Claim for Reciprocity: Problems of Challenging Prejudiced Discourse in Daily Interaction

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Xenophobic discourse draws on common procedures of membership categorization and predication, but it does so in a quite peculiar way requiring close examination. Among these peculiarities is that in social practice its inner logic is maintained, even when single assertions, on which this prejudiced ‘social knowledge’ is built, are repelled or disproved. Viennese telling personal stories about immigrants mostly touch upon very few master-topics arranged in a way that follows a certain predisposed logic and inner dynamics. My basic argument proposes this logic and dynamics as having been normalized to the extent that they are commonly not recognized as racist any more, which makes it difficult to reveal and challenge their discriminatory effects in ongoing daily interaction. In connection with its implicit, veiled nature, this presents a severe problem to immigrants fighting discrimination, especially in its unobtrusive forms. In this contribution I will try to explore some recurrent patterns demonstrating how this stability of the inner logic and its normalization are discursively achieved, in in-group gossip as well as in intercultural conversation.

Structures of social discrimination can be observed in societies simply by statistical means documenting the distribution of income, political or economic influence, access to qualified jobs, or a sophisticated lifestyle along ethnic, gender or other salient lines of social distinction. How they are actually maintained in social situations, however, is more a question to be addressed by examining how social actors make sense of their daily activities. For what is structural in social discrimination is articulated in situated practices, which simultaneously are some of the basic processes of their reproduction and stabilisation. Members of dominant groups express their stance towards mutual social positioning by their mere conduct in person-to-person communication, or when talking about absent persons. Sometimes even minor clues and clauses establish profound effects (Elias & Scotson, 1965: 38), when

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addressing members of minority groups, spoken for instance in a job interview, a career counseling situation (Erickson & Schultz, 1982), editorial meetings of newspapers (Fowler, 1991) or, as I will come back to later, proceedings in a criminal case (Gotsbachner, 1999). Institutionalized borders of social distinction, which function quite smoothly in societies, have to do with how single statements take some of their force from “the way they coalesce into discourses or discursive formations” (Mills, 1997, p.62).

Discourses, as cognitive schemata of conversationally conveyed social knowledge and typologies of identities, have a constitutive influence on how we organize our perceptions of the world around us. In xenophobic or racist discourse this influence is even more rigid, insofar, as the relevancy structures establishing a frame of reference for single utterances and events tend to concentrate on very limited thematic foci, which – in comparison to other social typologies - are much less amenable to repealing typifications or a situational replacability by competing conceptual resources. The function of this restricted repertoire of emplotted stories about self and other is therefore of basic interest in many studies of prejudiced language (van Dijk, 1984; Billig, 1991; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Blommaert & Vershueren, 1998; Reisigl & Wodak, 2000; Gotsbachner, 2001). Van Dijk (1984) found the people in his study to be reproducing quite homologous representative models when narrating stories about ‘foreigners,’ although these always were presented as one’s own or at least acquainted people’s genuinely personal experience:

Instead of relying on one’s own personal experiences, people may discount such models and prefer the use of social ‘ready-mades’ from semantic memory. (…) This may mean that people ‘invent’ stories based on imaginal evidence, or also that variable situations are coded and represented completely in accordance with the stereotypical organization of such situations. (van Dijk, 1984, p.32)

That only certain traits of immigrants’ activities are noticed and that only stories which converge with or - sometimes quite forcefully - are made to fit these stereotypical images are seen as worth talking about, contributes to the self-fulfilling character of prejudiced discursive schemata. A close study of prejudiced talk provides insights into how social ‘knowledge protected against induction’ – as Sacks (1992, vol. I. pp. 196, 336) called it - is actually stabilized and how social actors use it to secure its discriminatory impact. I will elucidate aspects of its topological ordering which we found crucial for the reproduction and employment of xenophobic representations in daily conversation, as observed and recorded during fieldwork in those Viennese districts, where most immigrants live.1

In Vienna, the word ‘foreigner’ is typically intended for Turkish or Ex-Yugoslavian immigrants, and the way distinctions are drawn can be quite telling for its implicit meaning. The following excerpt is from an unelicited discussion in a neighborhood center situated in the district with the highest share of immigrant population (‘Fünfhaus,’ about 35% immigrants), the participants are native Viennese, six mostly elderly people meeting every Friday to drink coffee and exchange gossip. ‘Ch.’ is my colleague Christine Hochsteiner, the
man here called ‘Mr Huber’ (HUB), 59, is an unemployed ex-professional, and ‘Mrs Friedl’ (FRI) aged 68, a retired secretary. They speak Viennese dialect.

Example 1: Who are the “foreigners”?

Nbz. 14.3.97: 557-567

1  Ch:  Und sog ma, i maan, es is jo a so, daß wenn Sie (.) auf Reisen gehen jo aa  
But let’s say, when you (.) travel you are foreigners as well, somehow?
2  HUB:  donn Ausländer san, irgendo? na?  
Aren’t you?
3  FRI:  [Wir sind ja Gäste, wir bringen jo]  
[We are guests, we bring our
4  Gölnd ins Lond.  
money there]  
5  HUB:  =Wir bringen a Gölnd ins Lond weil i foahr jo net ohne Gölnd ins Ausland,  
=We bring our money there, because I don’t travel without money
6  .hhh aber de wos doherkumman, de Touristen vo:m ehemoligen,  
.hhh but they, who come here, the tourists from the former eastern
7  Ostblock .hhh de hohn meistens ka Gölnd, ma sicht jo eh jetzan, wos .hhh  
.block .hhh they mostly don’t have money, you can see it now .hhh
8  FRI:  De lebn jo von uns, praktisch.  
They live from our assets, practically
9  HUB:  De lebn donn von uns, jo.  
They live from our assets, yes

