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What is This?
Linguistic Isolation, Social Capital, and Immigrant Belonging

Stephanie J. Nawyn¹, Linda Gjokaj¹, DeBrenna LaFa Agbényiga¹, and Breanne Grace¹

Abstract

A wealth of evidence points to the positive outcomes experienced by immigrants who can speak the dominant language in a receiving country. But most scholarship treats language acquisition as a variable that affects labor market opportunities, whether conceptualized as human or social capital. We argue that analyzing language as a noneconomic resource that can flow through social networks is important not only for understanding immigrant integration, but also for gaining insight into the nature of social capital. Using qualitative data from recently resettled Burundian and Burmese refugees in Michigan, United States, we explore the experiences resulting from linguistic isolation at the household and community level, demonstrating how linguistically isolated refugees experience language as noneconomic social capital, in that language provides access to necessary information and constitutes an act of social power. Our research suggests that the linguistic resources of communities (both immigrant and receiving communities) are a key component of immigrant integration. Our study also points to the importance of thinking about language as a form of social capital that provides social power in addition to economic opportunities.

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Migration scholars have documented that immigrants who speak their host society’s dominant language have better socioeconomic outcomes than immigrants who do not (Chiswick and Miller 1995, 2002; Dustmann 1994; VandenHeuvel and Wooden 1997; Trejo 1997; Tumlin and Zimmerman 2003; Bleakley and Chin 2004; McManus, Gould, and Welch 1983). But the social capital provided by language ability also benefits noneconomic elements of social integration. While migration scholars have focused predominantly on how linguistic social capital can be exchanged for other forms of capital (such as bilingualism’s association with better educational outcomes; see Feliciano 2001; Lutz and Crist 2009; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou 1997), we argue that it is also important to recognize the noneconomic value of linguistic social capital. By examining the experiences of linguistically isolated immigrants, we highlight how language serves as a source of social capital that shapes noneconomic outcomes.

In this paper, we explore the barriers associated with linguistic isolation experienced by Burundian and Burmese refugees who were resettled in the state of Michigan in the United States. While refugees in this study felt concerned about their employment prospects, they experienced their lack of English skills more as a barrier to (1) feeling respected and valued in their receiving communities and (2) developing social ties in those communities that could provide them with essential information. Our findings point to the importance of recognizing the noneconomic value of social capital, and to the importance of power relations embedded in language (Urciuoli 1995) and speech acts (Hymes 2003) in linguistic minority communities.

**Defining Social Capital**

Social capital appears frequently in social science literature, but remains undertheorized and often vaguely defined. All definitions rely on relationship networks as a key component. Bourdieu (1985) defined it as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 248). Granovetter (1973, 1983) theorized how strong and weak ties between people gave individuals access to different types of social capital. Coleman (1988) presented a useful description by comparing it to other forms of capital: “If physical capital is wholly tangible, being embodied
in observable material form, and human capital is less tangible, being embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual, social capital is less tangible yet, for it exists in the relations among persons” (pp. S100-101). What individuals largely acquire through these relations are intangible resources, specifically information, influence, and social recognition of their power or value (Lin 2001).

Economists have focused almost exclusively on how social capital can produce human capital or more tangible forms of economic worth (Sobel 2002). But as the concept of social capital developed, sociologists broadened their focus to the normative value of social capital. Putnam (1995, 2000, 2002) argued for the inherent value of more numerous and diverse networks, aside from whatever economic benefits may accrue. While Putnam’s definition of social capital (which is essentially social relations that produce good outcomes) has been rightly critiqued for being tautological and romanticized (Portes 1998; Sobel 2002), we implement his approach to the concept of social capital as something more than just an economic good. In turn, we define social capital as social networks that have the potential to provide either material or nonmaterial resources (including achieving physical and mental health, a sense of personal safety, and feeling integrated into a community and valued by others in that community). In this way, we broaden the focus of social capital in comparison to other work that examines the economic returns on social networks (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). In doing so, we attempt to rehabilitate the concept of social capital from a hopelessly limited neoliberal conflation of social interaction with market dynamics (Somers 2005). Our more expansive focus on noneconomic social capital also reflects what many refugee scholars have examined in studies of refugee social networks (e.g., see Lamba and Krahn 2003 on the importance of social networks for problem solving and Korac 2002 on the comparative value of state support versus personal networks for social integration).

Language as Social Capital, Linguistic Isolation, and Power

When scholars study language as a form of social rather than human capital, their research usually focuses on how the social capital of language can be exchanged for human capital, such as in higher academic achievement (Feliciano 2001; Lutz and Crist 2009) or higher occupational aspirations (Portes and Schauffler 1994). Migration scholars have paid much less attention to the relationship between language skills and feelings of belonging or exclusion for immigrants and refugees. Some exceptions include Warriner
(2007), who found that ESL instruction neglected language learning that would help Sudanese refugee women engage with their new surroundings, and Allen (2007), who found that in communities without sufficient language support, refugees can experience significant social isolation. By contrast, Rumbaut’s (2005) work describes how immigrant children with non-English monolingual parents may adopt an American identity out of embarrassment about their parent’s lack of English ability. Thus, research indicates that a lack of dominant language skills can leave immigrants isolated from their communities and create intergenerational tensions in their families.

