociology

Authors	Year	Title	Journal
Mäkelä, Kalla, and Piekkari	2007	Interpersonal similarity as a driver of knowledge sharing within multinational corporations	International Business Review
Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen, and Piekkari	2006	The multinational corporation as a multilingual organization: The notion of a common corporate language	Corporate Communications
Bordia, and Bordia	2015	Employees' willingness to adopt a foreign functional language in multilingual organizations: The role of linguistic identity	Journal of International Business Studies
Reiche, Harzing, and Pudelko	2015	Why and how does shared language affect subsidiary knowledge inflows? A social identity perspective	Journal of International Business Studies
Peltokorpi and Pudelko	2021	When more is not better: A curvilinear relationship between foreign language proficiency and social categorization	Journal of International Business Studies
Kalra and Danis	2024	Language and identity: The dynamics of linguistic clustering in multinational enterprises	Journal of World Business

Source: author

Scholars in international organisational behaviour employ the social identity theory to elucidate the reasons behind language diversity leading to the formation of employee groups based on shared language within MNCs, which is seen as giving rise to language boundaries, affecting communication and interactions among employees (van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010). Utilising particular language nuances articulates familiarity within groups, bringing trust towards the individuals acknowledged as familiar (Chong et al., 2010). This helps to explain the formation of language-based clusters within MNCs, driven by homophily— the inclination to interact with individuals who share matching markers or traits, which also occurs based on self-categorisation while takes roots in the defining of the social identity (Mäkelä, Kalla, & Piekkari, 2007).

On the other hand, language establishes a significant functional and identity-based boundary between expatriates and host country nationals, affecting interactions in both professional and personal settings (Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016). Furthermore, language was found to influence the social identity of the employees, which is highly intervened with the willingness to adopt a foreign functional language to effectively communicate with the headquarters (Bordia & Bordia, 2015). The same year study by Reiche, Harzing and Pudelko (2015) observes the other direction of the knowledge flow, namely from headquarters to subsidiaries, emphasising that the shared language between HQ managers and subsidiaries positively influences knowledge flows.

And while foreign language proficiency seems an advantage for an employee, it was found that such proficiency has a curvilinear U-shaped relationship with host country nationals' expatriate

outgroup categorization, as from a certain level of language proficiency, an identity threat arises and influences the categorization (Peltokorpi & Pudenko, 2021). Moreover, although playing an important role in the social categorization process, in some situations, the interplay between other identity markers, such as gender or status, may significantly influence the composition of clusters. That was illustrated by an example of employees who have graduated from more prestige universities, and thus avoiding the participating in a language-based clusters in professional setting, and their colleagues, who engaged in these clusters and viewed the behaviours of the first ones as display of elitism, thus forming in-groups and out-groups not strongly based on language (Kalra & Danis, 2024).

Thus, although the social identity approach is well established in social psychology, it still allows for the investigation of many other areas, including the role of language in international business. Some other theories are used quite often in the field of IB to address the topic of language (see Figure 5 below), but the SIT seems the most appropriate one, considering the complex social environment the thesis aims to take into account, as well as the individual level of analysis of the considered phenomenon.

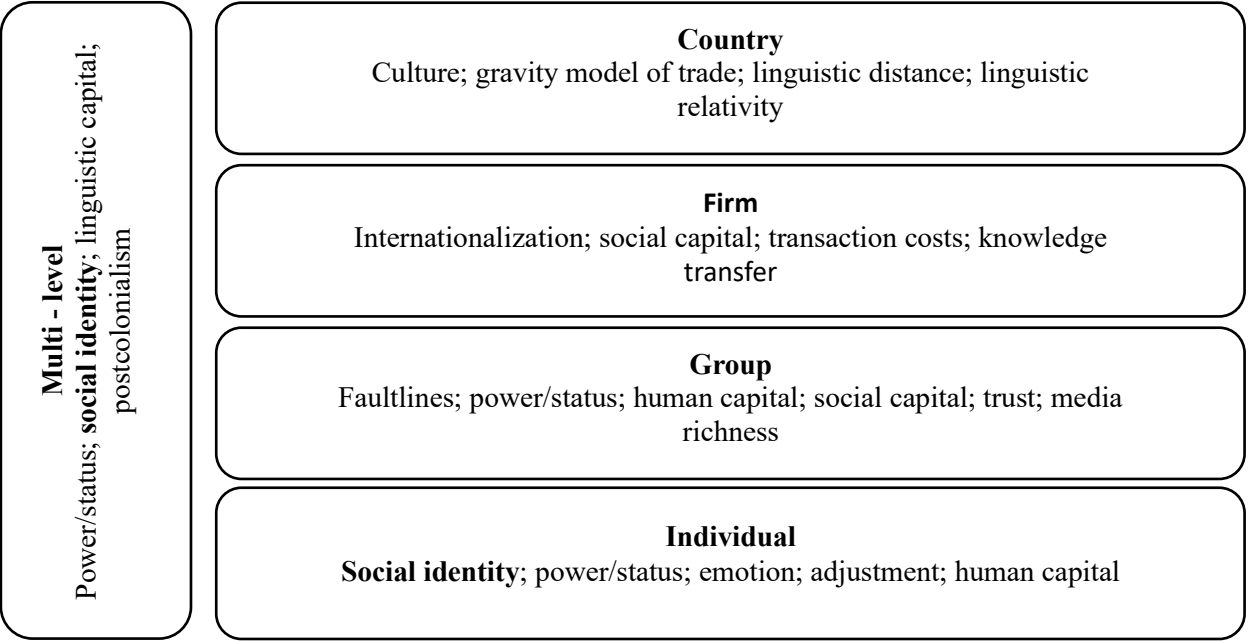


Fig. 5. Examples of theories used in IB research on language on different levels of analysis
 (Source: author; based on Tenzer et al., 2017, p. 827)

Now, after discussing language in IB and using social identity theory as the main theoretical lens for my thesis, I will introduce the next important concept—entrepreneurship. However, as the context is much narrower and concerns the entrepreneurship of forced migrants, I will begin the section with the basics—namely, migration.

II.3. FORCED MIGRANTS' ENTREPRENEURSHIP

II.3.1. Overview of migration

The topic of migration has gained attention in recent years. According to the report of the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2022), the number of international migrants in the world in 2020 was equal to 281 million, which, although only 3.6% of the global population, still impresses, as the number went from 154 million in 1990 (IOM, 2021). The reasons for the growth seem evident – globalisation and interconnection made it easier to travel, which has become relevant for many people who cross borders for different reasons.

The migration phenomenon is highly relevant for IB. However, the scholars mention the limited coverage of migration in mainstream International Business literature (Hajro, Brewster, Haak-Saheem, & Morley, 2023). Buckley, Doh and Benischke (2017) identify migration as one of the "grand challenges" – multinational phenomena as they transcend geographical, economic, and societal boundaries and thus have significant importance for the IB.

As the issue gains attention, it is no wonder that scholars also become interested in migrants. Nevertheless, what is relevant to this thesis is that most of the research is devoted to the economic migrants who choose to cross the borders voluntarily (Williams & Krasniqi, 2018). Moreover, the country to which to move may also be chosen because of several factors, one of which is language. I thus decided to address the location choice of the voluntary migrants specifically, as the forced ones do not often have this option.

II.3.2. Location choice of migrants

The literature addresses the connection between the destination country's choice and the language abilities of the migrant (Adserà & Pytliková, 2015; Bauer, Epstein, & Gang, 2005; Bredtmann, Nowotny, & Otten, 2020). The studies discovered that the linguistic proximity between the immigrant's language, the host country's language, and English at the target destination positively influences the migration rate (Adserà & Pytliková, 2015). Other sufficient criteria for choosing a destination country are not strict naturalisation requirements and significant linguistic enclaves, which also decrease the importance of the linguistic proximity criterium the larger they are (Adserà & Pytliková, 2015).

The fact that the linguistic communities negatively influence the migrants' proficiency in the host country's language has some empirical evidence, showing, as a result, that ethnic concentration plays a vital role in the migrants' location decision (Bauer et al., 2005). The migrant's language acquisition abilities may highly influence this choice, as they differ. The study based on the data of Mexican migrants to the USA demonstrated that the better English a migrant has, the smaller network they choose (Bauer et al., 2005).

Another study that used a random utility maximisation framework and data from the European Labour Force Survey confirms the positive impact of the enclaves on location decisions, while, in contrast, linguistic distance has the opposite effect (Bredtmann et al., 2020). Furthermore, linguistic communities are the essential factor in a more considerable linguistic distance, and at the same time, this linguistic distance is seen as less sufficient the bigger the enclaves are (Bredtmann et al., 2020).

II.3.3. Wage workers

The research concerning migrants in the IB literature addresses mainly wage workers. Concerning the language aspect, the studies show that the ability to learn a language of the host country in a shorter period, as well as the fluency in it, influence sufficiently the possibility of human capital's transfer to the host market and has a positive impact on the immigrant's accomplishment on the local labour market (Chiswick & Miller, 2002, 2010; Dustmann & Van Soest, 2002). The study of the ten years of data in Germany showed that language skills may be fundamental to immigrants' productivity, and communicating with the locals may be the most essential alterable aspect impacting their integration (Dustmann & Van Soest, 2002). The study conducted on the US market illustrated that English fluency significantly impacts 14% of the immigrants' earnings compared to those who lack this level of language proficiency (Chiswick & Miller, 2002). An exciting part is that the study also highlights immigrants' lower earnings regarding sufficient linguistic concentration in their area (Chiswick & Miller, 2002). The research also noticed that the immigrants' earnings depend not only on their English fluency but also on whether this proficiency is required for the job. That shows that labour markets tend to arrange workers accordingly, hiring people with high language proficiency for the jobs this proficiency requires and thus paying them more (Chiswick & Miller, 2010). The recent study of the immigrants' workplace outcomes also illustrates, that among other factors influencing a worker's pay and acquisition of a supervisory position such as gender and race, language also plays a role – the authors demonstrate the negative impact of not working in a mother tongue on both parameters (Fitzsimmons et al., 2020).

II.3.4. Migrant entrepreneurship

Before going deeper into the discussion of migrant entrepreneurship in particular, I would start by defining “entrepreneurship” in general. The terms "entrepreneur" and "self-employed" are used interchangeably in many studies (e.g. Gohmann, 2012; Hamilton, 2000; Hartmann & Philipp, 2022). Thus, I will also consider self-employed individuals as entrepreneurs and vice versa. Self-employment is defined as "...a particular income-generating mechanism that is different from paid work" (Blumberg & Pfann, 2016).

Thus, *migrant entrepreneurship* is defined by Sinkovics and Reuber “... the entrepreneurial activity of foreign-born individuals in a country other than that of their birth” (Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021, p. 1). This study also highlights that while the research on migrant entrepreneurship covers several disciplines, the labels that discuss the same phenomenon can overlap. Thus, in this master thesis, the terms “migrant” and “immigrant” are used interchangeably.

Migration is an exciting phenomenon to study, as it involves many actors. While the immigrants are affected by actors in the home and the host country, they also impact both in a row of cases, influencing the social and economic environment. Many articles cover wage earners (e.g. Chiswick & Miller, 2002, 2010; Dustmann & Van Soest, 2002), but some have focused on the aspect of migrant entrepreneurship (e.g. Beckers & Blumberg, 2013; Kloosterman, van der Leun, & Rath, 1999; Saxenian, 2002).

The contribution of migrant entrepreneurship to the host country is multidimensional and concerns many aspects that lead to the economic growth of the host country (Dheer, 2018; IOM, 2018; Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021). The scholars also highlight that immigrant entrepreneurship influences individual economic emancipation, job creation on local and regional levels, economic growth and innovative solutions (Beckers & Blumberg, 2013; Kloosterman et al., 1999; Saxenian, 2002). Thus, Saxenian (2002) observes the impact of Chinese and Indian engineers starting hundreds of businesses in California's technology sector. These immigrants created jobs, influenced exports, generated regional wealth, and contributed to California's integration into the global economy. The study of second-generation immigrant entrepreneurs in the Netherlands (Beckers & Blumberg, 2013) also demonstrated their impact on the country's economic structure.

What is interesting in these cases is the sector in which the businesses take place. The latter study highlights that second-generation immigrants are likelier to start an entrepreneurial activity in more demanding human capital business areas than the first generation, who more frequently set up a business in a traditional sector (Beckers & Blumberg, 2013). Californian engineers exemplify more technological entrepreneurship (Saxenian, 2002). Nevertheless, due to limited access to financial and educational resources, immigrant entrepreneurship tends to focus on low-entry-barrier economic activities, such as setting up a shop (Kloosterman et al., 1999). Alternatively, at least, it was the situation in the previous century because nowadays, it is noted that more and more entrepreneurs are skilled and choose the sectors connected to professional services, creativity, and technology to set up a business (Dheer, 2018).

The previous research indicated that migrants tend to have a higher self-employment rate in the host country than native-born individuals (Bizri, 2017; Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021). There are, however, controversial findings on the performance of such firms. While some highlight that

immigrant-owned firms are more successful (Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021), others note that while young, export-engaged firms owned by immigrants surpass domestically founded young firms in performance, generally, young immigrant-owned businesses that do not partake in exporting tend to underperform compared to other young enterprises (Neville, Orser, Riding, & Jung, 2014).

Migrant entrepreneurship unfolds through a nuanced push-pull dynamic, where push factors like language barriers, discrimination, and restrictive policies force immigrants towards self-employment, while pulling factors such as the potential for economic improvement and the desire to preserve cultural identity draw them into entrepreneurship (Bizri, 2017; Brettell & Alstatt, 2007; Rath, Schutjens, & Triandafyllidou, 2016; Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008; Williams & Krasniqi, 2018). These immigrants often begin their entrepreneurial journey out of necessity, facing language and cultural obstacles restricting traditional employment opportunities. However, as they navigate and adjust to their new environments, the context changes and motivations may evolve towards utilising opportunities (Williams & Williams, 2012), as they may employ their linguistic and cultural diversity as assets in a globalised market (Williams & Krasniqi, 2018).

The topic of ethnic entrepreneurship is among the most recognisable in the literature on migrant entrepreneurship (Kloosterman et al., 1999; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008). This type of business is characterised by the tendency to serve a co-ethnic community. That was the case, for example, in the study dedicated to returnee entrepreneurs, part of which was also engaged in entrepreneurial activity in the host country and tended to serve their ethnic community (ex., by establishing a restaurant) (Williams, Plakoyiannaki, & Krasniqi, 2023). In connection to ethnic entrepreneurship, an essential framework for immigrant entrepreneurship studies was introduced – namely, the mixed embeddedness approach, which suggested that in order to recognise the socio-economic status of immigrant entrepreneurs and their potential mobility paths, one must take into account not only the degree of their network embeddedness but also their embeddedness in the socio-economic and politico-institutional environment (Kloosterman et al., 1999). That leads to the following classification of challenges immigrant entrepreneurs may face into ones related to market opportunities, access to entrepreneurship, human capital, social networks, and the institutional and societal environment (Beckers & Blumberg, 2013; Rashid, 2018; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008).

This framework demonstrates that the environment in which immigrant business owners operate is challenging and influenced by many factors. The success of such interactions is also influenced by the ability to understand the locals, which can be more complicated if the migrants are not fluent in the host country's language. The interactions also impact social identity formation, as

people may see themselves as part of the different groups they encounter. Considering that the following sections are devoted to the nuances of forced migrants and their entrepreneurial activity, for several rationales, their experiences may differ significantly from those of general migrant entrepreneurs.

II.3.5. Forced migration

As noticed, most of the studies, even if dedicated to the entrepreneurial activity of migrants, still consider primarily economic migrants who were in the host country and intended to migrate. Much less research exists on the topic of forced migrants and entrepreneurship (Abebe, 2023; Bizri, 2017; Desai, Naudé, & Stel, 2021; Hartmann & Philipp, 2022; Rashid, 2018; Shepherd, Saade, & Wincent, 2020; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008; Williams & Krasniqi, 2018; Williams et al., 2023), which deserves to change, as the topic is essential today.

According to UNHCR, in 2023 the number of refugees worldwide is predicted to reach 29 million, with 15 million residing in Europe (UNHCR, 2023). The topic of forced migration has been a high priority in association with the Arab Spring since 2010 (Fargues & Fandrich, 2012). Later, at the end of 2014, there was recorded a boost of 25% compared to the previous year, which amounted to 14.4 million refugees, explained mainly by the civil war in Syria, unrest in the Middle East, and some other sources of refugees such Africa and the Balkans (Aiyar et al, 2016). All of that drew more attention to the question of the refugees' engagement in economic activities, in general, and entrepreneurship, in particular, but there is still a lot to research (Desai et al., 2021).

Today, the question of the forced migrants' economic activity in Europe can draw another wave of attention to itself, as now we witness a situation which was described by the World Health Organization as "the largest movement of people in the European Region since the Second World War" (WHO, 2023). WHO addresses in this way the flow of refugees, explained by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on the 24th of February, 2022, which resulted in the number of 6, 303,200 refugees from Ukraine recorded across Europe as of 14.02.25 (UNHCR, n.d. – b). According to United Nations data, this number amounts to more than 90% of all the refugees from Ukraine globally. Most of them live in Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic, but although in Austria this number is relatively small, it is still sufficient for the country's size, being 85,710 people as of 14.02.2025 (UNHCR, n.d. – b).

Furthermore, as the country has received a significant inflow of forced migrants who can participate in the economic environment, this thesis aims to consider one possible way they can do so—mainly entrepreneurship.

II.3.6. Forced migrants' entrepreneurship

Although forced migrant entrepreneurs have gained more attention in the previous years, the research area is still underdeveloped. That is explained by a fragmented knowledge base spread across various disciplines, such as – social and migration studies (Abebe, 2023). The research on the topic in the field of IB is relatively new (Bizri, 2017; Shepherd et al., 2020) and thus is still scarce. Interestingly, even the question of who a refugee entrepreneur is and when one stops being one does not have a clear answer (Abebe, 2023).

Thus, for this thesis, the definitions of refugee entrepreneurship and forced migrant entrepreneurship are going to be used as synonyms. However, according to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is one who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of [their] nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail [themselves] of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of [their] former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (UNHCR, n.d. - a). The forced migrant, however, may not be recognised as a refugee in the host country or may hold another legal status within the host country.

The following Table 3 summarises the kinds of entrepreneurship mentioned so far.