Their local understanding of ‘foreigners’ is brought to the fore by one of the rare statements of the participant researcher, who observed these weekly meetings for almost a year. Her rather simple interjection - after a long series of depreciatory stories about the alleged ‘mentality’ of immigrants - that virtually everybody is ‘foreigner’ in almost all countries of the world provokes protests and reveals what else would be part of the unspoken common-sensical frame of reference of these people. The participants vehemently deny that the designation ‘foreigner’ could be applied to themselves, because it evokes certain attributes, namely that foreigners “mostly don’t have money” and “live from our assets.” Even if it is difficult to replicate, in what way “tourists from the former eastern block” should “live from” whatever they regard as “our assets,” for the participants this seems to be clear. Mrs Friedl and Mr Huber, who otherwise often compete in their views, here cooperate closely (3-
6) and spontaneously agree, followed by a long pause (10-12), indicating that even for the handful of other participants there is nothing more to add.²

The reproduction of a rigid scheme determining what makes a ‘foreigner,’ takes precedence over other common-sensical, less stereotypical notions and observations. This sometimes leads to rather absurd situations. In another story (Nbz. 14.3.97: 473-475), Mrs Friedl talks about a personnel manager who excluded immigrants for a vacant secretary job, and explains that the job profile demanded a certain fluency in English. That she implicitly imputed ‘foreigners’ not to have sufficient command of international languages shows her being oriented mainly to a notion of immigrants, which differs considerably from the original meaning of the word, as used in dictionaries or e.g. in the government’s foreigner act.³ It comprises a collection of attributes, where participants equate ‘foreigner’ with uneducated, impecunious and lazy, a pattern we have observed throughout the whole series of meetings of this group, and a vast variety of other occasions involving different native participants from different social backgrounds.⁴ Since the classical sociological studies of Elias & Scotson (1965) gossip of ‘established’ about ‘outsiders’ has been identified as a major means of social control. It controls not only patterns of meaning, of social attributions, but also of social status and prestige. The participants’ vehement reaction in our first example becomes understandable only from the fact that a distinction between ‘foreigner’ and ‘paying guest’ is critical because of its implications for social ranking.

Let us stop here briefly to examine the question of normality and shared patterns of meaning. That this peculiar notion of ‘foreigner’ with certain attributes is widely shared,⁵ is not difficult to show. In fieldwork we soon attained a point of ‘theoretical saturation’ (Denz, 1988, p.97; Heinze, 1992, p.153) where every new story we collected only was another case of the patterns we already found and which I will sketch out later. We were told very similar stories or fragments of stories from very different persons, who do not know each other, sometimes even using the same words (e.g. “when you get on the bus you don’t hear a German word any more” as a standardized phrase for certain beliefs). We found the same implicit connotations of ‘foreigner’ also underlying newspaper articles and speeches of politicians (Gotsbachner, 1998), and this corresponds with other studies’ results (Bari et.al., 1990; Jäger & Link, 1993; Kalpaka & Räthzel, 1986, Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). As Hodge & Kress (1993, p.210) rightly note, in an ideographical study sometimes even a small sample can validly record shared patterns of background meaning, which holds even more for prejudiced discourse. But to give evidence of their social dissemination one needs to provide for a sufficient variability of types of data in the very design of the study (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998, p.36). One principally has to start by assuming a situation of polynormality (Gotsbachner, 1995), where different normalities are stabilized within social realms, and people shift more or less ingeniously between them. Proving a certain set of common sense patterns dominant in certain social situations (which also are crucial to the
lives of participants themselves) needs wisely collected data from fieldwork analyzed with appropriate means.

Coherence and recursivity create meaning networks, in which social patterns of meaning are embedded (...) The totality of presuppositions and implied meanings constitutes the general world view which a language user assumes to be or handles as if shared with others in the same community. Methods of pragmatic analysis, when efforts are concentrated in areas such as (...) wording patterns and strategies, local carriers of implicit information, global meaning constructs (and) interactional patterns allow one systematically to uncover ideologies in terms of common frames of reference.6 (Blommaert & Vershueren, 1998, p.34f.)

For the participants in a conversation their frames of reference are habitual and therefore invisible, so what they treat as true, close-to-experience accounts of the social world, among themselves is traded as if natural and unquestionable. Nonetheless, beside their prevailing discursive practice they obviously are able to at least handle social knowledge from differing normalities of other sub-communities and discursive practices. After considering mainly conversations between immigrants and native Viennese we found elements of competing discourses even in natives’ in-group talk, like the coffee-tattle in the neighborhood center. These ‘mixed’ instances are some of the most interesting for the conversational modes, how particular social knowledge is protected against induction: Each ideologically distinct version of common sense meanings must be stabilized against other views of the world, and I would like to concentrate further on how this actually takes place. In searching for the components of xenophobic discourse, which are kept stable over a broad variety of groups and social situations the problem was to find out how participants integrate or even use competing social knowledge without threatening the credibility and logic of their own.