Research on linguistic isolation in the United States generally defines a household as linguistically isolated if a language other than English is spoken in the home and no adult in the household is English proficient (Siegal, Martin, and Bruno 2000). If the concentration of linguistically isolated households in a community is high, the social capital available through dominant language ability will be low, even if the linguistically isolated households share a common language among them. Applying Mallinson’s (2009) recommendation to reintegrate sociology and sociolinguistics, we combine sociolinguistic theories of language and power with Granovetter’s (1973, 1983) theory of weak ties, and we propose that migration scholars should consider how power relations are embedded in linguistic interactions and how those power relations shape the sense of belonging of non-English speakers.

Granovetter argued it is not strong but weak social ties, particularly those that serve as bridges between otherwise distinct groups, that provide individuals with essential connections for accessing resources outside of what is available within groups of people connected by strong ties (1983). Weak ties between two people allow exchanges to occur not just between the two people within that dyad but also between groups of people not otherwise directly connected. Bridging social ties, or those that connect one group of strongly tied individuals with another, provide opportunities to exchange resources in ways that strong ties (which tend to form a closed system) do not (Coser 1975; Putnam 2002).

Bourdieu (1991) goes even further in connecting language use to power. He refers to “linguistic capital” as the acquired skills of speaking a dominant or “official” language according to the specifications of those in power. Sociolinguistic research frequently mobilizes these ideas from Bourdieu, which can connect the concepts of strong and weak ties to power inequality in linguistic interactions (see Milroy and Milroy 1992 and Fairclough 1989 for examples). Scholarship on language learning has argued that the inability to speak a dominant language constructs the learner as inferior to those people
fluent in the dominant language (Murray 1998; Peirce 1995). Repeated inter-
actions with dominant language speakers positions the learner as an outsider
(Berry and Williams 2004) who may suffer from feelings of isolation because
of those interactions (Beiser and Hou 2001).

Predominantly English-speaking receiving communities in which immi-
grants live dispersed from, rather than concentrated in, linguistic communi-
ties commonly produces this isolating positioning. Portes and Rumbaut
(2006) described how dispersion positively contributes to migrants developing
at least limited bilingualism, compared to immigrants in concentrated
settlement contexts who are more likely to remain non-English monolingual.
But what happens to dispersed immigrants before they achieve functional
bilingualism, particularly in receiving communities with poor linguistic
resources? What barriers might emerge to their integration, either in the pro-
cesses that should expose them to English or in their feelings of belonging to
and investment in their receiving communities? Our study examines this in-
between period to answer those questions.

We use data from recently resettled Burundian and Burmese refugees liv-
ing in Grand Rapids and Lansing, Michigan, to demonstrate how language
constitutes a system of power relations. Based on our findings, we argue that
scholars should focus greater attention on language as noneconomic social
capital. We show that small immigrant groups living in receiving communi-
ties with limited linguistic resources experience significant barriers to com-
municating with English speakers, which position them as speechless
subalterns, or as Nyers (2006) argued, entities incapable of political speech
and thus animal-like.

Linguistically isolated immigrants in linguistic resource-poor communities
are thus poor in language-based social capital, which has ramifications for their
integration that go far beyond the economic concerns that dominate both the
literature on immigrant assimilation and ESL instruction policies. Existing
studies of social capital and economic assimilation for refugees indicate that
refugees with few weak ties to English speakers are at an economic disadvan-
tage compared to refugees with access to weak ties outside their ethnic com-
community (Majka and Mullan 2002; Tran 1991; Allen 2009). What we explore in
this article are the noneconomic repercussions of the absence of weak ties, not
only among individuals but within entire immigrant communities.

Methods

In this study, we draw primarily on qualitative data from 36 face-to-face,
semistructured interviews with adult refugees from either Burundi or Burma.
We chose these two sending countries as both groups had arrived recently and shared some characteristics that made for good comparison. Both groups arrived between April and June 2007 and were resettled by the same agencies, so the available organizational and receiving community resources were similar across both groups. We chose Michigan as our research site because the greater Lansing and Grand Rapids areas have become home to an increasing number of refugees. In 2008 Michigan received the fifth largest number of refugees, behind California, Texas, Florida, and New York (Batalova 2009). Michigan has also become a major resettlement site for refugees who do not have family sponsors. These patterns of resettlement have led to an increase in ethnic diversity in small cities in Michigan that are more common within larger metropolitan areas that have long been traditional gateways for refugees and other immigrants. And without family sponsors or established ethnic communities, this diversity presents particular challenges for refugees and refugee service providers, who cannot rely on family members to assist the new arrivals. In addition, our proximity to these two areas of resettlement allowed us to develop relationships to refugees and service providers that facilitated our access to the communities we studied.

