

# Layering racism in Luxembourg

A complex web of sociohistorical and language riddles

The article draws on data collected on lusophone migrant workers' interactions at workplaces and society at large in Luxembourg, as part of DisPOSEG Project<sup>1</sup>. Racism is layered and concomitant with other channels of inequalities, such as language, class, gender and/or citizenship. While it is almost impossible to isolate racial discrimination from all the above-mentioned channels, the article attempts to concentrate on the interplay between racial and linguistic discriminations.

## Introduction

The modern understanding of race began to take shape during the European colonial period, particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries. Race is a colonial invention. European colonizers encountered diverse peoples in their travels, leading to the development of racial classifications based on physical attributes and perceived cultural differences. They imposed their cultural, economic and political dominance over indigenous populations in vast territories of Africa, Asia and the Americas.

Thus, race is a historically contingent social and mental construction that prescribes a natural inequality

between peoples, attributing value to certain peoples while disenfranchising others'.<sup>2</sup> The colonizers justified their activity on the grounds that they were engaged in a *civilisatrice* mission by bringing "superior" languages and cultures to colonized people. If race was a colonial invention to strategically enslave and dominate indigenous subjects, racism is very real and lived. It is important to note that racism is not merely a matter of individual prejudice but is embedded within institutions and social structures, with real consequence for subordinate people.<sup>3</sup> It is intrinsically motivated by power dynamics, rooted in colonial histories, in which language is imbricated as one of its main tools of deliverance.<sup>4</sup>

Bernardino Tavares

Over the scope of DisPOSEG project, the so-called lusophone migrants, i.e. originally from Portugal and its former colonies, reported about persistent challenges among themselves at workplaces and in their societal interactions in Luxembourg. Those challenges are highly marked by what Mignolo<sup>5</sup> termed the 'coloniality of being'. That is, the question of superiority and inferiority among human

Bernardino Tavares, born in Cape Verde, got his master's degree in Anglo-American Studies at the University of Coimbra in 2012. He got his PhD in Sciences du Langage in 2018, with a focus on the sociolinguistics of Cape Verdean migration trajectories into Luxembourg at the University of Luxembourg. As a Research Scientist at the University of Luxembourg from 2021 to 2024 and as the PI of the DisPOSEG Project, he researched lusophone migrants' social and workplace interactions.

beings in racial terms, often intertwined with language, that originated with the Western colonialism. Race, racism and language discriminations are some of the key manifestations of 'the effects of coloniality in lived experience and not only in the mind'.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, it is important to note that racial inequities do not exhaust reasons of inequalities and that talking about race/racism often implies talking about language and power, especially in highly multicultural and multilingual countries. The increasing nationalistic discourses on language are largely discourses on race and migration. As Weber<sup>7</sup> stresses, 'discrimination based on race is often illegal' and penalized by law in several countries. Thus, language has been one of the most legitimated channels of racialization. Racism can be gradually invisibilised through language as a proxy to race and ethnicity. It can manifest through 'linguistic microaggression'<sup>8</sup>, that is often a subtle and banal aggression towards speakers of "subordinate" languages, whose cumulative character can harm said speakers. Through the lens of 'raciolinguistics,' a relatively new field of inquiry in applied linguistics that examines the confluence of language, race and racism in the production of social difference and inequalities, Rosa and Flores<sup>9</sup> have nuancedly tackled how historical processes of nation-state building and colonialism are present in contemporary thinking and behaviour regarding race and language<sup>10</sup>, leading to exclusions of racialized individuals.

Taking the Luxembourgish society as an example, let's turn to concrete illustrations of situated moments of coloniality and how race, racism and language correlate permeating social and workplace challenges, in constructing the relations of difference and inequality that shape our world.