Table 3. Different kinds of migrant entrepreneurship

Kind of entrepreneurship	Definition	Source
Immigrant entrepreneurship	"Immigrant entrepreneurship – generally understood as the undertaking of entrepreneurial activities by immigrants..."	Dabić et al., 2020
Refugee/forced migrant entrepreneurship	"The United Nation's High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines refugees as people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country".	Desai et al., 2021
	"The distinctive attribute of refugees is that they are fleeing their war-stricken countries of origin due to a life-threatening danger, while migrants are leaving their countries in pursuit of better economic opportunities".	Bizri, 2017

Kind of entrepreneurship	Definition	Source
Ethnic entrepreneurship	"Ethnic entrepreneurs are often referred to as simultaneously owners and managers (or operators) of their own businesses, whose group membership is tied to a common cultural heritage or origin and is known to out-group members as having such traits; more importantly, they are intrinsically intertwined in particular social structures in which individual behavior, social relations, and economic transactions are constrained".	Zhou, 2004
Returnee entrepreneurship	"We define returnee entrepreneurs as individuals who have studied and/or worked in foreign countries for at least two years and then returned to their home countries to start up new ventures".	Williams et al., 2023

Source: author

As this work is dedicated to the phenomenon of forced migration, it would make sense to highlight once again that the refugee group is distinct from the general migrant population. This context of forced migration may have clear consequences for refugees when setting up an entrepreneurial activity. The six following differences between voluntary migrants and forced ones were presented by Wauters and Lambrecht (2006, 2008):

- It is expected that the social network of forced migrants in the host country will be less expanded.
- Refugees were forced to flee their country as a result of persecution there. That means the return to acquire the capital, funds or labour for the business is sometimes impossible.
- Due to the experienced traumatic events, refugees may have psychological problems, which may influence entrepreneurial activity.
- As a result of sudden leave, forced migrants are less likely to be prepared in advance for their stay in a new country, as sometimes they do not even know where exactly they are moving.
- Because of the exact reason for a sudden flight, they cannot bring many belongings with them. Essential items such as capital or education certificates are sometimes left at home.
- A sufficient number of forced migrants are not suitable for paid labour. It also concerns some with specific country knowledge and qualifications, who, if it were not for the circumstances, would never leave their country.

As a result, it is possible to say that forced migrants face more problems and challenges than voluntary migrants. Due to these differences in the context of migration, the motivations to set up a business and the obstacles the forced migrants may face in the process may vary significantly. Regarding the studies in the area, some scholars concentrate on the resources the forced migrants may utilise while setting up a business. The results indicate that the entrepreneurial activity of the

forced migrants is positively influenced by factors such as networking with the host community (foreign spouse in case a respondent is male) and fluency in the host country's language; in contrast, the significance of co-ethnic networking is not essential (Williams & Krasniqi, 2018). The last finding seems controversial, as many forced migrants establish businesses that foremost serve their community (ex., Williams et al., 2023). Other findings suggest that the spatial context is crucial as relying on strong connections within co-ethnic communities is more significant in urban areas, while, in contrast, local communities are more important in rural areas (Hartmann & Philipp, 2022).

These nuances are interesting for this thesis, as the approaches used by scholars do not relate to the social identity theory; they, therefore, operate with the group notions such as local communities, ethnic enclaves, and different networks, which are all, in fact, some kind of groups a refugee can identify with. The context of the host country brings the language to the forefront, as well as the social identity based on it.

When it comes to the discussion of entrepreneurship for the forced migrants, scholars classify challenges immigrants in general and refugees, in particular, may face as being related to market opportunities, access to entrepreneurship, human capital, social networks, and the institutional and societal environment (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008; Rashid, 2018). These aspects are based on the mixed embeddedness framework (Kloosterman et al., 1999). In many cases, while utilising these dimensions or specific aspects of them, scholars seek to address the issue of the integration of forced migrants into the host country's society via entrepreneurship (Hartmann & Philipp, 2022; Rashid, 2018; Williams & Krasniqi, 2018).

Regarding these five areas, it is evident that forced migrant entrepreneurs are involved in various social and economic activities, as well as entrepreneurs in general, who communicate with various actors as customers or investors (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). Thus, it makes sense to return to the social identity theory and discuss why the social identity approach, particularly its language aspect, may be insightful in studying forced migrants' entrepreneurship.

II.4. SYNTHESIS: LANGUAGE, SIT AND FORCED MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In this part, I will combine the previously discussed concepts. I already discussed language and SIT relations in the section dedicated to social identity theory. Now, I will briefly summarise this discussion and then address SIT and entrepreneurship. After that, all the topics will be grouped to integrate them into the thesis.

It is understandable that in the absence of a shared language, there could be some problems in communication. However, the SIT, addressing the intergroup behaviour, gives a more complicated perspective on that common fact. Language can contribute to both - diversity and the formation of distinct groups, thus influencing interactions and communication. The language also plays a pivotal role in constructing and preserving social identity and ethnicity. In the field of International Business (IB), SIT is primarily observed in organizational studies and within Multinational Corporations (MNCs), where language diversity influences the formation of employee groups and affects interactions. Moreover, language nuances contribute to familiarity and trust within groups, leading to language-based clusters in MNCs. Additionally, language impacts the social identity of employees and knowledge flows within organizations.

Thus, the connection between SIT and language is evident and essential, and the scholars in IB also incorporate both in their research. Now, I will discuss how researchers incorporate SIT to address entrepreneurship.

Although some studies in the entrepreneurship literature use social identity theory as a primary theoretical lens (Alsos et al., 2016; Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Franke et al., 2006; Powell & Baker, 2014; Sieger et al., 2016), the language factor is not put in the centre of their attention. The social identity approach is only one of many that scholars use to study an entrepreneurial identity. Although a wide range of studies appears, the domain is highly fragmented, as the various foundations are used to conduct research (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). The social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) coexists with several theories (e.g., identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003)), which originate from various disciplines from social psychology to management (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). The studies using SIT in the context of entrepreneurship are presented in Table 4 and then discussed in more detail below.

Table 4. The articles on entrepreneurship, implementing SIT as a theoretical lens

Authors	Year	Title	Journal
Franke, Gruber, Harhoff, and Henkel	2006	What you are is what you like—similarity biases in venture capitalists' evaluations of start-up teams	Journal of Business Venturing
Fauchart and Gruber	2011	Darwinians, communitarians, and missionaries: the role of founder identity in entrepreneurship	The Academy of Management Journal
Powell and Baker	2014	It's what you make of it: founder identity and enacting strategic responses to adversity	The Academy of Management Journal
Sieger, Gruber, Fauchart, and Zellweger	2016	Measuring the social identity of entrepreneurs: Scale development and international validation	Journal of Business Venturing
Alsos, Clausen, Hytti, and Solvoll	2016	Entrepreneurs' social identity and the preference of causal and effectual behaviours in start-up processes	Entrepreneurship & Regional Development
O'Neil, Ucbasaran, and York	2022	The evolution of founder identity as an authenticity work process	Journal of Business Venturing

Source: author

The paper, which was the first one in entrepreneurship research that it was possible to identify, is one by Franke et al. (2006). The article studies the impact of the similarity between a venture capitalist (VC) and venture team members on the VC's decision-making. Here, the similarity effect is presented, emphasising the tendency of people to rate those who are more similar to them more positively (Byrne, 1971). One of the theoretical backgrounds used to understand this phenomenon is the social identity theory, as highlighted by the authors (Franke et al., 2006). As the study demonstrates, VCs tend to support the teams whose members are similar to them in terms of training and professional experience, which aligns with the social identity theory, emphasising the possible bias towards their own in-group (Franke et al., 2006).

Fauchart and Gruber (2011) completed qualitative research to identify the founders' identities from the social identity perspective and to discover how this social identity influences decisions at the start of the firm creation, namely in fields of the market segments, addressed customers, and the resources utilised. The classification they provide as a result of the study includes three main types of the founder identity: Darwinian, Communitarian and Missionary, - and the hybrid identity type. Economic reasons drive Darwinians, and these entrepreneurs are more prone to focus on competition with other firms. The communitarians view their firms as social objects supporting the community; thus, the relationships are critical and mutually beneficial. For the missionaries, a firm is a political object, and they are determined to benefit the society as a whole. Fauchart and Gruber (2011) also emphasise that their results illustrate that the founders' strategic decisions are

consistent with their social identities. For example, Darwinians focus on the average consumer and address their needs. At the same time, communitarians produce for the community, for similar ones, and the missionaries serve the ones where the most extensive social impact may be achieved. Powell and Baker's (2014) longitudinal field study, conducted in the textile and apparel industry, supplements Fauchart and Gruber's (2011) research and explores the impact of founder identity on strategic responses to the same adversity. They focus on how entrepreneurs' social and role identities influence their behaviours and actions, suggesting these identities can sometimes conflict. The authors conclude that the founders utilise their companies to validate and protect their identities while constructing new roles within their firms to manifest previously unexpressed or suppressed social identities (Powell & Baker, 2014).

Building upon the findings of Fauchart and Grubert (2011), Sieger et al. (2016) developed a scale determined to measure the founders' social identity. The authors used the typology provided by Fauchart and Gruber (2011). They tested the scale in the Alpine region, where the previous qualitative study was conducted, and validated it in the other 13 regions. As the research on the founders' social identities could substantially benefit from the universal scale, which is supposed to provide further valuable insights into this research field, the scale of Sieger et al. (2016) serves as a helpful tool, allowing to obtain reliable results for the survey and thus address the further theory development on the social identity perspective on entrepreneurship.

The paper by Alsos et al. (2016) also uses the study of Fauchart and Grubert (2011) and explores the influence of the social identity (Darwinian, Communitarian, Missionary) on entrepreneurial behaviour, driven by effectual or causal approaches – while the first approach examines the available means, the second one emphasises the particular goal (Sarasvathy, 2001). The authors use a mixed-method approach and show that there is indeed evidence that social identity and the behaviours of the entrepreneurs are connected – the Communitarians utilise primarily effectual logic, while the Darwinians and the Missionaries identities are mainly linked to a causal approach, although due to different reasons – when the goal of the Darwinians is to generate profit and outperform competitors, the Missionaries aim to advance a more significant cause (Alsos et al., 2016).

The recent study by O'Neil, Ucbasaran, & York (2022), however, showed that while the social identity of the entrepreneurs is important for the early stages of the creation of a new venture, the personal identity may play a more crucial role. As this focus on “me” persists in the initial stages, the authors still highlight the possibility of the shift towards “we” over time and increasing experience, as there is a clear difference in a psychological state with the focus shifting from the individual to the group (O'Neil et al., 2022). That is illustrated by some entrepreneurs who began

referring to themselves as “social” or “green” over time, thus identifying with the group rather than relying on the individual’s values (O’Neil et al., 2022).

As the research in entrepreneurship, which uses the social identity theory as a theoretical lens, is relatively insightful, the language element was not at the epicentre of the attention. While the scale developed by Sieger et al. (2016) is available in 16 languages and was validated across 13 countries and regions, it does not put the language-based social identity as a particular phenomenon to study, which would make sense in the case of the forced migrants' entrepreneurship, as host country language proficiency and willingness to engage in social and economic exchanges – which are connected with the social identity - can influence the timing and manner in which economic activities, including entrepreneurship, take place (Desai et al., 2021).

Thus, although the existing research is somewhat meaningful, it was possible to indicate only one article on refugee entrepreneurship, which touches on social identity. Shepherd et al. (2020) explore resilience and entrepreneurial action among forced migrants, specifically Palestine refugees who have faced persistent adversity. The authors indicate that entrepreneurial action is both a response to adversity and a driver of resilience (Shepherd et al., 2020). In this study, the authors do not specifically indicate the use of social identity theory or specify the role of language. However, one can notice how interviewees identify themselves as "Palestinian", "Lebanese", or "refugee" or present themselves as having multiple identities. The association with the specific group and the specific wording some of them use to address the "others" set an example of social identification and the existence of in and out-group relations, while some elements are connected to the language nuances.

Thus, the mentioned studies are insightful but scarce. That could be explained by the fact that although the number of migrants in absolute numbers increases, most of the population is not involved in the activity (IOM, 2022). The forced migrants are also quite a particular part of this already not very wide group of people. That all makes forced migrant entrepreneurship a niche topic within IB research. However, the current geopolitical landscape—marked by significant waves of forced migration to Europe—raises urgent questions about how displaced individuals integrate into new economic systems. Recent literature calls for more research on their entrepreneurial participation (Abebe, 2023), yet the subjective perceptions, agency, and lived experiences of forced migrants in business remain underexplored.

Thus, my study addresses this gap by highlighting forced migrant entrepreneurs' perceptions of language in entrepreneurship. Approaching the topic with the SIT as a theoretical lens allows for a new perspective on the phenomenon. Unlike prior research, which tends to analyse language as a structural constraint, my study focuses on how participants construct meaning around language

and how that shapes their entrepreneurial paths. This Master thesis examines how forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive language not only as a practical tool but as a social construct, which affects their sense of belonging, legitimacy, and strategic decision-making in business.

Thus, I approach the research question “How do forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language in entrepreneurial activity?” through the lens of SIT. Because of this approach, this work studies the nuanced, subjective ways in which forced migrants negotiate language in business contexts. Language is not merely an external barrier or a tool, which helps, but it is socially constructed, and shaped by experiences, emotions, and individual agency. This perspective offers a contribution to IB research, shifting the focus from objective constraints to the lived experiences of forced migrant entrepreneurs and their role in shaping their own economic integration.

III. METHODOLOGY

III.1. Philosophical positioning

As was mentioned previously, the central concept of the thesis is language. The concept is hard to quantify, and often, it is viewed as social practice, embedded in layers of context and emerging through interactions (Karhunen et al., 2018), which not only transmits meanings but produces them too (Chidlow et al., 2014). Thus, considering the highly social nuances of language, for this thesis, I adopt the philosophical positioning, which steps from the mostly adopted in IB and management field positivistic logic (Christofi et al., 2024; Welch & Piekkari, 2017), and will aim to implement interpretive research drawing from the social constructivism (Prasad & Prasad, 2002).

This philosophy views a social reality constructed via meaningful interpretations. While the social world is being built in, the researcher's goal is not to study the world as it is presumed to exist but to capture these interpretations. This approach contrasts the domineering in the field positivistic view, which sees reality as something concrete, requires objective data collection and claims the researcher is separate from the reality they study (Prasad & Prasad, 2002). This philosophical positioning aims to reach a "truthful, accurate, and potentially generalizable snapshot of reality" (Welch & Piekkari, 2017, p.717).

In this thesis, I do not aim to achieve generalisation. Moreover, I emphasize that the contextual knowledge may be insightful and no less "truthful" for the person in question. My aim is to explore the individual perceptions of the participants, thus studying their own realities and trying to understand how their worlds are constructed. The fact that my own "reality glasses" will impact the findings is also worth mentioning, which brings us back to the thought that all the data and findings are influenced by the time and context and co-produced by the researcher and participants (Welch & Piekkari, 2017), thus being interpreted via subjective lenses, which does not make them any less valuable or of less quality. This reality is socially constructed and experienced and, thus, is impossible to measure. Different points of view exist regarding how phenomena work, and no single view is the right one. Furthermore, the knowledge is perspectival, as it depends on the views and values of the researcher as well (Kvale, 1998).

Thus, all that clearly states ontological and epistemological assumptions for this thesis. Driven by social constructivism as a philosophical positioning, the ontological assumption here is that reality is not something fixed or objective but is created through people's experiences and interactions. In the ontological assumptions of this thesis, the studied phenomena—language and entrepreneurship—are not universal truths but socially constructed through individual experiences and interactions. The epistemological assumption with the interpretivist approach considers that the knowledge for this master thesis is gained through understanding people's subjective

experiences rather than measuring objective facts. That means that in my case I acknowledge that each forced migrant entrepreneur has a unique experience, and all these ungeneralisable experiences build the knowledge in the study. I do not look for a universal “truth”, because for this thesis I assume it does not exist, but instead explore how different individuals perceive language in their business.

I argue that exactly this philosophical positioning and these ontological and epistemological assumptions are the most suitable choices to answer the research question “How do forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language in entrepreneurial activity?”. Language is inherently social, enabling communication and relationship-building, while entrepreneurship does not occur in isolation but is shaped by multiple actors in the entrepreneurial environment. These highly social constructs are best understood through a lens that assumes reality is socially constructed, with subjective perspectives forming the basis of knowledge about this interaction-driven reality.

The goal of interpretive research is to describe meanings and understandings in a real setting (Rynes & Gephart, 2004), and that is exactly what I aim to do in this thesis – give a voice to participants and present that in this thesis their social realities, claiming that the single “correct” interpretation of these realities does not exist.

III.2. Qualitative research

This thesis employs qualitative research to explore how forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive and use language in their entrepreneurial activities in Austria. Qualitative research is an approach that does not rely on statistical or numerical data. Such research can, therefore, be conducted using different philosophical positionings, methods, theorizing styles, and means of inference, which makes qualitative research very promising for enriching the field (Plakoyiannaki & Budhwar, 2021). Qualitative research concentrates on processes and meanings, stressing the question of how social experiences are created (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). That is very relevant in the context of my thesis with its research question - “How do forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language in entrepreneurial activity?” – and the adopted theoretical lens of SIT, which assumes the social context, and the philosophical positioning of social constructivism, viewing the world as constructed through interactions and interpreted through subjective experiences.

In general, qualitative research is suitable for answering "the "how", "who" and "why" of individual" (Doz, 2011), which is also the case of this thesis. But, what is more important, it “addresses questions about how social experience is created and given meaning and produces representations of the world that make the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 3, as cited in Rynes & Gephart, 2004). Language is hardly just a tool, which you could effectively measure and quantify, and in the context of my thesis, it is much more beneficial to study it with a more

open approach to capture some perceptions, which could not be visible in numbers. A quantitative approach would struggle to capture the fluid, context-dependent nature of language in entrepreneurial decision-making. To understand how forced migrant entrepreneurs use and perceive language in Austria, it is essential to explore how they experience the existing environment with its language barriers, how they leverage multilingualism, and whether they make strategic linguistic choices in their businesses and if yes - how. For instance, qualitative research allows participants to describe how they navigate multilingual interactions with customers and partners, whether they intentionally use their mother tongue to target ethnic markets or struggle with linguistic discrimination in their business networks. These nuances cannot be fully captured through standardized measurements like surveys, but require an approach that allows participants to express their perceptions and strategic decisions in their own words.

This study is situated in a highly specific and politically charged context—the forced displacement caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This event has led to not only economic and bureaucratic challenges in the host country, as would be expected, but also to linguistic and identity tensions, particularly among Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking communities as will be seen from the findings. Forced migrant entrepreneurs in this context are not only dealing with standard business challenges but also navigating deeply personal and politically charged linguistic tensions. A qualitative approach enables them to express how their language choices are influenced by war-related trauma, identity shifts, and social acceptance in Austria. These dimensions cannot be fully understood through predefined survey categories, and thus capturing these dynamics requires a research design that is sensitive to personal narratives, historical context, and emotional dimensions of language use. And that is stated, that qualitative research allows for sensitivity to the context (Plakoyiannaki, Wei, & Prashantham, 2019).

