Mind the Gap. Mimicry and Subjectivation in Racialised Discourses

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Abstract

In racialised discourses, there is a gap between a constructed *we* and a constructed *Other,* which is continuously maintained through processes of Othering. Our contribution discusses how othered subjects within this power relation challenge the gap through mimicry (Homi Bhabha). To this end, we trace historical (dis)continuities of racialised discourses and draw on two empirical studies to show the extent to which religiously and linguistically othered subjects gain agency in these discourses. Through the entanglement of subjectivation and Othering via mimicry, we ask how discursive subject positions can be fragilised and how, over time, cracks can be created in the discourses.

Zusammenfassung

In rassifizierten Diskursen besteht eine Grenze zwischen einem konstruierten *Wir* und den konstruierten *Anderen,* die durch Otheringprozesse kontinuierlich aufrecht erhalten wird. Unser Beitrag diskutiert wie verAnderte Subjekte

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in diesem Machtverhältnis die Kluft durch Mimicry (Homi Bhabha) herausfordern. Wir zeichnen dafür historische (Dis-)Kontinuitäten rassifizierter Diskurse nach und arbeiten anhand von zwei empirischen Studien heraus, inwiefern religiös und sprachlich verAnderte Subjekte in diesen Diskursen Agency erlangen. Durch die Verschränkung von Subjektivierung und Othering über Mimicry fragen wir darauf aufbauend nach Möglichkeiten, wie diskursive Subjektpositionen fragilisiert und Risse in den Diskursen (über Zeit) erzeugt werden können.

Keywords

Mimicry • Othering • Racialised Discourses • Gap • Othered Subjects

Schlüsselwörter

Mimicry • Othering • Rassifizierte Diskurse • Kluft • VerAnderte Subjekte

1 Othering: A Brief Introduction

Migration and integration are highly controversial issues in Europe, not least in German-speaking countries (e.g. Riegel 2016; Spies/Tuider 2022; Siouti et al. 2022b). This contribution focuses on the latter, as this is where both our empirical work and we as researchers are situated. Within discourses on migration, integration and belonging in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, processes of Othering occur, as studies from various disciplines such as sociology, literature, history and education show (Siouti et al. 2022a, 11 f.).

Othering, as a central concept of postcolonial theorising, describes the construction of powerful differences that juxtapose a *we* with *the Other.* The decisive factor herein is that both groups are continuously produced, fixed and brought into a relation of power with one another through attributions and essentialisations in different areas of discourse (Riegel 2016, 51 ff.). This goes hand in hand with the creation of binary subject positions (Bosančić 2019; Keller 2011) that either address subjects as part of an imagined *we*-group or position them as *the Other,* outside of it. Across a range of disciplines, the markers of difference at work have been identified and explored, such as race and religion (Opratko 2019; Shooman 2014; Trucco 2025), race and gender (Fischer/Dahinden 2017; Lavanchy/Purtschert 2022), race, religion and gender (Dahinden/Manser-Egli 2023; Gasser 2020), race and dis_ability (Akbaba/Buchner 2023; Konz/Schröter 2022,) race

and hegemonic language (Bjegač 2020; Pokitsch 2022; Rühlmann 2023) or race, class and gender (Spies/Tuider 2022).

In our contribution, we focus on the intersections of race and religion, as well as of race and hegemonic language, and ask to what extent othered subjects can gain agency within Othering processes. To this end, we use the concept of mimicry, which Homi K. Bhabha (1994) developed in the context of colonial power relations, and translate it to contemporary discourses. A specific feature of these racialised discourses is that a gap always remains between *we* and *the Other.* We discuss this gap in current 'integration debates,' using two research projects (Pokitsch 2022; Trucco 2025) as a basis to show how othered subjects gain agency in and through mimicry. Firstly, we provide a historical overview of *the Other* in the context of colonialism (2). We then explain the associated regime of subjectivation, which Bhabha conceptualises as mimicry (3), before transferring the dynamics of colonial power relations to postcolonial discourses (4). Thereby, we carve out continuities and ruptures that come to light in current racialised discourses and point out what we have termed 'the gap.' Finally, we illustrate the theoretical argument developed by means of two empirical studies (5): mimicry of a constructed religious *Other* (5.1) and mimicry of a constructed linguistic *Other* (5.2). We conclude with a discussion of the entanglement between subjectivation and Othering with regard to agency, and derive questions for subjectivation research that incorporates temporality to a greater extent (6).

