

When Do Migration-Related Differences (Not) Matter? The Perspective of Postmigration

Maja Povrzanović Frykman

Abstract *This article introduces the perspective of postmigration as a way of rethinking integration in societies shaped by migration. Rather than positioning migrants as outsiders who need to adapt to society, postmigration understands migration-related plurality as constitutive of society and shifts attention to acceptance, participation, and equal opportunities for everyone. Drawing on research¹ presented in the book 'Academia and Cultural Production in Sweden: Postmigrant Trajectories, Alliances, and Negotiations' (transcript Publishing, 2026), the article demonstrates the analytical value of this perspective by looking at the use of Swedish and English in academia as a highly internationalised professional field. It discusses shifting linguistic positionings that cannot be reduced to a migrant-native binary. Practices of collegial support and translanguaging illustrate how linguistic differences may be negotiated pragmatically to enable participation. The article argues that postmigration illuminates how differences acquire, lose, or regain significance in specific situations and how participation is continuously negotiated across migration-related differences.*

ON (NOT) SPEAKING SWEDISH

More than two decades ago, together with some ten other employees of Malmö University,² I attended a course for prospective doctoral supervisors. It included lectures in Swedish, English, and "Scandinavian", as one lecturer dubbed the language he used when speaking his native Norwegian while incorporating as many Swedish words as he could. I had not yet been promoted to Associate Professor, but I took it for granted that my many years of professional experience in Croatia, together with my forthcoming publications, would eventually qualify me to act as a principal doctoral supervisor. Having lived in Sweden for a couple of years, I could largely understand Swedish. My professional life, however, was conducted entirely in English, and my employment contract contained no mention of language requirements.

During one of the intensive course days, I walked to a restaurant for lunch with some of the other course participants. While I was speaking English

with one of them, another participant walking alongside us, an older woman from another faculty whom I had never spoken to, interrupted us to tell me: "You should speak Swedish, you are never going to come into the society otherwise!" Was it well meant, or was it rude? Was it uttered out of concern, or was it an instance of linguistic discrimination?³ I was astonished to be warned about "coming into society" when I was already embedded in multiple local relationships and contexts: as a researcher, colleague, university teacher, and trade union member, as well as a wife, parent, and neighbour.

I cannot claim that the utterance was a blunt assertion of power, that of a native instructing, or rather warning, an immigrant to behave 'properly'. However, there was clearly a clash between self-positioning and ascribed positioning: between my sense of being embedded in the various contexts of my daily life and work, and the positioning of me as an outsider who should seek entry into 'society'.⁴

The utterance resonated with the understanding of migrants being outside of society and therefore in need of integration.⁵ It stems from an understanding of society as consisting of non-others, as something primordially self-similar and confronted from outside with others. As explained by Willem Schinkel, the effect of this has been that difference has not been regarded as constitutive of the social, but solely as jeopardizing it.⁶

Such understandings of integration and society have been critiqued, and varied modes of belonging and self-understanding have been promoted in research.⁷ This article highlights the perspective of postmigration as a new way of understanding

integration in societies of immigration. Naika Foroutan⁸ explained that, instead of measuring indicators for structural, social, cultural and—as termed by Foroutan—“identificative” integration, acceptance, participation and equal chances in society are alternative ways of describing integration. However, from the perspective of postmigration, as explained in more detail below, questions of acceptance, participation, and equal opportunities concern the entire population, not only migrants. Treating the ascription of ‘migrant’ as the single most important marker of difference in increasingly heterogeneous societies risks obscuring structural, social, and cultural inequalities that affect people regardless of whether or not they have themselves migrated.⁹

WHAT IS SIGNIFICANT FOR THE PERSPECTIVE OF POSTMIGRATION?

The ‘post’ in postmigration signals neither an end to migration, nor the irrelevance of differences or possible challenges related to migration. Rather, it signals a shift in perspective: migration is understood as a historical constant that drives broader societal transformation and is therefore not regarded as inherently disruptive or exceptional.¹⁰ As past and ongoing mobilities continue to shape the present, *migration and migrants are seen as integral to society*, while the plurality associated with migration remains subject to negotiation.

Migration-related plurality encompasses a range of experiences, histories, and heritages (of languages, names, appearances, cultural expressions). It also encompasses diverse educational trajectories, ranging from education and skills acquired elsewhere and recognised in Sweden, as in my own example from academia to the difficulties many refugees face in meeting the educational demands of the contemporary Swedish labour market. Yet people’s manifold positionalities, as colleagues, teachers, parents, and neighbours, among others, intersect with age, gender, place of residence and work, class, education, and employment status and cannot be reduced to the

single category of ‘migrant’. A simple migrant-native dichotomy is therefore insufficient for grasping the migration-related plurality in present-day Sweden.