Some may argue that context-free knowledge is of a higher scientific value in comparison to contextualised one (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2019). This point of view is especially arguable for the IB research field, as it emphasises the cross-border phenomena and thus calls for considering context (Welch et al., 2011). As I aim to step from the positivistic approach, which calls for a more “objective” and decontextualised knowledge, I adopt the view on qualitative research that claims context’s fundamental role in researching, theorizing, and reporting (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2019). Decontextualized data may overlook the psychological and social realities of forced migrants, leading to misrepresentations of their lived experiences. And that is why I argue, that context sensitivity is one of the fundamental aspects of my work and the reason, why I chose to proceed with qualitative research – to ensure that the unique linguistic, social, and entrepreneurial realities of forced migrants are captured.

III.3. Qualitative interviews

Different approaches to gathering data in qualitative research exist. Such methods include but are not limited to, case studies, interviews, textual analysis, and observations (Rynes & Gephart, 2004). I use qualitative interviews as a research method in this thesis.

What are interviews? They are contextual, interpersonal interactions in which the researcher usually asks questions that are answered by the participant (Rynes & Gephart, 2004). The qualitative research interview is considered to be “a construction site of knowledge” (Kvale, 1998, p. 42). Moreover, an interview may be viewed as “a complex social event” surrounded by various social and linguistic complexities (Alvesson, 2003). In this study, language itself is not just the research subject but also a central factor in how participants express their business strategies and social integration.

There are two main perspectives on interviews: neopositivism and romanticism. While the first one aims to discover a context-free truth about reality, the second one emphasises the importance of establishing trust and commitment between interviewer and interviewee as a prerequisite for discovering the interviewee’s inner world with their experiences, ideas, and intentions (Alvesson, 2003).

The social construction of reality in an interview is also one of the cornerstones of postmodern thought, which draws attention to the interview process (Table 6) (Kvale, 1998).

Table 6. The relation of the knowledge generated by interviews to five features of a postmodern construction of knowledge and its relevance for the thesis

Feature of the postmodern construction of knowledge	Citation/description	How/Why it is relevant for the thesis
Knowledge as conversation	“They emphasize discourse analysis as not so much a method as an approach, focusing on the constructive nature of questioning, transcribing, and analyzing in interview research” (Kvale, 1998, p. 43).	The way the questions are asked (form, intonation, etc.) and further transcribed and analysed influence the research results and thus may potentially uncover the previously hidden topics. That is, for example, done by preferably asking open questions rather than simple “Yes” or “No” ones to let the respondent talk about matters, that concern them.
Knowledge as narrative	“In open interviews people tell stories, narratives, about their lives” (Kvale, 1998, p. 43).	The thesis pays attention to the stories of individuals (forced migrants) without aiming to generalise their lives to one truth, as the story of one may not apply to another.

Feature of the postmodern construction of knowledge	Citation/description	How/Why it is relevant for the thesis
Knowledge as language	“In interview research, language is both the tool of interviewing and, in the form of tapes and transcripts, also the object of textual interpretation” (Kvale, 1998, p. 43).	The thesis is written in English, while the interviews are taken in Russian. While the specific language structures can be used in Russian, there may be no equivalents in English and vice versa. Although moments like interviewees switching to another language or untranslatable phrases are highlighted, specific knowledge may be gained or lost as a result of the impossibility of transmitting the exact meaning of the language structures. The translation process itself brings extra knowledge as well.
Knowledge as context	“Interviews are sensitive to the qualitative differences and nuances of meaning, which may not be quantifiable and commensurable across contexts and modalities” (Kvale, 1998, p. 44).	The specific context of forced migrants due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in Austria may not be transferable to other contexts, but it is still valuable for capturing as it influences individuals here and now.
Knowledge as interrelational	“An interview is literally an inter view, and inter change of views between two persons conversing about a common theme” (Kvale, 1998, p. 44).	I as an interviewer also have an impact on what kind of knowledge is to be obtained, which is important to remember – another researcher might have brought the dialogue in another direction, thus gaining different insights.

Source: author, based on Kvale, 1998

Qualitative research interviews can be divided into three main types: unstructured, semi-structured, and structured (Fig. 6).

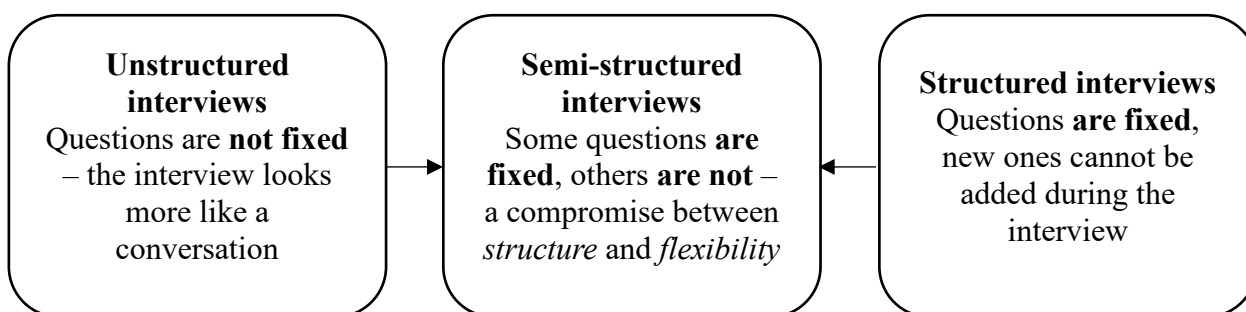


Fig. 6. Three types of interviews

(Source: author, based on Plakoyiannaki, 2024)

For this thesis, I decided to choose semi-structured interviews, as they allow one to adapt the interview to the specific situation and move with the flow while staying on topic without losing

the goal. Kvale (1998) defines this type of interview as one “... whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1998, p. 5-6).

This study involves semi-structured interviews with forced migrant entrepreneurs from Ukraine, displaced due to the Russian-Ukrainian war. These individuals operate in different industries and have varying degrees of prior entrepreneurial experience, market integration, and host-country language proficiency. Given the highly personal and context-sensitive nature of linguistic adaptation, semi-structured interviews allow respondents to freely express how they navigate Austria’s business environment linguistically, whether they leverage multilingualism as a strategic advantage, and how language barriers affect their professional interactions.

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews is particularly valuable in this study because language is both a practical business tool and an emotionally charged aspect. Some interviewees may discuss how language proficiency influences customer relations, while others may focus on language-based discrimination, networking challenges, or even shifts in self-perception due to linguistic struggles. Moreover, some may effectively avoid putting a lot of emphasis on the language aspect, not perceiving it as the most essential aspect in their entrepreneurial journey. These personal narratives cannot be fully captured through standardized surveys or rigid questioning structures, as linguistic choices are fluid and context-dependent, and so the individuals’ perceptions and thought behind these choices.

This, the interviews are capable of providing deep insights. Moreover, as the respondents’ selection is carefully made, it occurs, that the large number of respondents typically needed, for example, for a survey in a quantitative study to uncover the connections, is not required in this case. That is because the chosen respondents are the ones who have firsthand experience regarding the researched question, and thus, even from a relatively small number of conducted interviews, interesting findings can be reached (Welch & Piekkari, 2017). In my study, all the interviewees are people working for themselves, thus experiencing the challenges the host country has for them as the forced migrant entrepreneurs. They do not have identical backgrounds, and that allows to capture various experiences.

In summary, qualitative interviews are essential for this study because they provide the depth, flexibility, and context-sensitivity required to understand forced migrant entrepreneurs’ linguistic realities. Since language use in business is deeply personal, this approach allows for an exploration of language as a strategic, emotional, and identity-related phenomenon—something that could not be fully captured through more rigid research methods.

III.4. The research context

In this section I would like to highlight the context of this study in a more detailed way. The researched question, in particular, and the qualitative research, in general, indicate that contextualized knowledge is no less valuable than the general one. Moreover, this contextualized knowledge can become a source of rich insights and draw attention to particular cases, thus uncovering the stories of individuals without claiming their experiences suitable for everyone.

My research context is limited; firstly, geographically—I concentrate on Austria; and secondly, temporarily—I study the forced migrants who had to move due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine after the 24th of February 2022. Thus, Figure 7 illustrates these intersections.

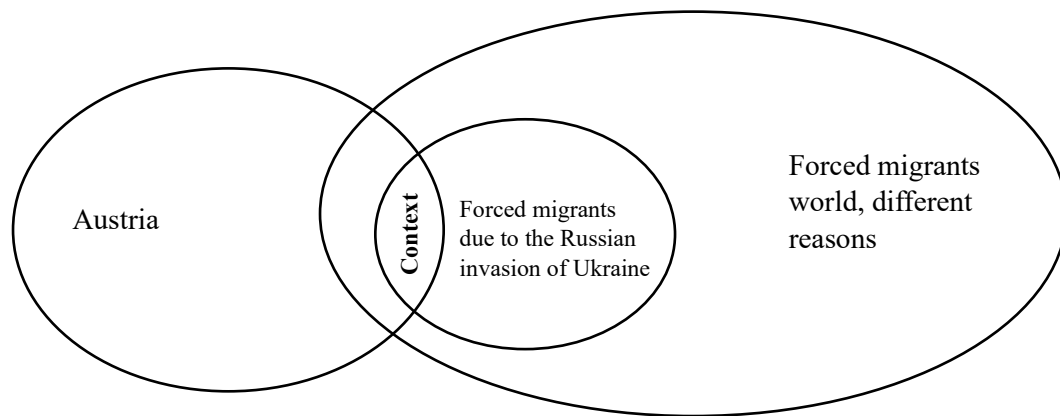


Fig. 7. The context of the study.

(Source: author)

Austria is a country in the European Union with a population of 9 104 772 people as of 2023 (European Commission, n.d. - a). The official language is German, and English is taught as the first foreign language in most schools (Migration.gv.at, n.d.). Around 19.6% of the total population are foreign citizens, while 26.7% or ca. 2.4 million people have some migration background as for 2023 (Migration.gv.at, n.d.).

The number of refugees from Ukraine globally is 6,863,400 (as of 14.02.2025); Europe hosts 6, 303,200 of them, and Austria 85,710 (UNHCR, n.d. – b). Austria, like the rest of Europe, has a history of receiving refugees from different regions. However, the response to Ukrainian forced migrants differed from previous waves, such as those from Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in 2021. Research suggests that this difference stems partly from perceived cultural proximity, as Ukraine is often seen as sharing similar values with European countries (De Coninck, 2022). This perception influenced both public attitudes and policy measures, with Ukrainian refugees receiving broader access to residence permits and work opportunities under the EU’s Temporary Protection Directive (European Commission, n.d.-b).

Thus, according to the information on the governmental platform oesterreich.gv.at, Austria implemented several measures to support Ukrainian forced migrants. Among them a granted temporary right to reside in Austria, currently valid until at least March 4, 2026 (oesterreich.gv.at, n.d.). This status is documented through an "ID card for displaced persons," which also facilitates access to the labour market, education, and medical care. This status differs from the traditional refugee process, as it grants residence through registration at police stations or reception centres rather than requiring an asylum application. This registration provides legal residence without the need to apply for asylum, which is a long process. Also, Austria offers help with temporary accommodation. Moreover, with the temporary residence status, forced migrants can access the Austrian labour market. The Austrian Public Employment Service (AMS) provides information and assistance regarding employment opportunities. Furthermore, there is an offer of free German courses and learning materials. The overall information on the education system, medical care, and other areas is also available.

Thus, that seems fair to notice, that Austria supports forced migrants from Ukraine by ensuring they have access to essential services and opportunities for integration. This information is accessible in several languages including Ukrainian, and the sources helping Ukrainians to find regular employment in Austria also exist. Thus, while Austria provides structured pathways for wage employment, the situation is more complex for those seeking self-employment, as relevant information and resources are harder to access. Often the forced migrants do not have the knowledge of where to search, and thus even the existing initiatives, which are open to foreigners – such as free consultations of Vienna Business Agency (Vienna Business Agency, n.d.) on the questions around business, - are complicated to find.

In general, though, according to the OECD report on entrepreneurship in Austria, although the overall access to entrepreneurial schemes for potential entrepreneurs is rather good, the scope for improving the strategies to address disadvantaged groups such as immigrants still exists (OECD, 2018). Furthermore, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor indicates the Austrian entrepreneurial ecosystem as intact but still mediocre compared to international standards (GEM, 2023).

III.5. Sampling and Data Collection

As one of the advantages of qualitative interviews is an opportunity to purposefully select the respondents who are knowledgeable in the specific research context, the number of respondents may not be very high. Keeping that in mind, I used several sources to identify the respondents.

In this study, I employed a purposive sampling approach, using criterion-based sampling to select respondents who met the following criteria: (1) they were forced migrants due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and (2) they engaged in some form of entrepreneurial activity in Austria,

whether formally or informally. Furthermore, being acquainted with several forced migrants from Ukraine, I contacted them first and then utilised the snowballing sampling to find people “who know people” (Williams et al., 2023). This method is particularly suitable for the context, as the strategy is commonly used when some actors are hidden or not well established, which is expected when forced migration is concerned (Williams et al., 2023). Additionally, I incorporated convenience sampling by searching social media for local businesses and self-employed individuals who had migrated due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I built a small database on my computer with the list of possible respondents and contacted them through the contact details they mentioned in their profiles (direct messages, email, WhatsApp) to inform them about my research and ask whether they would like to participate. The ones who agreed to talk with me were asked afterwards whether they could recommend to me someone else they know, which is a snowballing method as well. After realising that these two methods combined did not result in a sufficient number of interviews, I proceeded with searching for the events organised for the Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking communities and participated in them, presenting my research project and asking potential interviewees whether they would be interested in being a part of it. The combination of the utilised methods resulted in 10 in-depth interviews conducted in the period from May to November 2024. Although 11 interviews were held, one of them proved itself to be less suitable for the study – as while at first I thought the situation the respondent was in fell under the criteria I established for this study, during the interview it became clear that did not suit my research context, and I did not include it in the analysis. The length of the interviews ranged between 44 and 117 minutes, with an average length of 75 minutes. This resulted in 456 pages of text. I aimed to enrich my data by collecting different experiences from my respondents. Thus, I paid attention to the diversity in my sample, trying to accommodate several backgrounds (gender, business sector, etc.), as that could bring some valuable insights (Williams et al., 2023).

Table 7 below summarizes the respondents’ details.

Table 7. Respondents' details

N	Age	Gender	Sector	Languages spoken (moment of interview)	English spoken before arrival	German spoken before arrival	Entrepreneurship experience	Home country	City of Migration	In Austria from	Austria as initial choice
R1	30	Male	Media	Ukrainian, Russian, English - B1/B2, German - A2	not often	no	yes	Ukraine	Odessa	March 2022	no
R2	24	Female	Marketing, media	Ukrainian, Russian, English - B2, German - A2	worse, A2	no	yes	Ukraine	Odessa	March 2022	no
R3	20	Male	E-commerce	Ukrainian, Russian, English - B2/C1, German - B2, Spanish - A2/B1	yes, but "never learned English normally in Ukraine"	no	yes	Ukraine	Kharkiv	beginning of the war	no
R4	26	Male	Sports	Russian, Ukrainian, German - "not bad", English - "a bit worse"	no	no	yes	Ukraine	Rostov-on-Don	beginning of the war	yes
R5	41	Female	IT	Ukrainian, Russian, English, German - A2	A2	no	no	Ukraine	Kharkiv	March 2022	yes
R6	36	Female	Healthcare	English - fluent, Russian, Ukrainian, Spanish - "así así", German - A2	yes	no	yes	Ukraine	Kharkiv	beginning of the war	no
R7	36	Female	Healthcare	Russian, Ukrainian, English - "basic everyday level"	no, "in restaurants, in shops, some words, yes"	no	yes	Ukraine	Odessa	February 2022	yes

N	Age	Gender	Sector	Languages spoken (moment of interview)	English spoken before arrival	German spoken before arrival	Entrepreneurship experience	Home country	City of Migration	In Austria from	Austria as initial choice
R8	34	Female	Crafts	Ukrainian, Russian, English - A2/B1, German - just in the beginning	no, "University English"	no	yes	Ukraine	Lviv	March 2022	no
R9	31	Female	Media	English - C1/C2, Russian, Ukrainian, French - B1, German - A2	yes	no"	yes	Ukraine	Kyiv	March 2022	yes
R10	41	Female	Healthcare	Russian, Ukrainian, English - "above average", German - A2	yes	no	yes	Ukraine	Kharkiv	February 2022	no

All the interviews were conducted in Russian, which is one of the participants' and my mother language. Most of the interviews were held offline, except for the one, which was conducted online. With the written consent of participants, the interviews were also recorded for further transcription.

As this Master thesis adopted the semi-structured interview guide, it allowed me to ask questions for clarification if something was not very clear, as well as expand beyond the prepared interview guide and deepen the issues mentioned by participants, in case it seemed either relevant for the thesis or the respondents gave a lot of emphasis on the subject, which led sometimes to unanticipated topics and stories.

III.6. Interview process

In this section I aim to guide you through the interviewing process, following the Kvale's (Kvale, 1998) seven stages, as this framework allows to capture and illustrate the complexity of the process, as well as stay on the track, without losing the focus.

The Table 8 shortly summarizes all the stages and actions related to them.

Table 8. Seven stages of an interview investigation

Stage	Name	Description
1	Thematising	Clarify why and what of the investigation
2	Designing	Plan the study design, paying attention to all 7 stages
3	Interviewing	Conduct the interviews
4	Transcribing	Prepare the material for the analysis by turning oral speech into written form
5	Analysing	Decide on the appropriate analysis method
6	Verifying	Use context-specific criteria to ensure the quality of the study
7	Reporting	Communicate the findings and highlight the ethical aspects

Source: author, based on Kvale, 1998

Kvale's first stage focuses on clarifying the objectives of the investigation. In my research, this involved defining the research question: "How do forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language in entrepreneurial activity?". The research question itself was changed several times during this stage, as I made initial research, going through the literature, and trying to understand what was not only a potential insightful area, not thoroughly studied yet, but what can also be interesting for me personally. After observing my surroundings and identifying an initial research gap, I decided to proceed with the current research question, as it also aligned with my personal interests. However, the research question was refined multiple times to ensure alignment with existing literature and methodological fit. Since the study aimed to capture personal experiences

and interpretations rather than quantifiable trends, a qualitative approach, particularly semi-structured interviews, was deemed the most suitable method

The second step allows to design the study, paying attention to all the steps needed and plan the actions for each stage accordingly. I studied the literature in the area of interest, which were dedicated to the fields of language, IB, entrepreneurship, social identity, migration. After getting acquainted with the previous research, I prepared the interview guide with quite broad range of questions, ensuring flexibility while maintaining consistency across respondents. The guide was structured as follows:

Introduction and background: to get acquainted and to gather participants' migration experiences and their premigration background.