2 The West and the Rest: European (Post-) Colonialism and the Invention of *the Other*

European colonialism, which lasted for over 500 years, was not only a form of imperialism, but was also characterised to a large extent by a symbolic division of the world. It was accompanied by processes of difference making, i.e. the construction of Otherness as a complementary counterpart to Europe. 'The West' is therefore, as Stuart Hall (2019 [1992]) points out, "a *historical,* not a geographical, construct" (ibid., 142), which consists of the sum of discursively (re)constructed ideas based on the principle of difference (ibid., 155 ff.). Processes of Othering thus not only served the construction of *the Other* but were also essential for the construction of 'the West' and the consolidation of boundaries between these poles. The discursive construction of Othering has been described in detail by Edward Said (1979) in "Orientalism," even if he does not use the term itself. In his discourse analysis of the academic discipline of Orientalism, which has existed in Europe since the 18th century, Said works out how the Orient (and

at the same time the Occident, as its counterpart in demarcation) was discursively constructed and thus also epistemically subjugated. Said (1979) understands the Orient as Europe's "deepest and most recurring image of the Other" (ibid., 1) that "has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" (ibid., 5). The construction of the Orient hence also serves the construction of a European identity and a hierarchical juxtaposition, in which Europe appears as the "superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" (ibid., 7).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay "The Rani of Sirmur" (1985), ultimately coins the processes described by Said terminologically as Othering. In her widely cited essay "Can the subaltern speak" (1988), she traces the mechanisms of this powerful practice of subjugation by focusing on marginalised women in the global South. As such, she makes a crucial contribution to anchoring Othering as an integral part of postcolonial theories. Spivak demonstrates in her work that *othered* subjects are not merely excluded (and silenced) through Othering, but also bound up in the (post-)colonial discourse of power. The continuous positioning at the margins serves as a counterpart to the 'normal' and therefore as the (epistemic) perpetuation of an imagined *we.* An essential characteristic of Othering lies in the dynamics of these construction processes, because *the Other* is continuously (re)produced and at the same time fixed in the position of difference. What does that mean for *othered* subjects?

In order to approach Othering from the perspective of subjectivation research, the strategy of splitting described by Hall (2019 [1992]) offers a starting point. Splitting means separating the 'normal' from the 'abnormal,' *the Other* from the *we.*

> The world is first divided, symbolically, into good/bad, us/them, attractive/disgusting, civilized/uncivilized, the West/the Rest. All the other, many differences between and within these two halves are collapsed, simplified—i.e., stereotyped. (ibid., 171)

Stereotyping reduces a complex reality to a few characteristics, simplifies and fixes them and therefore essentialises and naturalises (Hall 1997, 258). We could also speak of subject positions: these are "positioning processes and 'patterns of subjectivation' which are generated in discourses and which refer to (fields of) addressees" (Keller 2011, 55). They can be understood as identity templates that make "certain self-relations appear desirable" and present others as "negative examples that are stigmatized or denied recognition" (Bosančić 2019, 93). One could therefore argue that Othering creates opposing subject positions through which *the Other* is perpetually addressed as different. The subject positions of *we/*

the Other are dichotomous and can be understood as model subjects: 'the West' is the ideal model subject, *the Other* is the negative model subject or anti-subject. Among others, Andreas Reckwitz suggested that subject forms emerge through a process of differentiation from an anti-subject (Bosančić 2014, 128 ff.).[1] This anti-subject, Reckwitz states, is often a cultural *Other* towards which Othering is practised (Reckwitz 2008, 45).

At the same time, the anti-subject of *the Other* is also split into two dichotomous positions: the threatening or dangerous *Other* and the friendly or innocent *Other* (Hall 2019 [1992], 171). We can find this split and the emphasis on supposedly positive attributions of *the Other* in numerous colonial images, Western literature, and various knowledge productions about 'the Rest.' We encounter it in particular in the figure of the 'noble savage,' who was staged as a stereotypical central figure of European desire by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Rudyard Kipling, Karl May, and many more. We therefore find both *the good Other* and *the bad Other.*

But does being addressed as *the Other* automatically lead to submission or is it also possible to develop agency in this process? In his concept of mimicry, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) has shown that Othering processes can be fragilised or used strategically as resistance. This will be examined in more detail below, before we look at transferring mimicry from colonial to postcolonial discourses.

3 Not Quite/Not White: Mimicry and/in Colonial Discourses

The construction of binary opposites through Othering is often understood as fixed and stable. In his analyses of colonial discourses, Homi K. Bhabha attempts to move beyond this dichotomy and explores the in-between of these poles. One of the key concepts from his early period of work is of particular interest for our contribution: mimicry. Bhabha understands mimicry as a form of colonial control: the colonised subject is required to adapt to the values and norms of the occupier (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 119) or, in other words, to assimilate. Therefore, *the Other* is constructed *"as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite"* (Bhabha 1994, 122; emphasis in original). This conceptualisation is compatible with Hall's understanding of splitting within the construction of *the Other* (Hall

[1] He thereby follows Foucault who described the emergence of the normalising society in "History of Madness" (Foucault 2006) and "Discipline and Punish" (Foucault 1995), among other works.

2019 [1992]). The subaltern subject should distance itself from the dangerous or threatening *Other* and instead invest in a position that attempts to adapt to 'the West' through assimilation. *The Other* should be like *us,* but by no means be identical—difference remains crucial in order to maintain power. Subalterns are encouraged to mimic, based on the assumption that they can never be like *us.* In other words, mimicry can be understood as a desire for a transformed, but still recognizable *Other.* These constructions must be constantly repeated and produced, which for Bhabha (1994, 94) suggests that they are not as securely established and fixated as they pretend to be.