Example 2: Maintenance of a Xenophobic Inner Logic in Mixed Arguments

Nbz. 14.3.97: 480-98

1 HUB: […] I siegs jo bei die unssn, wir hohn a jugoslawische Hausmasta, jedes Kind, die […] I see it with ours, we have a Yugoslavian janitor, every kid, they
2 hohn a poar Kinder (.) und i hobs des gsegn, die Häuser, wos hohn hohn .hhh have a couple of kids (.) and I’ve seen it, the houses they build .hhh
3 Jedes Kind kriegt ein Haus, oha a schens, a modernes Haus. each kid gets a house, but a beautiful, a modern house.
4 FRI: Jo oha, Herr Huber, i versteh ma donn net, no guat= Yes, but, Mister Huber, then I don’t understand - yes, Ok=
5 HUB: [Jo, oha des Göld geht olls haus] [Yes, but the money all goes back home]
6 FRI: [=no guat, überhaupt, die is Hausmeisterin,] .hhh aber de was wirklich für a [=well, anyway, she is janitor] .hhh but those who really have to pay
7 Wohnung wos zoiln müaßn, wie kennan de wos hamschicka, .hhh wann’s for their flats, how can they send money back home .hhh when they
8 allweil jammern, daß de Zigt ausend zoiln müaßn für always complain that they pay ten-thousands of Shillings for their
In lines 1-3 Mr Huber opens with a remark that most immigrants send money back home to their countries of origin to build their own houses, giving the example of his janitors. But Mrs Friedl does not want to accept that because according to her representation immigrants are poor. As a ‘proof’ she invokes the topic of immigrants’ housing situation (lines 6-9). Remarkable is that she introduces it as a common knowledge item (8: “they always complain”, and in fact it is referred to frequently) but as such it is taken from immigrants own discourse, or an emancipatory migrant discourse, where usually it is addressing the exploitation of immigrants on the housing market. The way she uses it of course is different, she puts it in a context where she constructs it as a question of what legitimately is due to whom. In fact, some ten minutes before she has referred to her own housing situation as main indicator for her social identity, where she hinted that her flat is so expensive that a ‘foreigner’ allegedly could not afford it, and for this reason she does not need to relate to immigrants. ‘Foreigners’ have no money to live in or to build “beautiful houses” again is her implicit reasoning.

Mr Huber supports this argument with the oddly sounding statement that immigrants “all try to be janitor” (10/11), revealing that for them immigrant janitors are something like prototypical ‘foreigners,’ and in fact among the few they have personal contact with. In this story, too, they excessively extrapolate from their rudimentary episodes and generalize to “all” (lines 10, 14 and 17) immigrants in general. Oscillating permanently between modeled accounts of events and general assumptions makes the narratives work, lending plausibility to their thematic development, which in this particular mode is characteristic for prejudiced discourse (cf. Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p.92).

In line 12 Mrs Friedl gives a twist to the story, “And then they don’t even clean up properly”, presuming previous talk about their allegedly lazy janitors, which is among their
favorite proofs of what they interpret as immigrants ‘deviant mentality.’ ‘Deviant mentality,’ represented here as laziness, lacking sense of duty (line 12ff.) and suspect consumerism (line 17, excessive video-watching), is another master topic in discourse about ‘foreigners,’ and sequentially and logically connected with ‘foreigners are poor’ gives a normative aspect to it. The habitualized connection makes it clear why Mrs Friedl did not want to accept that immigrants could have money. Her normative stance is also expressed in a number of clauses, as here the ironic label “gentlemen” (line 16), suggesting illegitimately arrogated behavior, or the modal particle “not even” (12) derogating the adequacy of immigrated janitors being paid for their job: ‘Foreigners’ have to be poor, because of their ‘deviant mentality,’ they do not deserve it better.

Note that the ‘inner logic’ of this narrative is implicit. It has to be ‘filled up’ by a receptive audience to understand its morals and full pejorative meaning, which is a common trait in talk about ‘foreigners.’ It is mostly hidden in the sequential arrangement of topical conjunctions, which are heard as causative conjunctions, and that it is understood properly is recognizable from the fact that other participants often react by narrating ‘second stories’ (Sacks, 1992, vol.II pp.3ff.) modeled after the same inner logic. The regular implicit functioning we observed can also be taken as evidence for its habitualized character in certain communities.

That topics from competing discourses – like immigrants’ exploitation in the housing market in example 2 - frequently are fluidly worked into these xenophobic narratives without challenging the implicit inner logic, is a phenomenon requiring special attention. It is recognized in studies of xenophobic discourse (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p.56; Blommaert & Vershueren, 1998) but mostly without conceptual integration. Actually, mixed arguments are quite common, which led Billig et.al. (1988) to their seminal theory of ‘ideological dilemmas,’ which they propose to be a practical concern in many social situations. But our example does not seem to throw the participants into much of an ideological dilemma. On the contrary, xenophobic discourse here, as in some other instances (Gotsbachner, 1998; 2001), seems capable of digesting ideologically competing facts and topics quite unproblematically: In an emancipatory discourse the common knowledge point ‘immigrants pay too much for their flats’ would emphasize its discriminatory aspect and demand equal treatment. Mrs Friedl, however, handles it as an even more credible proof of her version of ‘foreigners have to be poor.’

In discourse about ‘foreigners’ the master topics ‘poor foreigners’ and ‘cultural difference’ are somewhat ambivalent; they gain different meanings in the different ways they are used in xenophobic or in emancipatory discourse. The different meanings and their evaluative character, which I sketch out in the figure below, stem from the different social knowledge items they are filled up with (in figure 1 the points at the left and right margins). As in unelicited talk these master topics co-occur in a habitualized connectedness, which
constructs a certain inner logic, the two ways of filling up the master topics obviously can lead to two very different conclusions. An emancipatory discourse, which I construct here only heuristically from occasionally found topics, would connect ‘social weakness’ and ‘fascinating plurality’ to a ‘plea for tolerance.’ In the xenophobic version, contrarily, the understanding of immigrants as ‘have-nots’ with a ‘deviant mentality’ functions as a legitimization, why they do not have to be treated as equal citizens, because they allegedly ‘live from our assets.’