Business and entrepreneurship: the section is dedicated to entrepreneurship, why they chose self-employment over traditional employment, how they started in Austria and whether they had such an entrepreneurial experience in their home country.

Language in business operations: the questions around the role of language in client communication, networking, day-to-day operations.

Personal and social contexts: driven by the social identity theory, I decided to explore the experiences of inclusion/exclusion, communities' and group's belonging, and self-perception.

Advice and future plans: in this concluding section I aimed to capture some thoughts of interviewees on their own journey in the advice they could give to others in the similar position. Moreover, I concluded with the question of whether there was something they would like to add that might be important, and this question was added to catch some specific insights the entrepreneurs could not have shared in other sections of the interview.

Thus, the decision to organize the questions as stated and also expand them to the social context were dictated by the wish to incorporate the personal experiences of the participants not only specifically in the business context, as some discoveries may happen, while the talk is stepping from the main point of interest. For example, the important, in my opinion, insight of the tension in the context of Russian and Ukrainian language use was not mentioned specifically in the dedicated to business part of the questions. Furthermore, to better understand the nuances of qualitative research design I took a specific course on "Qualitative Research" at the University to familiarize myself with the specific methods and practices and drafted the first strategies on how to approach further steps.

Interviewing, being the third step, emphasises the very moment of the interview. As we met with participants at the negotiated place, in which they felt comfortable talking, I briefly introduced the purpose of my study again, the participants signed the consent form, and the interview began. The

semi-structured format allowed for clarifications and further elaborations as needed. Being an important participant in an interview it is also a researcher's task to "feel the atmosphere of the room" and make the decisions about whether an additional question should be added or one which was planned skipped, as it is essential to "go with the flow". As an example, some interviewees were answering rather abruptly, so to get them to elaborate I tried to ask them additional questions. And, on the contrary, some were talkative and could jump from topic to topic, which I did not stop, so they could talk freely, but made notes during the interview, so I could return to my questions if not answered during their reply. Sometimes, I skipped the questions which were not relevant to an interviewee or elaborated on what I meant. For example, during the interviews, I discovered that while some questions sounded fine in English, their translation into Russian was not very clear, so I had to elaborate further or some respondents were willing to hear the English version of the question, which helped them significantly in understanding what was asked. Thus, after some interviews, I already knew that some questions did not sound very clear, so I was ready to explain to them if the questions arose. I decided not to reformulate them so I could ask more or less the same questions to all my respondents.

The next three stages, namely – analysing, verifying and reporting will be thoughtfully discussed in the next sections of the thesis.

Data analysis

This section is dedicated to the fifth stage of Kvale's (1998) interview process: analysing. There are several ways to analyse qualitative data, and the analysis in this master's thesis was based on coding (Saldaña, 2016).

A code can be "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Saldaña, 2016, p.4). In the case of this work, the data, which is exposed to a coding process, are interview transcripts. In a broad sense, I adopted both deductive and inductive coding methods. I began with examining the literature before starting the coding process in the first place, which allowed me to get acquainted with the range of topics and meanings associated with the phenomenon. But I was also open-minded towards new insights and thus saw the data as unprejudiced as I could allowing it to speak for itself, giving a space for new themes and subjects to arise (Plakoyiannaki, 2024). Thus, the approaches were used simultaneously to gain the most from the data set.

The data was analyzed in three cycles. In the first step, it was analyzed by implementing the method of "in vivo coding." This type of coding operates with the words as they were spoken and allows to capture "the terms used by [participants] themselves" (Strauss, 1987, p.33, as cited in Saldaña, 2016, p. 105). The examples below are the answers given to the question "*Why did you choose this path of entrepreneurship?*".

R2.: "I think this is connected to my experience even before moving to Austria, as I already had a similar experience in Ukraine. And why do I like it? Because it gives me complete autonomy and independence. That is, if I want to increase my income, it is easier for me to do so as a self-employed person. It also provides freedom of choice. That is, at any moment, I can change, for example... Yes, primarily my pricing policy; I can change my approach, change my location, or even my place of residence."

R3.: "Well, besides... Of course, it would be strange to deny it and say that it's purely altruism or just a hobby. Let's be honest, it's ultimately about **revenue**¹ and the hope of securing a future income that one can rely on. And it will be **remote work**..."

Once in vivo codes were identified, they were grouped into conceptually similar categories, forming 1st-order codes. This process involved clustering responses that addressed the same underlying concept.

Table 9. An example of the categories built from in vivo codes by implementing the method of axial coding

<i>increase my income</i> <i>pricing policy;</i> <i>purely altruism</i> <i>Revenue</i> <i>the hope of securing a future income</i>	<i>Financial motivation</i>
<i>complete autonomy</i> <i>independence</i> <i>freedom of choice</i>	<i>Independence as motivation</i>
<i>location</i> <i>place of residence</i> <i>remote work</i>	<i>(Geographical) flexibility as motivation</i>
<i>similar experience</i>	<i>Previous entrepreneurship experience as motivation</i>

Source: author

The second analysis cycle is employed to reorganize and reanalyze the codes obtained after the first stage, and it was implemented by utilizing the axial coding. This step is aimed at building the themes from the codes obtained after the first round of coding. At this stage, the number of codes is reduced by grouping, sorting and relabeling the available ones (Saldaña, 2016). The 2nd-order

¹ Here and further the words in bold in citations are left on the language they were spoken (Author's note)

themes were then organized into the 3rd-order aggregate dimensions. Building on Stoian, Dimitratos, & Plakoyiannaki (2018), I structured the coding results into hierarchical levels of abstraction, progressively refining raw data into higher-order themes and aggregate dimensions. Figure 8 in the next page illustrates this coding framework.

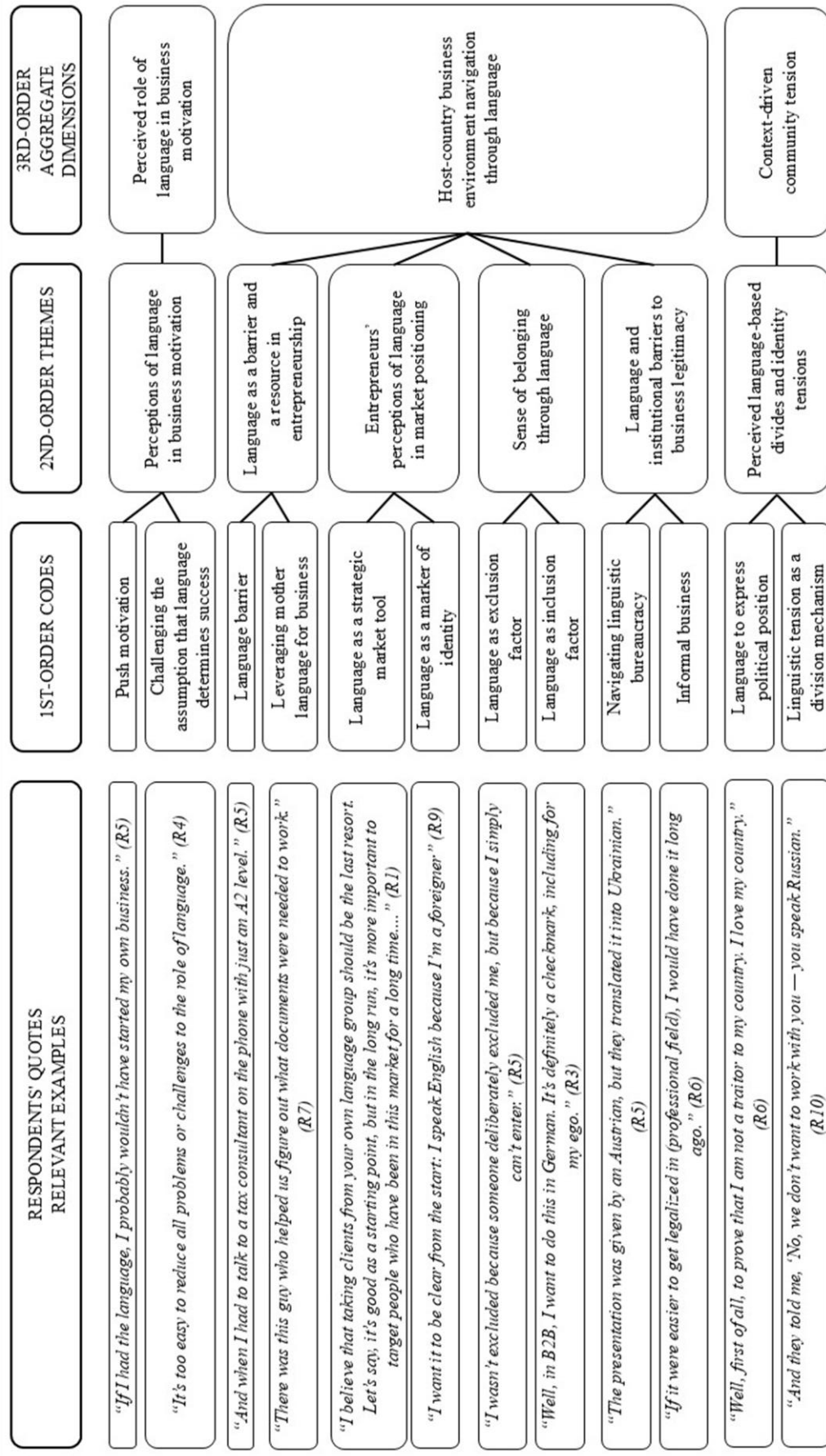


Fig. 8. The data analysis process
(source: author)

Verifying – quality criteria

Acknowledging my philosophical positioning for this study as well as its high emphasis on the context, I argue that the quality of the study is not to be measured by whether the right checklist of procedures is applied (Welch & Piekkari, 2017). I find it important to track the context-dependent decisions to evaluate the quality of the study. Table 10 summarises the procedures undertaken.

Table 10. Quality criteria

Criteria	Description
Researcher's positionality & reflexivity	I acknowledge my personal "reality glasses" and my interest in the study, which influence my decisions and interpretations. I keep memos indicating which steps I follow and why, as well as my thoughts about interviews and the coding process
Inter-coding reliability	I acknowledge that how the questions are asked and later analysed influences the outcome of the study. Thus, I consult with my supervisor about the interview guide and try not to put the answers in the questions
Peer feedback	Some peers not participating in the project are asked to give their opinion on the thesis, as they can notice nuances I do not see because of my understanding of reality
Consulting the literature	During the whole interview process, starting with the thematizing stage and finishing with reporting, the literature is consulted
Research question	As a result of the research, the research question should be answered. If it does not happen, the procedure should be reviewed to find a mistake and adapt the changes

Source: author

Ethical considerations

As during the interview a lot of emphasis is dedicated to the participant's worldview and experiences, the generated data and the process itself might be quite sensitive. That is even more evident in the context of my study, which is forced migration, that is a very sensitive theme itself. Thus, it is essential to put on the central place the interviewee's well-being and assure, that as a researcher I do not harm them. Thus, the following principles are applied: *informed consent*, *confidentiality*, and *consequences* (Kvale, 1998).

Informed consent is achieved by informing the participant about the interview's goals and the research's theme. While approaching my potential participants face to face I explained to them what my research is about, why I am doing that and what they can expect from the participation in it. If the first contact with the participants happened online, I also attached an *information sheet* with summary of the project. Later when the participants agreed to participate and the interview was scheduled, I sent them the *consent form* online so they could examine it in advance and ask questions if they had ones. Then the paper form was presented to them at the day of the interview. We considered the points in it, which repeated and summarized the information we had discussed

during the initial phase of interview negotiations. I translated the points, if necessary, as some of the participants did not speak English at the sufficient level to understand what was the form about. After clarifying concerns and answering the questions the consent form was signed by both sides (see Appendix for a form example).

Confidentiality is ensured as the private data allowing to identify the participated person is not included. The raw data, including the audio recordings, is accessible only by the researcher, as well as their original transcripts in Russian. And no third persons have access to them.

Not only the interview process itself but also its *consequences* should always be considered. Thus, I aim to be careful in discussing the interviews with third parties, so neither identities of my participants, nor their entrepreneurial activity are compromised, as the most important part is not causing participants any harm.

The next table (Table 11) summarises ethical considerations, highlighted by Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023) for this research project:

Table 11. Ethical considerations throughout the master thesis

Anonymity	The information in the thesis does not include personal details as name, adress or other essential details that could help with the interviewee's identification
Privacy and confidentiality	The collected data remains private and I ensure no third party to access it
Voluntary participation	No one is forced/induced to participate, and interviewees voluntarily accepted to engage. Moreover, forcing participation can lead to false information gathering.
Option to opt out	The participants were free to decide to refuse to answer any question without any consequences, as well as ask about deleting all the interview during some time after data collection
Non-maleficence/Beneficence	To avoid causing harm intentionally and trying to identify and prevent any situation in which the participants would feel uncomfortable, I also opted to "reading the room" and skipping any questions that might overwhelm the participants to ensure trust and welcoming environment

Source: author, based on Nii Laryeafio and Ogbewe (2023)

IV. FINDINGS

IV.1. Presentation of the findings

In this session I aim to present the findings, clustered to bigger groups after the analysis of codes emerging. The research question “How do forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language in entrepreneurial activity?” guides the analysis, with a particular focus on the topics as “language”, and “entrepreneurial activity”, with special attention to forced nature of migration and the Austria context.

As the study applies Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a theoretical lens, the findings are also viewed in terms of how language influences group belonging, exclusion, and identity in entrepreneurship. Some thematic categories overlap, reflecting the interwoven nature of language, business, and social identity; thus minor repetition may occur.

The main themes emerging from interview data and categories defined and the findings are presented in the following table:

Table 12. Summary of findings

Thematic block	Summary of findings
Perceptions of language in business motivation	Some entrepreneurs view language as a barrier to formal employment, pushing them into business. Others see it as irrelevant to entrepreneurial success, prioritizing problem-solving over linguistic skills.
Language as a barrier and a resource in entrepreneurship	Some entrepreneurs express that they struggle with bureaucratic hurdles and exclusion from networks due to language, while others consider developing workarounds (e.g., bilingual employees, digital translation tools, or focusing on ethnic markets).
Entrepreneurs' perceptions of language in market positioning	Some entrepreneurs intentionally cater to Russian/Ukrainian-speaking customers, while others emphasize prioritizing German integration for broader market access. A few report use English to signal international identity.
Sense of belonging through language	Entrepreneurs' language choices shape their inclusion or exclusion in a business environment. Some highlight German as a legitimacy marker for Austrian business credibility and belongingness
Language and institutional barriers to business legitimacy	Some entrepreneurs fear bureaucracy due to low German proficiency, delaying formal registration. Others leverage community networks or bilingual professionals to navigate legal systems. Some avoid formal business registration
Perceived language-based divides and identity tensions	For some, language reflects political identity (e.g., Russian/Ukrainian tension). Some experience exclusion from diaspora business communities due to language use, while others refuse to engage in these divisions.

Source: author

1. Perceptions of language in business motivation

This section explores the perceived role of language in shaping the motivation and decision-making process of forced migrants who engage in entrepreneurial activities in Austria. While host-country language proficiency is not always the primary driver of entrepreneurship, the findings suggest that it plays a significant role in most cases. Additionally, the connection between language skills and access to the local labour market is highlighted. The importance of migrants' mother tongue is also evident in their entrepreneurial paths.

To begin with, none of the respondents spoke German upon arrival, nor did they initially plan to learn it. Some even expressed a strong aversion to the language, which affected both the speed and openness with which they approached learning it. As one respondent described:

"For me, the mechanism is unclear, incomprehensible, and sometimes very strange. But I don't completely reject it, because when I first arrived, I was like 'Bweh'. I'd hear it and... well... now I can distinguish words, and it no longer makes me feel like throwing up. That, I consider a victory and progress. So, I'm not rushing it - I just don't want to feel sick from the language anymore."

(R7)

For many, the inability to secure a job due to language barriers was one of the primary motivations for starting a business. Some respondents acknowledged that they could find low-skilled jobs in retail or gastronomy, and while a few accepted these roles as temporary solutions, others rejected them outright. Given their education, skills, and work experience, these jobs were neither financially sustainable nor professionally fulfilling. The effort required seemed disproportionate to the rewards.

One respondent reflected on how language barriers forced them into entrepreneurship despite their initial intentions:

"If I had the language, I probably wouldn't have started my own business. That's 100%. I would have gone to a company, earned a stable income - not 100,000, but at least 50,000. But here, I have to... At first... I had—I can't say it was depression, but I had disappointment. Everything I built for 40 years had collapsed. And at 40 years old, I was left with nothing but a backpack..."

(R5)

This illustrates the classic push dynamics of entrepreneurship, where individuals start their own businesses due to the lack of viable employment options. In this case, language serves as a key exclusionary factor in the labor market, pushing forced migrants toward self-employment as an alternative.

From a Social Identity Theory (SIT) perspective, this exclusion reinforces the out-group positioning of migrants, as they are unable to integrate into the mainstream job market due to linguistic barriers. Instead, they create their own entrepreneurial pathways, where they can operate within a familiar linguistic and cultural environment.

Thus, the mother tongue takes centre stage. Unable to fully utilize German in their entrepreneurial activities, forced migrants rely on the tools and resources they already have. For many, the decision to start a business arises from the realization that they have access to a sufficient client base in a language they master.

In some cases, this understanding serves as the primary motivation - the fact that they can succeed despite language barriers. For others, it is an additional consideration that reinforces their choice. Beyond language, prior entrepreneurial experience in the home country also plays a sufficient role. Those who had businesses previously often continue in the same field, utilising their expertise. While some migrants first attempt employment in Austria before transitioning to self-employment, others never even consider seeking a job in the host country.

One respondent mentioned that their decision to start a business was connected to the previous experience:

I: Why did you choose this entrepreneurial path?

R: Well, probably because... I know how to do it.

I: That's all?

R: Well, yeah. (chuckles)

I: Interesting. Did you look for a job here in Austria?

R: Yes, I worked.

(R4)

Meanwhile, another never saw the traditional employment as an option for them:

"I never even thought about looking for a job. Why would I look for a job when I already have one? I can't work in a store—well, theoretically, I could. If something happened to me, I could.

But I don't want to."

(R7)

From SIT perspective we notice, how the forced migrants engage in constructing their identities based on their linguistic and past experiences. While some maintain a sense of belonging to their own linguistic group by entering the entrepreneurial field through their mother languages, others reaffirm their self-perception as entrepreneurs in contrast to employees.