However, Bhabha views mimicry not only as a form of colonial control. By producing subjects that are not quite the same, mimicry exposes an ambivalence at the centre of colonial discourses that constantly undermines them from within. The reason for this is that mimicry, as Bhabha explains, "in order to be effective, […] must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (ibid., 122). *The Other* is constructed as possessing the potential to be reformed under the coloniser's leadership, but at the same time as ontologically different and inferior (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 120). The not-quite sameness "acts like a distorting mirror which fractures the identity of the colonizing subject" (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 121). The identity of those in power is thus simultaneously stabilised and undermined (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2015, 225). Consequently, mimicry must also be examined from the perspective of the subject who is mimicking. Because *the Other* is able to return the coloniser's gaze (Bhabha 1994, 159 f.), mimicry "is at once resemblance and menace" (ibid., 123). Yet the colonised can refuse to return the gaze, or they can evade the "colonizer's narrative demand" (ibid., 141). These two strategies can be understood as active and therefore conventional forms of resistance.

However, Bhabha also proposes 'intransitive' and passive models of resistance. We discuss these from a basis which outlines central critiques of Bhahba's concept of mimicry from a (queer) feminist perspective. We believe that these criticisms not only reveal gaps and possible abbreviations in Bhabha's work, but also possibilities for a deeper understanding. For this contribution, we consider the incorporated emphasis on the ambiguity of agency in connection with mimicry to be particularly productive.

The key points of criticism already formulated by Spivak (1998), among others, can be subsumed under the terms male gaze or male spots (in analogy to the ableist concept of blind spots). Bhabha completely ignores non-male positions in his work. This concerns the preliminary work on which he based his book, above all Luce Irigaray's (1985) "The Sex Which is Not One," in which Irigaray carves out the processes and structures of gendered mimicry ("mimétisme," ibid.,

220). She understands adaptation to a stereotypical femininity as a strategic and necessary "masquerade" (ibid., 84), in order to gain agency in a patriarchally structured society. "To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (ibid., 76). Irigaray therefore sees "undoing by overdoing" (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2009, 325) as a feminist strategy to challenge and shatter gender norms. This has been viewed with scepticism in feminist studies, as it runs the risk of strengthening rather than weakening binary gender logics. In particular, feminist studies highlight the omission of intersectionality in Irigaray's work, above all the entanglement of gender and race (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2009, 325). This aspect is also crucial for a critical consideration of Bhabha's understanding of mimicry, because Bhabha's colonised subject is always a male subject who obtains agency through mimicry. He overlooks power relations that are structured along intersections of race, class, gender or dis_ability and which lead to completely different starting positions for subjects. As Spivak (1998) emphasises in her extensive critique, the basic prerequisite for mimicry lies in an "access to the so-called culture of the imperialism" (ibid., 191), which in a patriarchally structured system of oppression is also granted along gender lines. Or, as María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan (2009) subsequently summarise: "Mimicry as a strategy of resistance is only possible because the mimicking subject has 'access' to the subjects being mimicked" (ibid., 329 f.; emphasis in original).

This leads us to the second central point of criticism of Bhabha's conception of mimicry, which focuses primarily on his understanding of agency. Bhabha explains his departure from Frantz Fanon's idea of self-sacrifice or self-denial in the context of colonial assimilation, i.e. that the colonised subject, in the desire to be *white,* represses everything that is undesirable *(Black)* from a colonial perspective, which is tantamount to self-dissolution (Bhabha 1994, 126 f., 133 ff.).

> [He] will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language. […] Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the other country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle. (Fanon 1986 [1952], 18)

Bhabha (1994), however, does not see an inferiority complex of the colonised subject in mimicry, but rather the resistance potential that is already inherent in

the paradoxical logic of mimicry (*"almost the same but not quite,"* ibid., 127; *"[a]lmost the same but not white,"* ibid., 128). In becoming "almost the same," the mimicking subject undergoes a transformation from object to subject and therefore acquires agency. Even if the colonised subject remains inferior, the status as subject enables a reflection of the colonial imagination, thus fragilising the discourses. According to Bhabha, this is how mimicry shifts discursive logics and creates cracks in discourses. It appears as a tool of resistance, even if no intentional actions are linked to it. Bhabha's understanding suggests that mimicry is a kind of agency without a subject that unintentionally produces effects (Castro Varela/Dhawan 2009, 235)—a perspective that has been heavily criticised. The example of how colonial imagination is reflected reveals the vagueness of Bhabha's concept of agency: does it involve an active return of the gaze or does this reflection happen automatically, passively, and not intentionally? His works suggest both.

In our opinion, this offers a starting point for a new perspective on agency. While the focus of contemporary empirical studies often lies with conventional forms of resistance—here, the return of the coloniser's gaze or the refusal to return the gaze; in subjectivation research, the rejection of a subject position or its reinterpretation—, Bhabha's passive form points to further possibilities. We therefore do not equate mimicry with agency, as Bhabha suggests at times, but we would like to demonstrate that mimicry can lead to more agency in the long term. Thus, agency can also lie in the adaptation to or the adoption of a subject position.

