


Intercultural Communication Experiences of Syrian Immigrants and the Challenges They Face: The Case of Şanlıurfa Province*

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Abstract

Migration and migrants have been one of the most fundamental elements of social, economic and cultural transformations throughout history and have therefore become an important focus of academic studies. This study analyses the intercultural communication problems of Syrian migrants living in Şanlıurfa, Turkey, with the local people. In this applied field study using qualitative research method, face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 participants selected by purposive sampling method. The data obtained was analysed by content analysis and various themes and codes were created. The findings reveal that Syrian migrants see the language barrier as the biggest challenge and that this negatively affects their social cohesion. In addition to language-based problems, social factors such as exclusion, marginalization, prejudices, nationalist discourses and lack of empathy were also found to deepen communication problems. Especially the elderly participants stated that they experienced serious difficulties due to their lack of language skills and that their sense of belonging weakened. Despite all these negativities, Syrian migrants stated that they believed that behaving respectfully and empathizing would help them overcome communication problems. This study makes important observations and offers some suggestions in light of the findings obtained from Syrian immigrants.

Keywords: Migration, Syrian Immigrants, Intercultural Communication, Communication Barriers.

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Suriyeli Göçmenlerin Kültürlerarası İletişim Deneyimleri ve Karşılaştıkları Zorluklar: Şanlıurfa İli Örneği

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Öz

Göç ve göçmenler, tarih boyunca sosyal, ekonomik ve kültürel dönüşümlerin en temel unsurlarından biri olmuş ve bu nedenle akademik çalışmaların önemli bir odak noktası haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'nin Şanlıurfa ilinde yaşayan Suriyeli göçmenlerin yerel halkla yaşadıkları kültürlerarası iletişim sorunlarını incelemektedir. Nitel araştırma yönteminin kullanıldığı bu uygulamalı alan çalışmasında, amaçlı örnekleme yöntemiyle belirlenen 30 katılımcıyla yüz yüze derinlemesine görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Elde edilen veriler, içerik analizi ile değerlendirilerek çeşitli tema ve kodlar oluşturulmuştur. Bulgular, Suriyeli göçmenlerin en büyük zorluğu dil engeli olarak gördüklerini ve bunun sosyal uyumlarını olumsuz etkilediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Dil kaynaklı sorunların yanı sıra, dışlanma, ötekileştirme, önyargılar, milliyetçi söylemler ve empati eksikliği gibi sosyal faktörlerin de iletişim sorunlarını derinleştirdiği saptanmıştır. Özellikle yaşlı katılımcılar, dil bilmedikleri için ciddi zorluklar yaşadıklarını ve aidiyet duygularının zayıfladığını belirtmişlerdir. Tüm bu olumsuzluklara rağmen, Suriyeli göçmenler saygılı davranmanın ve empati kurmanın iletişim sorunlarını aşmada yardımcı olacağına inandıklarını ifade etmişlerdir. Bu çalışma, Suriyeli göçmenlerle ilgili elde edilen bulgular ışığında önemli tespitlerde bulunmakta ve bazı öneriler sunmaktadır. Araştırma, göçmenlerin kültürlerarası iletişim sorunlarına ilişkin literatüre anlamlı bir katkı sağlamayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler:: Göç, Suriyeli Göçmenler, Kültürlerarası İletişim, İletişim Engelleri.

Introduction

Globalisation has led to the reshaping of economic and political systems across the world; this has paved the way for the increase in international and regional conflicts and the acceleration of people's displacement processes. Developments in communication and transport technologies have also increased inter-country mobility and strengthened global migration flows (Aksoy 2012, s. 292). Especially from regions where war, conflict and economic crises prevail, millions of people seeking safe harbours migrate to other countries to provide better living conditions. Following the civil war that started in Syria in 2011, Turkey became one of the countries where this wave of migration was experienced most intensely (İçduygu, 2015). Since then, Syrian refugees have become one of the biggest threat perceptions of today, and this threat perception has led to anti-refugee sentiment in countries (Gessler et al., 2022; Yaylacı & Bakiner, 2023). Today, more than 3.5 million Syrians live in Turkey with temporary protection status (UNHCR, 2023). With the departure of Syria's ousted leader Bashar al-Assad, Syrian migrants are thought to be preparing to return home, but their presence in Turkey is likely to continue. It is important to address the intercultural communication problems of Syrian immigrants in general and the main communication problems experienced by immigrants in particular. In order to make a sound assessment of this issue, it is necessary to carry out comprehensive academic studies on Syrians in Turkey at different levels.