While many respondents acknowledged the role of language in their entrepreneurial journey, some challenged this assumption, arguing that language is more of an excuse than the real barrier. These

individuals claim that problem-solving and determination matter more than linguistic ability. One participant rejected the idea of language playing a role altogether, stating:

"Honestly, I would round up all these questions and say that language plays no role at all."

(R4)

When pressed further on whether language truly had no influence, they elaborated:

"Yes. Because... hmm, how to put it... It's too easy to reduce all problems or challenges to the role of language. I think that you can always find a way to solve the problem that you need to solve. If you really need to solve it. If you get stuck on the language and don't complete certain tasks, then the problem isn't the language. That's the point."

(R4)

Other respondents echoed similar views, asserting that those who are truly determined to reach their goals see language as a tool rather than an obstacle:

"Language also plays an important role—it's a tool that helps you expand your horizons and achieve better results. A tool. A tool for further realization."

So, if a person is in charge of their own life, sees their goals, and plans accordingly, they understand: 'Aha, to succeed in this, I need to do this, this, this, and this.' And as a responsible and self-aware person, they just take action and do it."

(R10)

Furthermore, various factors beyond language shape the entrepreneurial motivations among forced migrants. While the language factor can serve as an initial push - in the case of not mastering the local language, or pull - in the case of the existence of a big group of potential customers, speaking their mother tongue, the core drivers behind the businesses also vary.

While some entrepreneurs are primarily driven by some sort of fulfilment, impact or personal vision, others put an opportunity to reach financial success at the front. While these two groups have distinct motivations, they are not mutually exclusive - even those who prioritize financial success acknowledge the importance of interest and passion, and vice versa.

As one of the respondents explains entrepreneurship, emphasizing the initial interest, still confirming, that it is an essential factor to succeed:

"Create whatever you want, but create. I put a lot of meaning into this phrase because every person has a vision—something they can do. From anything, from any random thing they can do uniquely, they can build a business, so to speak. But it will only succeed if they genuinely enjoy it."

(R1)

To summarize a section, while the core drivers for the entrepreneurial activity in the host and home country stay more or less the same, the linguistic aspect comes into a more prominent position in Austria. That is also the most evident in the case of ones, who did not have any prior business experience before the migration. While some would try to come into entrepreneurship anyway, others would take a job opportunity as soon as it arose, if it was not for the lack of language skills.

2. *Language as a barrier and a resource in entrepreneurship*

This section explores the dual role of language proficiency — as both a barrier and a resource — for entrepreneurial activity. While the limited host-country language proficiency can be a sufficient obstacle in the entrepreneurial activity, there are some workaround and strategies to overcome it or at least lower the impact.

First of all, it is noted, that insufficient German proficiency may hinder access to bureaucratic procedures. Most of the respondents mention their struggles with the Austrian formalities, some found them also emotionally consuming:

“I don’t speak German. A2 is... (laughs), well, it’s basically nothing. I mean, it’s... I mean, I would go there, and there were moments when I cried in the WKO, you know. And when I had to talk to a tax consultant on the phone with just an A2 level”.

(R5)

This highlights not only the technical challenge of navigating bureaucracy in a foreign language but also the existing emotional tension of facing administrative hurdles with limited linguistic resources.

The institutions functioning in local language are not the only problem, arising with low German proficiency. Some respondents also note its importance for accessing professional and business networks.

“If we want to participate in conferences in the future, attend business meetings, or take masterclasses, then, of course, language plays a very important role - especially if the market involves Austria and Germany. So, German is still a priority in order to find and understand each other better. To make connections, yes. Knowledge of German is necessary. That’s why it’s more of a long-term perspective—something to use in the future as language skills improve”.

(R2)

This perspective suggests that language proficiency is not just a functional tool but also a marker of legitimacy and inclusion within professional ecosystems. This example here illustrates that without German, one is limited in their ability to engage in the local entrepreneurial scene, thus according to Social identity theory the in-group and out-group dynamics is concerned.

Furthermore, in the case of forced migrant on the front moves the emotional distress associated with the circumstances of their migration, as in contrast voluntary migrants these are highly impactful. Some respondents, for example, delayed enrolling in German courses because they were unsure if they would stay in Austria.

“And now I finally started German courses. Only A1, after two years, only now... Uh... First, we didn’t know if we would stay. And... Well, probably because we became more certain about it. And I also had a big fear — how will I go to classes, how... It was something inside me... How will I go to courses and understand German in German, how will they explain things, how will I handle all that...”

(R8)

This shows that fear of failure, stress, and emotional exhaustion may impact the ability to engage in language learning, which illustrates that while foreign language acquisition may be seen as a skill perfection, it is highly connected to the emotional state of a person.

Despite these struggles, respondents continue taking steps toward business development. While bureaucratic challenges persist, they develop and implement strategies to navigate them. Many solve issues with administrative procedures by persistently engaging with institutions, using translation tools like Google Translate, DeepL, or ChatGPT. Others seek informal assistance from friends or partners, or hire bilingual professionals to handle the process. As one respondent explains:

"There was this guy who helped us figure out what documents were needed to work. He was a lawyer. Back when we lived on the hill, we found him. And when we moved to Vienna, we went to him, and he said, ‘I can fill this out for you. It costs this much.’ Okay. So, yeah, the paperwork needed to open an office and work in it — he handled that for a fee."

(R7)

Beyond bureaucracy, these adaptive strategies extend to business operations. Some respondents intentionally structure their businesses around their existing linguistic strengths, choosing markets where German proficiency is not essential, or targeting ethnic community – either as a starting point or as a long-term strategy. Others integrate bilingual support by hiring German-speaking employees or collaborating with local partners, allowing them to access both ethnic and local markets. As one respondent notices:

"The human resources in our Russian-speaking audience are just as good. Like I said, I'm not going to push myself into a more difficult direction just for the sake of it. Why would I do that, if I can work with the resources that are more familiar and accessible to me? If one day I realize that

these resources are no longer enough, then I'll adjust. But I don't see anything wrong with this approach."

(R4)

Thus, the findings illustrate the various barriers that limited proficiency in the local language builds for forced migrant entrepreneurs. From bureaucratic hurdles to exclusion from professional networks, language influences their entrepreneurial identity by shaping their strategies, emotional resilience, and integration into the host-country business ecosystem. In response, forced migrants adopt adaptive measures, ranging from AI translation tools to targeted market positioning within ethnic communities. These workarounds are not merely tactical but reflect deeper in-group and out-group dynamics in entrepreneurship.

3. *Entrepreneurs' perceptions of language in market positioning*

The languages, the forced migrants speak, shape not only their experiences with local institutions and access to business networks. They also have a strong impact on the way, how entrepreneurs approach the strategic choice of their target audience.

Thus, considering that the majority of the respondents do not have a high proficiency in German or English, they finish focusing on ethnic customers, using Russian/Ukrainian as a main operational language, tailoring to a specific target audience. In this case, sometimes happens, that the local clients may be indirectly approached, but they are never the main focus and thus their acquisition is not considered as a primary goal.

Some respondents mentioned that beyond linguistic limitations, successfully catering to a local audience requires a deep understanding of their needs and cultural context—something they feel more confident about within their own community. One entrepreneur explained:

"He told me, 'Open your office. Learn German. Work with Austrians.' But to work with someone, you need to understand their struggles. I don't know what Austrians struggle with. I know our struggles - they're close to me."

(R10)

On the other hand, some entrepreneurs deliberately invest in learning German, seeing it as a crucial step toward fully integrating into the Austrian market. For them, linguistic fluency is not just about communication—it is a strategic tool for understanding customer needs and successfully adapting their businesses. As one respondent put it:

*"But for a small business, you learn the language to understand the culture as well. If you understand the culture, you understand the **market**². Period. That's the most important thing—*

² Here and further the words in bold in the quotes are left in the language the person used while speaking if it was not Russian. (Author's note)

*you have to understand the **market**. And if you understand the **market**, you know what people need; you can give them what they want."*

(R3)

Market positioning depends on language choice, balancing between cultural affinity and broader customer reach. Furthermore, the question of possible level of income also comes into the picture, as respondents note not only the bigger potential customer base among the local market, but also a higher paying ability of the locals.

"Our Russian-speaking community is, of course, good, but the locals pay more."

(R8)

"I believe that taking clients from your own language group should be the last resort. Let's say, it's good as a starting point, but in the long run, it's more important to target people who have been in this market for a long time, who are working here, and to communicate not just within your own group, but with everyone else. That essentially opens up the whole world for you".

(R1)

While some entrepreneurs see German as key to integration, others adopt a different strategy—positioning themselves as international entrepreneurs through English, which can have several motivations behind. First, it allows businesses to cater to an international audience, expanding their potential market—particularly relevant in e-commerce. Second, some entrepreneurs deliberately use English even when targeting the local market to signal their foreignness. This strategic choice reflects long-term ambitions beyond Austria and helps set clear expectations for customer interactions. Some entrepreneurs prefer to maintain clarity by openly presenting themselves as foreign professionals rather than struggling with imperfect German. One respondent explained:

*"I'll probably make a website in German too, but only when I can actually speak German. Because if someone visits my site in German, then calls me or emails me, and I either write in broken German or answer in English - it'll be **confusing**. I don't want people to feel lost. I want it to be clear from the start: I speak English because I'm a foreigner." (laughs)*

(R9)

Ultimately, language choice is not just a practical necessity but a deliberate strategic decision that shapes market positioning. Whether entrepreneurs focus on ethnic communities, integrate into the local German-speaking market, or establish themselves as international players through English, their approach reflects broader business goals and adaptation strategies. These findings align with the SIT framework, where language serves as both a marker of social identity and a tool for economic positioning. Entrepreneurs navigate between maintaining a sense of belonging within

their community and expanding their reach by integrating into or distinguishing themselves from the local market.

4. *Sense of belonging through language*

Language plays a crucial role not only in operational business activities but also in shaping access to entrepreneurial networks and the formation of professional identity. For forced migrant entrepreneurs, language barriers often determine whether they can fully participate in local business communities or remain on the periphery.

First, it is unsurprising, that low German proficiency leads to exclusion or limitation of possible usage of Austrian entrepreneurial communities. This exclusion is not intentional but rather a natural consequence of language limitations. As one of the interviewees says:

"I wasn't excluded because someone deliberately excluded me, but because I simply can't enter.

Yes. There are so many events at WKÖ³. You could go every week, nonstop. But what's the point..."

(R5)

This experience aligns with SIT, where language proficiency serves as a gatekeeping factor, determining who can fully engage in business networks and who remains on the periphery.

An alternative way to navigate these limitations is by relying on networks of people who share the same mother tongue. As SIT suggests, language acts as a defining factor in shaping group identity. Here, linguistic commonality strengthens in-group cohesion, creating a supportive business environment for migrant entrepreneurs. This dynamic is illustrated by one respondent who initially engaged with fellow Ukrainians through free workshops. Through these interactions, they connected with a future business partner who introduced them to local networks, enabling them to organize paid events outside their ethnic community:

"At first, I was organizing [workshops] for Ukrainians—there's a center for Ukrainians, and I held free sessions there. Even now, I sometimes still do them because I really enjoy it. And then I met a woman who invited me to start doing paid sessions."

(R8)

For those with higher proficiency in English, a third option remains open—accessing more internationally oriented business networks. Many respondents actively utilize this opportunity. However, an interesting pattern emerges: some entrepreneurs deliberately choose to operate in German, even when English could suffice. This decision is not purely practical but tied to their sense of identity and legitimacy within the local business ecosystem:

³ WKÖ - Wirtschaftskammer Österreich - Austrian Federal Economic Chamber. (Author's note)

"And the role of language here... Well, in B2B, I want to do this in German. It's definitely a checkmark, including for my ego. It's also a certain form of legitimization in my own eyes—that I'm doing all of this in German."

(R3)

The same respondent illustrated this identity shift with a powerful metaphor, comparing their transition to that of a fish adapting to a new environment:

"It's like... you were a freshwater fish, but then you swam into the sea, and you become a saltwater fish. A salmon. Salmon is the only fish in the world that can survive in both waters. So, you transform from a freshwater salmon into a saltwater salmon—because you adapt. And then, the other saltwater salmon will start accepting you as one of their own."

(R3)

This metaphor highlights the process of adaptation—by embracing the local language, entrepreneurs feel they 'transform' into legitimate members of the Austrian business ecosystem, ultimately gaining acceptance from their peers. This aligns with SIT, which suggests that individuals actively seek belonging in a group they identify with. By using German, they position themselves within the local business in-group, reinforcing their sense of legitimacy and increasing their chances of acceptance.

High proficiency in multiple languages—not only German but also their native language and English—shapes how entrepreneurs interact with clients. A strong command of the local language fosters trust and credibility among locals, while their native language helps them connect with ethnic communities, and English allows them to position themselves more internationally. As a result, entrepreneurs adapt their language use based on client preferences, facilitating stronger relationships and a more positive engagement experience

"... And, of course, with clients - it can be English, my native language, or German, all depending on what the client prefers. If their priority is German, and we have a better chance of understanding each other in German, then yeah, we'll do that - whatever makes them more comfortable."

(R2)

Ultimately, language is more than a means of communication for forced migrant entrepreneurs—it is a key factor shaping their access to business networks, their professional legitimacy, and their sense of belonging. Limited proficiency in German restricts participation in Austrian entrepreneurial ecosystems, reinforcing out-group positioning. At the same time, linguistic adaptation enables in-group inclusion, whether through ethnic networks, international markets, or full integration into the local business landscape. SIT helps explain these dynamics, as

entrepreneurs actively seek legitimacy and acceptance by aligning their language choices with the groups they aspire to belong to. Their strategic use of German, English, and their native language demonstrates that language is not just a barrier or an enabler but a central element in identity formation within the entrepreneurial environment.

5. *Language and institutional barriers to business legitimacy*

I have already briefly introduced the legal and bureaucratic challenges that arise from not mastering the local language of the country where the business is located. Here, I will provide a more detailed account of the specific areas where these issues emerge, as the phenomenon is quite multidimensional.

Forced migrants often struggle with taxation, regulations, and business registration, partly due to the complexity of legal language. One common strategy to overcome these barriers is hiring a professional who speaks their native language to mediate the process and handle legal inquiries. However, not everyone can afford this approach. For many, financial constraints make hiring an expert unfeasible, leading them to seek alternative solutions.

In such cases, migrants find ways to gather information independently, typically by first researching in their native language to build a foundational understanding of the legal landscape before engaging with Austrian institutions. This research happens both online—through community forums and business chat groups—and offline, such as by attending information sessions tailored for migrants. One respondent describes this process:

"I went to WKO. Actually, even before that, I spent a lot of time reading 'Native Language Business Chat 1' and 'Native Language Business Chat 2.' I read about how to register as a sole proprietor. I read everything I could first. Then, there was a seminar—it was organized for free at one of the Ukrainian centres. The presentation was given by an Austrian, but they translated it into Ukrainian."

(R5)

Another common approach to handling interactions with institutions is seeking informal help from friends or partners who are either native German speakers or have higher language proficiency. This strategy is used even by those who are fluent in English, as many respondents lack confidence that official institutions will be willing — or even able — to communicate in English. Some mention that local bureaucratic staff actively discourage the use of English, emphasizing that German should be spoken instead.

This experience aligns with SIT's argument that language-based discrimination can reinforce out-group positioning, as migrants perceive these language barriers as an additional layer of exclusion. One respondent described their frustration with such encounters:

"They will understand me - unless it's some super-official institution like AMS, where they go, 'Oh no, we won't speak English. Absolutely terrible, terrible! English is not our language, go learn German and come back to AMS.'"

(R10)

However, while some encounter resistance, others report more accommodating experiences, particularly in institutions where staff are willing to switch to English. This suggests that language-related exclusion is not uniform across all bureaucratic settings. One respondent had a notably different experience:

"Actually, Austrians are very supportive. At the Wirtschaftsakademie, they really try - they switch to English and genuinely want to help you. Even at AMS - people always say, 'Oh, AMS is full of old ladies who don't speak anything but German, you have to speak German there.' But when I went to AMS, the young woman helping me actually spoke English with me."

(R9)

Linguistic difficulties not only slow down the process of business registration but also contribute to broader structural barriers that forced migrants face in Austria. While bureaucratic and legal challenges are not solely tied to language, they are often exacerbated by it. Some entrepreneurs struggle to navigate Austria's complex business regulations, particularly in fields with stricter regulations. As a result, some opt to delay registration or operate informally, as formalization may be too difficult, too costly, or legally unattainable.

This complexity, combined with uncertainty about legal pathways, makes some respondents cautious when discussing their business activities.

I: Can you tell me more about that? What exactly do you do on a daily basis?

R: ...In general, I can... Let me think. Hold on. (laughs) I'm processing. You know what, maybe let's leave this off the record.

I: Alright.

R: Basically, I'm doing the same kind of work I was doing before the war.

(R6)

"I haven't been able to fully restore my profession in Vienna. If it were easier to get legalized in (professional field), I would have done it long ago."

(R6)

From a Social Identity Theory perspective, these experiences reflect how forced migrants face structural exclusion from the formal business landscape. Their inability to meet legal requirements places them outside the 'legitimate' entrepreneurial in-group, leading to alternative (and sometimes informal) business practices as a means of survival.

While some entrepreneurs view informality as a temporary phase, hoping to eventually legalize their business, others see it as the only viable option due to legal restrictions in their field and uncertainty about their long-term stay in Austria. For them, formalization is not worth the struggle. This strategic adaptation highlights how legal and linguistic barriers intersect, shaping migrants' entrepreneurial pathways.

This situation places entrepreneurs in a delicate position—operating without proper legal status creates uncertainty about who should be aware of their business activities and to what extent. It also limits their client base primarily to the ethnic community in Austria, where legal formalities may be less of a concern, or to online clients from the same linguistic background if the business model allows it. In this context, the connection to their mother tongue remains crucial, as it shapes both their market reach and business strategies.

"I don't operate legally. If someone asks me, 'Do you pay taxes here?' I'll say, 'No, because I only provide consultations for free.' And I have this feeling that... well, this is something you should step into only once you're officially registered. And I'm not registered."

(R10)

In summary, linguistic barriers are deeply intertwined with bureaucratic and legal challenges, shaping how forced migrant entrepreneurs navigate the Austrian business landscape. The inability to fully comprehend legal procedures and communicate with institutions places many outside the formal entrepreneurial space, reinforcing their out-group positioning.

