

Belonging on Trial: Purism and Anti-Multiculturalism in Contemporary France

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This study examines how linguistic purism and anti-multicultural discourse reproduce social inequality in contemporary France. More specifically, it investigates how dominant discourses in the French society shape belonging, legitimacy, and discrimination for multilingual and multicultural individuals in France. To achieve this goal, I trace how a monolingual and monocultural model of Frenchness, articulated through republican universalism, defines legitimate citizenship as linguistically and culturally homogeneous. Within this model, other languages, cultural practices, and even first names are framed as signs of illegitimacy and weak national loyalty.

Two forms of qualitative data were collected and analysed. First, statements by high-visibility French media and political figures, including Zemmour, Maréchal, Onfray, and Polony, were gathered and subsequently analysed based on Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013). The focus was placed upon how these statements normalise linguistic purism, portray multicultural presence as a civilisational threat, and link proper French and proper first names to worthiness. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five multilingual and multicultural participants. The interviews addressed linguistic trajectories, migration histories, experiences of discrimination, and reactions to the selected discourses, and were transcribed. Findings indicate that pressure to perform a purified and standardised French, and to mute other linguistic and cultural resources, acts as a gatekeeping mechanism. Participants described the need to align with a narrow model of Frenchness while still being treated as not fully legitimate. They identified the role of media and politics in spreading and banalising discriminatory talk. Participants also reported emotional harm and described strategic adaptation in everyday interaction. This study argues that linguistic policing sustains symbolic hierarchies, while public narratives claim neutrality and equality. Participants voiced critical awareness and active resistance, and ultimately framed their multilingual and multicultural repertoires as sources of value and belonging.

Fairclough, N. (2013). Critical discourse analysis: the critical study of language / (Second edition.)