**Figure 1: Topological Ordering in Discourse about ‘Foreigners’**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Xenophobic Blame-Gossip</th>
<th>Emancipatory Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• exploiting welfare</td>
<td>• exploitation in working relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• parasites</td>
<td>• live in expensive and poor flats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• criminals</td>
<td>• legal discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have-Nots</td>
<td>Social Weakness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• uneducated</td>
<td>• ‘useful’ customs of immigrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• work-shy, lazy</td>
<td>• sense of family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• poor cleanliness</td>
<td>• music, folklore, ethnic food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• suspect consumerism</td>
<td>Fascinating Plurality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deviant Mentality</td>
<td><em>CULTURAL DIFFERENCE</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"foreigners live from our assets"

-> suspension of reciprocity in rights and entitlements

plea for tolerance

-> recognition of equality in rights and diversity in culture

Now we have seen, how Mrs Friedl integrates a common sense item from emancipatory discourse into her xenophobic framework in a way which even supports its inner logic, and there are other examples showing the ambivalence of the master topics being taken advantage of for such a distorting espousal (Gotsbachner, 1998; 2001). The ambivalence here is used as functional ambivalence.

As mentioned, another crucial moment for this operation is the imputation of a ‘deviant mentality,’ which interprets cultural difference automatically as inferiority. It makes the xenophobic scheme flexible and adaptable to various circumstances, at the same time immunizing its normative character against competing facts. For instance, in such stories, whenever ‘foreigners’ were seen as wealthy, this wealth and its indicators – big cars, beautiful
houses, expensive clothing, mobile phones - were not taken as contradiction defeating the
generalization ‘foreigners are poor,’ but narratively presented as a sign of immigrants’
‘suspect consumerism,’ and supposed that they must have acquired them by criminal activities
or exploitation of the welfare system (Gotsbachner, 2001). In that way the main function of
the inner logic was upheld: the defense of social hierarchies and discrimination which makes
this discursive scheme actually xenophobic. The range of social practices discursively
employing and reproducing this inner logic play a major role in discriminating against
immigrants.

The imputation of a deviant mentality plays a key role in another set of data we
collected: in negotiations at an official, legal institution, a mediation center, where small
criminal cases are resolved, it was used by native parties to shift the responsibility for the
conflict to their immigrant opponents. By implying that the conflicts were caused by the
immigrant parties, who allegedly were ‘unable to adapt’ (e.g. by stereotyped phrases like “He
thinks he can do what he likes”), they mobilized the xenophobic scheme as referential frame
of the negotiation. Alleging that immigrants were notoriously aggressive or habitually
breaking norms etc. they tried to redistribute social reputation and guilt (Gotsbachner, 1999).

It was interesting that this sometimes happened only by very subtle clues, but immigrant
parties, even as victims in a case, nonetheless reacted by diligently trying to change the
symbolic background of how their actions were perceived. If they didn’t, they ran risk to lose
the negotiations, as we observed actually in one of the cases.

Without going into the details of what I have described elsewhere (Gotsbachner, 1999;
2001) this was how immigrants were forced to accept a xenophobic version of discourse
about ‘foreigners’ as active common-sensical frame of these mediations, even when they
needed to act within it only for the purpose of fighting its threatening effects. That they had
to, we observed as putting them into considerable disadvantage and severely constraining
their strategic possibilities by forcing them to constantly legitimize their actions.\(^{10}\) It resulted
in an imbalance of identity demands, of informal rights and entitlements, of social reputation
and status, as e.g. directly observable in the gross differences, how native and immigrant
parties handle face threatening acts. Although the mediators conducting these negotiations
could not be regarded as xenophobic or racist, the imbalance was not felt by them: When we
approached the field, they unanimously asserted there were no xenophobic practices to be
observed in the identity negotiations there. A veiled version of xenophobic discourse, the
discriminatory effects of which can be traced minutely, obviously has dispersed into more
common social practices, in an official setting involving immigrants themselves and the
mediators, whom natives could not presume to share the same perspectives as they could in
in-group talk. It is normalized to an extent, where even for rather emancipatorily minded
native participants its presence and consequences are not visible any more.
Now, how do immigrants deal with veiled discrimination when confronting xenophobic discursive practices? In the rest of this paper I want to concentrate on the problems of how to challenge xenophobic representations directly, in a more informal situation, without the severe pressure of a legal conflict, where no criminal conviction or loss of residence rights is at stake. My examples come from another unelicited discussion where the Mr Huber from our previous excerpts meets young immigrants of Turkish origin, Mr Mustapha, Mr Ibo and Mr Dede, in a pub ran by a Cypriote lady, Mrs Hayrie, chatting and drinking beer for over three hours. From the very beginning Mr Huber tries to establish his views and is attacked by the immigrants sometimes in a quite humorous fashion. Here is one of the highlights: Mr Mustapha has just complained that still he feels discriminated against, although he has lived and worked in Austria for most of his life and has fully adapted to the local customs. Mr Huber answers:

**Example 3: Challenging Ethnic Definitions**

**Sam. 9.6.97: 464-484**

1. **HUB:** *Eben, weil Du trotzdem ein Ausländer bleibst, (...) auch wenn Du*  
   Right, because you nonetheless remain a foreigner, (...) even when you