6. Perceived language-based divides and identity tensions

This section of findings is dedicated to a very important contextual phenomenon. The thesis examines the role of language for the forced migrants, who moved to Austria due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Most of the respondents had a residency in the Ukraine and one in Russia, while all of them identified as Ukrainians. The respondents stated two mother languages in all cases – Russian and Ukrainian, while in some cases the proficiency in the latter was stated as lower, as explained by having Russian as a primary language for the majority of life, while the exposure to Ukrainian was limited. The participants also introduced “Surzhyk⁴” while explaining their history in both languages. As one of the interviewees tells:

"No, I have two mother tongues: both Ukrainian and Russian. That is, I can't say that I didn't know Ukrainian at all. I just spoke it poorly. It was more like, you know, when I spoke, it sounded more like Surzhyk."

(R6)

⁴ Surzhyk - hybrid language variety that blends Ukrainian and Russian elements in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. (Author's note)

As a result of the war the need to choose and demonstrate own identity came to the front. Some of the participants explain the emotional turnover happening with them as the result of all the events and the identity conflict happening also on the linguistic layer. The choice of language at some time transforms from a simple communication tool to one, showing own political position and national identification. One of the respondents shares the following experience:

"...I only speak Russian. I only speak Russian, but when I write... sometimes I write explanations in Russian, sometimes in Ukrainian. Because at the beginning of the war, I wanted to show my position, that I am from Ukraine, so that people wouldn't confuse me with Russians."

(R10)

This linguistic identity negotiation also happens on an emotional level, making the person go through different conflicting positions, trying to find a place of belonging. In this example, the choice of language becomes a heavy psychological game, in which the person tries to negotiate the identity but comes at a lose, as in some aspects while choosing one part of themselves, they have to decline another. This tension on the linguistic layer also leads to the cutting contact with others, who do not see the situation from their perspective, and thus strong division into in and out groups takes place. One of the participants speaks about this conflict as follows:

"Well, first of all, to prove that I am not a traitor to my country. I love my country. And unfortunately, I lost a lot of people from my social circle - but actually, maybe not unfortunately, maybe fortunately, because in a way, it was a sort of cleansing of my surroundings, meaning they probably shouldn't have been there in the first place. But it happened specifically because of disagreements over the fact that they would say to me, 'Why do you still speak Russian? Why don't you speak Ukrainian?'

Guys, I do speak Ukrainian. But you know, I just feel more comfortable, it's easier for me to express my thoughts in Russian. Now, okay, I am trying to do the same in Ukrainian. And I'm trying. But still, my language—the main language I use—remains Russian. At home, I speak Russian..."

(R6)

These tensions happen not only in the personal field, but may also hinder some business opportunities. One of the participants shared an experience of being restricted from collaborating within an ethnic Ukrainian-speaking community because of their language usage at the first place. As they said:

"...There was this moment with the Ukrainian diaspora in (city name). I came to them and said, 'I can run free workshops for you.' And they told me, 'No, we don't want to work with you — you speak Russian'."

(R10)

On the other hand, some respondents stated that they did not experience any issues with language-based exclusion. While they acknowledge that such divisions exist, they choose not to engage in them, emphasising their personal stance. Moreover, in their entrepreneurial activities, they do not feel pressured to validate their language use with others; instead, they focus on their confidence in their own identity and work. As one of the respondents said:

*"The issue of the Russian-Ukrainian language divide—I speak Ukrainian just as fluently as Russian. But my family is Russian-speaking, and throughout my childhood, I spoke Russian. I don't consider it important... not even that - I just don't have this idea in my head that someone might not understand Russian. And I have a very... well, I don't think highly of people who run their social media in Ukrainian but then speak Russian in real life. I don't like such hypocrisy. If someone genuinely doesn't understand me and asks me to switch to Ukrainian, I can do that. But honestly, that rarely happens - maybe some people have never encountered Russian before... very rarely. For everything else - this whole **mrakobesie**⁵ (laughs) - I don't see the point in it. I heal people with my hands. I can stay silent. The language I speak is my decision, not theirs."*

(R7)

This complex questioning of identity on the basis of language becomes even more layered when respondents compare "our people" to "locals" or "Europeans". Some participants clarify who they mean by "our", referring to Russian speakers or a shared historical, political, and economic background that connects them. However, this sense of belonging is not uniform - while some refer to it neutrally, others express a negative stance toward the group.

One respondent neutrally describes how mental frameworks differ between post-Soviet migrants and Austrians, emphasizing the need to adapt:

"Why? Because we are from the CIS countries⁶ - we think like people from the CIS countries. It's ingrained in our genes. And you need to adapt to a different mentality. Despite what my friends say - that I'm a snob like the Austrians (laughs) - that still doesn't mean I'm an Austrian. I still think like a Slav."

(R3)

And another respondent while talking about these differences and indicating the existence of groups, elaborates, when asked about the meaning of "us":

⁵ Mrakobesie – is an emotionally charged word, which does not have a direct translation to English. In this context can be understood as "all this nonsense," "all this extremism," "this hysteria". (Author's note)

⁶ CIS countries - Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) - is a regional intergovernmental organization, formed following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. (Author's note)

"Well, just CIS countries. Just the 'Sovok'⁷."

(R4)

While both respondents use the same label ('CIS countries'), the second respondent's choice of words ('Sovok') carries a distinctly negative connotation. This suggests a more critical or even dismissive attitude toward their own in-group, highlighting the complexity of identity perceptions among forced migrants.

Thus, we see the very specific context of forced migrant entrepreneurs' complex identity conflicts based on language. Some encounter them more, some less, but their influence is not to be ignored, as it has consequences not only in personal but also business relations. The degree to which one is affected depends on both the entrepreneur's own identification and positioning, as well as the attitudes of their counterparts.

Summary of the section

The section presented the findings from the interviews with an emphasis on the role of language in the entrepreneurial activity of the forced migrants in different aspects connected to the business – from the motivation to start the activity to the acknowledging of the informal activities' existence and the context's specific language-based identity conflict. The aspects are intervened in some cases, as one may follow from another and vice versa. Following the thematic topics the SIT theoretically explains arising phenomena and allows studying them under a certain light, what is to be observed in the next section, dedicated to the discussion of the presented results.

⁷ Sovok - derogatory term for the USSR, Soviet mentality, something having the connection to USSR. (Author's note)

IV.2. Discussion of the findings

This section is dedicated to discussion of findings presented earlier. These findings are to be observed under the lens of the Social Identity Theory with the aim of answering the question of “How do forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language in entrepreneurial activity?” I will start with the brief overview of the main ideas of SIT. Then, to ensure the smooth flow the section covers all the six main thematic topics as they were presented in the previous section, and indicates how the findings related to the Research Question and how they can be interpreted under the SIT perspective. After the discussion the overall summary section on theoretical contribution of this master thesis follows.

Social Identity Theory recap

Introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1986) the SIT studies the intergroup behaviour (Brown, 2020), with attention on identification and motivation. While seen themselves as members of the group, individuals aim to reach a positive self-esteem by belonging to the group, which was formed during the processes of social categorization, social identification and social comparison (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As the goal is to be seen positively, the groups are compared such as an own in-group looks better. As the result the “in-group” bias happens, because if which the in-group is been perceived more positively (Aberson et al., 2000), and the favouritism towards in-group members takes place, while the out-group members are discriminated (Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016). Language can be one of the most prominent characteristics of the categorisation, often happening instinctively (Kinzler et al., 2010).

The thesis here is determined to get new insights into how forced migrants perceive the role of language in the entrepreneurial activities in a specific migration context with the use of these aspects SIT provides.

1. Perceptions of language in business motivation

The findings which I presented in this section cover the motivational aspect of starting an entrepreneurial activity in the host country. In these findings, one may notice the strong phenomenon of push-pull dynamics towards entrepreneurship, closely connected to access to the labour market. What is also prominent, is the role of mother language in leveraging the decision of starting a business. Moreover, the fact of putting an agency on themselves in the sense of reaching the goals rather on the language was also essential. This contrast highlights that motivation is not purely reactive but can also be self-driven, shaped by how individuals perceive and leverage their linguistic resources.

The push-pull dynamic (Bizri, 2017) considers the linguistic barrier as one pushing immigrants to self-employment. It is evident, that some forced migrants perceive language barriers as limiting

their ability to integrate into the local labour market, and some respondents state their absolute wish to switch to regular employment in case they have a chance. From the SIT perspective, this dynamic exemplifies the exclusion of forced migrants from the labour market, which limits their economic mobility - an exclusion largely shaped by language-related challenges.

However, this situation can also be viewed from another angle: proficiency in one's mother tongue (Russian, Ukrainian) can serve as a pull factor, presenting opportunities for economic growth. Some forced migrants perceive their native language as an asset and actively leverage it to create business opportunities. When starting a business they strategically design their business models, recognising that they can utilise their ethnic community for their business development in different aspects, including but not limited to targeting the ethnic community as a primary customer or employing people sharing the same language and cultural background. That signals the rational usage of accessible resources.

Thus, for some, entrepreneurship is not merely a reaction to linguistic barriers in wage employment. It is an active choice motivated also by the desire to use their native language as an asset to reach other goals. This suggests that language is a source of empowerment, allowing forced migrants to have greater control over their business and professional course rather than being solely dictated by external limitations.

From the SIT view, this phenomenon can be interpreted as a reinforcement of linguistic identity, as while entrepreneurs put a strong emphasis on the use of their tongue, they confirm their belonging to a particular language group. By seeking trust and support within their community, they create stronger in-group cohesion based on shared language, thus ensuring a stable foundation for business development.

Thus, I argue that language serves as both a push and pull factor in entrepreneurship for forced migrants. The key distinction lies in how different languages are associated with different motivations. The low proficiency in the local language serves as a push factor, while the knowledge of the mother language may pull some in entrepreneurship. Important here is the influence of own agency on the decisions and careful consideration of all the resources and other motivational factors. Thus, for example, when some emphasise the primary role of financial benefit, while others try to serve their community, and others have a higher goal, which can align with the classification suggested by Fauchart and Grubert (2011) and remind us of Darwinian, Communitarian and Missionary social identities, where motivations are concerned.

2. *Language as a barrier and a resource in entrepreneurship*

An important and expected finding in this section is that language barriers exist and hinder entrepreneurial activity among forced migrants not only on the stage of motivation. This happens

in many areas of business and personal life from contacts with institutions to access to professional communities. However, these barriers are not static – with time the entrepreneurs acquire a higher level of the local language that allows them to become more included in the fields and groups which were not available for them earlier. Moreover, they leverage strategies like the use of translation and AI tools and seek formal or informal assistance with the language.

The SIT considers the division of people into in- and out-groups, and that can explain why some forced migrants feel excluded from mainstream business networks. That limits their business and professional opportunities to grow and search for valuable connections. However, some of the respondents demonstrate the wish to cross those boundaries by learning the host-country language. That speaks about the desire to challenge the status quo and belonging to one particular group. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), individuals may utilise a strategy of individual mobility to move to another group. The SIT perspective though sees it more driven by the need to escape a negative self-image associated with the current in-group a person identifies with (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

I argue that in the case of forced migrant entrepreneurs, this strategy is not about rejecting their original in-group but about strategically expanding their group affiliations to gain access to broader opportunities. What seems important here, there is no refusal to associate with the current in-group with the wish to belong to another one as well. Thus, the boundaries of the groups become less static. Thus, language functions as both a constraint and a resource: those who successfully navigate these linguistic transitions are not only able to integrate into broader business networks but also use their dual-group identity as an advantage in building connections, expanding clientele, and positioning their businesses more strategically.

3. *Entrepreneurs' perceptions of language in market positioning*

The findings illustrate that language choice plays a crucial role in shaping market access, target customers, and business positioning. Forced migrant entrepreneurs strategically decide on a primary business language, which, in turn, determines their market niche and how they present themselves in a social and economic context.

The following classification (Table 13) summarizes these dynamics, linking language choice to market engagement and identity positioning.

Table 13. The connection between the chosen language, operating market and positioning.

Language Choice	Market/Niche	Positioning
Mother Language	Ethnic Market	"Our People" – Strong in-group identification, catering to co-ethnic clientele.
German	Local Market	Integration – Seeking to be recognized as part of the host community, blending in culturally and linguistically.
English	Local/International Market	International – Positioning business beyond national/ethnic ties to attract diverse clientele; signalling being a “foreigner” to a local audience

Source: author

While this classification introduces three distinct positioning strategies, in reality, forced migrant entrepreneurs often transition between these categories over time. Some may initially rely on their ethnic community before expanding into mainstream markets, while others may deliberately maintain an international identity to cater to broader audiences. Moreover, some entrepreneurs use several strategies at the same time, switching between the languages and identities depending on the context.

SIT suggests that people reinforce group belonging by emphasizing shared language, which explains why many forced migrants open businesses that serve their ethnic community first. However, some entrepreneurs purposely step outside their linguistic group to gain legitimacy in mainstream markets, which shifts the leading role from a mother language to a local one, signalling their switch towards adaptation to the local environment. Others, already having a solid knowledge of English, choose to go outside of the ethnic community by implementing English as a main business language, claiming to be an “International” to signal their distinction from host and ethnic communities, though still serving both if requested. Thus, that is clear, that forced migrant entrepreneurs can use language as a market positioning tool, which can influence their long-term business success and ability to scale beyond ethnic enclaves.

4. *Sense of belonging through language*

Findings show that language proficiency has an impact on trust in business relationships, both within co-ethnic groups and with host-country actors, though different languages play a more important role in each of these contexts.

SIT suggests that linguistic commonality builds social identity and trust - this explains why forced migrants tend to seek business partners who speak their language. The members of the same in-

group tend to provide support for each other and have a more positive outlook. Thus, no wonder entrepreneurs utilise these connections to seek help, support and growth. That aligns perfectly with the previous findings, illustrating that the language nuances demonstrate familiarity and those who are familiar enjoy a higher level of trust (Chong et al., 2010).

While in-group trust is naturally reinforced through language commonality, forced migrant entrepreneurs face a different challenge when entering cross-cultural business networks. Here, trust must be built through other mechanisms, often requiring language proficiency as a signal of credibility. However, some entrepreneurs intentionally break linguistic barriers to expand their network and build cross-cultural trust. From the findings presentation, we see that German proficiency allows to be included in the economic context, which would not be accessible without a sufficient level of language. Access to the professional local communities may not be explicitly restricted, but insufficient linguistic skills contribute to an individual feeling uncomfortable as well as the members of the out-group not being easily able to include the outsider. According to SIT, and as, for example, mentioned by Zhang and Peltokorpi (2016) language operates as a trust-building mechanism, rather than a functional tool. Because if it was otherwise the switch to English when both parties can do it would solve the question just as effectively, which is not really the case in some situations.

As was clearly illustrated by one of the respondents with the fish metaphor - language proficiency is not just about communication, it's about legitimacy, credibility, and trust in business relationships. It signals an entrepreneur's competence, commitment to the local market, and ability to navigate business environments effectively. While the social identity of the entrepreneur is shaped by the sense of belonging to the group they aim to become a part of, the business relations are affected via the increased access to previously unavailable networks.

5. *Language and institutional barriers to business legitimacy*

Following the findings, that demonstrated the various difficulties the forced migrant entrepreneurs encounter in the legal field, I argue, that navigating bureaucratic processes is also language-dependent, and this affects forced migrants' ability to formalize their businesses.

Tenzer and Pudielko (2017) illustrate the influence of language on power dynamics in multinational teams within organizations. I argue in this thesis, that in the entrepreneurial context we may as well state, that from the SIT perspective, language-based exclusion reinforces power dynamics, which explains why forced migrants struggle with legal and regulatory processes in a new country. To overcome these challenges, forced migrant entrepreneurs rely on available resources, primarily their mother tongue. They often seek information in their native language first or involve third parties such as consultants, employees, or friends to assist in navigating the legal system.

And therefore some experience language-based discriminatory behaviour in the form of refusal to switch to the language for clear communication from formal institutions. That behaviour aligns with SIT, which shows this tendency of negative perception of out-group members, as well as putting less effort into understanding the messages by the members of another in-group (Greenway et al. 2016). In this case, the forced migrants and the local representatives of formal institutions are contrasted.

Thus, those who gain proficiency in the host-country language or receive institutional language support can more effectively break the bureaucratic barriers. However, for some forced migrant entrepreneurs, language-based bureaucratic struggles amplify the perceived complexity of business formalization. As a result, they choose not to formalize their businesses, as the effort required outweighs the perceived benefits. This exclusion from the formally registered business environment limits their opportunities for growth and can negatively impact their self-image. From the SIT perspective, being excluded from the formal economy reinforces a marginalized social identity, further entrenching their position outside the mainstream legal and business system.

6. *Perceived language-based divides and identity tensions*

The last, but not least aspect to discuss is the findings regarding the context relevant to this particular wave of forced migration. In general, according to SIT, some highlight the main role of language in establishing and maintaining social identity and ethnicity (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1983). In this particular scenario, the forced migrant experience is shaped by political and historical tensions, affecting language choice in business and in personal life. What makes this choice even more complicated – the individuals often are torn apart between two mother languages – Russian and Ukrainian. In this case, they have to navigate the conflict, in which one of their social identities is put in a negative light, and thus respondents must find a way around accepting or rejecting this part of themselves. As the usage of the Russian language, which for some of the interviewees is the first language to use, becomes a marker of “traitor”, the switch to Ukrainian becomes a sufficient strategy to claim the identity among the right in-group.

To navigate this divide, some entrepreneurs attempt to avoid explicit associations with Russian. Others strategically adapt their language use depending on the target market, utilizing Ukrainian for certain networks while continuing to operate in Russian for existing customer bases. Others, however, do not accept these tensions and continue using Russian in their operations, claiming their identity as professionals, whose skills do not depend on the language they speak.

While the personal conflict is clear, these linguistic tensions might also affect the possible business collaborations inside own ethnic community. Beyond personal identity struggles, this linguistic divide influences business operations in tangible ways. Entrepreneurs may face difficulties in

attracting certain customers, securing partnerships, or being accepted in specific business networks, all of which impact their market positioning and growth strategies. As mentioned, SIT suggests that language is a political and identity marker, which explains why some migrants deliberately choose or reject Russian/Ukrainian in their branding and business networks. That also explains why some communities may deliberately exclude some willing to belong due to this specific language division. Thus, as a result, some forced migrant entrepreneurs are not granted valuable opportunities even in their own ethnic community, while one may expect from previous findings this to be a place, where individuals would be accepted. Negative attitudes and emotions towards ones perceived as outsiders are nothing new indeed for SIT (Lauring, 2008). What is important though, is that the spoken language takes the primary lead in group categorization, moving the nationality behind. As a result, entrepreneurs must navigate an internal conflict where one aspect of their linguistic identity is stigmatized. This forces them to either accept or distance themselves from that part of their background, shaping both their personal identity and business strategy.