Participants had been in the United States for between 120 and 180 days when they were interviewed. We sampled refugees from anonymous lists of refugee households provided by resettlement agencies. We used a purposive sampling technique to capture spousal relations and intergenerational dynamics within households, as this was an empirical point of interest in our larger study. Therefore, whenever two married individuals lived in a household, we sampled both partners. Many of the Burundian families were households composed of spouses with children, but the population of Burmese refugees in Michigan contained fewer family households than the Burundian sample, so we selected all the Burmese families composed of spouses with children. A staff member at the resettlement agency contacted our selected participants and described the project and requested the refugees’ permission to give us their names and contact information. Some resettlement agencies did not have the staff capacity to call refugees; in these cases, we asked our interpreters to identify refugees fitting our eligibility criteria and the interpreters contacted them directly for their permission to release their names and phone numbers to us. We contacted the refugees who expressed initial interest in participating by phone, and we used an interpreter to describe the study in detail. Refugees who agreed to participate gave formal consent before we conducted the interview. Each of our participants received a $40 gift card for their involvement in the interviews.

We conducted interviews from October 2007 through May 2008. All the refugees that we approached for inclusion in the study agreed to participate
except for two Burmese refugees. The two Burmese individuals who declined to be included in the study initially agreed to talk with us, but called the interpreter right before the interview to cancel because they feared that the information they might share would get back to their resettlement agency. This fear was not expressed by any of our Burundian participants.

Table 1 lists basic demographic information about our participants, including their names (all pseudonyms), ages, highest level of education, employment status and occupation at the time of the interview.

The interviews focused on the services refugees received from their resettlement agency, as well as assistance and support they received from other organizations and individuals. We also asked refugees about how helpful and effective they found the assistance they received and the challenges they faced in adapting to life in Michigan. Finally, we asked what changes they would make to the services they received in order to make resettlement more helpful. We conducted the interviews in English and either Kirundi (for the Burundians) or the Chin dialect of Burmese (for the Burmese). We conducted all interviews in the participants’ homes. The interviews were tape recorded and lasted approximately one to two hours in length. We used interpreters for all interviews except for one interview with a Burundian man whose English was very good. We transcribed verbatim all the interviews in English, maintaining the particular wording used by our interpreters.

For data analysis, we used Atlas.ti qualitative software to discover patterns and themes in the data. Our analytic strategy was based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser 1967) in which we built codes and developed salient themes directly from the data. We first used an open coding process by analyzing each transcript line by line using the Atlas.ti software. We then engaged in a selective, focused coding process (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) in which we analyzed the data to find connections between general codes and subcodes until we developed key themes. Salient codes captured the different levels of linguistic isolation expressed by the respondents. We also wrote brief memos and used triangulation to compare the codes we each developed and the memos we wrote, to further develop the meanings of and linkages between the codes. While we were interested in coding for difficulties related to learning English, the challenges posed by linguistic isolation and the linguistic resource-poor communities emerged unexpectedly as a central theme in our data. For this article, we selected quotes that best represented what our participants said about language and linguistic isolation.

After analyzing the interview transcripts, we decided that we needed to collect additional data from the Burundian refugees in order to understand their extreme problems with linguistic isolation. We thus conducted single-sex
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focus groups with Burundian men and women (one focus group with each sex) who lived in Lansing. We chose to organize separate focus groups for men and women because we expected that both men and women would be more open and comfortable sharing their stories about spousal relations in single-sex groups. We conducted the focus groups approximately eighteen months after completing the interviews. For the focus groups, we chose five women and five men from among our Burundian participants. All the women we sampled were able to attend the focus group, but because of transportation difficulties on the day of the focus group only three of the five men attended their group.

The topics presented in the focus groups were language challenges, relationships between spouses and with children, and any continuing difficulties the refugees’ faced. The focus groups were conducted in Swahili and English with the women and Kirundi and English for the men, and interpreters were used for both groups. They took place at a refugee community center in Lansing and lasted approximately three hours each. Data analysis is based on the audio recordings as well as field notes we took during the focus groups. We analyzed these field notes, in Atlas.ti using a similar coding strategy to the one we used for analyzing interviews. Each woman received a $20 gift card and, at their request, men received $20 in cash for their participation. We also served East African food during each focus group. We received Institutional Review Board approval and complied with all protocols.

In addition to focus groups and interviews with refugees, we participated in meetings of service provider collaboratives in Grand Rapids and Lansing throughout the project period. These observations included discussions among service providers about what types of language assistance they were offering their refugee clients, for how long that assistance was offered, and what the service providers thought their clients’ linguistic needs were that they were not meeting. We draw on these data to provide a richer context for the data from refugees.

**Migration Histories of Burundian and Burmese Refugees**

Most of the Burundian refugees in our study were among the group that fled Burundi in 1972 following a military assault on ethnic Hutus. Most had been farmers or small tradespeople with little or no formal education, and many were young (less than twenty-one years of age) when they fled Burundi. Nearly all of our participants went to refugee camps in Rwanda, where they describe their lives as manageable. In Rwanda they were given some land to farm and were allowed to move in and out of the camp with relative freedom.
As a result of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (directed primarily at Tutsis), Burundians were once again forced to flee, this time ending up in refugee camps in Tanzania. Life in these camps was much harsher; participants describe widespread violence and dependence on UN rations as they were not allowed to leave the camps. On average, our participants spent 34.5 years in exile from Burundi before being resettled in the United States. Their families included relatively large numbers of children; the average number of children in a household among our respondents was 6.25.