2. **HUB:** *die Staatsbürgerschaft host. Wenn Du ein Türke bist, Du hast Deinen Boart,*  
   have the Austrian citizenship. When you are Turkish, you have your beard,

3. **HUB:** *jo, des is a türkisches Kennzeichen und du hast Deinen Namen. Du*  
   yes, which is a Turkish characteristic and you have your name. You

4. **DED:** *bleibst immer/  
   always remain/

5. **HUB:** *Jo, er ist irgendwie markiert, jo, allan schon vom Namen her.*  
   Yes, somehow he is marked, just from his name already

6. **HAY:** *Wieso, wieso*  
   Why, why

7. **Ch:** *Wieso, er schaut doch aus, als, er könnte ein Österreicher sein, [er könnte...]*  
   Well, he looks like - he could just as well be an Austrian  [he could/]

8. **HAY:** *Wieso, wieso*  
   Why, why

9. **HAY:** *A Österreicher sein, ja*  
   [Be an Austrian, yes]

10. **DED:** *Ein echter Österreicher, schau!*  
    A real Austrian, look!

11. **MUS:** *Ja mich tun sie eh vertauschen, aber trotzdem, es, zum Beispiel im*  
    Yes, actually they do mistake me, but nonetheless, it – for example in

12. **MUS:** *Kaffee Los Angeles/  
    the pub ‘Los Angeles’/

13. **HAY:** *Und Bart sag ich, Bart ist ein Eitelkeits- eh eh ehh -symbol von*  
    And beard, I always say, a beard is a vanity- eh eh ehh –symbol of

14. **HAY:** *einem Mann, von allen Männern.*  
    men, of all men*
In reaction to Mr Mustaphas’ complaints about discriminatory practices Mr Huber explains (and thereby implicitly legitimizes) them by pointing to an aspect of his appearance which he sees as a ‘Turkish characteristic’ (1-4). It should be mentioned that the shape of Mr Mustaphas’ roundish beard looked more like the fashion of the late 90s than an ethnic style, so Mr Huber himself is ‘marking’ him by his peculiar gaze in the same moment while trying to find a justification. Mr Dede comments sarcastically that they were treated like animals, but Mr Huber does not react. He continues reifying the effect of the social process of marking (6), as if being “marked” was something ontological, independent of this discriminatory practice. The participant researcher, Mrs Hayrie and Mr Dede then begin to challenge this ethnic definition, pointing at Mr Mustapha as somebody, who “could just as well be an Austrian,“ with the same ostentatious self-evidence in their identifying “look!” (and he confirms that it actually works, 11-12). Generally, identity politics always needs to be implicit to a certain extent, trying to reach a level of unoutspoken ‘naturalness’ in order to be successful. Mrs Hayrie then (16ff.) tops off with a really funny joke: if beards were a ‘Turkish characteristic,’ then Austria’s last emperor, Franz Joseph II. must have been a Turk! She picked an ideal image, because the old emperor’s big bushy beard is an emblem for traditional Austria replicated in large numbers by the tourist industry, thus turning Mr Huber’s ethnic definition into absurdity. In fact this kind of playful role reversal and humorous play with common clichés is where the immigrants are at their best, making fun of Mr Hubers’ prejudices. There they are also most successful in claiming reciprocity in rights (cf. Kallmeyer, 2001).

Let us then have a short look at another excerpt, following an exchange where Mr Dede had complained that some Viennese address him in a crippled and abusive ‘foreigner-speak.’ Mr Huber replied that this was a matter of ‘niveau,’ of socio-cultural distinction, suggesting that only simple people use this involuntarily caricaturistic register (I omitted these parts of the exchange in Ex.4, because in translation they sound quite opaque). Mr Dede responds:
Example 4: ‘Niveau’ or: Those ‘with class’ get along well

Sam. 9.6.97: 1143-1156

1  DED:  Ich sehe dann in diesem Gesellschaft nicht viele, die Niveau haben. Then I don’t see many in this society who have class
2  HUB:  Ja dann geht man zu diese, ja dann geht man zu den Niveau, es gibt Leute Well then one needs to go to those who have class, there are people
3    mit Niveau! with ‘niveau’!
4  DED:  Eben. Eben, ja./ Sure. Sure, yes/
5  HUB:  Ja das hab ich zu ihm gesagt, er soll sich diesen Leiten anschließn, die ihn akzeptieren. Well, that’s what I said to him ((meaning IBO)), he should join the people who accept
6    Und wenn des Niveau - [des- (.) und du bist!] And when the niveau-
7    [the- (.) and you are!]
8  IBO:  [Ja aber ich, ich wohne da, bitte. [Ich kann nichts Yes but I, I live in this area. [Its not my
9    dafür. Gerne will ich innere Gürtel wohnen, [aber es geht nicht. fault. I would like to live in another area, [but that’s out. There the niveau
11  HUB:  [Ja beiderseitig] [Yes, mutual]
12  DED:  [Ja beide Seiten müssen sein.] [Yes, it needs to be mutual]

The example must be seen as the temporary solution to a lengthy dispute between Mr Dede and Mr Huber about the ‘niveau’ of Austrians, where they already had touched on a wide range of topics, from tolerance and civil rights to the quality of Austrian hospitals and universities. Here, for the first time, Mr Huber seems to accept one of Mr Dede’s arguments, namely that a widespread practice of many Viennese is a sign of low ‘niveau,’ or lack of class of those, who, when finding out he was an immigrant, still address him in a humiliating ‘foreigner’-language. Mr Huber approves (2-3), giving him the advice to socialize with people of ‘high niveau.’ What is quite interesting is that in this utterance he changes the perspective, talking from the viewpoint of immigrants facing discriminating practices. He tried to do so even before, but had failed spectacularly, because he proved himself to be able to reproduce only crude clichés.12 This time Mr Dede, picking up the signal in lines 5-6, takes the chance demanding that Mr Huber implements his change of perspective consistently, (while Mr Ibo desperately keeps on talking in the background) asserting vividly that his own acceptance of Viennese is crucial as well (10), and Mr Huber in an almost minimal answer confirms: They
meet on the basis that acceptance needs to be mutual, which looks pretty much like a real conciliation.