4 Racism Without Races: Continuities and Ruptures in Contemporary Racialised Discourses

As mentioned, we have approached contemporary racialised discourses through the concept of mimicry. We consider it legitimate to apply mimicry to contemporary discourses, because Bhabha (1994) spoke of an "on-going colonial present" (ibid., 183).[2] He held the view that "the social, political and economic structures (and ideological forms of Othering) which characterised the colonial history" (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 122) persist to this day. At the same time, according to Étienne Balibar (1998), the practices of address in postcolonial discourses

[2] Accordingly, he argued that "[t]he language of rights and obligations, so central to the modern myth of a people, must be questioned on the basis of the anomalous and discriminatory legal and cultural status assigned to migrant, diasporic, and refugee populations" (Bhabha 1994, 251).

have changed. This leads Balibar to ask whether a "neo-racism" (ibid., 17) has replaced the ideological form of Othering in colonial discourses. In contemporary racialised discourses 'race' seems no longer to be the exclusive signifier, instead, "the insurmountability of cultural differences" (ibid., 22), comes into focus as a "dominant theme." In this "racism without races" (ibid., 22), hierarchised group constructions are no longer argued *qua naturae,* but via the imagination of a collectivising and collectivised culture, which is to be protected from softening its boundaries, changes or similar. According to Balibar (1998), neo-racism is therefore characterised above all not by the fact that 'racial affiliation' is naturalised, but that racist behaviour itself is constructed as necessary, and therefore legitimate and natural.

> In fact, what we see is a general displacement of the problematic. We now move from the theory of races or the struggle between the races in human history, whether based on biological or psychological principles, to a theory of 'race relations' within society, *which naturalizes not racial belonging but racist conduct.* (ibid., 22)

Hall (2019 [2000]) speaks of a shift away from biological racism, towards a "cultural differentialism" (ibid., 110), emphasising that these are not "two different systems, but racism's two registers" (ibid., 111). Within a culturalized register of racism, the signifier "culture" is often used as "linguistic hiding place for 'race'" (Leiprecht 2001, 103; translation by the authors), especially in German-speaking discourses:

> The term *Rasse* remained ideologically tainted as a marker of the Nazi past, while race as a social category allegedly had no bearing on German life. Racial problems, it seemed, occurred only in other societies (Berg/Schor/Soto 2014, 802).

In current racialised discourses relevant to this article, such as those on migration, integration and belonging, the Otherness of the cultural *Other* is justified, for example, through a supposed religious or linguistic Otherness and staged as a threat to the imagined *we*. The racialised positioning practices within neo-racism (Balibar) or cultural differentialism (Hall) are compatible with the concept of racialised power difference put forward by Maureen Maisha Eggers (2009), in which she defines four constitutive practices (ibid., 57): within the framework of racialised marking practice, knowledge about *the Other* is generated and legitimised, while the difference to one's own self is emphasised. First, *the Other* is marked as different. Second, this difference is naturalised, meaning the constructed knowledge about difference is institutionalised (by dominant speakers of the discourse) and made absolute in the form of racialised naturalisation practice.

Third, through racialised positioning practice, *the Other* is positioned hierarchically, within a close relationship to the *we.* Finally, any subsequent form of racialised exclusion practice can be articulated as "necessary" (ibid., 57 f.). In short, in contemporary racialised discourses, *the (cultural) Other* is constructed through the inclusion of further orders of difference (e.g. class, religion, gender, hegemonic language) and positioned in close relation to the *we* in such a way that exclusionary practices are framed as necessary defensive reactions and thereby also legitimised.

If we now look at contemporary migration discourses within Europe, we first find, as in colonial discourses, a production of knowledge about *we* and *the Other,* "which [is] stereotypical but antithetically evaluated" (Bhabha 1994, 101). Secondly, we can identify a split within the subject position of *the Other: the bad migrant—the good migrant.*[3] *The bad migrant* is characterised as a threat to the existing social order, while *the good migrant* is presented as willing to 'integrate' and is therefore encouraged to engage in mimicry. Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley (2011) describe this as racialised neoliberalism that mobilises "the boundaries between the rational, self-managing citizen-subject and the wilful, dependent, resource-heavy subject" (ibid., 178). We localise Bhabha's mimicry in contemporary racialised discourses at the level of subject positions addressing *the Other*. We thus understand the juxtaposition of a normalised, but mimicking subject *(the good Other)* and a deviant subject *(the bad Other)* as specific forms of subject position. In return for their integration efforts through mimicry, *good migrants* are promised recognition and social participation. However, the demands are constantly shifting, so that the required integration effort can never be completely fulfilled (see Hänggli/Trucco 2022, 444 f.). In line with the conceptualisation of mimicry, *the Other* remains positioned at the margins. Racism, xenophobia, anti-Muslim racism, and antisemitism have been on the rise in recent decades and are increasingly framed by various (political) actors as a necessary defence of a *we* that needs to be protected from *the Other* (see Fassin 2005, 381)—both *the good Other* and *the bad Other.* Therefore, a gap between *we* and *the Other* persists. This reveals the hypocrisy of integration discourses. No matter how great

