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# Language, (em)power(ment) and affective capitalism: the case of an entrepreneurship workshop for refugees in Germany

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**Abstract:** This paper seeks to advance research on the nexus of language, work-related training and affective capitalism by focusing on an entrepreneurship workshop organized for newly arrived refugees in Germany. Despite the occupational orientation, the primary objective of the workshop was not establishing a business but “empowering” the participants by guiding them to adopt “an entrepreneurial mindset”. To delve deeper into this ‘will to empower’, the study brings together the perspectives of governmentality studies, ethnography, discourse studies and affect studies. To investigate in more detail the evocation of the ‘entrepreneurial mindset’, the study draws on ethnographic data collected in the context of the workshop and focuses on a particular discursive resource, the genre ‘elevator pitch’. The analysis examines how this genre operated as a technology of government by allowing an attempt at modulating the affective states and attachments of the participants so as to evoke an affective configuration characterized by hardness, resilience and diligence, but above all by aspiration, optimism and confidence: faith in oneself, and a horizon of hope that the possibility of self-employment created. The concluding section discusses this sub-judgmentation regime as a manifestation of contemporary affective capitalism, in the context of forced migration and beyond, in the light of recent social and socio-linguistic research.

**Keywords:** affect; discourse; elevator pitch; empowerment; entrepreneurship; governmentality; refugees

## 1 Introduction

During 2015 and 2016 Germany admitted more than one million people seeking shelter from the escalating conflicts in the Middle East (BMI 2017). Subsequently,

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Germany faces, along with many other countries, an unforeseen political, economic and ethical challenge to integrate the newcomers into society, and especially the labour market. As one solution to this challenge, responding to the call for “reigniting the entrepreneurial spirit” in the European Union (European Commission 2013), European countries including Germany have invested in entrepreneurship training schemes targeted specifically at refugees (see also Del Percio and van Hoof 2017).

Scholars of language and society (e.g. Allan 2016; Del Percio and van Hoof 2017; Flubacher and Yeung 2016) have provided insightful investigations into the “policies and programmes associated with the education and training” of migrants that, as Kathryn Mitchell has described, by the beginning of the new millennium had turned away from “an institutionalized affirmation [–] and valuation of individual and group difference” towards a “constant formation and reformation of work skills” and “the formation of mobile, flexible and self-governing European laborers” (Mitchell 2006: 392). The recent upsurge of entrepreneurship training schemes for refugees can be viewed as the latest shift in this orientation towards a (re)formation of work skills. The promotion of entrepreneurship training for refugees reflects, however, also another “core policy objective for the EU”, namely, “promoting an entrepreneurial mindset among the EU citizens” (European Commission, n.d.), viewed as a form of empowerment and, as such, a way to social and economic integration for a variety of marginalized groups (cf. Cruikshank 1999; European Commission 2013; Del Percio and van Hoof 2017; Pétursdóttir 2018).

To delve deeper into this “will to empower” (Cruikshank 1999), the present study<sup>1</sup> focuses on a two-week workshop on entrepreneurship organized for refugees by a charitable organization in a small German town in Spring 2018. The overall framework of the study draws on the analytics of governmentality; an approach aimed at investigating how power operates through the “conduct of conduct” of social actors, thus constituting subjects (e.g. Bröckling et al. 2000; Foucault 2006; 1982; Rose 1996). Characteristically, the interest in governmentality studies has lain on the “art of government”: on governmental calculations manifest in ‘archival material’ (cf. Brady 2016: 13; Bröckling 2007). The interest in the present paper lies, however, in the “actual practices” of government, and in this way the study aligns itself with a newer strand of research that combines the analytics of government with an ethnographic approach (cf. Brady and Lippert 2016; Martín Rojo and Del Percio 2020; Strömmer 2021; see also Urla 2019). Following also here a neo-Foucauldian strand of thinking, inspired by Deleuzian

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<sup>1</sup> The study is part of a broader research undertaking that examines entrepreneurship training schemes for displaced persons in Germany. I would like to sincerely thank the three anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments on an earlier version of this paper.

theorization, I view the workshop on entrepreneurship in the focus of the present study as “a governmental assemblage”, a contingent, temporal and situational formation consisting of heterogeneous elements – institutions, rationalities, discourses, technologies, practices, embodied subjects, material arrangements – that are brought together to act on the “problem” of the economic and social integration of refugees (cf. Brady 2016).<sup>2</sup> While the ethnographic approach allows examining governmental practices taking place in time and space, the notion of assemblage allows these practices to be linked to broader social developments while avoiding totalising accounts (cf. Brady 2016). As Pietikäinen (2021: 237) has argued, assemblage presents “an ontological shift from binaries and dichotomies to a more complex terrain of multiplicity, heterogeneity, convergence and flows”.

To investigate in more detail the evocation of an entrepreneurial mindset, the analysis focuses on a particular discursive<sup>3</sup> resource (Blommaert 2005), namely the genre elevator pitch that was used in different variations as a “pedagogical tool”, as the organizers called it, throughout the workshop. As such, it operated in the workshop in two interrelated ways: On the one hand, regarding the notion of skills, it provided a scheme for approaching and presenting oneself and one’s entrepreneurial undertaking in “the right kind of way” (cf. Urciuoli 2019). On the other, it constituted, as I will elaborate below, a technology of government that allowed an attempt at modulating (Massumi 2015a) – inducing, inciting but also suppressing – affective states and attachments of the participants so as to evoke an entrepreneurial mindset; an affective configuration that not only resonates with recent findings by scholars in sociolinguistics (see below) but bears a striking similarity to subject formations investigated and associated in social sciences with a “turn to character” in neoliberalism (Bull and Allen 2018), which I will argue in the conclusion of this paper forms part of affective capitalism. The characteristic trope of the entrepreneurial subjectivity evoked in the training was not *homo oeconomicus*, the archetype of neoliberal subjectivity (e.g. Bröckling 2007; Massumi 2015b; Sunyol and Codó 2019),<sup>4</sup> but rather, *homo optimisticus*, characterized by optimism, confidence and resilience.