But it is not flawless. Notably, this agreement is reached on the cost of giving in to the point that you need ‘niveau’ to be accepted as a ‘foreigner,’ which for Mr Huber implicitly means assimilation and complete renouncement of cultural difference. It is also built on his attesting of Mr Dede’s ‘niveau’ and identity, and makes Mr Dede dependent on this attestation, despite the fact that Mr Huber is an unemployed clerk with only basic education. Throughout the whole discussion he never ratified that Mr Dede has academic training and teaches as an assistant at an Austrian high-school. Although here it seemed he had changed his xenophobic standpoint, the frustration follows almost immediately, just two minutes later:

**Example 5: Suspension of Reciprocity**

*Sam. 9.6.97: 1217-1245*

1. **DED:** Und was, was ist mit, mit mir los?
   And me, what about me?
2. **HUB:** Na i weiß net, Staatsbürgerschaft, jo oder na?
   I don’t know. Citizenship, yes or no?
3. **DED:** Ich hab keine.
   I don’t have it
4. **HUB:** Na dann (.) bist a Ausländer.
   Well then (.) you’re foreigner
5. **DED:** Tschusch.
   Tschusch ((abusive word for immigrants in Viennese slang))
6. **HAY:** ((laughs))
7. **HUB:** Tschusch.
   Tschusch
8. **DED:** Schleich dich.
   Bugger off
9. **HUB:** ((laughing)) Salamaleikum
10. **HAY:** Putz dich ((lacht))
    Beat it ((laughs))
11. **DED:** ((raises threateningly in his chair towards HUB))
12. Anasini avradini sikiym ben böyle/
    ((Turkish:)) I fuck the mother and wife of such a/
13. **HUB:** Ja, so is des.
    Yes, that’s it
14. **DED:** Mann, ich werd narrisch werden
    Man, I could get crazy
15. **HUB:** ((abschwächend)) Naa, jetzt/
    ((appeasingly)) No, here/
16. **HAY:** [Moment mal aber, Moment, Moment, na na na, wieso wirst du
    [Wait now, hey, wait, wait, no no no, why do you
Mr Huber has conceded just before that Mr Ibo should enjoy equal rights, because he has become Austrian citizen. Mr Dede asks, what about him, then. In line 4 HUB answers ambivalently that he is a ‘foreigner,’ and DED tries to reveal, what this means, drastically exposing the hidden connotations (5, where ‘Tschusch’ is an abusive word for East European immigrants, and 8, where DED fills up, that HUB thereby hints him to “bugger off”). Mr Huber confirms these interpretations by repeating (‘Salamaleikum’, 9, which for him means ‘goodbye,’ although he has been told already it was a welcome greeting) and thereby asserts that Mr Dede then has no right to live here. Mr Dede gets very angry. At this point, my colleague told me afterwards, it looked as if they would start a fight, and Mrs Hayrie was very busy appeasing the situation (16-19). Mr Dede lists all the arguments, that show why he should enjoy equal rights: that he pays taxes, is fluent in the German language, and – what Mr Huber had agreed upon just a moment before – that he has ‘niveau,’ meaning that he represents no threat to Austrian culture whatsoever. Mr Huber rebuffs coldly, stating that all this is only good for Mr Dede himself, but does not entitle him to equal rights and treatment, even though he lives here for a very long time, which was the original question.

After all the arguments Mr Huber had lost already and all his previous concessions, for him the reciprocity of rights was revocable at any time, even when he had to admit that his prejudiced attributions were utterly wrong. He shows himself not even to be committed to his
own judgement, to what he himself had said about lacking ‘niveau’ only moments before, as in 29, where oddly enough he uses exactly the crippled foreigner-speak (twisted word order and omission of the reflexive pronoun) which he was told is felt as abusive by immigrants.

Discussion

Remarkable about this conversation was to see, how Mr Huber actually maintained the basic line of what we already knew were his prejudiced images of ‘foreigners,’ even in a dispute with immigrants who obviously did not fit this discursive scheme. Although he must have realized that they had either higher education than he, like Mr Dede and Mr Ibo, or were successful in their jobs - Mr Ibo is working for the magistrate, Mr Dede teaching - or successful in their business, like the landlady Mrs Hayrie, he obstinately kept coming back to his stereotypes, even after being repeatedly thwarted. He addressed his interlocutors as if they were his kind of prototype of ‘foreigners,’ uneducated ‘guest-workers,’ dependent on low paid jobs because of an alleged lack of knowledge in local language and culture. The Turkish immigrants who could be reckoned among the increasing class of ambitious, quite wealthy, often highly educated immigrants, demanded their rights by insisting they all were living in Vienna for a long time, fluent in German and quite integrated into social life. But in trying to prove the xenophobic images wrong, Mr Dede and - to a lesser degree - the other immigrant participants were keen on showing they were ‘adapted,’ or at least what Mr Huber could interpret as such, and in fact, what Mr Huber made out of that, was that he holds immigrants to be responsible for their discrimination, if they do not give up their cultural difference. In their entanglement in tricky questions of ‘adaptation’ the Turkish participants were caught in a form of ‘double bind’ and ceded the chance to attack the inner logic of Mr Huber’s discursive scheme. Thus they did not succeed in keeping him from channeling the dispute into paths where he finally acted as if he was the winner of the argument.