The phrase “coming into the society” from the introductory vignette makes little sense when referring to people who are already part of it. The issue is rather whether and how they are accepted despite differences in skills and cultural preferences; whether and how they are able to participate regardless of where their former experiences or work, education, and family have been grounded; and whether they are offered equal opportunities in the various fields in which they seek to participate. As noted above, from the perspective of postmigration, these questions concern the entire population, not only migrants.

The phrase “coming into the society” is rarely applied to people regarded as natives, and certainly not to natives as a group. Yet, everyone needs to adapt to the changes in a society, in this context, to the presence of and interactions with colleagues, neighbours, and fellow citizens who were born and raised in other countries. At the same time, vernacular understandings of who counts as a ‘native’ often exclude persons who were born and educated in Sweden but are nevertheless racialised or othered, for example because of their names.

The acknowledgement of migration-related demographic changes and, consequently, of who is considered to be “in” the society, is also reflected in statistical categorisations. Under the earlier definition, persons born in Sweden with one parent born abroad were categorised as having a ‘foreign background’; with the revised classification introduced in 2002, they came to be categorised as having a ‘Swedish background’.¹¹ However, alongside those born abroad, the category ‘foreign background’ also includes persons born in Sweden to two parents born abroad. Yet, they too, are not from elsewhere and do not need to “come into” the society into which they were born. The issue is instead whether they have equal opportunities to participate and whether disadvantages associated with their parents’ socio-economic positioning are reproduced across generations, not least as a legacy

of particular histories of post-WWII labour and refugee immigration to Sweden.

According to recent statistics, 20.8 per cent of Sweden's population was born outside of Sweden, 6.8 per cent was born in the country to two parents born abroad, and 8.0 per cent had one parent who was born outside of Sweden.¹² Across European countries of immigration, growing numbers of people born to parents who migrated are increasingly confronted with the clash between their self-understanding and the otherness ascribed to them. They demand equal opportunities and representation, and these demands find expression in political and cultural struggles.¹³

The lens of postmigration does not reveal utopian harmony and consensus in multiracial and multiethnic contexts. On the contrary, it highlights the negotiations and struggles that migration-related plurality entails. In other words, it brings into focus struggles over acceptance and recognition, participation and representation among people with different heritages, whom the lens of postmigration shows as constitutive of a changed and continuously changing society.

Writing about contemporary Sweden, Signe Askersjö sees the concept of postmigration as useful for confronting the "lack of language" to address the Swedish reality, where migration has become commonplace, yet politicians refuse to acknowledge it.¹⁴ We could say that the 2002 change in the statistical definition of who is, and who is not, considered to have a 'foreign background' in Sweden indicates a move towards recognising Swedish society as postmigrant.

Nevertheless, the commonness of migration provides no shield against ascriptions of difference that lead to othering, and have consequences in everyday, educational, or professional contexts. These consequences can be summarised as positioning people lower in social hierarchies (of who is considered desirable as a friend, who is expected to perform well in school, who is deemed worthy of being invited for a job interview, and so on). At the same time, many people who migrated to Sweden experience acceptance and participate

on equal terms in a variety of contexts alongside friends, colleagues, and neighbours who have not migrated.

Furthermore, new social encounters and working constellations, not the least in the internationalised academic workplaces, may bring new aspects of difference into the picture, requiring everyone involved, regardless of whether they have migrated themselves, have parents who migrated, or have no personal or family history of migration, to accommodate them. The lens of postmigration seeks to capture precisely these dynamics and to understand which differences matter in a given situation, to whom, when, and why.

Ethnographic studies conducted in workplaces with multiethnic staff exemplify that engagements with difference are not fixed but fluid, situational, and continuously negotiated, often with humility and humour.¹⁵ The following example, which connects to the story from the beginning of this article, looks at academia through the lens of postmigration.