### Racism in Luxembourg: beyond the locals-racialized subjects' divide

In a given host society, debates on racism have the tendency of being polarized and channeled into interactions between local people *versus* racialized individuals or migrants. However, there is a need to go beyond this fixed interactional prism of the local-racialized subjects' divide. Because racism is such a dynamic and transversal issue, that putting it into an unequivocal and linear divide is doomed to fail in mitigating its production and circulations. Critical race scholars have argued and shown us how racism is systemic and pervasive, operating at both the macro-level through laws and policies and at the micro-level through everyday situated social interactions and practices.<sup>11</sup> It permeates and negatively affects encounters between subjects from former

colonized countries of the global South and Western individuals, across contexts of their interactions.

As some studies have insightfully shown, the manifestation of racism is a longstanding issue in Luxembourg. It can range from formal colonial times in which the country actively collaborated with classical colonizing countries such as Belgium, in the colonization of Congo<sup>12</sup>, through the eve of lusophone migration and into its (super)diverse contemporary society. For instance, "official" racism surfaced when the then-Luxembourgish government had to deal with the unexpected arrival of Cape Verdeans in the sixties and seventies, under the scope of the guest worker contract signed with the fascist Portuguese government. As an attempt to stop the arrival of Cape Verdeans who also possessed Portuguese citizenship, the two governments revisited the contract by explicitly putting it on racial terms when they asked for '*portugais de souche*' only.<sup>13</sup> In the day-to-day encounters, racism does not always manifest through hostility, but also through indifference, disregard and disrespect.<sup>14</sup> Racism as prejudices against groups and individuals based on their supposed-inferior race may occur 'without hatred,' for example in forms of jokes.<sup>15</sup>

More recently, the topic of racism has had a more substantial conversation in both the state and societal standpoints. This is due to several intersecting reasons, such as: a) the global phenomenon of *Black Lives Matter* movement; b) the study entitled *Being Black in Europe*, carried out between 2017 and 2019 by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) of the European Union that positioned Luxembourg as the second European country with the highest percentage of racism perception; and c) the brutal assassination of George Floyd by a police officer on May 25<sup>th</sup> 2020. Newly created anti-racist and feminist associations (in 2019) such as *Finkapé* and *Lëtze Rise Up* have immensely contributed to open more nuanced debates on this longstanding social issue, with strategies for promoting inclusion, advocating for social justice and fostering intercultural dialogue.

It is important to note here that a statement of racism does not necessarily mean that only or all "ethnic" Luxembourgers are racist toward Black people and/or other racialized individuals/migrants in the country. Unfortunately, there is a web of layered and structured racism, riddled with language demands and ideologies of nation-state, which manifests in societal and administrative encounters, ranging from encounters between ethnic Luxembourgers and racialized individuals, and between and within migrants' groups/individuals linked by colonial histories (or not). Studies such as the FRA's one

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mentioned above and the more recent CEFIS' study entitled *Le racisme et les discriminations ethno-raciales au Luxembourg*<sup>16</sup>, published in 2023, have shown how racism permeates multiple layers of encounters and situated moments in society. However, to a certain extent, those studies overlooked the language imprint on racism.

In the past, the Luxembourgish language was used as an 'act of identity'<sup>17</sup> to resist the Nazi occupation.<sup>18</sup> Recently, the state's incisive promotion of Luxembourgish also suggests an "act of differentiation" and protection from contemporary migration. For there is an ongoing centralization of it as the national language and in the access of resources, although the Grand Duchy has been branded as a multilingual country *par excellence*. Consciously and unconsciously, language has been often used to express dis-belonging (or not-fully belonging) of racialized subjects (or not) to the assumed white society of Luxembourg. This turns to be a form of harm inflicted on racialized individuals who, in spite of speaking Luxembourgish competently, are often reminded of their geographical origins or the ones of their parents, by administrative, workplace and societal acts of differentiations in forms of racial and linguistic microaggressions and coloniality, as shown below.