While Michigan has sizeable settled communities of refugees from other African countries like Sudan and Somalia, Burundians are new immigrants to the state. They come from both Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups, which have been involved in conflicts since 1972 (Lemarchand 1998). But when we asked them about their ethnic or tribal identification, most rejected any ethnic identification and instead told us they were “just Burundian” or “just human.” While this might reflect an actual distancing from ethnic identification, it has likely been shaped by messages that Burundians received in refugee camps from UN officials that discouraged the refugees from identifying as either Hutu or Tutsi (and thus the Burundians were accustomed to telling White people in “official” capacities like our research team that they did not hold an ethnic identification). Our key Burundian informants told us that there was some fear and mistrust between Hutus and Tutsis living in Michigan, but we also saw many positive social interactions and relationships of dependence between Hutus and Tutsis, likely because the Burundian community in Michigan is so small.

Our Burmese participants took a very different path to the United States and came in with different resources. Most were either ethnic Karen or Chin who had been displaced from Myanmar for less than three years. While some of our participants were resettled from refugee camps in Thailand, many fled to Malaysia where they lived as unauthorized migrants in cities until being identified by the United Nations as eligible for resettlement. People working in resettlement have found that Burmese refugees who have been resettled directly from urban areas instead of spending protracted time in refugee camps have had an easier time adjusting to life in the United States (Barron et al. 2007). They had higher levels of education (on average just between eight and nine years). In addition, there is a settled community of Burmese in Battle Creek (75 miles from Grand Rapids and 60 miles from Lansing), many of whom have been there for as much as twenty-five years. Their family size was smaller than the Burundian families, with more single childless men. For instance, the average number of children in a household was 0.88.
Results

Our research points to the importance of thinking about linguistic isolation at three levels; the individual, ethnic community, and receiving community levels. We found that while refugees were concerned with how their lack of English abilities would limit their employment prospects, they did not express that as their primary concern. More troubling for refugees was their lack of access to basic information like how to find a hospital if they became sick, or their inability to tell service providers what they needed and to stand up for themselves when they felt they had been mistreated. We also found that the problems associated with household linguistic isolation were compounded in ethnic communities in which few coethnics spoke English.

Lansing and Grand Rapids offered inadequate resources for people who do not speak English. While interpretation and translation services exist, they are expensive and many social institutions, such as hospitals and government offices, often fail to provide interpretation for non-English-speaking clients, despite a federal law (Title VI of the Civil Rights Act) which stipulates that federally funded institutions provide such services. Thus, refugees without English abilities had few options for gaining access to necessary information or for expressing their own needs and desires to people who might be able to help them.

Instead, linguistically isolated refugees turned to bilingual conationalists who could assist them with translation and interpretation. These bilingual members of the conational community were often elites in the community (in terms of educational levels) but had very few economic resources themselves and were struggling to care for themselves and other members of their immigrant community. Because of the small number of people who spoke Kirundi in these areas, the few bilingual Burundians also served as our interpreters for this study. They had no training as interpreters, and their own English skills were still developing. While our participants were undoubtedly more eloquent in their native language, we chose to report verbatim the interpreters’ translations of what our research participants said in interviews and in focus groups so that readers could have a better sense of the linguistic challenges facing even elite members of this community and the difficulty participants had being heard with limited interpretation resources.

We also found that individuals in immigrant communities with few linguistic resources were much more likely to express frustration, anger, and anxiety about their future compared to equally linguistically isolated individuals in relatively resource-rich immigrant communities. Surprisingly,
having employment did not appear to mitigate anxiety for refugees in resource-poor communities.

**Anxieties Associated with Linguistic Isolation**

Without English language comprehension, refugees expressed anxiety about how they would get access to basic social institutions after the federally mandated resettlement period ended. Participants most frequently described barriers to accessing medical assistance. Ornella, a fifty-one-year-old single mother from Burundi, described her major challenge to adjusting to life in the United States:

The challenge is English and then the agency is going to leave us and then they want us to go to the hospital. I think we’re going to die in the house because I don’t know how I’m going to go to the hospital. I don’t speak English, I don’t know how and then I try to learn English, but it doesn’t work.

Refugees frequently expressed concern about how to schedule doctor’s appointments, which hospital they should go to, how to get there, and how to fill prescriptions. Ernest, a forty-nine-year-old Burundian man said:

We are over there six months. We will have to be by our own, we don’t speak English, we don’t know even how to make appointment, how to follow up the appointment. We will have a big problem if we can be by ourselves. We will not going to be able to take care of ourselves to go especially for to the hospital, follow up the doctor appointment, they still, we may still need help for that. They provided the service but it’s not yet time to tell us go by yourself because the English. We are not even yet be familiar with the hospital, which door to go, how to call my doctor, how to know that if I’m supposed to go by myself, still big problem, challenge for us.

Access to other information is also a challenge; even reading street signs feels beyond the reach of linguistically isolated refugees. Ernest’s wife, Donathe, explained, “Most of the time where ever I have to go I have to take the bus [and I can’t navigate the bus system] because I don’t know how to read and write.” With the limited bus routes in both Lansing and Grand Rapids, refugees benefit greatly from having a driver’s license. However, they must take the test in English, so most had to find employment that was
accessible by public transportation unless they knew someone who could drive them.