Although the nexus of language, training/education and neoliberalism has grown into a significant field of investigation (e.g. Allan 2016; Flubacher and Del Percio 2017; Lorente 2012; Urciuoli 2019), the “lens of affect” (McElhinny 2010) has

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2 For an overview of applications of the notion of assemblage in governmentality research, see Brady (2016:14–17); for a recent application in sociolinguistic research, see Pietikäinen (2021).

3 In this study, language is understood in terms of “discourse” that “comprises all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural, and historical patterns and developments of use” (Blommaert 2005: 3).

4 Although the idea of acquiring presentation skills could be seen to suggest a kind of “investor subjectivity” (Allan 2016; also Urciuoli 2019).

remained in the margins of this field until very recently. In this connection, Ng (2019) examined how linguistic, visual and spatial modalities are utilized in university branding in Singapore to valorize particular affective sensibilities and subjectivities geared towards passion, enthusiasm and feel-good sentiments. Del Percio and Sze Wan (2020) analysed the strategic use of “hope” in an employability programme targeted at “at risk” youth in Britain. In a somewhat similar vein, Allan (2019) examined in the Canadian context the reconfiguration of volunteer work as a form of “hope labour”, premised on the logic of investment. Nissi and Dlaske (2020) examined the “empowerment” of factory workers through personnel training, drawing on a play shown in a city theatre in Finland.

All these studies point towards what scholars in social sciences have labelled ‘affective capitalism’ (see the Introduction to this issue). Drawing on Massumi’s theorization of affect and capitalism, Karppi et al. (2016: 9) have described affective capitalism as “a mode of capture where [–] our capacities to affect and become affected are transformed into assets, goods, services, and managerial strategies”. In this paper I view affective capitalism both as a mode of operation and as a characteristic of contemporary neoliberal governmentality (cf. Introduction to this issue). While the analytics of governmentality has met growing interest in recent years among the scholars of language and society, the focus has been on the many ways in which language figures in governmental processes and practices; the dimension of affect has remained, also here, underexplored (e.g. Kauppinen 2013; Del Percio and van Hoof 2017; McIlhenny et al. 2016; Strömmer 2021; for an overview see Urla (2019)).

The paper proceeds as follows: I will first outline the governmental assemblage(s) in the focus of this paper, the broader entrepreneurship training scheme and the workshop that forms part of it, situating these in a broader societal context. Subsequently, I describe the study data. I then discuss elevator pitch as an interactional genre and as a technology of self/government and develop a view of Massumi’s notion of affect modulation as a dimension of governmental practices. Drawing on these considerations, I analyse in the empirical part of the paper the genre/technology elevator pitch in action and in the conclusion discuss the implications of the findings in the context of forced migration, the broader society, and future sociolinguistic research.

## 2 Situating and outlining the assemblage

In the aftermath of “the gravest economic crisis in the last 50 years”, in 2013 the European Commission released an Entrepreneurship Action Plan “to bring Europe back to growth”. The main objective of this plan is to “unleash Europe’s

entrepreneurial potential”, which is to be achieved by a variety of measures outlined in the plan (European Commission 2013: 3, 5). One such measure is opening up “new horizons: reaching out to women, seniors, migrants, the unemployed [and] young people”. Regarding these groups, the argument goes as follows: “Europe has to open up for them paths into entrepreneurship to create for them jobs, empower them economically and socially and leverage their creative and innovative capacities” (European Commission 2013: 22). With a vision to contribute both to economic growth and individual empowerment, the Action Plan offers a tangible illustration of neoliberal logic in which political power no longer restrains the agency and empowerment of individuals, but instead offers to facilitate these (cf. Rose 1996: 155). The aligning principle, as illustrated in the Action Plan, is the logic of entrepreneurship. Thus, in the contemporary dominant discourse, *empowerment* no longer denotes, or even connotes, any form of political resistance, but rather the ability to think and act entrepreneurially (cf. Nissi and Dlaske 2020; Bröckling 2007: 180–214; Cruikshank 1999: 68; Kraft and Flubacher 2020). This view and the objective of “unleashing the entrepreneurial potential” are supported by a concomitant call for “promoting an entrepreneurial mindset” in the field of education (European Commission n.d.). Moreover, they are fostered in the field of popular media culture, especially in “entre-tainment” shows such as *Dragons’ Den* (see Section 3), where entrepreneurship is depicted as respected and desirable career choice (Swail et al. 2014).

The governmental intervention in the focus of the present study was assembled under the dual rationality of entrepreneurialism, introduced above, that forces an alignment between economic growth and individual empowerment (cf. Li 2007). It was organized under the umbrella of a multi-levelled network, Integration through Qualification, that aims at improving the employment opportunities for migrants in Germany. The network is funded through the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the European Social Fund. Most of the work of the organization is situated in the areas of vocational German language training, credential recognition and job training as well as anti-discrimination. Recognizing the need “to tap [into] all available potential (sic)” (IQ Network n.d. A), and after the increased immigration of displaced persons also the “voices [–] becoming loud [–] hoping for a new entrepreneurial boom in Germany” (IQ Network n.d. B) the network has devoted one of its five competence centres to the promotion of migrant and refugee entrepreneurship. Besides a comprehensive website that gives advice for different target groups with a migration background, the network hosts a number of training schemes targeted at migrants – and since 2016 more specifically at refugees – located across the federal states.