ZOOMING IN ON THE SWEDISH ACADEMIA

Internationalisation brought about grand-scale changes of ethnic diversity of academic staff in Swedish academia. In 2024, 41 per cent of all research and teaching staff were either born abroad or born in Sweden to two foreign-born parents, with the proportion ranging from 16 to 76 per cent across staff categories.¹⁶ It was highest among career-development (non-permanent) positions where it surged from 31 per cent in 2008 to 76 per cent in 2024. Around 31 per cent of professors active in 2024 were foreign-born, while they accounted for only 19 per cent in 2008.¹⁷

Swedish academia was one professional field under scrutiny in our research project¹⁸ devoted to professional trajectories of academic staff statistically categorised as foreign-born (migrants and children to two migrants) who made it to the positions of professional authority. However, research participants included also individuals who have no personal or family-related experience of migration but have met, worked with, and

developed relations with people who do. We asked the initial participants to identify individuals who had played a key role in providing advice and support, whom we conceptualised as *allies*. Some of them were born abroad, while others were born in Sweden to Swedish parents.

Based on interview material, we examined how institutionally framed relations among colleagues across diverse heritages, skills, and perspectives are narrated as factors in professional recognition and establishment. We were interested in how our research participants make sense of their own professional achievements as well as of the migration-related changes of their workplaces and their disciplinary fields.

Employing the perspective of postmigration, we tried to understand which differences (concerning own or parental migration, intersected with disciplinary field, gender, age, time of arrival to Sweden, own or parental country of origin, and parents' level of education) mattered to whom, under which circumstances, and why they may appear, disappear, or reappear as significant. By placing migration-related plurality and its negotiations at the centre of research attention, the project 'migrantised' research on Swedish academia and 'demigrantised' research on migration-related plurality within it.¹⁹

Through our research participants' stories of mentorship, collegiality, friendship, and gatekeeping, we gained insights into the alliances academics often forge across gender, class, ethnic, and generational differences, which influence recognition and advancement.²⁰ While the existent research²¹ focuses, to a great extent, on various forms and structures of discrimination, the lens of postmigration allowed us to foreground the simultaneity of discriminatory hierarchies and changes toward equal opportunities and merit-based status, visibility, and influence. The matters of language use proved to be of special importance in this regard. They revealed that ever-changing constellations of difference in today's Swedish academia bring about situations and relations in

which migration-related plurality does not imply predestined positionings.

BACK TO THE LANGUAGE USE

Drawing on Bourdieu's work, we conceptualised language not only as a medium of institutional communication, but also as a power resource through which individuals pursue their own interests, display their practical competence, and may build alliances. Examining the tensions surrounding the use of Swedish and English in an increasingly internationalised academic landscape, we discussed language as capital central to symbolic struggles and shifting positionings.²²

The ongoing internationalisation has made English a crucial part of working in Swedish academia. Between 2019 and 2023, 94 per cent of all doctoral theses and research articles produced at Swedish universities were written in English. Nearly all research output in natural sciences and technology was in English, while it amounted to 70 per cent in the humanities in the same period. English was the language of instruction in 20 per cent of bachelor's courses and 58 per cent of master's courses at Swedish universities.²³

Nonetheless, only 12 per cent of academics occupying formal leadership/management positions are foreign-born, with a quarter of those coming from other Nordic countries. The perceived lack of proficiency in Swedish (or other Nordic languages)²⁴ has been identified by both the Ministry of Education and Research and our research participants as a major explanation for the striking underrepresentation of foreign-born academics in administrative leadership positions.²⁵ Moreover, research has linked language policies to university employees' limited sense of being involved in both formal and informal processes, including decision-making and even simple access to information.²⁶ Swedish universities' language policies are decentralised and largely vary, but overall prescribe which language, mostly either Swedish or English, should be used for different functions. While Swedish is the official language of public institutions in Sweden, including universities,

prescribing the use of one language appears to be at odds with the intense internationalisation of academia. In contrast, university language policies that prioritise successful communication rather than specific languages may foster a sense of inclusion and enhance opportunities for academics with limited proficiency in Swedish to participate in administrative bodies and take on decision-making roles.²⁷

Our research has shown that the insistence on the exclusive use of Swedish that makes equal participation of some migrants among the staff in departmental meetings impossible, had been framed as resistance to the neoliberalism characterised by internationalisation. On the other hand, the perspective of postmigration helped us elucidate that it is not only migrants who may feel excluded by the universities' language policies or by language use practices at particular departments. The expectation that English be used in everyday interactions with colleagues and students alike may disadvantage non-native speakers who are not comfortable using it. A sense of 'feeling at home' in an academic environment may thus be challenged by linguistic insecurity among people statistically classified as having a 'Swedish background' just as much as among those classified as having a 'foreign background'.