Having a job did not mitigate the anxieties associated with linguistic isolation. Two-thirds of our refugee participants were employed by the time of our interviews, and yet even those employed expressed anxiety about not speaking English. Most employed refugee participants had no exposure to English on their jobs (the majority being employed in light manufacturing or food processing in which nearly all of their coworkers were immigrants who spoke only Spanish at work). Therefore those refugees with jobs did not garner any linguistic benefits from employment. So while employed refugees did have a higher income than unemployed refugees, they were no less likely to express concerns about their English abilities.

**Linguistic Isolation, Talking Back, and Feelings of Disrespect**

In addition to feeling anxious about their lack of English skills, some refugees felt neglected and disrespected as they could not express themselves to staff at their resettlement agency. For instance, Emmanuel, a forty-seven-year-old Burundian man, describes this sense of disrespect:

They [the staff at the resettlement agency] don’t respect me. This [ESL instruction] doesn’t match my culture. Because they know that and we told them that we really need somebody who speaks our language to tell, but they didn’t look for somebody who, they didn’t even want to look for somebody who can [speak our language]. Yeah and teach us. It’s doesn’t really, it’s not, they didn’t, it’s not respect for us or they didn’t listen to us, something like that (emphasis added).

During our focus group discussion with Burundian women, Adelphine described in very emotional terms how she felt disrespected during her English classes. She explained that the instructor went through a list of words and pictures very fast, and only allowed people in the class to speak English. She felt that she and the other students “paid for notebooks and they are just taking money from us; we’re their business.” The idea of teaching English was good, but she felt strongly that the instructor should be someone who could also speak their language to them. While second-language instructors now commonly allow only the language taught to be spoken in the classroom, for many of the refugees this added to their frustration and made them feel even more alienated.

Htun, a twenty-seven-year-old Burmese man who has two years of college education, described a similar situation in his ESL class:
[Our resettlement agency] has provided ESL classes that have been good, but I wish the way they provided us was, for instance—Okay, nobody can speak Burmese language . . . [and some students in the] class, than some of them we all are different levels and then some of them . . . keep asking to the people who understand English a little bit. Then when [the interpreter] explain to them what the teacher was saying in Burmese then the teacher [gave the people speaking Burmese] punishment.

Htun knows other Burmese who complain that they are not learning anything when the teacher insists on students speaking only English, and they feel tremendously frustrated when they cannot even ask others in the class for an explanation of what the teacher is saying. He said he thought of the ESL classes as “wasting time.”

Not only do their frustrations stem from being immersed in an English-only class where they “didn’t learn one thing,” but they felt disrespected by institutional representatives with whom they needed to interact. As one Burundian woman, Nadia, describes, “they looked for me [at] ESL class but they didn’t follow up, so we stopped going [because the class was discontinued] and then they, they kind of ignored just to look for another school for us.” Feeling disrespected was a repeated theme that emerged, particularly from Burundians. In the women’s focus group, participants talked about how the resettlement agency workers wronged them by discontinuing resettlement support before they had learned English. Adelphine was very emphatic when she expressed how the resettlement agency blamed and mistreated them for not getting jobs. While she rested her cheek on her hand, she mockingly stated that the resettlement agency workers say, “I think you have not tried hard enough. I think you should go here to find a job or to get help. I think you will be fine. I think. I think. I think.” The situation Adelphine described is that the resettlement agency workers think all these things, but they do not know what she and other Burundians are facing. She looks for jobs and goes to places to receive help, but still does not know English and thus cannot communicate with anyone.

Disrespect entailed more than just emotional hurt; it also involved material neglect. Two of our Burundian participants, Ernest and James, wanted an explanation of what their resettlement agency was required to do for them, and asked to see the director of their resettlement agency. They sat in the lobby of the agency for some time waiting to speak to the director, but they said their request was denied. During the Burundian men’s focus group, they asked if our research team could arrange for them to speak to the director, as
they wanted to be able to express their needs directly to someone. Yvette also described going to the resettlement agency only to sit there because they had no one to interpret for her:

Because of the problem of language . . . like this morning, I was in the office, and then we’ve been sitting there, because she [the interpreter] was not there. So waiting to come to translate, because the case manager [said], no, we need someone to translate, we can’t talk with you . . . I don’t know how to do anything because I don’t speak English.

Joseph described a similar situation in which he waited in the lobby of the Secretary of State’s office for more than three hours, insisting that they provide him an interpreter. Another Burundian woman, Aline, was angry that her resettlement agency was not providing her as much cash assistance as she thought others were receiving, but she had no way to express her frustrations with the agency. She said, “if I knew English, I could just go to court [take the resettlement agency to court]. I am dreaming of speaking out to [the resettlement agency].” Eric, a twenty-eight-year-old, single Burundian man who spoke fairly good English, confronted his case manager about treatment he felt was unfair, telling him, “Just because I don’t speak English, don’t think I am stupid.” Many of the Burundians in particular felt that their inability to understand English made them vulnerable to exploitation, and they often expressed suspicion that English speakers were taking advantage of them. When we asked Egide about the biggest challenge he faced in being resettled, he grabbed a shabby chair sitting next to him in his dining room and pounded it on the floor. Egide told us about how everything he received was shabby and worn out, and that he felt disrespected by the resettlement agency for being given such poor-quality furniture, but he couldn’t complain about it directly to agency staff.