The workshop on entrepreneurship in the focus of the present study was part of one of the schemes targeted at refugees. The scheme was a two-year project

(2016–2018) that made use of different training formats, including a seminar series of several weeks, individual counselling, and workshops, such as the one examined in the present study. The scheme was initiated at a point of time, in 2015, where the newly arrived displaced persons were residing in reception centres, waiting for a decision about their right to stay, and, when granted the right, were taking part in state-run integration courses, designed to teach the basics about German language and society. Reflecting the historically dominant view of liberal governments that becoming a speaker of the nation's first language is "as a *sine qua non* for political, social and professional integration" (Del Percio and van Hoof 2017: 158; cf. Flubacher 2014), participation in a language course is a mandatory part of the process for displaced persons in Germany and language proficiency practically a prerequisite for getting a job. In this context, one goal of the entrepreneurship training project, as described in a project report, was to test to what extent entrepreneurship can open up occupational perspectives for refugees and asylum seekers. Echoing the ethos of the Action Plan, entrepreneurship, or self-employment, was envisioned as a "fast track" to occupational inclusion, a way of circumventing obstacles, such as a lack of (recognition of) competences – including linguistic ones – and discrimination in the recruitment process that typically impede the integration in the job market. Contrary to the dominant view of language proficiency as a condition for occupational integration, in this vision self-employment was viewed as a realm free of this requirement. In an interview with me, Sabine, one of the managers of the training scheme who also acted as a tutor of the workshop, asserted: "I am certain that one can establish a business successfully without knowing any German". Although the argument is subject to debate, as the analysis below will show, it does indicate the ideological positioning of the managers whose views also had implications for what was viewed as the objective of the training.

Despite the occupational orientation, the ultimate objective of the training scheme was not guiding the participants to establishing a business, or honing any particular skills, but as the project report describes it, echoing the rationality of entrepreneurship education (cf. European Commission n.d.) "empowering" the participants through training in entrepreneurial thinking and acting. "The participants", the report describes, "become aware of their strengths, they define their personal and occupational goals [–]. Their entrepreneurial thinking and acting shows in their initiative to discover chances, try out different ways, and discard some plans altogether. Entrepreneurs don't let themselves become so easily discouraged by stumbling blocks [translation mine]".

Unlike the state-run integration courses, the entrepreneurship training scheme was neither exclusive nor coercive, but an offer open to anyone with refugee background, as a gesture of goodwill that operated through incitement and

promise instead of discipline and coercion. At the same time, although promoted with goodwill and vigour by those involved, I gathered during my field work that the idea of refugees establishing a business was not always met with enthusiasm by actors among the stakeholders and gatekeepers such as the International Chamber of Commerce or the Jobcenter, who would have preferred the usual way of labour market integration.

The workshop in the focus of the present paper took place in a small German town in spring 2018. Although organized under the umbrella of the two-year entrepreneurship training project introduced above, it was an independent event that took place over six days during two weeks. The initiative for this particular workshop came from the foundation counsellors of the local Jobcenter,<sup>5</sup> who had diagnosed a need among the customers with a refugee background for training that would prepare them for the encounter with the counsellors. These encounters are of vital importance in that the foundation counsellors are the first gatekeepers on the way from unemployment to self-employment; they evaluate the viability of the initial ideas and plans and if deemed viable enough, support for the next steps is provided: composing a business plan, seeking funding and, finally, establishing the business. That the genre elevator pitch took such a central role in the workshop was thus partly owing to this practical aim to train the participants for these encounters. The participants were recruited mainly through the Jobcenter and word-of-mouth advertising. The workshop itself was led by three tutors, Sabine, Maria and Daniel, all involved also in the broader entrepreneurship training project. All three have an academic background and substantial practical experience in projects with migrants including teaching entrepreneurship.

The ethnographic material on which the empirical part of the paper is based was collected in the context of the workshop and includes 24 pages of transcribed field notes from the workshop meetings; photographs from the site, including photos of the written products of the exercises that the participants did during the course; two audio-taped interviews with two of the tutors of the project; and casual conversations with the tutors and participants of the workshop. The analysis draws moreover, as does the broader examination of the assemblage above, on related policy documents and media materials as well as on insights gained through ethnographic engagement with other entrepreneurship projects for refugees in Germany. Despite the ethnographic approach, the focus of the study is, as described above, on the “governmental attempts” (cf. Brady 2016), rather than on the empirical effects on the participants. This focus also directs the analytical angle of the examination.

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5 Jobcenter in Germany is an institution under the Federal Employment Agency that looks after the recipients of the basic subsistence benefit (unemployment benefit II).



### 3 The genre/technology elevator pitch and affect modulation

Elevator pitch, also known as elevator speech, is a vital genre in the contemporary start-up and management scene. “Having a good elevator pitch ready can help entrepreneurs make the best of brief encounters with potential investors at parties, business events, or elevators. An elevator pitch is a prime chance to make a good first impression and generate interest in the company”, advises the site Slidebean (Caya 2019), one of hundreds of sites dedicated to giving advice on “how to write the perfect pitch”. While advice may vary, in the core, a pitch should describe in a succinct and compelling manner one’s person, one’s business (idea) and what one is asking for. The speech should not last longer “than an elevator ride”. Start-up events, such as the Slush, organize pitching contests with the opportunity for the attendants to get attention from investors, feedback for their performance, and in the case of the winners, financial support for their ventures (Slush n.d.). Outside of the start-up scene, the genre has been made famous by the reality show *Dragons’ Den*, which, after its origin in Japan, is currently being broadcast in nearly 30 localized versions around the world. In the show, budding entrepreneurs, “who have what they consider to be a viable and potentially very profitable business idea, but who lack funding and direction [–] pitch their idea to five rich entrepreneurial businesspeople” in the hope of winning them over and receiving funding (Wikipedia.org, s. v. Dragon’s Den n.d.).