V. CONCLUSION

V.1. Summary

In this Master's thesis the following research question was raised: "How do forced migrant entrepreneurs perceive the role of language in entrepreneurial activity?". To answer this question the Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) was applied as a theoretical lens. The phenomenon of language is complex, and as the chosen theory suggests, adds an additional layer of complexity via its role as a social identity marker.

The research started with a careful examination of the existing literature in order to gain an understanding on what coverage of the phenomenon exists. The second chapter thus examines the role of language in IB, the application of SIT and the question of forced migration and entrepreneurship, while trying to bring all of them together. Adopting the philosophical positioning of social constructivism I attempted to do interpretive research to discover the voices of participants, rather than achieve the overall generalisation. The semi-structured interviews as a method of qualitative study were chosen as the best option to achieve this goal. The interviewees faced different struggles and reacted differently to similar experiences, which I showed via incorporating their words, while presenting the findings. The discussion section thus served to elaborate on what was found to highlight the most prominent themes and pay attention to how all these experiences connect to the theory and to what was already known. The findings indicate that language is not merely a communication tool but a defining factor influencing economic participation, social belonging, and professional identity. The complex role of language is clearly demonstrated, thus calling to even more attention and further examination.

V.2. Theoretical contribution

The thesis builds upon Social Identity Theory (SIT) and its application in language, international business (IB), and forced migrant entrepreneurship. By bringing these concepts together some interesting extensions and additions to already existing research occurs. Further, I will highlight four key areas, in which the work contributes.

Expanding SIT to forced migrant entrepreneurship

The SIT enjoys quite a wide application in the scientific field in general, and it also found its place in the IB studies (Brown, 2020). An important remark here, however, is that the theory is mostly used in organizational studies (Tenzer et al., 2017). That seems reasonable as such topics as multinational teams and intra-firm relations indeed concentrate on group dynamics, so the application of SIT fits. My thesis makes an attempt to apply the SIT not just to entrepreneurship, but to the specific context of forced migration, which was not done before. While the IB application of SIT focuses on formal employment, studying such phenomena as knowledge sharing in MNCs (Mäkelä et al., 2007) or formation of employee groups (van den Born & Peltokorpi, 2010), my work moves to the field of entrepreneurship, the field of self-employment, and demonstrates how the forced migrants navigate social identity through entrepreneurship, using language. I highlight, that in-group and out-group formation is a dynamic process, by showing how the forced migrant entrepreneurs shift identities also depending on business strategy, which is not widely covered in the literature on SIT. The respondents adapt, negotiate, and even reject linguistic groupings based on economic strategies rather than fixed identity affiliations.

Bridging language and market strategy in IB

The research on language in IB is also mostly studied via its connection to MNCs (Karhunen et al., 2018). The topics, which are usually covered are, for example, linguistic barriers or lingua franca (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014). This thesis expands the research, integrating the discussion of language with market positioning and decision-making in the context of forced migrant entrepreneurship. The focus of the research is on the perceptions of the participants, but I also find reasonable to highlight some pattern of the strategic language use, which I divided into:

- ethnic market focus (mother language)
- local market integration (German - host-country language)
- international market positioning (English)

This contribution is valuable as it also considers that the language can be perceived not only from the perspective of a barrier but as a strategic tool to utilise to establish a position in the market and reach their goals. Thus, that widens the previous research, which suggests that linguistic diversity can be used as an advantage in a globalised market (Williams & Krasniqi, 2018).

Challenging the “language barrier” narrative

Although I touched upon the perception of language being a barrier for entrepreneurship in the previous subsection, I put it with strong emphasis here as well to highlight various aspects, of which this is applicable.

Much of the existing literature (ex. Bizri, 2017; Wauters & Lambrecht, 2008) treats language as an obstacle that migrants must overcome to integrate into the economy. I argue, that this narrative simplifies the experiences made by forced migrant entrepreneurship. While, as was already mentioned, some deliberately leverage language barriers for market positioning, choosing whether to remain in an ethnic niche, integrate locally, or market internationally. Moreover, some of my interviewees actively reject the idea that language is a limitation at all, which challenges the dominant discourse in IB literature. They claim agency in their decisions, not seeing these language struggles like anything more as a piece of environment they have to take into account and handle in the best way possible to reach their goals. Thus, forced migrant entrepreneurs use language dynamically rather than passively overcoming hurdles. Moreover, for sure, the aspect of changes should be also recognized, and as Williams and Williams (2012) state that migrant entrepreneurs tend to adapt to new environments and contexts, in which motivations might change, I build upon this view and claim, that the view on language and its meaning for the entrepreneur personally and on their business also does not stay in stasis.

Language, emotional identity, and business decisions

The qualitative design of the study does not claim to aim to create a generalisation or pattern, applicable to all cases, but it allows capturing stories of individuals. Thanks to that I was able to take a closer look at the connection between language learning and emotional experiences to business development. Some of my respondents showed resistance to host-country language learning due to trauma or feeling instability or uncertainty regarding their future, while others viewed learning German as a form of self-legitimization and professional validation in the host country. Moreover, as language is a dynamic construct, the attitude towards it and the emotional response of the forced migrant entrepreneurs did not stay the same as at the beginning of their journey in Austria.

Important for the context of this forced migration is the finding of the tension between two mother languages of the interviewees – Russian and Ukrainian – and the following linguistic identity conflicts based on them. Moreover, these divisions do not only concern the respondents on a personal emotional level but can also influence market access and networking opportunities, which illustrates another side of language’s impact on entrepreneurial decisions. And while it is recognized, that forced migrants indeed often face psychological problems as a result of the

traumatic events in contrast to voluntary migrants (Wauters & Lambrecht, 2006, 2008), I attempt to broaden the topic for discussion in the IB and entrepreneurship literature by addressing emotional resistance to language learning in entrepreneurship and the socio-political dimension to the study of language in business.

V.3. Managerial Implications

As the thesis studied a complex phenomenon, there is no wonder, there are some areas, where their implications can be of benefit. Thus, I would highlight the relevance of my work for policymakers, business support organizations, and forced migrant entrepreneurs themselves.

Policymakers and business support organisations

As was highlighted by Piekkari et al. (2021) language barriers limit access to “knowledge, safety, justice, and voice”. Though, they were discussing that in a management context, that seems true for a lot of other fields. The language proficiency should also be recognized as a core element in forced migrant integration policies. And while Austria indeed recognises the importance of language knowledge and provides free courses for refugees via initiatives such as ÖIF - the Austrian Integration Fund, which acknowledges the role of language as a core element in integration (ÖIF, n.d.), I argue that the special language offer for forced migrant entrepreneurs or ones, interested in starting the business, can bring a lot of value. The contribution of migrant entrepreneurship to the economic growth of the host country has already been noted by respectful sources (IOM, 2018). That is also noted in Austria, as there are some programmes offered to assist in starting the business. Unfortunately, often the forced migrants are disadvantaged as they do not know how to find them. Thus, this moment should be taken into account and higher publicity might be reached via collaborations of the institutions and organisations with ethnic communities, so they could communicate to forced migrants the available support options. Moreover, I would add some programs that support language acquisition for business purposes (rather than just general communication), which can accelerate migrant entrepreneurs’ entry into formal economic structures, thus adding value to society. Furthermore, bureaucratic processes should be made more accessible by offering multilingual resources or facilitating language-friendly business advisory services to reduce administrative exclusion. Although, some respondents mention the existence of consultations tailored to their needs in terms of language, the existing solutions and offers are rather limited which can not only slow down the process of registration and business growth but also lead the entrepreneurs to the informal sector, what can bring negative consequences for them and limit the country’s potential benefit of having them formally registered and contributing. Moreover, I suggest, that incubators and accelerators should tailor support to forced migrants by providing mentorship in multiple languages and fostering multicultural business networking opportunities. Legal and financial advisory services should be adapted to accommodate linguistic diversity, ensuring that language barriers do not limit access to funding or business registration support too.

Forced migrant entrepreneurs

While, again, that is quite impossible to generalise the recommendations for forced migrant entrepreneurs themselves, as the story of each individual is diverse. Furthermore, that is not only the external and seen factors such as the capital available to be considered, but the unseen internal struggles as the psychological and emotional conflicts also to be taken into account. Thus, while I will list some practical suggestions, I emphasise importance of tailoring them to each case individually.

Entrepreneurs can strategically use their native language as a competitive advantage when targeting ethnic markets while simultaneously investing in German or English proficiency to expand beyond their immediate communities. Essential to consider the speed and motivation in learning the language. Thus, what some respondents highlighted as their own advice is to make a decision about the future plan regarding staying in Austria or moving back or somewhere else. They say, it is important and actually helps with taking further steps not to live in indecision. Moreover, the modern solutions that can help with navigating language-based barriers in bureaucracy, customer acquisition, and business scaling such as digital and AI tools and online translators are not to be avoided, as they can substantially support the entrepreneurial journey. While, of course, the traditional option of asking for informal help from acquaintances or friends and the formal option of paying for services remains relevant this technological way of translation gives better access to knowledge and enables communication, which is of high importance in multilingual contexts (Piekkari et al. 2021).

V.4. Limitations and directions for future research

This study is driven by a socio-constructive logic with the aim of doing interpretative research – that means I did not strive for generalisability and the objectivity of the knowledge is not something at the centre of attention in this work. I encountered and analysed ten stories of ten individuals, which is valuable. There are several limitations and context-relevant remarks which must be acknowledged for a better understanding of the results.

First of all, I - an author and interviewer – am Russian and my respondents are from Ukraine. I find it appropriate to highlight that fact as very context-sensitive, considering the ongoing war between the countries and the tension, surrounding not only language. Thus, the individuals who agreed to participate in the interviews are those, who already might have been more open to dialogue. This means that perspectives from individuals less willing to engage with a Russian interviewer—perhaps due to mistrust, trauma, or strong political stances—were not captured in this study. I would also expect differences in experiences and world-views from these potential respondents.

I also highlight the limitation in the range of sectors my interviewees were present. The greater access to different industries could enrich the data and give an insight on specifics of doing business in various entrepreneurial fields.

Furthermore, I think the research further can benefit from acknowledging different social experiences made by female and male entrepreneurs. As for example, even previous studies noticed the difference in gender (male) positively influencing the entrepreneurial activity of the forced migrants (Williams & Krasniqi, 2018), I would suggest paying more attention to this aspect in future research as well. Future research could adopt a gendered lens to closely examine, for example, whether female forced migrant entrepreneurs face different linguistic or social barriers compared to men or how entrepreneurial motivations and strategies differ based on gendered expectations in host societies.

Entrepreneurs' language use, market strategies, and social identities are not static—they evolve based on experience, economic success, and long-term integration plans. Thus, it might be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study in the field, trying to capture the changes throughout time and possibly space, as some forced migrants for example tend to go home even after being successful in the host country (Williams et al., 2023), while others stay, and the differences for this case can also be interesting.

And, for sure, the experiences made by participants are tied to the geographical context as well – what is relevant for Austria does not have to be applicable to other countries, due to differences in various parameters, such as, for example, the English language proficiency of the general

population. Thus, while I explicitly studied the Austrian context, I highlighted the limits of its transposition to other contexts.

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APPENDIX

Participant Consent⁸

THE LANGUAGE INFLUENCE ON THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITY AMONG FORCED MIGRANTS: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS STUDY

- I _____ **voluntarily** agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that I can refuse to answer any question **without** any consequences.
- I have had the purpose of the study explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to **ask questions** about the study before, during, and after the interview.
- I understand that by participating in the research, I take part in an **in-depth qualitative interview**.
- I agree to my interview being **audio-recorded**. I am aware that this will not be included in the thesis, it is used for data analysis.
- I understand that I can ask for deleting my interview **within 1 week** after the recording.
- I understand that the information provided will be treated **confidentially**.
- I understand that in this research my identity will remain **anonymous**. This will be done by changing my name and hiding any details of my interview which may give out my identity or the identity of people mentioned in the interview.
- I understand that my interview or parts of it will be **quoted** in Resercher's name master's thesis.
- I understand that a **transcript** will be made. I agree with this transcript to be shown in the thesis attachment.
- I understand that I have **access** to the provided information.
- I understand that I can **contact the researcher** for further information anytime.
- I have received a **copy** of this consent form.

Researcher:

Researcher's name

Email: researcher's email

Supervisor:

Univ. -Prof. Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki, PhD

Department of Marketing and International Business

Date

Name (in block letters) and signature of
the **participant**

Signature of the **researcher**

⁸ Participant's consent form with minor changes is taken from the Master thesis of Julia Angi (Angi, 2022)

Interview Transcript - Sample

Introduction and Background

I (00:27)

Could you please introduce yourself? What is your name, age?

R2 (00:29)

I am (Name). I am 24 years old. What else?

I (00:35)

Where are you from? Which city? What part of the country is it?

R2 (00:39)

Alright, I am from Ukraine, from the city of Odesa, which is in the south of the country.

I (00:47)

Can you tell me about your journey as a forced migrant to this country? Why did you move to Austria, when, and with whom?

R2 (00:54)

So, the reason for my relocation was the war, the lack of... Well, obviously, the lack of safety and development potential in my country due to the war, as my professional field is not as well-paid and in demand at the moment. So. I left with (Boyfriend's name)...

I (01:20)

Who is that?

R2 (01:21)

... (Boyfriend's name). That's my boyfriend. (laughs) Yeah. Should I mention the date? Like...

I (01:28)

As you wish.

R2 (01:29)

Alright. Well, it happened around March 2022. Why Austria? Because a friend of mine was already here. He offered to help with translating documents and to support us in general, as we had no contacts abroad where we could go and settle. So, we chose Austria, and once we arrived, we were deciding whether to stay here or move somewhere else. But Austria turned out to be quite an attractive country to settle in and develop in many aspects - security, accessible education, availability of jobs. I wouldn't say that social support was amazing, but it was necessary in the beginning until we found work. However, we didn't rely on it for long and tried to get employed or start self-employment as soon as possible.

I (02:35)

How do you feel about moving here, and was Austria your initial choice, or did it just happen?

R2 (02:41)

It just happened.

I (02:45)

And what was the initial choice?

R2 (02:47)

The initial choice... It was primarily based on having a good acquaintance here who was willing to help, since we didn't know the language and had no relatives or friends to assist us with settling down. It was crucial to have a place to stay initially, register properly, and just get a short guide on what to do. And that's basically it.

I (03:15)

What was your occupation before moving to Austria?

R2 (03:19)

So, I graduated from university with a degree in marketing. From Odesa National University of Economics. Then I got a job at the company (Name of the company) where I worked as a graphic designer. I started working there while still in my final year of university.

After graduation, I decided to go into self-employment, which was also related to **social media marketing**. I managed social media accounts, set up targeting, and wrote content. However,

photography was not my main task, though I did take pictures occasionally. In Austria, I focused more on this aspect.

I (04:23)

What languages do you speak? How proficient are you?

R2 (04:26)

So, well, I speak Ukrainian, Russian, and English. And... German too, I guess. Yeah, let's count German as well. Obviously, Russian and Ukrainian are my native languages. Umm... English—I'd say conversational... Yeah, let's put it at B2. As for writing... Well... Maybe B1? Yeah, let's go with B1 for now. Umm... German—A2. Across the board, A2 in everything. That's it.

I (04:56)

Did you speak German or English before coming to Austria?

R2 (05:00)

I spoke English, but before moving to Austria, my level was lower. My spoken English was probably A2, just like my writing. So I worked on it here. German? No, obviously not.

I (05:17)

Not at all?

R2 (05:18)

Not at all. It wasn't part of my life in any way.

I (05:20)

And you didn't plan on learning it?

R2 (05:24)

Umm... No, I didn't plan to. Maybe I had some slight interest, but it wasn't related to university or my career. I had no connections to the language. Yes, that's it.

Business and Entrepreneurship

I (05:37)

Can you tell me about your business? Could you please give me examples of your daily activities?

R2 (05:43)

So, in business, well, it's primarily about providing services, mainly in marketing - specifically, social media marketing. Of course, a lot depends on the platform, but at the moment, I focus mostly on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook.

And what does my job include? Well, it's content creation - so, photography, video shooting, and of course, editing. Then there's the actual account management and proposing business strategies. Basically, I offer my clients a structured service package along with pricing, and the client chooses what works best for them.

Now, one of the main selling points of my... my business, I'd say, is flexibility. See, each of these plans comes with a specific set of services and a certain number of photos, but the client decides how much control they want to give me over their social media management.

Some prefer to hand over full control, while others only need partial support - for example, just photos and videos - but they want to handle the posting themselves. I give them full access to all the content, which makes my services a great option for those who don't want to spend too much on marketing or want to maintain personal control over their social media.

So, it's more flexible, both financially and in terms of personal preferences. That's what makes it an adaptive approach.

I (07:41)

Why did you choose this path of entrepreneurship?

R2 (07:45)

I think this is connected to my experience even before moving to Austria, as I already had a similar experience in Ukraine. And why do I like it? Because it gives me complete autonomy and independence. That is, if I want to increase my income, it is easier for me to do so as a self-employed person. It also provides freedom of choice. That is, at any moment, I can change, for example... Yes, primarily my pricing policy; I can change my approach, change my location, or even my place of residence. Well, I don't mean that I'm going to just up and leave Austria or anything. What I mean is that I have the freedom to manage my time however it suits me—let's say, to maintain a balance between work and my hobbies, yeah?

So, I set my own schedule, and I definitely prefer that over, say, a standard job with fixed hours.

Plus, I really enjoy variety, and I like it when my work is project-based, where I can explore different industries and develop myself in various directions - whether creatively or technically.

I (09:06)

Did you search for a job here in Austria? If yes, could you please share your experiences?

R2 (09:12)

Yes, I looked for a job (laughs). I did, and it actually happened pretty quickly.

When I arrived, I didn't register with AMS. I had a general understanding that without a strong level of German, I'd most likely be looking for work in service-related fields, or... um... how do you say it, the food industry? Yeah? Like, in the food industry, what's the right term for that...?"

I (09:40)

Gastronomy.

R2 (09:41)

Gastro... well, let's call it gastronomy, yeah.

So, I immediately applied to C&A, sent my resume there. Um, basically, places like Zara - where you stock merchandise, or maybe help out with food prep, if needed.

That also included McDonald's, where I got a very quick response. After the interview, I got the job right away. It didn't take me long at all—maybe just a couple of weeks. They reply really fast. And then, after I left McDonald's, I found out that a café was looking for someone in the **social media marketing** field. Since I already had experience, I just walked in for an interview - I didn't even send a resume. It was more of a conversation, and then they offered me a trial week to show my skills. After that, they hired me officially.

And yeah, that's it! (laughs)

I (10:59)

How do you understand entrepreneurship?

R2 (11:03)

How do I understand entrepreneurship? Well, I see it as... I think, first and foremost, it's about making decisions. In simple terms, it's about a person who takes responsibility - for their actions, for their business.