When these refugees could not communicate with organizations tasked with assisting them, they could not ensure that they were receiving the services to which they were entitled, nor effectively communicate what their needs were. Bourdieu (1991) points out that the power of language consists not only of the ability to communicate but also the ability to advocate for oneself through verbal interaction. Giving voice to one’s situation is an act of power, and the Burundians in particular felt upset by the absence of power to speak and to be heard. While they felt angry about different situations they regarded as unfair or unjust, their inability to express themselves compounded their frustration. Without the power to speak and be understood, they could not effectively demand better treatment, which had material as well as emotional repercussions.
Challenges of Linguistic Isolation in Resource-Poor Communities

Many of our participants acutely felt the limited bilingual resources in the receiving communities, particularly the Burundian refugees who had fewer ties to other conationalists that would give them access to material assistance, information, and social support. According to area service providers, the English classes offered in Grand Rapids and Lansing were insufficient to meet the needs of English learners, with few classes offered in the late evenings or weekends when refugees who worked during the day were available. Consequently, many refugees described barriers to continuing English-language assistance provided by the receiving community. Patrick, one of our Burundian informants who worked full-time at a laundry service, explained,

I went, they put me in an ESL class but when I got a job I stopped. This is a problem. Really serious problem with these refugees that, who are coming now. Because they don’t know how to write, they don’t know how to read, they don’t know English. So, with the, the agencies want them to have a job within six months. So if they have that job, they don’t go back to school. Probably they got a job after three months or four months. That’s it. They don’t have a chance again to go back to ESL.

We found that our participants typically dropped out of ESL classes after two to four months, and they were most likely to drop out once they had obtained employment because they could no longer attend ESL classes during the scheduled times.

Refugees’ individual-level sense of linguistic isolation is further complicated by their dependence on one or two conational interpreters. When we asked Ornella from whom she received material or emotional support, she said, “I didn’t see anybody except you [the interpreter for our interview] . . . he brought food for me when I was hungry and he gave me clothes. He was advising me, he was telling me many things about life.” Some refugees came to view their interpreters as separate from the resettlement agency that employed them, and developed close, dependent relationships on their interpreter rather than their case managers. Yvette told us her resettlement agency did not help her very much, but her interpreter did. She said:

They [the resettlement agency] did not tell me about the American culture, but she [pointing to the interpreter] did . . . She’s provided us
the clothing. And then she came here to teach us how to use the kitchen, how to cook, how to clean the house. How to use stuff in the house. And how we can, how to live here in the America, especially for the children.

While the interpreter helped Yvette as part of her employment responsibilities with the resettlement agency, Yvette saw the interpreter’s efforts as something she did because she was a fellow Burundian, not because she was being paid to do it. And Yvette was partly correct, as our interpreters often provided linguistic assistance outside their job responsibilities. After our interview with Yvette, our interpreter stayed to help the family translate a large pile of mail that Yvette had saved for her.

Refugees who depend on only a few conationals as their sole connection to the receiving community also impose strains on the conational interpreter. Myat, a twenty-four-year-old woman from Burma who was employed as a waitress, told us how her husband lost his job helping other Burmese refugees. She explained:

So, when the [resettlement agency] didn’t came, didn’t take care many things, in that case my husband can understand and can talk English a little bit, so many people ask about their health, so he is helping some of the people once, he is also lost his job at [name of employer], because he is doing other things for other people. . . . He works at night shift, so when he taking care of daytime for other people, he didn’t get enough sleep and finally he could not make it, so he lost his job.”

During our interviews with Burundians, it was common for the participant to point to our interpreter as the person who helped them the most. One interpreter told us:

My wife also was, came to help her, I think once just to teach her how to cook or to use towels, something like that. And then about me, she said that it’s often. Actually we talk many times every week. Probably, I don’t know how much, it’s many times I talk with them on the phone, or just, it’s probably, I think maybe I talk with them five times a week.

In general, resettlement caseworkers are responsible for explaining how to do things like cook with an electric stove or how to use other items in the house that are unfamiliar to the refugee. However, in many cases refugees told us that caseworkers often did not have an interpreter with them and, thus,
could only exchange limited information. Funding available to pay for inter-
preters has decreased to the point where the resettlement agency in Lansing
stopped providing interpretation for services offered outside of their organiza-
tion, even if the service recipient was one of their clients. Therefore, bilingual
conational served as the primary connection to the receiving community for
linguistically isolated refugees, and they performed this service on a volunteer
basis. While bilingual conational struggled to care for themselves and their
own families, they expressed feelings of obligation to assist their fellow refu-
gees who had no other linguistic resources from which to draw.