As this description suggests, ‘genre’ can be understood, following the point of view of discourse studies, as an interactional resource that is shaped by a set of social norms and rules that derive from broader social, political and historical developments (e.g. Blommaert 2005: 66, 67). In other words, genres regulate not only our linguistic, and more broadly semiotic, conduct, but also the way in which we understand and relate to our social world and to ourselves. Especially in the case of interactional genres that have to do with representation of the self, such as elevator pitch, following the norms of the genre means producing a particular type of self (cf. Koller 2011; Solin 2018; Del Percio and Sze Wan 2020). This is the point where, I suggest, the notions of genre and technology of self/government<sup>6</sup> overlap. In his famous definition, Foucault (1988) characterized technologies of self as “types of technologies, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and

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<sup>6</sup> Technologies of self are always tied to power/government, cf. Foucault (1988). Since my focus here is on government of the participants of the entrepreneurship workshop, I prefer the notion ‘technology of government’.

souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality". While the Foucauldian notion of technology directs the attention to the subjectifying potentials of the genre elevator pitch, it offers little help for attending to the affective dimensions related to the use of the genre in the context of the workshop. To address these, I borrow from Brian Massumi's (e.g. 2015a) theorization on power and affect the notion 'modulation'.

Infamous for his conceptual separation of language and affect (Massumi 1995; cf. Ahmed 2004; Wetherell 2013), Massumi has been either overlooked or derogated (e.g. Wetherell 2012) by scholars in sociolinguistics interested in the study of affect. Although Massumi's separation of language and affect and the multiple divisions involved in this separation – between mind and body, consciousness and non-consciousness, emotion and affect – have rightly been criticized as untenable by a growing number of scholars (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Leys 2011; Wetherell 2012), there are other aspects in his work, such as the view of affect and capitalism and the theorization of affective power, that are useful for sociolinguistic research as well, especially as his considerations leave room for methodological development (cf. Slaby 2018: 8).

Although Foucault's and Massumi's views of subject and power differ in that Foucault emphasises the aspect of knowledge and Massumi that of affect,<sup>7</sup> both view subjects as emerging and relational and power as productive (e.g. Foucault 1982; Massumi 2015a). Drawing on Spinoza's philosophy, Massumi defines affect as "the capacity for affecting or being affected" (Massumi 2015a: 4) and views modulation as regulation of affective states and attachments of people. Foucault (1982: 220), on the other hand, has described the operation of governmental power as follows: "it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely". What Foucault describes here are indeed affective processes, and thus Massumi's notion of affect modulation can be seen as one dimension of the operation of governmental power (cf. D'Aoust 2014). Taken in the context of the present study, the notion of affect modulation allows for an examination of how the genre elevator pitch constituted a technology that facilitated an attempt at modulating – evoking, strengthening or suppressing – affective states and attachments of the participants in the entrepreneurship workshop.

While Massumi has theorized the operation of contemporary neoliberal power in terms of affective capitalism, Lauren Berlant (2011) has coined the term 'cruel optimism' to describe the affective attachments of people to "fantasies of

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7 In this respect, Massumi goes so far as to claim that both contemporary political and capitalist powers operate mainly through affective channels (e.g. Massumi 2015a: 25, 31).

the good life” that derive from an era before the rise of neoliberalism. In this era, desires such as job security or upward mobility were made attainable by relative structural stability and systems for social security. In the contemporary, these have been dismantled by neoliberal politics and replaced through conditions of insecurity and precarity. In these conditions, the “old” fantasies have not only become unachievable, but Berlant argues, also keep people from reaching what they are striving for, “the good life” – which is what makes this optimism “cruel” (Berlant 2011: 23, 191–93). Drawing on this notion, I propose that the contemporary attachments of cruel optimism not only originate from a past social order, but are also generated and modulated through the very logics of contemporary neoliberal social order itself (cf. Nissi and Dlaske 2020).

With these theoretical and methodological considerations in mind, I will turn next to the operation of the genre/technology elevator pitch in the context of the workshop. In order to illustrate the “organic” emergence of the entrepreneurial spirit in the course of the training, the analysis follows the temporal progression of the two-week workshop, beginning at the first meeting.

## 4 Modulating affective attachments: elevator pitch in action

It is an exceptionally warm week in late April. The sun is shining high in the blue sky, old chestnut trees are unfolding pale green leaves on the dusty courtyard of an abandoned school where the workshop is about to start.<sup>8</sup> Inside, in the locations currently used by a charitable organization supporting immigrant children, the tutors, Maria and Daniel, are busy preparing the first session: organizing the tables in a circle so that everyone can see one another, placing the flip chart at the front, markers and photocopied programs on the tables. Participants start dropping in. After a while, there are four of them, seven had signed up. We wait for a while longer, then the tutors start. Besides the tutors and the participants, there are three ladies, who have come to follow the beginning of the workshop. They introduce themselves: one is educational advisor at a ministry of the federal state, two others are counsellors at the local Jobcenter – the workshop was their initiative. They commend the atmosphere of the location: this is exactly what they were wishing for, something cosy, not reminiscent of the Jobcenter.