It's someone who can bring a new product to the market or offer services, while being completely independent... right? Self-employment. Yeah, self-employment. They rely entirely on themselves, their skills, and their capital. And naturally, the future of their business depends on the decisions they make.

Of course, a business can have employees as well, but in the end, it's the entrepreneur who stands at the top, makes all the decisions, and leads the business.

I (11:53)

Given the chance to be employed, would you choose employment over entrepreneurship?

R2 (12:00)

I think it would be possible if there were... let's say, certain criteria that would make a salaried job suitable for me. Why? Because employment, after all, is a more stable form of work, obviously. There are fewer risks involved, right?

But if the salary were high enough or at least reasonably competitive, and the working conditions matched my expectations, then yes, I would consider it. For example, I have specific criteria—as I mentioned before - like variety in tasks, flexibility, and the ability to plan my own schedule. If it were project-based work, for instance, then yes, quite possibly.

That could apply to **social media marketing**, strategy, PR, and basically anything related to marketing and its different branches. So, why not? Especially if the company's field itself was something I found interesting.

I (13:04)

How did you start your entrepreneurial activities in Austria? Could you provide an example of how it was?

R2 (13:11)

Yeah, so, I started thinking about the fact that, since I already had my own kind of project that I was working on—so basically, I was employed. I had a job. I thought about the fact that, since there was already some level of success in managing social media for that particular business, then maybe it would be worth trying myself in other projects as well.

So, I started looking into how to start my own business, I looked into taxes. How to do it all - since I already knew some people who had started businesses in Austria, I was able to ask them about it, yeah, how exactly they did it. And that made it easier for me as well when it came to handling the paperwork.

And that's it. (laughs).

I (14:10)

What factors did you consider before starting the business?

R2 (14:12)

I think... the possibility of having enough time. Understanding how much I need to earn. Yeah, I mean, some kind of minimum, considering Austria's laws. Like... under what conditions, yeah, at what income level, I have to pay taxes.

What I need for that, what I need to buy to run my business—like, you know, equipment, any kind of gear for content creation.

And, of course, competition—so basically, just how relevant my business actually is in Austria. Like, whether there are already similar agencies or entrepreneurs doing the same thing. How much demand there really is.

I (15:04)

What about language?

R2 (15:06)

I can't say that the German language played a decisive role. Yeah, of course, I understand that it's a big advantage if you're trying to find clients or employers who prefer doing business in German. But I'm really glad that many entrepreneurs here are open to speaking English.

Yeah. And plus, since I found other entrepreneurs from Ukraine here, yeah... and I actually got a job with some of them, of course, it was much easier to work with them in my native language.

And also, I don't know if I should mention this or not, but... my business partner, the person I create content with, yeah, she understands German at a C1 level.

So, since we work together, it simplifies things a lot. Because my main task is to stick to our plan and execute the project.

I mean, I have a list of things to do, a list of how they need to be done, and communication can happen in different ways - either together as a team, or with the client directly... in English, in our native language, or if it's in German, then of course, my business partner takes the lead, since she knows German at a much higher level.

Language in Business Operations

I (16:41)

Okay. What language do you use in your day-to-day business operations?

R2 (16:49)

Day-to-day business operations... You mean, like, bookkeeping, taxes?

I (16:58)

Everything. Communication with clients, reports, taxes, AMS, or whoever you need to talk to. With your business partner...

R2 (17:04)

Oh, it's a complete mix. A total mix. (laughs)

So, like... Documents, for example - contracts, spreadsheets, my personal financial records for tax purposes, expenses - that's all in English.

Receipts and communication... well, receipts are in German.

Communication with AMS, Finanzamt, WKO - that depends on what I need from each organization. It can vary—sometimes in English, sometimes in German.

But I'm really glad that, at the very least, some people in these offices understand a little bit of English - even if it's just a bit.

Like, government offices, public administration services - yeah, in those places.

And, of course, with clients - it can be English, my native language, or German, all depending on what the client prefers.

If their priority is German, and we have a better chance of understanding each other in German, then yeah, we'll do that - whatever makes them more comfortable.

I (18:25)

How do you manage communication with clients?

R2 (18:31)

What exactly do you mean?

I (18:30)

Everything. What language? What platforms do you use?

R2 (18:31)

Okay. So, email. Social media—like WhatsApp or Telegram. I also reach out to clients directly through Instagram sometimes. And, again, it depends on the nationality of the client and their preferences. I might write in Ukrainian, Russian, English, or German. And, of course, I use a more formal tone depending on the context. That's it. (laughs) I don't know what else to say.

I (19:18)

I assume you don't have suppliers?

R2 (19:18)

No.

I (19:20)

And you don't have employees either...?

R2 (19:22)

Well... yeah. I mean, if we're talking about how I'm legally registered - then yeah, I don't have hired employees. Of course, it's a possibility, but right now, I'm not considering it. Because I've only just started.

I (19:38)

Could you provide an example where language facilitated business operations?

R2 (19:45)

Hmm... (pauses)

I (19:50)

Like, in negotiations or networking?

R2 (19:50)

Successful in what sense? Like, we spoke in a particular language and the person appreciated it or...?

I (20:00)

Yeah, something like that. If anything comes to mind.

R2 (20:04)

Honestly? Not really.

I (20:07)

What about the opposite? A time when language made business negotiations more difficult?

R2 (20:10)

I can't say I've had any problems with communication. Like, again, I'm lucky that a lot of people are open to speaking English... Even with bloggers, for example - since my business is in social media, sometimes I need to reach out to influencers for collaborations. And from what I've seen, most bloggers understand English, or they're also foreigners from other countries. And since English is an international language, there's no issue there.

I (20:43)

How do language skills influence your access to resources?

R2 (20:46)

I'd say they do have an impact, but... Like, if I'm on a computer or a phone, I can translate a webpage, so it doesn't really cause me any inconvenience. Obviously, this mostly applies to German. With English, it's clear - I might need to translate a word or two, but overall, it doesn't create any difficulty. But since I've mentioned that my German level is lower, then yeah - if I'm on some government website, I can find the information, translate it, and understand it.

I (21:25)

Right, the next question is related to that - have you used any translation services or tools for your business, and how effective have they been?

R2 (21:33)

Of course! I've used Google Translate, artificial intelligence...

I (21:41)

Which AI tool?

R2 (21:42)

ChatGPT. (laughs) ChatGPT, because it helps structure responses. Like, if I need something in German, it translates texts more accurately, more properly. Plus, it's a really useful tool for writing reviews, drafting responses to client messages. For example, it makes my responses more grammatically correct and more clearly formulated—especially when I get repeat questions and I don't want to waste time typing out the same thing every time. In that sense, AI is just an irreplaceable thing.

I (22:25)

Hmm. So, five stars?

R2 (22:26)

Yes. It does a good job. (laughs)

I (22:28)

What do you think influences your understanding of the local market?

R2 (22:32)

Understanding the local market... Well, first of all, mentality - understanding the way people think. And in general, realizing that we do have differences in values, even in how business is approached. Second, a really big one is understanding the laws. Because I think the biggest fear people have—and I have it too—is not understanding some legal regulation. Because legal systems here are very different from Ukraine's, yeah. What else could there be? What else?

I (23:15)

What is the role of language in all of this?

R2 (23:16)

In all of this...? Very important! If we're talking about German, then yes, it's very important—because, obviously, the laws are in German. And of course, if you really want to immerse yourself in the culture and understand the mentality, you have to communicate with locals. That's the first thing. Or at least—if it's possible to do it in English, then okay, fine, English can work. But still, it's important to understand what's essential for local people—what their needs are, how they make purchasing decisions. And naturally, even if clients aren't locals, but they've lived in Austria for a long time, they've adapted to this system—so the way you approach them should be the same as with Austrians. Basically, they're already part of the society here.

I (24:10)

Have there been any misunderstandings influenced by language differences? If so, how did you resolve them?

R2 (24:18)

Mmm... no, not really. I can't think of any.

I (24:22)

Hmm. What is the role of language in recognizing business opportunities?

R2 (24:30)

Also... I'd say it's important. Why? Because, for example, if we want to participate in conferences in the future, attend business meetings, or take masterclasses, then, of course, language plays a very important role - especially if the market involves Austria and Germany. So, German is still a priority in order to find and understand each other better. To make connections, yes. Knowledge of German is necessary. That's why it's more of a long-term perspective - something to use in the future as language skills improve.

Personal and Social Contexts

I (25:09)

Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur? And what does it mean to be an entrepreneur?

R2 (25:14)

Even though I haven't been doing this for very long—I mean, it's only been a short time—I do consider myself an entrepreneur. Because I understand that all the responsibility is on me. I'm responsible for my decisions, I'm responsible for my income.

What was the second part?

I (25:47)

What does it mean to you to be an entrepreneur?

R2 (25:50)

I feel like I already answered that question.

I (25:50)

Yeah, you mentioned that it's about being responsible for yourself and your business.

R2 (25:55)

Well, yeah. Exactly. So that's why I can call myself an entrepreneur - because when you ask me what it means to be one, my answer is basically just describing myself. That's exactly what it is, yeah. The reasons, the criteria.

I (26:05)

What communities, groups, or networks are you connected with? And why these communities?

R2 (26:11)

Communities... like, you mean, people I talk to? My...

I (26:18)

Yeah, more or less, the people you associate with.

R2 (26:21)

Okay. So, here's how it is. My community, my social circle, it exists both online and offline - like, in person, face-to-face interaction. For example - my boyfriend, (Name). We have similar past experiences, so we can talk about that, discuss perspectives. Then, there's also the people around me - creative individuals. Or just people who are also interested in content creation. Or in any

other form of creativity, where we can exchange ideas. It can be a mix of friends, acquaintances, or work contacts.

I (27:13)

So is this already an established group, or is it something you're still forming?

R2 (27:18)

Well... I mean... how do I put this... I do have a number of acquaintances and friends. I know a lot of people who are involved in some kind of creative work, or have tried to monetize their creativity. It's not necessarily just related to what I do—it could be any kind of artistic field. But the common factor is that they're all interested in creating something and making a living from it.

I (27:49)

Is there another group you compare your community to?

R2 (27:57)

I don't even know. (laughs) What group would I compare it to? You mean, like, the content creator community?

I (28:06)

Let's say so, if that's how you define it.

R2 (28:09)

I think it's similar to bloggers. Because, after all, that's a category of people—I mean, bloggers—who are mainly focused on building their personal brand. But it's still a kind of **social media marketing**. And first and foremost, their goal is to make money from advertising and earn through... How do I put it...? Like, getting free products or perks from businesses they collaborate with in exchange for advertising - like barter deals. So, in a way, we're similar because we work on the same platforms. But unlike bloggers who promote themselves, we promote a specific service-based business. So, there's no barter system - all our services are paid.

I (29:22)

If you compare these two groups, what's the result of the comparison?

R2 (29:25)

The result of the comparison... I'd say we're similar in that both of us are self-employed. Right. And we both operate on the same platforms—like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok. Where we differ... First and foremost, in how we earn money. Like, the type of income we get, or the way we receive benefits. For example, our profit comes exclusively in cash. For bloggers, their income might also include free products or services instead of just money.

I (30:20)

How would you describe your feelings towards your own group?

R2 (30:23)

Okay, feelings... I'd say it's inspiring - I get inspired by the people around me. It's kind of... joy, I guess? (laughs) Joy, and a sense of freedom. And I think... (pause) I'd say determination, like, persistence - that drive to reach your goals. And also resilience to stress. If we're talking about emotions specifically, then I'd say... admiration. (laughs) Yeah, let's go with that.

I just don't know exactly how to frame these adjectives properly in an emotional sense. (laughs) But that's basically it.

I (31:25)

What about your feelings towards the other group we talked about?

R2 (31:30)

Yeah, I also really admire them - because these people have been able to establish themselves. And they're not afraid to put themselves out there. So, I feel... admiration for their self-actualization and self-sufficiency, I guess.

I (31:56)

Alright. What's the role of language in shaping your social connections?

R2 (32:02)

Hmm, the role of language... Well, obviously, it's important. Are we talking about a specific language? Or just all of them?

I (32:13)

All of them. In what situations do you use one language over another? When do you use your native language, and when do you switch to a foreign one?

R2 (32:16)

Obviously, when I'm around people who are from the same country as me, or from neighbouring countries that understand Russian, there's no problem - that's really important. With English, I wouldn't say there are any issues either. It's the same - it's not just with people from English-speaking countries. Since English is an international language, knowing it helps you connect with literally anyone from anywhere. As for German... Well, I do know some local people here—they're native German speakers. But they're also open to speaking English. So, the openness of people is a key factor. And language, of course, is another key factor

I (33:08)

How do you perceive yourself in each of these contexts?

R2 (33:12)

So, in the Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking community, I feel comfortable. In the English-speaking community, I also feel comfortable. But in the German-speaking community... I don't feel comfortable. Because I feel a language barrier - first and foremost. And just knowing that I lack the vocabulary to express myself fully, to express my thoughts and ideas completely. And... It just makes it harder to present myself - to show who I am. Because other people, like, let's say Austrians, who are mostly German-speaking, don't fully understand me - or what I'm really about - because I can't fully open up.

I (34:13)

Who are your friends and acquaintances?

R2 (34:14)

Hmm. Should I mention nationalities, or just...

I (34:21)

As it comes to mind.

R2 (34:22)

Okay. My friends and acquaintances...

I (34:25)

What brings you close to these people?

R2 (34:27)

Mhm. Alright. They're Ukrainians, Russians... (quieter) Belarusians - actually, no, not Belarusians. Hold on, let me think. (laughs) Okay... Let's include (Friend's name), right?

I (35:50)

Of course.

R2 (34:51)

Of course! Then, okay, we include him. So, Iran. What else...? France. Still thinking. Turkey. It's too diverse, honestly. Let me think... Now... should I include Austrians? I mean, I wouldn't say they're close friends, exactly. It's more like... we know each other, we hang out together. But we don't really have one-on-one, personal interactions. So, let's say they're more like acquaintances. Yeah, let's put Austrians as acquaintances.

I (35:35)

What brings you closer to these people?

R2 (35:37)

Common interests. Similar views on life. Sense of humour. (laughs) Alright. Hobbies. And well, of course, work as well.

I (35:57)

What about language?

R2 (35:58)

Well, since we understand each other, there's no miscommunication. So, no problems there.

I (36:10)

What language do you speak with them?

R2 (36:14)

Again, it depends. But mostly English, Ukrainian, and Russian

I (36:18)

Can you give an example of how you interact with people who speak different languages in your business context?

R2 (36:27)

Okay. If it's Slavic countries, obviously, I switch to whatever language is more convenient—Russian or Ukrainian. If it's any other EU resident, then it's English. And if it's an Austrian, I first ask how comfortable they are with English. Because we're in Austria, so someone might prefer to say, 'I'd rather speak German—I'm not that fluent in English.' In that case, I delegate the conversation to my colleague, since we both know exactly what we're doing and how we do it. We work together toward results, so there are no misunderstandings within our team. She's good at conveying information the right way.

I (37:17)

Have you ever felt included or excluded in different social circles related to your business because of language?

R2 (37:27)

I think that for now, I don't really have access to certain local Austrian spaces. Like, small local cafés or family-owned Austrian businesses that focus on something very traditional. I feel like in those cases, having native-level German is a big deal. Or maybe they just prefer local employees, who'd obviously have a deeper understanding of everything. Maybe there's even a fear factor, you know? Like, maybe they worry that a foreigner won't fully grasp the culture or won't be as in tune with everything. So, for now, that's not an option for me.

But if the business is something more tourist-oriented... Or if the business owner themselves isn't Austrian, maybe they're from another EU country or even outside the EU, then things are easier. Because those people - they've also been through the relocation process. They've experienced starting a business in a foreign country, so they're more open.

I (38:56)

Do you have a specific example of this?

R2 (38:57)

Okay, let's take a Chinese business owner. He's been in Vienna for quite a while. And he was open to talking to us in English. Even though he knows his native language well. And he also speaks German at a high level. What I really liked was how open-minded he was. Like, he's open to new ideas and new people. And, you know, even though we were just starting out, that didn't stop him from considering us. What really mattered was that we had past work examples, and that our presentation was convincing. That was the deciding factor in hiring us.

Advice and Future Plans

I (39:49)

Alright, that wraps up the main part of the interview. Just a few final questions left...

R2 (39:55)

Alright.

I (39:55)

What advice would you give to forced migrants?

R2 (39:58)

Mmm, to forced migrants... First of all, learn the language. That's something I'm working on myself and still planning to work on. Even though I'm currently on a break from it. (laughs) Yeah. What else... Mmm, what other advice...

I (40:19)

Which language, by the way?

R2 (40:20)

German. German. German, and yeah, obviously, it would be great if you also know English. I had some knowledge of English before moving. But if we're talking about priority, like, if someone

doesn't speak either German or English, then I think they should start with German. But if German is proving to be too hard, which is likely if someone doesn't even know English, then it's better to start with English first. Because with English, you'll start speaking faster.

Next... Don't be afraid to open up to new things. Try to embrace the local mentality and the way people see the world. Like, understand their holidays, their taste preferences, even their mannerisms in conversation. Just accept the culture - since, well, you're here now. (laughs)

And also to feel more confident, and to not be afraid of new things, you need to understand two things. First, the mentality of locals. Second, their laws and regulations. Because I think the main fear people have is not knowing their rights. They don't know what they can and can't do. So even just having a basic understanding of the law, or hearing from locals about how things work here, or even just reading up about it in your own language online, that makes things so much easier.

And lastly... If you already have a solid professional background, if you already know your field well, then sooner or later, you'll get there. You'll be able to do it in this country, it just takes time.

I (42:14)

What are your future plans for your business, and how do you see language playing a role in this?

R2 (42:21)

In the future... Maybe... I'd like to... I mean... I can't say 100% for sure what will happen. (laughs) But, again, I'm happy that I'm working with my colleague. But if, in the future, there's more demand, even more than we expected, then I'd like to hire more employees. Maybe even expand the range of services. Like, for example... I could scale up the content side of things, maybe start offering advertising setup, or more comprehensive business strategies. Maybe even go into visual branding, like branding kits and brand identity development. Or even 3D graphics and animation - more complex visuals. I mean, this could be me doing it personally if I find that area interesting. Or I could hire people to expand our services further, yes.

I (43:41)

Is there anything else you'd like to add—something important that we didn't discuss yet?

R2 (43:46)

Hmm... There was something I was thinking about earlier... It popped into my head for a second, but then I totally forgot it. I think it was something about language... No, I can't remember right now. Maybe I'll remember later - and if I do, we can record it separately.

I (44:22)

Sure, just message me. Thank you so much for participating!

R2 (44:28)

You're welcome!