Although both Burmese and Burundian refugees overwhelmingly cited
learning English as their biggest challenge and both groups lived in linguisti-
cally resource-poor receiving communities, Burundian refugees reported feel-
ing disrespected more frequently than the Burmese refugees. Many Burmese
wished that they could have spent more time learning English before they got
a job, but the Burundian participants in our study expressed deeper dissatisfac-
tion and often anger regarding how they were treated by institutional rep-
resentatives. This difference may be related in part to their different migration
patterns. For example, because the Burundians spent decades in refugee
camps, they may have learned how to direct grievances at those in charge in
order to garner additional resources, whereas the Burmese may have devel-
oped more strategies of self-reliance through having to make their own way
while living illegally in Malaysia before they were resettled. As we described
erlier, the Burmese had higher levels of education and smaller families than
the Burundians, which likely made it easier for them to more quickly learn
English (although few refugees after six to nine months could speak much
English). Burmese and Burundian refugees also come from different cultures,
which may shape their response to English speakers and their own linguistic
isolation. However, we argue that the difference between the Burundians’
and Burmese’s feelings of disrespect can be explained at least in part by the
different linguistic resources of their respective communities, and the value
gained from weak ties with bilingual conational in a linguistically poor
receiving community. In the next section, we present data supporting this
argument.

**Linguistic Isolation and the Absence of Weak Ties**

Although Burundian and Burmese refugees both found themselves in receiv-
ing communities with limited language and interpretation, they had different
levels of resources within their respective immigrant communities. Among
the Burmese, the immigrant community seemed to mitigate some of the
distress associated with lack of English language skills. Meeting other Burmese immigrants who had been settled in the United States for a longer time provided opportunities to develop weak ties that connected newly arrived refugees with a host of additional resources. Ba-Maw, a single man from Burma, described how such weak ties with the Burmese refugee community provided him much needed social support. He said:

[In] the beginning I was very lonely but since they are different Burmese clients that are all here and then we are able to talk with one another and encourage one another. That helped me a lot and since I don’t speak English and it was so hard in the beginning, but now I enjoy.

Many Burmese developed weak ties through a local Burmese church, as Suu-Kyi described:

Burmese have worship once uh once a week um Chin Christian Fellowship, CCF they call it . . . Burmese group gather together and worship every Saturday at [the Burmese] church, and then also on Sunday night they have a prayer meeting house to house.

Although our Burmese participants knew few people at this church initially, their common religion and language allowed the newly arrived Burmese refugees to form initially weak ties with settled immigrants in the church, through which many of our participants reported they received clothing, food, furniture, and other material goods. Maung-Win, a twenty-seven-year-old, single Burmese man, explained how the settled Burmese assist the new arrivals: “people who arrive here, we just train them and just the next person they keep just training, training [laughing] to one another.” While new Burmese arrivals may have only been weakly connected to settled Burmese initially, such connections provided the bridging social capital that refugees needed when they first arrived. This form of capital included material resources, information, and social support.

By contrast, the Burundian communities were resource-poor, with only a few bilingual elites and no members who had been in the United States more than a year before our participants arrived. Kamariza explained that even though there are other Burundian families in Michigan that can help her, it is not “one hundred percent. . . . [I] don’t get help, the time that I need help, because sometime even them [Burundians], they are facing their own problem.” Our Burundian focus group participants reported that even after being
in the United States for two years, they had not found a church that conducted services in Kirundi. It was common for both Burundians and Burmese to receive information and explanations of American culture and institutions predominantly from conationals. However, for the Burundians that was only one to three people, whereas for the Burmese that included many people, such as family, neighbors, and church congregants. One of our Burundian interpreters felt that his fellow Burundians relied on him so heavily that he was apologetic for having to cancel a scheduled appointment to help them the day his wife went into labor. Thus, while the Burundians may have had more difficulty learning English both because of their lower educational levels upon entering the United States and the greater demands of child care associated with their larger families, the lack of linguistic resources at the immigrant community level served as an additional barrier that limited their access to social capital.

This community-level linguistic isolation affected how well individual members of the Burundian community functioned in their day-to-day living. At the request of our participants, our research team arranged for them to meet with the new director of the local resettlement program so that they could express their frustrations. The director was enthusiastic to meet with Burundian refugees, a group that had been resettled in Michigan over two years before she was hired as the resettlement program director. After that meeting, the program director expressed dismay at how little the Burundians had progressed since their eligibility for resettlement assistance had ended. She told our research team that their knowledge of how to navigate everyday life in the United States should have been much greater at that point in time. The Burundians themselves shared that concern, repeatedly using the phrase, “they left us” or “they abandoned us,” referring to the resettlement agency no longer providing services after refugees either found employment or reached the end of their six months of resettlement eligibility. They also frequently spoke of having “nowhere else to go,” or feeling completely isolated from the world around them. Emmanuel said, “it is just comes back to English ‘cause I cannot go anywhere, I cannot communicate anywhere without knowing English.”

During the Burundian women’s focus group, the participants described the importance of learning English by using the Swahili word *kufafanua*, meaning “to make clear” or “to see things clearly” with the word *kusafisha*, meaning “to clean.” For these women, their daily lives were “dirty” because they could not see things clearly and, in turn, could not understand what was going on around them. If only they could learn English, they reasoned, they could “clean” their thoughts and understand things better. Without knowing English,
they looked out on the world as if through a dirty window; nothing was clear, nothing made sense. In large part, these women had no one who could trans- late, in the literal and figurative sense, the new world they inhabited.