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<sup>8</sup> The workshop took place in German, all excerpts from the data are my translations. All names are pseudonyms.

The participants are asked to introduce themselves and their business ideas. All are men, ranging from just over twenty to well over forty years of age. Most of them have arrived in Germany a year or two ago, leaving the same war and conflict-torn region in the Middle East. Currently they are attending a German language course at B1/B2 level, part of the state-run integration course.<sup>9</sup> The educational and occupational backgrounds of the participants vary: Abdul has run a grocer's shop along with selling shoes and bags, Raed has run a hotel he inherited from his father, Farid, in turn, has a bachelor's degree, acquired through a distance learning program at a US university; before coming to Germany he had worked as a stockbroker in his home country. After leaving school, the youngest one, Ali, has done promotional work for advertising agencies. Despite their varied background and experience, the business ideas converge: a restaurant, a grocer's shop, a nut shop, a barber's. As they prepare to leave, the business start-up counsellors pay the compliment of saying they are great ideas, very concrete, and encourage the participants to carry on with them.

After a brief overview of the program for the coming days and a preliminary relaxation exercise, the tutors get down to the actual business in hand, starting with the phases of establishing a business. Daniel draws a line on the flip chart. To begin with, he tells the participants, you will need a business plan in German and you will need to be able to present it yourself. They (counsellors at the Jobcenter and possible funders) will notice if you haven't written it by yourself. The business plan has important questions that you need to answer. It doesn't have to be thirty pages, but it does take some time, and we will not be able to do it here over these six days. What follows in the next six days are a number of exercises linked to the main questions to ask when creating a business plan. The questions are related to the would-be entrepreneur and his/her motivation to become self-employed, to the business idea and the motivation for it, who the potential customers are, and to marketing and promotion. The exercises conform in different ways to the genre of elevator pitch. The first exercise, called Profile, follows after a short break. Daniel writes on the blackboard:

1. Why do I want to become self-employed?
2. With which business idea do I want to become self-employed?
3. What are my strengths?
4. What questions do I have regarding self-employment?

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<sup>9</sup> In the course of the workshop, the older participants especially seemed to experience occasional difficulties in understanding the tutors; the tutors took time to explain and at times the younger participants translated.

The first two questions are drawn directly from *Guidelines for drawing up a business plan*, a document produced by the Integration through Qualification Network, introduced in Section 2. The third question focuses, rather than on the skills and qualifications asked about in the *Guidelines*, in the spirit of support and empowerment, on the strengths of the participants. The fourth is designed in the same spirit, to create prompts for the tutors to better cater for the individual needs of the participants. At the same time, the exercise reflects the three main points of elevator pitch: introducing oneself, one's business idea and what one is asking for (cf. Section 2).

Two further (male) participants have dropped in during the afternoon, the younger one, Jamal, has a background in game programming; the older one, Nadeem, has worked in accounting in his home country. Both have fled the same region as the rest of the group. The participants, now numbering six, are instructed to work in pairs, to write down their answers and then present each other to the rest of the group. After a while Maria invites the first pair to the front of the class; they struggle with the assignment, not sure who is supposed to present to whom. Daniel gives the instructions once more. Raed, who has a restaurant background, presents Ali, the youngest one in the group: This is Ali, he wants to become self-employed because he wants to stand on his own feet, be independent, self-reliant. His business idea is a 3-in-1 concept including a grocery store, barber's shop and a speciality shop for water pipes. He is team-minded, can work well under pressure, and has social skills. He needs advice on how to realize his idea and good luck.

Besides the wish to "be independent" expressed by Ali, the motivations of the participants for their (assumed) wish to become self-employed include a wish for "a better life", "higher income" or just any chance at all, since, as one of the older participants, Nadeem, finds, his German skills are not that good and he is over 40 years old so he hasn't really got much of a chance at finding a job in a company. What these answers suggest is that the participants have picked up the promises associated with self-employment circulated in various spheres from the globalized "entre-tainment" shows (Swail et al. 2013) down to the present entrepreneurship training scheme (cf. Sections 2 and 3). The dimension of affective modulation starts to emerge here as these promises become motivations for the participants and are cast as future scenarios of the good life of self-employment. In addition to a desire for a better life, that also indicates a hope of social mobility (Berlant 2011), the motivations expressed suggest confidence in one's own plans. Raed, whose business idea is an exceptional restaurant where "old and new [i.e. Arabic and German] cultural styles meet", wants to become self-employed because "he has a good idea".

When it comes to the question of strengths, the older participants do not understand what "strengths" means. This is exactly why, Sabine explains to me

later in an interview, they address the notion in the training, to make the participants familiar with the idea, and to lead them to discover strengths in themselves. Maria tries to explain to Abdul: You have run a shop for years, I could imagine that you can sell well, that you are good at interacting with customers. Abdul lightens up: Yes, I know how to bargain. See, Maria replies, that's what strengths and competencies are.

Like Ali with his background in the globalized business of promotional work, other younger participants with a similar background (in the stock market, game programming), do not have difficulties in identifying strengths; they know the name of the game, the requirements of the genre. Effortlessly they draw, similarly to Ali, on the discourse of entrepreneurial strengths, talking themselves into being goal-oriented, motivated, aspiring, and good with customers. The affective modulation here goes through a discursive-cognitive-affective chain in which also the notion of empowerment is predicated: "discovering" strengths "in oneself" (or otherwise attributing these to oneself) is expected to lead to feeling stronger, more confident. As part of this exercise, discovering strengths in oneself not only brings about a feeling of confidence, but does so in relation to the envisioned scenarios of a better life, making them seem more attainable, and evoking feelings of optimism and eagerness.