### Linguistic microaggressions

Linguistic and racial microaggressions often occur in interplay. To illustrate this, I draw on the narrative of a research participant, a young woman who was born in Luxembourg from lusophone parents. She underlined how surprised ethnic Luxembourgers seem when she addresses them in Luxembourgish:

*Because I have the typical Mediterranean physique, dark hair, curly hair, dark skin and so on, what has often happened to me is that when I say, when I speak Luxembourgish, people are amazed. They're amazed, they look at me, 'oh, you speak Luxembourgish? [...] oh, you're Luxembourgish?'*

Note that the reason for this surprise is the result of complex, interwoven and 'fixed' relationships between race, ethnicity, language and nation-state ideologies. These intertwined and fixed assumptions 'lead us to expect that certain things will be in a certain place, that people will speak in a certain way.' On the one hand, she was a kind of 'unexpected speaker' in that moment.<sup>19</sup> But, on the other hand, such an unexpected speaker can also be cumulatively addressed in French instead of Luxembourgish even if s/he addresses the ethnic Luxembourgers in a "good" Luxembourgish level. This is an experience reported by some Luxembourgers of lusophone parents from Portugal, Brazil and African countries in Luxembourg. To a certain extent, the persistence in using French to address these Luxembourgish speakers of migrant background may serve the purpose of perceiving them as not-fully belonging to the country.

### Coloniality/racism at workplace

Workplace dynamics are inherently challenging due to power relations, and colonial attitudes can intensify racism. Thus, coloniality or echoes of a colonial past still mediate interactions, creating tensions and affecting dynamics at workplaces which bring consequences to racialized people in Western societies. On the one hand, this can implicitly manifest through more legitimised channels such as some "banal" racial jokes and beliefs, indifference and language



ideologies. But on the other hand, it can culminate in more explicit racist attitudes towards historically disenfranchised people, occupying positions of power or not.

To illustrate the above-mentioned assertions, I draw on a narrative of a racialized research participant who has navigated and occupied a position of power in a company that provides cleaning, gardening and construction services in Luxembourg. He became the general coordinator in that company where he has worked for more than a decade. He is in constant negotiations with state administrations in the pursuit to place workers of diverse origins and educational backgrounds, mostly from the global South but also many Portuguese, few Luxembourgers and other Europeans. When I asked him about his relationship with Portuguese and other European migrants who were his subordinates at work, he stressed that:

*There is that question of superiority, when they have [an African] team leader, they don't accept [...] while Africans [...] accept the leadership of Europeans [...] from the other side is more difficult, it is always more complicated!*

He went on to highlight a more overt personal lived experience of coloniality/racism, anchored on the reaction of one of his European subordinates after knowing that he became coordinator in that company:

*Eh now he is the boss, but I don't have an African boss, I don't have a black boss, he is the boss of nobody, he is your boss!*

The new coordinator added that there were many who left the company for the majority did not accept him. In the end, he lamented the persistence of coloniality at workplaces. His experiences interestingly show that racialized individuals can occupy positions of power in the West, but that this does not necessarily redress racism towards them. On the contrary, s/he can be perceived as "being out of place" as labor divisions are highly permeated by coloniality. Consequently, s/he can be more surveilled by both her/his subordinates and higher authorities who allowed her/him to inhabit that privileged position. However, to a certain extent, that position of coordination contributes to defamiliarize or denaturalize the habitus of labor divisions in Europe, which is still permeated by racism. As we can see from the experience of this coordinator, opportunities for racialized subjects can sometimes become challenges due to higher surveillance on them, in both micro and macro encounters.

The best defense against coloniality and microaggressions, as described above, is the ability to recognize them and to defend promptly so as to reduce the cost of accumulation.<sup>20</sup> In order to work toward a more equitable society and intrinsically celebrate unity in diversity, we need to beckon towards a collective call to action, in which race and racism cease to exist as barriers and causes of social inequalities. ♦

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1 <https://disposeg.wordpress.com>

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7 Weber, *Language racism*, p. 22.

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19 Alastair Pennycook, *Language and Mobility: Unexpected Places*, Bristol, Multilingual Matters, 2012, p. 23.

20 Ingrid Piller, *Linguistic diversity and social justice: An introduction to applied sociolinguistics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 154.