[3] In German-speaking discourses, the subject position 'migrant' encompasses people with a personal history of migration, descendants of immigrants and people with an ascribed migration history. The term "with Migration Background" (Rühlmann 2023, 24) is used as a synonym. Furthermore, one must take into account "the question of power structures, whether or not we even define a person who moves across state borders as a migrant" (Glick Schiller 2010, 113). A class dimension is implicit here, as 'expats,' whose migration is desired, are not normally regarded as 'migrants.'

the efforts to integrate or even assimilate are, they never lead to a stable position within the *we*. Rather, *the Other* remains fixed in a fragile position.

In what follows, we will shed light on these dynamics using two empirical examples in contemporary racialised discourses. These each focus on an order of difference at the centre of debates on migration, integration and belonging: religion, which is currently being discussed in Europe primarily with reference to Islam; and hegemonic language and its appropriation as an 'obligation' of *the Other*.

5 Mimicry of *the Other:* Empirical Findings

5.1 Mimicry as Contribution? The Imam and Public Discourses on Islam and Muslims

The first example focuses on imams in Switzerland, i.e. Muslim—and according to the prevailing view, male—religious professionals who fulfil various tasks: "being a preacher, chaplain, teacher, community organizer, mosque spokesman, chairman, director, and organization representative" (Hashas et al. 2018, 21). Public debates on imams are embedded into larger discourses on Islam and Muslims in Europe. Despite some national differences, these discourses share similarities: Islam and Muslims are portrayed as foreign and in an increasingly negative manner over time (see Ahmed/Matthes 2017, 236; Ettinger 2018, 15). Intensified by various (discursive) events such as the attacks of 11 September 2001 (see Ettinger/Udris 2009), discourses on Islam and Muslims are characterised by securitisation (see Cesari 2012; Croft 2012).[4] This reflects the already-described Othering: the cultural Otherness of Muslims is staged as a threat to the imagined *we*. Robert M. Bosco shows that 'radical Islam' is framed as a threat (Bosco 2014, 42), while 'moderate Islam' becomes the reference object for the respective state's national security discourse and is at the same time defined by it (ibid., 5). The subject positions of *the good Muslim* and *the bad Muslim* are constructed accordingly (see Mamdani 2004) as variations of *the Other*. Within these discourses, imams are seen as central figures of authority who wield influence over their community members and through whom the latter, it is assumed, can be steered to a certain extent (Schmid 2020, 64 f.).

[4] In Switzerland, there is an additional discursive dimension: direct democratic instruments can be used to restrict the rights of minorities (Skenderovic 2007, 171 ff.), as happened with the so-called minaret and burqa bans in 2009 and 2021 respectively.

Imams are also split into dichotomous subject positions, as can be shown empirically for mass media and political discourses in Switzerland (Trucco 2025, 123–182): *the model imam* and *the imam as a threat* (see Fig. 1). *The model imam* embodies a variety of competences that are expected of an imam: he should prevent radicalisation, promote integration, cooperate with authorities and institutions and much more. Here, the intertwining of integration and prevention discourses becomes visible. The subject position of *the imam as a threat,* on the other hand, situates imams as a threat to Swiss society in various ways. The ascription of *the imam as a threat* can have various and sometimes grave consequences. These may involve, for example, loss of employment, measures under migration or residence law (including deportation) but also—if applicable—criminal prosecution. Measures relating to residence or migration law, however, are only possible if the imams do not have Swiss citizenship (Trucco 2025, 126–131, 146–148). It is therefore important to note that Switzerland is characterised by a relatively strong closure towards everything that is understood as 'foreign' (Dahinden/Manser-Egli 2023, 144) and accordingly has comparatively high hurdles for acquiring citizenship (Cinalli/Giugni 2013, 157).

How do imams in Switzerland deal with these interpellations? As highlighted, the ascription of the subject position of *the imam as a threat* can have serious consequences for imams. They therefore either reject this subject position or distance themselves from it by ascribing it to a specific group (e.g. so-called 'guest imams'), then drawing a boundary between themselves and these other imams. In order to successfully refute *the imam as a threat,* they have to draw on aspects of *the model imam.* At the same time, adapting to and positioning oneself as a *model imam* is advantageous: it offers some measure of protection against being labelled 'foreign,' the avoidance of social closure and, at best, a certain degree of recognition, inclusion and networking (Trucco 2025, 291–346). However, a gap remains: imams who position themselves as *model imams* and act accordingly may, due to their being *the religious Other,* be called into the *threat* position at any time. This fragile positioning is visible in the following extract from an interview with an Albanian-speaking imam in Switzerland:

> Now, when it comes to extremism and the like, mosques are expected to be prevention centres. We cannot do that—we do that, our work as imams is primarily preventive—but we are not experts on extremism and how it evolves. I have done research myself and together with other colleagues we have organised seminars, workshops, projects for our young people and even written a book in Albanian, (title of the book), but not all imams are able to do this and not all have the time and the will [...]. Not all imams are ready. That's why in that sense more is expected of imams than they are capable of. // Interviewer: Yes // Sometimes you get the impression that yes, people need or

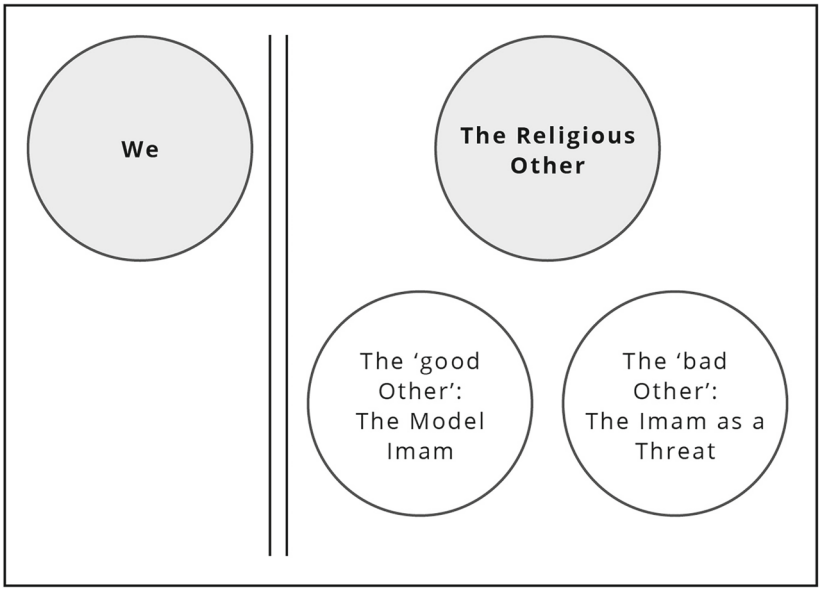

Fig. 1 Gap between *we* and *the religious Other* and split subject positions within *the religious Other*

> want, expect a super imam and not a normal imam. (Mr B., line 329–339, translation by the authors)

In the first line of this utterance, Mr B. addresses the societal expectation that mosques act as prevention centres. He is in fact referring to an aspect of *the model imam:* that imams are expected to prevent radicalisation. The next sentence is revealing, as he abruptly jumps back and forth between two contradictory statements: that imams cannot fulfil these requirements because they are not experts on extremism, and that they are already active in prevention. The passage gives the impression that Mr B. cannot simply allow the statement "we cannot do that," but must immediately assure the audience that imams meet the expectations of *the model imam* (or at least try to). Only then can he explain why he believes it is not possible for imams to fulfil this demand: "we are not experts on extremism." However, he then positions himself as someone who has researched extremism, led workshops, and even written a book. Thus, he depicts himself as a *model imam* and at the same time rejects *the bad Other* (*the imam as a threat)* through

this positioning. Yet, he immediately emphasises that not all imams are able to do this. Mr B. deconstructs aspects of *the model imam* in stating his impression that the expectations placed on imams are too high. The ambivalence in this passage is interesting: he positions himself as a *model imam* by showing how he fulfils the competence of preventing radicalisation, but at the same traces why this cannot be expected of all imams. In the next sentence, he uses the term "super imam." Mr B. employs it to describe unrealistic expectations of an imam, which he contrasts with the "normal imam." However, he does not explain this notion of normality any further.

This statement is characterised by mimicry as a form of control: imams have to position themselves as *model imams* in order to show that they have adapted to the values and norms of Swiss society. Adapting to *the model imam* in the sense of mimicry is what makes it possible for imams to continue working as imams in Switzerland in the long run and, at best, to contribute to public discourses in one form or another. Even if an imam succeeded in fulfilling all the demands laid out in *the model imam* or respectively, the super imam, a gap remains: an imam remains the *religious Other*. He can be positioned as a threat at any time, which reveals the power relations within racialised discourses. However, mimicry as an adaptation to *the model imam* also provides some agency, because it reveals discursive cracks. Only by positioning himself as a *model imam* can Mr B. subsequently partly deconstruct *the model imam* subject position, by questioning the expectations inherent to it.

5.2 What Is Your Mother Tongue? Language Assimilation in Education

The second example focuses on language assimilation in education in Austria. In integration discourses, German fulfils a special function as the hegemonic language: while demands for 'cultural integration' remain abstract and difficult to verify, linguistic integration can supposedly be measured objectively. In countries such as Austria, Germany and the German-speaking part of Switzerland, learning German has therefore increasingly become a measure of integration and, at the same time, an ongoing political issue. For adults, this means that many of their rights (e.g. residence, work) depend on passing specially designed language tests, which in Austria have also been accompanied by the testing of so-called values knowledge since 2017 (Hofer-Robinson 2023). In these discourses, the demand for linguistic, and thereby also cultural, assimilation creates the subject position