After each presentation, Maria probes the business ideas in the spirit of elevator pitch. Instead of really challenging the ideas, however, she expresses support and encouragement, thus turning further up the nascent affective intensities. Can I ask you about your 3-in-1 concept, she asks Ali. Why? Because there's everything under one roof, Ali replies. Are you a hairdresser?<sup>10</sup> Maria inquires. No, but I can hire one, Ali replies. See, Maria explains to others, this is how you can get round a regulation in Germany, if you don't have a specific competence, you can hire someone who has. After the presentations, Ali asks the tutors what they think of the business ideas. Instead of saying anything about the actual ideas, Daniel stresses the importance of the right kind of affective stance: confidence, you have conviction – that's important. It's important to show "I can do this, I need to plan a bit, but I can do this". That's why we do these presentations. They were great, Maria comments on her part, reinforcing further the feeling of optimism and confidence.

On the next day, work on the business ideas continues, focusing this time on customers and marketing. The sun is shining high again, there is a feel of summer in the air, the group decides to go out on the courtyard. They take the flipcharts along, two participants go with Daniel, two with Sabine, who will be there for the

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**10** In Germany, the profession of hairdresser is one of the traditional handicraft trades. To open a barber's shop of one's own, one needs to complete training to become a "master hairdresser".

rest of the course instead of Maria. Two of the six participants from the first day have dropped out without saying anything. In Sabine's group are Farid and Raed, and Daniel works with Ali and Nadeem. Turning first to Ali, Daniel asks: To begin with, what's your business idea again? Ali seems a bit melancholic: That 3-in-1 concept, but we can forget about it now, actually. How about, we say, groceries and water pipes? Daniel suggests, to light up the sparkle of enthusiasm again. Ali nods, but looks thoughtful. Nadeem replies for him: A grocer's shop... or... a shoe shop. Let's say a shoe shop, for the sake of this exercise, Daniel suggests. He turns back to Ali: Who are your customers? Ali: Everybody. Daniel: How do you mean "everybody"? Ali: Everybody needs to eat. Daniel: But who smokes a bong? Ali: Everybody. Who? All Germans? No ... Daniel shakes his head. Ali: Well, the Russians, Arabs ... OK, the Russian and the Arabs, Daniel agrees. He turns to Nadeem: What kind shoes do you sell? Nadeem: All kinds of shoes ... brand shoes ... all kinds of shoes ... Daniel: To whom do you sell the shoes? Nadeem: To everybody, Germans, everybody. Daniel asks again: What *kinds* of shoes do you sell, remainder or...? Nadeem looks irresolute, but nods: Yes, yes, remainder shoes.

Daniel keeps shooting questions and reformulating his questions, advising for and against, urging the participants do research, study statistics, collect facts. Over the two next hours, they go through customer segments, prime costs and selling prices, marketing and advertising strategies. We are standing in the dusty courtyard, the sun blazing down, and the men keep answering Daniel's surge of questions as best they can. The exercise is a mixture of coaching and pitching, the pitching part reminiscent of *Dragons' Den*, in which "the dragons probe the idea further [to] either reveal a sound business proposition that the investor may become interested in [–] or an embarrassing lack of preparation on the part of the contestant [–] (Wikipedia.org, s. v. *Dragons' Den* n.d.). I imagine myself in the position of the participants and think I would start crying. But the goal of the exercise is not to make the participants cry, quite the opposite. Besides introducing further elements essential to a solid business plan, the objective is to train the participants in the right kind of performance and affective attitude: quick-wittedness and toughness, and remaining strong, calm and confident when hit on a weak spot, to evoke a kind of resilience characterizing what Gill and Orgad (2018: 477) have called "bounce-backable" subjects. Unlike on the first day, however, keeping up confidence is not enough. What also needs to be generated is diligence, a drive to strive for hard facts for a consistent workable plan – an ethical pedagogy familiar from *Dragons' Den*.

On the next day, Sabine says Raed has quit the course. Maybe we were a little bit too hard on him yesterday, we *really* kept probing, she muses. There are three participants left, Ali, Nadeem and Farid, who will continue until the end of the

workshop. In the second week, the participants are invited to work out a road map, that is, plan their individual path to self-employment, which may include taking up some studies or working as an employee along the way. None of the participants seems to be interested in taking up employment or studying, but rather reluctantly they write down possible options suggested by the tutors. Self-employment is their preferred choice by far, a vision held in place through an exclusive affective attachment, and soon enough they can get back on this track again.

The course is planned to culminate in a meeting where the participants will have the chance to present their business ideas to the representatives from the Jobcenter and the ministry and, as Sabine notes jokingly, to wow them. Now the task is to prepare a short presentation covering four key points, similarly to the exercise at the beginning of the course, but now, instructed by Daniel, with a little more content. Daniel jots down the four points on the flipchart: Me and my strengths; self-employment or some other way; which business idea I have; what do I need. This time, the participants are instructed to start by describing their strengths. The somewhat altered format of the exercise also gives them the option to choose “some other way” than self-employment. Nevertheless, right after that they are asked to describe their business idea. Instead of the general “What questions do I have about self-employment?” This version of the exercise invites reflection on one’s own needs. So in spite of the adjustments in the instructions, the participants are still led to sustain the vision of the good life of entrepreneurship, and in so doing, the attachments of aspiration, hope and optimism, to talk themselves into being confident and strong and to expect support for their individual needs.