Our material revealed that positions of high status in academia need to be negotiated when it comes to everyday workplace communication. It is not only institutional power hierarchies that stand and fall through fluency—or the lack thereof—in a particular language: personal wellbeing and the assessment of one's own academic excellence are also at stake. Hence, a binary distinction between privilege and marginalisation fails to capture the full complexity of our interviewees' experiences, regardless of their native language. In spite of being established academics, all our interviewees have found it necessary to make different kinds of efforts in their daily negotiations of inclusion and recognition. These negotiations in turn depend on the institutional context of faculties and departments in intersection with the fields these

academics work in. They also depend on collegial support. One of our interviewees, a native speaker of Swedish, recalled translating his doctoral student's thesis from Swedish into English, as the student had migrated to Sweden from a country where the standard of English-language education was relatively low. Another interviewee, herself a migrant, described receiving help from her doctoral student in polishing texts she had written in Swedish.

On the other hand, translanguaging is common in informal communication in lunchrooms and in meetings in departments with significant numbers of staff who have migrated. This practice of using different languages at the same time is the way people draw on their entire linguistic repertoire, rather than treating the languages they know as separate systems that must be used one at a time. For example, Swedish-speaking colleagues in the lunchroom may switch to English when a newly employed colleague from abroad joins them at the table. Someone searching for a precise expression in English or in Swedish may receive ad hoc help from a colleague with a stronger command of the language. Swedish words are inserted in English conversations due to the difficulty of quickly finding English terms for specific Swedish phenomena, including, e.g., the names of administrative units and documents. At a meeting conducted primarily in Swedish, some participants may contribute in English.

In sum, translanguaging recognises differences in language skills and preferences without hierarchising them in a fixed or prescribed manner. It is an example of "innovative social praxis"²⁸ that prioritises effective communication and thereby enhances participation on equal terms.

The perspective of postmigration enabled us to highlight that negotiations around language use, and the practices that enable successful communication and participation, concern not only people who have migrated but everyone in the field. Perhaps that is why the female attendee of the course mentioned in the introductory vignette felt compelled to 'remind' me of the primacy of her

native language? My use of English in informal communication foreshadowed changes in a field in which, two decades later, such exchanges have become an everyday matter at many departments in Sweden.

Author bio Maja Povrzanović Frykman is Professor of Ethnology at the Department of Global Political Studies and an affiliate of Malmö Institute for Migration Studies, Malmö University. She has published on war experiences, labour and refugee migrants, diaspora and transnational practices, highly skilled migrants, and affect. Her co-edited books include *Sensitive Objects: Affect and Material Culture* (Nordic Academic Press), *Migration, Transnationalism and Development in South-East Europe and the Black Sea Region* (Routledge), *Highly-educated Migrants in Sweden* (Arkiv, in Swedish), *Conviviality at the Crossroads: The Poetics and Politics of Everyday Encounters* (Palgrave Macmillan), and *Academia and Cultural Production in Sweden: Postmigrant Trajectories, Alliances, and Negotiations* (transcript Publishing).

¹ This article draws on Chapters 1 (pp. 9–45), 3 (pp. 75–100) and 8 (pp. 203–231) in M. Povrzanović Frykman, E. Narvselius and C. Sarrimo (Eds.) (2026). *Academia and Cultural Production in Sweden: Postmigrant Trajectories, Alliances, and Negotiations*. transcript Publishing.

² At that time, Malmö University College.

³ Schütze, C., & Nahikari Irastorza, N. (2026). When language feels like home: The role of multilingualism and discrimination for migrants' belonging to Sweden. *Current Issues in Migration Research*, 3(1), 17–23.

⁴ Khosravi, S. (2024). Doing migration studies with an accent. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(9), 2346–2358.

⁵ Klarenbeek, L. M. (2019). Relational integration: A response to Willem Schinkel. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 7, 20; Klarenbeek, L. M. (2021). Reconceptualising 'integration as a two-way process'. *Migration Studies*, 9(3), 902–921.

⁶ Schinkel, W. (2018). Against 'immigrant integration': For an end to neocolonial knowledge production. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 6, 31.

⁷ See, for example, Vertovec, S. (2024). Superdiversity and the quest for complexity thinking. *Current Issues in Migration Research*, 1(1), 32–34, and the literature on superdiversity.

⁸ In a short video "How can we define integration", <https://sharingperspectivesfoundation.com/video-lecture/video-26/>.

⁹ Foroutan, N. (2019). *Die postmigrantische Gesellschaft: Ein Versprechen der pluralen Demokratie*. transcript Publishing.