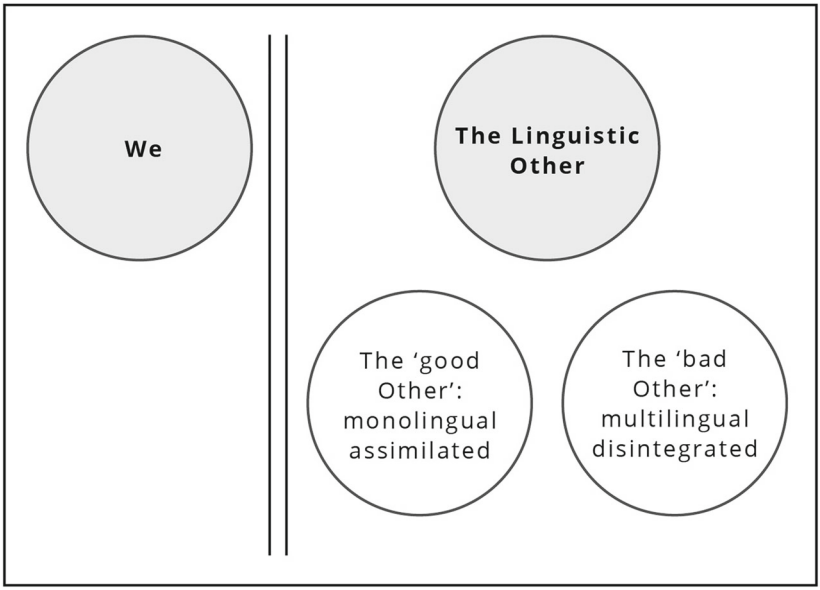

Fig. 2 Gap between *we* and the *linguistic Other* and split subject positions within the *linguistic Other*

of *the good Other,* who accepts the 'integration mandate' and not only learns German, but also only speaks German henceforth (see Fig. 2).

In addition to groups of adults who have to learn German in a specific way in order to integrate themselves, multilingual students are also repeatedly addressed as *linguistic Others.* This constructed group of students "with Migration Background" (Rühlmann 2023, 24) appears in various areas of discourse as consisting of educational losers, or "troubled outsiders" (Sitter 2016, 127): they are said to have problems at school because of their cultural and linguistic Otherness (Sitter 2016; Stošić 2017). "Students with Migration Background" addresses all students who are considered to have a (personal) history of immigration and therefore also a 'different mother tongue to German.' The subject position *the bad Other* is therefore a multilingual subject who doesn't integrate due to its multilingualism. This subject position of *the bad Other* also becomes a danger for the students themselves, as the non-integrated multilingual subject is always discursively portrayed as a deficient German speaker. Moreover, speaking migrant languages is constructed as a danger to learning German properly. According to

this narrative, multilingual students are less successful in education (Bjegač 2020; Pokitsch 2022).

The model subject *linguistic Other* includes the idea of the so-called non-native speaker who does not belong to the group of legitimate and competent speakers of the national language. The frequently described language ideology of native speakerism (Holliday 2006; Khakpour 2016) is not without consequences for multilingual students. Since the idea is widespread that native speakers are the only legitimate speakers of a language, having an 'innate feeling' for the language and its use that cannot be learnt, they remain marked as linguistically deficient. Regardless of their actual language use, skills or preferences, they remain permanently stuck in the subject position of German learners. The *linguistic Other* must therefore continually integrate linguistically, actively learn German and displace other languages. Regardless of their efforts, however, there remains an unbridgeable gap between the *we* and the *linguistic Other.* What does this mean for students in Austria?

The following excerpts are taken from a group discussion with four young students aged 13–14 in an urban area in Austria, who were all born and raised in Austria. In terms of German skills, there is no recognisable difference in level between the students. The two students who are speaking in the following transcripts, Aleyna and Naima, seem to be in different subject positions language-wise: Aleyna is monolingual and positions herself as a German native speaker; Naima is multilingual (Arabic and German), positions herself as a non-native German speaker and as a committed and dedicated German learner, who is willing to follow the frequently formulated demand for 'integration through language':

> I think that if you are a nation, that you just/you don't have to feel like you belong, but you/you have the task of adapting to the situation. It's also our job to learn German because we're here in Austria. (Naima, line 588–591, Pokitsch 2022, 229; translation by the authors)

Naima refers to the discursive 'integration task' of learning German, regardless of the fact that she was born and raised in Austria. What is striking here is the collectivisation that she undertakes to include the other students in the group of *linguistic Others* ("our task"). While in this utterance she reserves the right not to have to create a sense of belonging through hegemonic language, the situation itself is portrayed as non-negotiable. Learning German thus becomes a duty and a personal responsibility. In another sequence, she justifies this by referring to the ideology of native speakerism:

> I do believe that you have a feeling for the language when you're Austrian, but uh even if you [...] come from Egypt or something like that, I think you can have the same level as an Austrian. (Naima, line 137–142, Pokitsch, 2022, 221; translation by the authors)