With considerable success, Mr Huber exploited a normalized discourse about ‘foreigners’ for his local strategy of identity politics. A major obstacle of the Turkish immigrants trying to face these strategies was their difficulty in laying open the hidden, implicit meanings, the logical structure and interactional function, which were quite recognizable to them as xenophobic. Demonstrating what these utterances actually mean in their social perspective and engaging Mr Huber on how he meant them they even encouraged him to speak openly, to make him assailable. Of course the implicitness necessary to be rhetorically accomplished during any effective identity politics, and the unequal availability of commonly understood images for this implicit referential background, set up something like a slant of symbolical resources, which made the task of locally establishing a counter-hegemonic discourse about ‘foreigners’ quite difficult. When melting down a definition of howsoever ‘hegemonic’ or ‘dominant’ discourses to an empirical question, if and how the
disadvantaged start to base their own feeling of their social position according to it (Gramsci, 1984), the considerable difficulty of the immigrant participants facing the problematics of integration / cultural adaption / assimilation could be used to draw a differentiated picture. In playful role reversals like example 3, the joke where Mrs Hayrie turns Mr Huber’s argument around, they successfully attack the hostile understanding of cultural diversity and by that the crucial point of this xenophobic logic. But they do not succeed in establishing their own implicit notion of self, of their contributions to Viennese society in the common frame of reference. All of their remarks concerning these questions were ignored.

When trying to establish counter-hegemonic discursive practices the habitualized inner logic of discourse about ‘foreigners’ needs to be accounted for, because like the mythological hydra it reassembles itself, even when single propositions, on which it seems to be built, are repelled or disproved: As in our last case, where these items (‘foreigners are have-nots, exploiting welfare’, ‘uneducated’, ‘work-shy’) have been proven altogether inapplicable, without bringing the implicit logic to collapse. In historical perspective changing circumstances like the rise of a bourgeoisie, educated class of Turkish and Ex-Yugoslavian immigrants have not revised the inner logic of prejudiced discourse. Even to the contrary, the detailed items and topics seem exchangeable, without touching the inner logic. Even a formerly central concept, like the one of ‘race’, which in most of Europe is not accepted or acceptable any more, obviously can be replaced without changing the basic logic and its functional impact. Culturalistic discourses, where an ontologized, naturalized understanding of ‘culture’ replaces older representations of ‘race,’ still are based on a jumbling of congenital and socially acquired attributes. Prejudiced or, specifically, xenophobic discourse has an incontestable tendency to maintain its logic and evaluative function despite major changes in the items, topics and arguments it is rooted in. It gains some of its stability from the resulting flexible character and adaptability. There are many pitfalls, as observation of discourse about ‘foreigners’ in various social contexts teaches, and trying to avoid them needs close understanding and examination of how it actually works in natural, unelicited settings.

One aspect which I tried to emphasize here was that normalized xenophobic discourse shows a certain ability to espouse and ‘digest’ competing discursive representations, to provide for a possibility to revise and tilt their original meaning. We are reminded of Victor Turner’s analysis of ‘dominant symbols,’ which in the course of their social history take up various and increasingly more contradictory meanings until they stand for entire aspects of social life (Turner, 1967, p.43f.). The exploitation of immigrants in the housing market in Ex.1, or Mr Mustafa’s complaint, that his discrimination in job-interviews still continues, when he becomes Austrian citizen (onset of Ex.3), are not treated as a challenge to the xenophobic discursive scheme and the implicit conclusion of its inner logic (that ‘foreigners live from our assets’). In both cases natives tilt the argument by legitimizing discriminatory practices with immigrants’ alleged ‘deviant mentality.’ They even treat these items as social
knowledge within the framework of xenophobic discourse without accounting for their contradictory argumentative direction. Now as this kind of common sense knowledge is never unproblematic in a social situation of polynormality, the aim was to show how various discursive practices contribute to its maintenance, the stability of their inner logic and the regular accomplishment of their social effect. They are based on a functional ambivalence of the master topics which allows for the recontextualization of key symbols and representations from competing discourses in the lines of a dominant version.

A practical understanding of prejudiced discourse could guide attempts to make the ‘game’ function the other way round: How one could use the ambivalence of topics to create new social practices of ‘filling up’ meanings, to establish emancipatory discourses in a mode that - in course of time - influences the widespread perception of legitimacy and normality more prominently. Analyzing immigrants’ strategies for reclaiming a reciprocity of rights seems to be a good starting point to find out what actually works in social practice.

References


NOTES

1 My paper is based on a research project exploring the “negotiation of social identities in natural conversations between immigrants and native Viennese”. It was commissioned by the Austrian Ministry of Science in a research focus on xenophobia. During ten months of sociological fieldwork, 1997, in an interdisciplinary and interethnic team of four researchers (with me Christine Hochsteiner, Jelena Tošić and Aslihan Sanal) we tried to identify and record interactions which the observed themselves found to be most crucial for the shaping of their senses of self and other: events like tenants’ meetings in ‘problem’ houses, communication in public parks or in bars. More institutionally based interactions underscored the aspect of (identity) negotiation, like moots in a local community center or proceedings in an informal court mediating small criminal cases. Where the participants agreed we recorded any conversations which we found promising and minutely transcribed selected events from these 35 hours of tapings, in total about 320 pages.