¹⁰ Schramm, M., Moslund, S. P., Petersen, A.R., Gebauer, M., Post, H. C., Vitting Seerup, S., & Wiegand, F. (2019). *Reframing migration, diversity and the arts: The postmigrant condition*. Routledge; see also the extensive review of the literature employing the notion of postmigration in Chapter 1 (pp. 9–45) in Povrzanović Frykman et al. (2026).

¹¹ Statistics Sweden (2002). *Statistics on persons with foreign background: Guidelines and recommendations*. (Reports on Statistical Co-ordination for the Official Statistics of Sweden 2002:3).

¹² Statistics Sweden (2026, 28 March). *Population in Sweden by country/region of birth, citizenship and Swedish/foreign background*. <https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/population-and-living-conditions/population-composition-and-development/population-statistics/>.

¹³ See Foroutan (2019); Petersen, A.R. (2024). *Postmigration, transculturality and the transversal politics of art*. Routledge.

¹⁴ Askersjö, S. (2025). *How to think differently about difference: Convivialities and contentions in the postmigration condition*. Doctoral Dissertation in Social Anthropology. Gothenburg University, p. 90.

¹⁵ Askersjö, S., Hellman, J., & Åkesson, L. (2026). *Det nya normala: En uppgörelse med vårt tids besatthet av integration*. Natur & Kultur; see also Povrzanović Frykman, M., & Narvselius, E. (2026). Personal names in Swedish academia: Ambiguities of difference from the perspective of postmigration. *Ethnologia Europaea*, 56(1), 1–22.

¹⁶ Statistics Sweden (2025). *Higher education. Employees in higher education 2024* (UF23 – Higher education).

¹⁷ Swedish Higher Education Authority (2025). *Sweden's academic landscape: Higher education and research explained* (Report 2025:18). Notably, only 1 to 3 per cent of higher education staff in any category was born in Sweden to two parents born outside of Sweden.

However, this group is more strongly represented by students and third-cycle students and also has the highest transition rate from upper-secondary to higher education. For further statistical details and their thorough contextualisation see Chapter 2 (pp. 47–73) in Povrzanović Frykman et al. (2026).

¹⁸ *Academia and Cultural Production as 'Postmigrant' Fields in Sweden*, funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (P20-0137) in 2021–24. See Povrzanović Frykman et al. (2026).

¹⁹ See Römhild, R. (2017). Beyond the bounds of the ethnic: For postmigrant cultural and social research. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 9(2), 69–75; and Dahinden, J. (2016). A plea for the 'de-migrantization' of research on migration and integration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(13), 2207–2225.

²⁰ See Chapter 8 (pp. 203–231) in Povrzanović Frykman et al. (2026).

²¹ Reviewed in Chapter 1 (pp. 9–45), Povrzanović Frykman et al. (2026).

²² See Chapter 3 (pp. 75–100) in Povrzanović Frykman et al. (2026), where the sources for the figures in this section of the article are provided.

²³ Malmström, H., & Pecorari, D. (2024). *Language of instruction and publication in Sweden* (Chalmers Studies in Communication and Learning in Higher Education 2024:1).

²⁴ While Swedish is the official language, Danish and Norwegian are in practice not perceived as 'foreign' and

communication among the native speakers of these languages appears as relatively unrestricted (even if levels of mutual understanding can differ). See Nordic Cooperation (2026). Language.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20180201225026/http://www.norden.org/en/fakta-om-norden-1/language>; and Nordic Council of Ministers (2007). Declaration on a Nordic language policy 2006. In *Deklaration om nordisk språkpolitik* (ANP 2007:746, pp. 91–95).

²⁵ Ministry of Education and Research (2018). *En strategisk agenda för internationalisering* (SOU 2018:3). Utbildningsdepartementet.

²⁶ Jeong, H., & Lindemann, S. (2024). Facilitating or compromising inclusion? Language policies at Swedish higher education institutions as workplaces. *Multilingua - Journal of Cross-cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 43(3), 365–395.

²⁷ Jeong and Lindemann (2024: 383) hold up the example of Malmö University's policy that explicitly requires "a mutual willingness to negotiate and a pragmatic approach when it comes to choosing language in various informal, semi-formal and formal contexts".

²⁸ Hill, M., & Yıldız, E. (2021). A postmigrant contrapuntal reading of the refugee crisis and its discourse. 'Foreigners out! Schlingensiefel's container'. In A. M. Gaonkar, A. S. Øst Hansen, H. C. Post and M. Schramm (Eds.). *Postmigration: Art, Culture, and Politics in Contemporary Europe* (pp. 109–130). transcript Publishing.