Conclusion

This research provides important clarity to the particular challenges that linguistically isolated immigrants face in receiving communities that lack a well-developed infrastructure for immigrant integration. The detrimental effects of household linguistic isolation are compounded within immigrant communities with a high concentration of linguistic isolation, and when the receiving community has few linguistic resources to assist non-English speakers. Our data cannot confirm the refugees’ beliefs that better English abilities would improve their lives or that the disrespectful treatment that many Burundians experienced was due to their English abilities. However, our data do show that a lack of linguistic social capital within receiving and immigrant communities introduces uncertainty in their lives that itself is a source of anxiety. So even if speaking English would not improve their employment opportunities, it would allow them to access information that is important for their survival, which might moderate some of their anxieties. If the treatment that some refugees interpreted as disrespectful was not related to their status as non-English speakers, they cannot be sure because they cannot effectively challenge people mistreating them. While not completely without voice, they felt as if they were unheard when they did speak. So akin to Nyers’s (2006) argument, they are positioned as animal-like by institutional representatives not because they are incapable of political speech but because their speech is unintelligible to those institutional representatives.

Our research has several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, our findings contribute to how we understand the role of social capital in immigrant integration by addressing the role of noneconomic social capital in immigrant belonging. Immigrants need to have information about what resources are available to them in the United States, and how to access those resources. In those cases where newly arrived refugees do not individually have weak ties to English speakers, they can indirectly access social capital through the weak ties of others if they live in an ethnic or receiving community with linguistic resources. Thus, while they may not experience economic returns on that social capital because they themselves do not speak English, they can experience less tangible returns, giving them the sense of belonging that facilitates their engagement in their receiving community.
Our research also indicates how the concept of social capital can be useful at the community level if clearly defined and specified, something that has been lacking in much sociological research (Portes 2000). By viewing language as a form of community-level social capital beyond what can be exchanged for economic benefits, we can see the connections between linguistic isolation and migrants’ social citizenship, or belonging to a polity and therefore having the right to access resources like social services or education from that polity (Marshall 1964). The research on immigrant social citizenship largely assumes that if immigrants have the right to access resources from the state, they have social citizenship in that state. Our findings suggest that the inability to communicate in the dominant language has important implications for social citizenship rights, particularly when the immigrant community has few members that can provide linguistic social capital, and the receiving community has few resources to provide linguistic assistance. In such a context, the availability of and legal access to state resources described by Marshall are irrelevant if immigrants cannot access those resources through an inability to communicate (directly or through an interpreter), making any speech act by those immigrants unintelligible to state agents. In this way, social capital is better thought of as a process (Bankston III and Zhou 2002) rather than a quantity that produces easily measured economic benefits.

In addition, our findings speak to Somers’s (2005) critique of social capital theory as too embedded in rational choice theory and a neoliberal reduction of citizenship rights to individual choice, devoid of state responsibilities. While conceptions of social capital that focus on economic returns have often reduced social relations to rational, market-driven interactions, our findings illustrate a different way of thinking about social capital that does not reduce social networks to rational choices nor reify neoliberal erasure of the state. In fact, our data show that the limited state funding for refugee resettlement (and immigrant incorporation more broadly) exacerbates the individual-level problem of refugees’ lacking dominant language skills by underfunding the interpretation services new refugees need, and demanding quick employment so that refugees with more education and some English skills have the opportunity to develop interpretation skills that would better their entire community. Thus, we agree with Somers’s (2005) criticism of prior social capital scholarship that blames an overreliance on the welfare state and other state institutions for the disintegration of community formation. On the contrary, we argue that the neoliberal decline of the welfare state and government support limits community formation and maintains linguistic isolation within these receiving communities.
Related to that theoretical point, our findings suggest the need for changes in the government’s resettlement program that would develop new strategies for refugee integration and English language learning. Resettlement agencies and government resettlement policies should think of adaption as a community-level process. The federal resettlement program in the United States has as a primary goal of helping refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency through quick employment (Nawyn 2010). However, our data illustrate that quick employment does not necessarily help refugees better integrate into their local communities in the long term. Federal resettlement assistance would improve with more funding for ESL instruction, as Linton (2009) has recommended for immigration policy across the board, and engage with a diverse ESL curriculum (Crandall 2000) rather than focusing primarily on vocational English instruction. Resettlement agencies should also make more efforts to connect refugees with the kinds of social supports they will need after their eligibility for resettlement has ended, and to build the social capital of the community rather than focusing primarily on the human capital of individuals. Putting resources into communities and helping individual refugees build weak ties within those communities will, we argue, establish a better model for refugee integration than the current model that conceives of language as an economic asset and refugees as unconnected individuals who must learn to stand on their own two feet.

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Notes

1. The anonymous lists provided by the resettlement agencies included a household number, a column indicating the relationship of household members (e.g., wife, husband), an individual case number (instead of their actual names), and country of origin.

2. We use the term “conational” rather than “coethnic” because many of the refugee participants in our study were from different ethnicities within the same national origin. Because of the small number of coethnics in the area, refugees tended to
associate with people of the same national group who spoke their language, and
ethnic divisions, while present, were less relevant.
3. The Burmese refugees come from a culture in which they may have felt more
inhibited than the Burundian from telling our research team about disrespectful
treatment they received, even if they would not be less likely to perceive being
disrespected (Barron et al. 2007).

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