The men withdraw to work on their own. They work with concentration, asking about a word or an expression in German every now and then. After twenty minutes, Sabine asks if they are ready but everyone needs more time. Finally, Farid agrees to go first. He greets his audience and thanks them for coming, introduces himself and says a little bit about his family. Then he goes on to detail his strengths: I am active and persistent, I always try to reach my goals. I am optimistic and get well along with people. He describes how he has worked for a long time for others and how now it’s time for him to start working for himself. His business idea: a nut shop, where he also will sell coffee, dried fruit and gifts. At the moment, he says, I am working on the business plan. It needs around two weeks, then I will start. Regarding the needs, he mentions financial help and counselling in the first six months, meaning a Jobcenter support scheme. He ends by saying I am very sure I am on the right way. Very persuasive, we get to know you and your plan is very comprehensible, Sabine tells Farid after the presentation, and in so doing reinforces the feelings of optimism and confidence.



Next on the stage is Nadeem. He introduces himself and his background: Back in his home country he had worked as a sales manager and accountant in a construction company. Here in Germany he wants to become self-employed because his German is not very good. He wants to establish a brand shoe outlet, because everyone wants good quality brand shoes at a cheap price. He would need support and counselling. Good, Sabine comments. You can emphasise your strengths and competences even more, she says encouragingly, seeking to boost the feeling of confidence.

The last presentation is by Ali. Like the others, he first introduces himself and then goes on to list a number of strengths: he is team-minded, good at boosting sales, dynamic, flexible over when and where he works, good at engaging customers. My idea, he goes on to say, is a 3-in-1 or 2-in-1 concept, that is, I would like to have a grocer's shop with a barber shop and water pipe shop, or a grocer's shop with a water pipe shop, because I want to be my own boss and decide my own working hours and create my own client base. At the moment, he says, he would need counselling by the Jobcenter. After the presentation, Daniel probes the idea further to push Ali towards more persistent work on the idea: What would be your major customer group? What would be a good location for the shop? For which aspects exactly would you need counselling? We talked about these on Wednesday already, he adds, referring to the exercise conducted outside in the courtyard. Ali answers the best he can, but seems uneasy, and so do, gradually, also other participants – the good vibes start fading, the energy level in the room is beginning to drop. Shall we do an elevator pitch for consolidation? Sabine suggests to lift the spirits. She explains the idea behind elevator pitch: it's when you enter an elevator and you have three or four floors time to convince the important person who is in the lift too about your idea. Daniel and Sabine enter an imagined elevator. Sabine plays the mayor of the town, Daniel puts his rhetorical skills into play to convince her about his idea of a 24/7 home delivery service. Before the doors of the imagined elevator open, Daniel has received a business card from the mayor. What is important, Sabine underlines, is to find commonalities and to quickly convey the central points of your idea. The men look sceptical. Hmm, I don't think that's a very good idea, Farid remarks, you cannot explain a good idea in 2 min, you would need an appointment. Often it is difficult to get an appointment, Daniel points out, the most complex ideas, say, of Apple or Microsoft, can be explained in a couple of minutes, he adds to lessen the doubts and to strengthen the faith in the power of the genre. Come on, let's try, says Sabine. The men seem reluctant. Finally, Ali stands up and enters the elevator with Sabine who acts out an exaggerated version of being the mayor to lighten the atmosphere. Once more, although looking uneasy, Ali makes an effort to give a good impression of himself and tries to convey

the central points of his 3-in-1 concept. Eventually, he succeeds in persuading the mayor to promise to see what she can do and to exchange business cards.

In terms of affect modulation, besides its purpose of lightening the atmosphere and keeping spirits up, the dramatized exercise does exactly what Sabine had said was needed; consolidate once more the essential elements of an elevator pitch and the affective stances it involves (aspiration, optimism, confidence in oneself and one's idea, and diligent preparation). Besides these, the exercise introduces the aspects of temporality and spatiality germane to the genre: you never know when and where an opportunity presents itself. In so doing, the exercise suggests a relation of hope in an "extended present" (Berlant 2011); a relation of hope for an opportunity for reaching one's dream; an opportunity that is not here yet, but can be at any time soon and that is fundamentally conditional on adequate investment and disciplining of affective energies: constant alertness (anytime, anywhere), optimism, confidence, diligence.

On the second last day, the participants visit a charitable organization that runs a project on integrating refugees into the labour market. Although the project does not focus on self-employment, the participants nevertheless get the chance to present their business ideas to the representative of the organization. On the last day, the workshop meeting takes place in a conference room at the district administration centre. The three women, the representatives of the Jobcenter and the ministry, who visited the workshop on the first day, are there too. The grand finale with the pitch presentations, however, has been exchanged for an opportunity for the participants to discuss their ideas more informally and to put questions to the counsellors. The participants recapitulate their ideas once more, and the counsellors ask about the current life situations of the participants. Nadeem is able to share happy news: his family had learned yesterday that they finally are allowed to follow him to Germany. Eager to start with the envisioned entrepreneurial activities, but recognizing his need for support and counselling, he takes the opportunity to ask, Where can I get shoes? The question does not go down well, the women look disturbed by the question, and one of them replies: That you will need to figure out yourself! You can't just come here and expect us to do these things for you! She reminds him of the entrepreneurial attitude – proactivity, initiative, self-reliance – and remarks how these kinds of questions demonstrate the lack of it. Besides the putative lack of entrepreneurial spirit, the question demonstrates sheer cluelessness. A day before, during the visit to the charitable organization, Nadeem had presented the same question to Roland, the representative of the refugee integration project. After the visit, Roland remarked to Sabine: Well, in an emergency, we are there for them, too. But I am not able to tell him where to get those shoes. That he's keeping up the illusion he could start a business in the first place, with no concrete idea, no money, Roland shook his head. Well, for

him, Sabine replied, the idea of a shoe outlet is a kind of placeholder, without that he would have nothing. What started as “for the sake of exercise” a few days ago has amounted into a prospect for life, a horizon of hope and, as I will elaborate below, an attachment of cruel optimism.