2 From the background of their main activity in this discussion – the reproduction of a general picture of ‘foreigners’ – and from what the participants express in other sequences, the pause will commonly be heard as a consensual pause. If the others would not agree, they very likely would at least add modifying remarks.

3 I refer to the ‘foreigner act’ because the basic line of argument here touches on informal rights, on what the participants seem to hold as due to whom, often contrasting with legal rights of immigrants, especially when it comes to questions of social advancement.

4 More examples are given in Gotsbachner 1998, 1999 and 2001

5 Reisigl & Wodak (2001: 61) found the same patterns: „The term ‘Ausländer’ (‘foreigner’ E.G.) is very often used as ‘synecdoche,’ strictly speaking, as totum pro parte by which the seemingly allinclusive anthroponymical nomination actually refers only selectively to very specific groups or persons.” Similar phenomena of this use can be shown in many societies, as Steil (In Lengfeld 1995:146) for Germany or Ann Dummett ‘A Portrait of English Racism’ (1973), only to name two.

6 I cite this methodological guideline of Blommaert & Vershueren even when I was quite disappointed of their own empirical analysis.

7 In fact there is statistical evidence from the micro-census that immigrants live in flats with bad equipment and low sanitary comfort to a considerable higher degree than natives and that – because of their social vulnerability – they even pay a higher rent for these than the average. (Bari; Boucek & Mayer 1990)

8 The full excerpt and its analysis is given in Gotsbachner 2001.

9 There are a number of arguments that it was not by chance that Mrs Friedl happened to talk about allegedly lazy janitors, but as reaction to what Mr Huber said before, about “all” immigrants sending money
home to build houses. The strongest is maybe that this is a constantly recurring pattern throughout the discussions of this group, always serving a specific narrative and argumentative function, as analyzed more closely on other transcripts in Gotsbachner (2001).

10 Immigrant parties were not able to use elements of their positive self-understanding, like their ‘sense of family,’ and even had to deny them, because there are distorting xenophobic equivalents to them which easily could be seen as causes of the conflict. In one case, a native party, which started a fight with the brother of his Yugoslavian ex-girlfriend, after she left him, claimed in the negotiation that this was initiated by the brother, who had an ’unduly close relationship’ to his sister. Even when it became known in the mediation that during the three years before their frequent contact was unproblematic, which made it unlikely that this was a case of a brother trying to protect his sister’s virginity, the verbose defense of the brother was build on a number of arguments trying to symbolically exclude family matters as being involved in this conflict. At the same time the native party did not make any efforts to rectify the impression he as the repudiated lover, who already had a criminal record for injury from another occasion, almost automatically was bound to make.

11 There might be distortions resulting from the fact that Mr Huber was invited by my colleague Christine Hochsteiner to join her, and maybe a special consideration on the side of the immigrants, some of whom were already familiar with our research, as was Mr Huber. But from what we learned in other, less ‘experimental’ situations, as from the mediation-center-material, there is reason to believe, that these distortions were not systematical, and the participants, while developing their lines of argumentation without any pregiven thematics, draw on discursive repertoires they normally use in daily interaction. Even a few beers cannot make forget completely, that a microphone is present, though.

12 In a previous reaction to MUS’ complaints of discrimination (Sam.9.6.97: 450-455) “HUB: [Well, you yourself are a little- you are here, yes, you are at home here (.). o.K.. You are accepted, but you yourself (.) feel yourself [as foreigners towards the others.] HAY: [((unusual firmly)) Mister Huber], not we are accepted, the others here are accepted by us! HUB: Mohammed, how readily do they say to you/ MUS: Mustapha, not Mohammed ((all laugh, except HUB)).” Telling them, how they feel, and by using a term he had been told is abusive, of course is a gross violation of face. By the way, line 6 in Example 3 can be seen as Mr Huber’s reaction to his mistake, that for him all these names are the same.

13 Her gloating in lines 6 and 10 had contributed to the development, tempting HUB to think he could afford to do the same. Interesting, too, that DED immediately reacts to her following appeasement (16-18), and even mitigates his mildly impolite label “this type” (in German [ty:p]) by evading to a quite arbitrary, phonetically similar sounding variation, “Turk” [ty:rk], which else would not make much sense here (19).

14 Sam.9.6.97:536-539 “HUB: Well, here you have to add, that the foreigners have made themselves a bad reputation. For instance the Yugoslavians living here, well (.)= IBO: Yes, come out with it, yes yes ((laughs))”

15 It is difficult to attack single propositions or even master topics of the xenophobic scheme. From what we have seen in natives’ in-group talk about ‘foreigners,’ even assimilated immigrants are often treated as somewhat inferior, because of what is referred to as their ‘alienation’ from their ‘original culture.’ In this specific usage, which we found especially in political speeches (Gotsbachner 1998), they maintain the basic function of
xenophobic discourse in a very tricky and very mean understanding of ‘poor foreigners.’ But even underlining the positive contribution of immigrants to their ‘guest’-societies, an attack on the assumption ‘foreigners live from our assets,’ does not always challenge these dominant representations, because it could be integrated into an economistic discourse where basic human rights still are at the disposal of social forces determining their advantages purely from their own egoistic measurements. Mr Huber’s argumentation exploits both strategies.