Naima distinguishes between two groups of speakers: Austrians, who have a "feeling for the language," and non-Austrians, who lack this feeling. A national affiliation is linked to a linguistic affiliation in this argument: being Austrian equates with being a German native speaker. Conversely, those who 'come from another country' are not nationally affiliated and are therefore non-native speakers with an even greater obligation to learn German. Naima addresses this statement directly to Aleyna, who is regarded as the only native speaker in this group. From the perspective described, she CAN speak German, while the others have to LEARN German. Although Naima refers to the possibility of acquiring the same language skills as Austrians, she also highlights the remaining gap: even though *the linguistic Others* may speak like a native speaker, they can never be one. This gap also affects Aleyna, as becomes clear later in the discussion:

> So [...] I just don't look like an Austrian at first glance. [...] A lot of people think I'm Egyptian or something. And then a lot of people ask me where I'm from/what my mother tongue is. And then I usually say: I was born in Graz[5] and my mother tongue is German and most people don't believe me. They always say, (...) so they always ask: Yes, but where do you actually come from? What is your actual mother tongue? (Aleyna, line 606–616, Pokitsch, 2022, 221; translation by the authors)

Once again we see the powerful entanglement between 'coming from somewhere' and not being a German native speaker, but no further requirements become apparent. The subject position of a linguistic *we* is based on an imagined "ethnic ownership of language" (Bonfiglio 2013, 36), with its intersections of race and language, referring to the racialised idea of Europe as a *white* continent. Aleyna as a Person of Colour therefore does not 'look like an Austrian' and is repeatedly addressed as a student from a Migration Background and *linguistic Other.* Her self-positioning as Austrian and a German native speaker is not recognised, due to the fact that she cannot fulfil the condition of a *white* body.

All this shows that in racialised discourses, even monolingual assimilated speakers remain marked as *linguistic Others* who must continue to make an effort to integrate themselves through language (acquisition). At the same time, we should not overlook that Aleyna, for example, can take up different positions in

[5] Graz is a city in Austria.

different social contexts and is repeatedly addressed in her peer group as part of a linguistic *we*. The detachment from ascriptions of "looking like a language" (Rosa 2019, 2), in the attributions of this students can point to the very first cracks in current racialised discourses. These can be interpreted as slight shifts in the dominant subject position through a bottom-up process.

6 Mimicry in Racialised Discourses: Overcoming the Gap?

In our contribution, we have shown how Othering works as a powerful positioning practice in contemporary racialised discourses. We have highlighted continuities with regard to colonial power relations. By focussing on mimicry as simultaneously "resemblance and menace" (Bhabha 1994, 123), we were able to illustrate how othered subjects can also gain agency in and through mimicry—without, however, being able to completely bridge the gap between the *we* and *the Other*.

Racialised discourses work with a strong coercion to adapt. Furthermore, according to Tina Spies (2013), it becomes clear that whether there are any positioning options available at all is a consideration. And, as Moore (1994, 65) writes, "one's interrelations with other individuals—intersubjectivity—will also determine what positions one takes up." For othered subjects, it is not possible to be part of the *we,* rather, the subject positions are limited to *the good* and *the bad Other*. In our empirical examples, the overarching strategy seems to be remaining within the (national, educational) system: adaptation in racialised discourses means survival, sometimes even literally.

Conceptualising subjectivation as mimicry in the context of racialised discourses allows us to break away from reductive dichotomous interpretations: neither adaptation as subjugation and disempowerment, nor agency as open resistance (see Brodersen in this volume). In both empirical examples, we have shown that mimicry offers the potential to shift othered subject positions or at least to render them fragile. Nuances become visible. With Hall (1996), the question of whether subject positions are also strategically taken up comes to the fore. The subject does not remain permanently tied to them.

If a temporal dimension is taken into consideration (see Röhrer in this volume), it becomes clear that mimicry does not—and in some cases cannot—necessarily lead directly to ruptures in discourses. In our empirical findings, imams are potentially given the opportunity to (co-)shape the discourses on Islam

in Switzerland through mimicry, i.e. to adopt a speaker position in mass media.[6] Students, on the other hand, are hardly likely to reach a speaker position, but can still slightly shift the discursive 'logic' of (not) being a *linguistic other.* Their focus on the hegemonic language has an effect on educational discourses as well, because it increases the likelihood that they will be successful in education. With the concept of mimicry, it is therefore possible to recognise even the nuances of discursive shifts, even though racialised discourses clearly appear to be determined by Othering.

In our view, these temporally delayed possible ruptures or shifts in discourses cannot be captured with the usual approaches to subjectivation processes within Empirical Subjectivation Research. In conclusion, we therefore argue in favour of an empirical expansion of subjectivation research, that also takes temporalities into account and incorporates them into the iterative-cyclical research process. This raises the question of whether changes occur at the level of discourse or whether subjects have the opportunity at later points in time to reject or reinterpret certain forms of subject positions and to position themselves differently. In other words: will the gap be closed discursively or will subjects themselves find ways to bridge the gap?

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[6] A research gap still exists with regard to the conditions under which imams succeed in assuming a speaker position.

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