## 5 Language, (em)power(ment) and affective capitalism: introducing *homo optimisticus*

This paper examined how a particular discursive resource, the genre ‘elevator pitch’, operated as a technology of government in an entrepreneurship workshop targeted at refugees by allowing an attempt at modulating the affective states and attachments of the participants so as to evoke an entrepreneurial spirit, viewed as equal to empowerment. As the analysis suggests, this spirit consisted of a configuration of affective dispositions, including resilience (bounce-backable subjects (Gill and Orgad 2018)), diligence and alertness, but above all aspiration, optimism and confidence; faith in oneself and the horizon of hope that the possibility of self-employment created.

In the context of the integration of refugees into the job market, this spirit feeds directly into the expectation inherent in the promotion of refugee entrepreneurship, or of disadvantaged groups in general, of these persons taking on the responsibility for solving the problem of systemic discrimination through self-employment (cf. Section 2). For someone like Farid the act of empowerment served as an additional boost for ‘realizing his dream’. Equipped with business acumen acquired through studies at a US university and work as a stockbroker, along with financial capital to start with, he did open a delicatessen soon after the workshop. Due to his ability to bring the business online, the shop survived even the Covid-19 pandemic, with the entrepreneurial spirit therefore being needed all the more.

Another but different case is Nadeem, who, besides lacking the kind of business understanding Farid had, had literally walked to Germany with nothing but the clothes he was wearing. For him the rather random idea of a shoe store evolved during the workshop into a horizon of hope that in the light of his position and the prevailing circumstances appears to have been rather than a way to “the good life” an attachment of cruel optimism (Berlant 2011). In the workshop, the elevator pitch suggested a vision of hope not only by leading the participants to envision (the good life of) entrepreneurship as their personal goal, but also by regularly asking for the needs of the participants with regard to their plans, suggesting, in so doing, that individual support is available. The reality outside of the workshop appears different, characterized by a rather weak supply of counselling services in

the public sector, often less than supportive atmosphere (indicated by the reaction of the ladies to Nadeem's request for help) and structural obstacles, including racism. After the outbreak of the pandemic establishing a business became even harder. Most affected were the restaurant and retail sale sectors where persons with a refugee background typically establish their businesses (Expertenreport 2021). Here (see also Nissi and Dlaske 2020), it is not the promises of an earlier socio-democratic order (cf. Section 3, above), but rather the neoliberal logic itself that evokes the precarious and injurious attachments of hope and optimism, in conditions where everybody could, but not everybody can (Bröckling 2007).<sup>11</sup> Based precisely on the recognition that not everyone will be able to actually establish a business, echoing the rationality of entrepreneurship education (European Commission n.d.), the main objective of the entrepreneurship training project was to foster an entrepreneurial mindset that would empower the participants to battle their way through whatever challenges they would meet on their individual paths.

Importantly for the main argument of this paper, the entrepreneurial spirit evoked in the workshop shows striking similarities to other contemporary configurations examined in the context of education (Morris 2018; Ng 2019) and popular media discourse (Gill and Orgad 2018; Favaro and Gill 2019). All these point to an increased influence of positive psychology in contemporary governmentality (Cabanas and Illouz 2019; see also Salonga this issue). More specifically, these subject configurations have been discussed as indications of a "turn to character" (Bull and Allen 2018), a "cult(ure) of confidence" (Gill and Orgad 2017) and "compulsory positivity" (Favaro and Gill 2019) characteristic of contemporary neoliberalism. With the "turn to character", Bull and Allen refer to a recent shift in the education policy in the British context towards advocating optimism, confidence, resilience and grit in the persisting condition of austerity as the key to social mobility and success in life more generally (Bull and Allen 2018; cf. Cabanas and Illouz 2019). As such, this turn can be seen as a manifestation of contemporary affective capitalism. The orientation towards "educating the character" (Bull and Allen 2018), or, modulating the affective states and ties of people, as conceptualized here, marks a partial break with the cognitively oriented logics of accumulation (associated with adoption of skills, including language skills) and points at a shift in the imagination of the ideal type of subject, the entrepreneurial self, from *homo economicus* towards *homo optimisticus*. In the context of migrant integration, the promoted entrepreneurial spirit is indicative of the ways in which the contours and boundaries of "integration through qualification" are being

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<sup>11</sup> How Nadeem's (or Ali's) story continued is not known. Neither I nor the tutors were able to reach them anymore after the workshop.

redefined: what counts is not merely “work skills” (Mitchell 2006) but also and especially a right kind affective attitude, set for survival with “good vibes”.

Like many other similar schemes of the time, the scheme examined here was conceived as a demonstration project. As such, it constituted a short-term and local assemblage that was put together and dissolved soon after. However, the elements assembled – rationalities, technologies, embodied subjects – are products of broader social, political and economic developments rendering the assemblage itself a snapshot indicative of contemporary developments (cf. Pietikäinen 2021). Also, as discussed above (in this Section and the Introduction), this particular subjectification regime converges in significant ways with other contemporary regimes. What the insights from this study thus above all suggest is a need for further research on language, affect and the suggested “turn to character” in contemporary neoliberalism/affective capitalism, in the world of work, education and beyond. When the Monty Python song “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life” turns into an encouragement of power, we know neoliberalism is not *passé*.

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