In addition to demographic changes, migration movements cause the emergence of new socio-cultural dynamics and communication problems between local people and immigrants (Vertovec, 2007). The necessity for individuals with different cultural backgrounds to live together in Turkey makes intercultural communication inevitable. Especially in the southern regions of Turkey (Kilis, Hatay, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Mersin), the interactions between Syrian immigrants and local people cause intercultural communication problems. Addressing these problems and developing effective communication strategies are of great importance for ensuring social cohesion (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). This study is important in terms of identifying communication problems between Syrians and locals people and offering solutions.

Although many studies have been conducted on Syrian immigrants, the lack of a comprehensive study to identify the intercultural communication problems of immigrants increases the original value of this study. A review of the literature reveals that it is generally found that Syrian immigrants experience various problems in different countries (Bartels et al., 2021; Clarke, 2024). Although Syrian migrants in Turkey have achieved a certain degree of integration during their stay (Bimay & Çetin, 2023), It can be seen that the steps taken by local administrations and policy makers towards cultural adaptation are insufficient (Havan, 2024).

It is stated that intercultural communication competence is not only about language, but also about making connections between the worldviews of individuals and groups with different values (Deardorff, 2006). Further field studies are needed to identify these connections. In today's world where migration is constantly increasing, overcoming communication barriers and developing communication

skills are imperative for ensuring harmony and peace between societies (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018; Byram, 1997). It can be said that there is a lack of in-depth academic studies on the language barrier, which is one of the biggest problems Syrians face in the integration process in Turkey. Although there are many studies on Syrians, the lack of a comprehensive study focusing on intercultural communication problems and barriers is an important gap in the literature. This study aims to make a unique contribution to literature by identifying existing communication problems and offering solutions. It is aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the problems faced by migrants in the future by identifying that even the people of Turkey and Syria, who are neighbouring each other, have different levels of communication problems. In addition, it is of great importance to minimise the effects of the destruction caused by Bashar al-Assad in Syria and to create a healthy communication environment with Syrians living in Turkey.

This study addresses the problems faced by Syrian immigrants who came to Şanlıurfa due to different reasons and risks arising from the Syrian war in intercultural communication processes with local people with a qualitative approach. This study, which is based on intercultural communication theories, contributes to filling the gap in the literature by providing an in-depth understanding of the intercultural communication dynamics of the interactions between refugees and local people and offering solutions to these problems.

1. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Intercultural communication focuses on direct interactions between groups/individuals with different cultural backgrounds and individuals belonging to different sub-cultures (Kim, 2005, pp.555-556). Due to the acceleration of globalisation processes, intercultural communication competence has become important for people who are sensitive to intercultural communication to communicate effectively and appropriately in society in order to minimise the problems that may arise from the necessity of different societies to live together (Chen & Starosta, 2012). Because the necessity of different societies to communicate more with each other has increased intercultural activities and intercultural communication-oriented activities have become the routines of different societies (Samovar et al., 2013). Thus, as a result of the cultural interactions of people from different cultures with each other, a symbolic exchange is experienced, which plays a functional role in symbolic production or transfer (Neuliep, 2016; Samovar et al., 2013; Özay, Söğütlüler & Söğütlüler, 2024). In short, intercultural communication is related to the interaction between different individuals with cultural differences, meaning transfer and cultural differences (Kartari, 2006).

Research in intercultural communication examines in depth the processes of effective communication between individuals with different cultural backgrounds and the problems that arise in this process. Some studies focus on exclusion, ethnocentrism, acculturation processes and cultural adaptation, which are obstacles to intercultural communication depending on the level of communication established between immigrants and the local population (Ekşi & Şahin, 2024; Gudykunst, 2005; Katbeh, 2020; Safi et al., 2023, 2024). These studies show that intercultural communication barriers continue to exist.

As Selçuk, (2005, p. 2) states, individuals who participate in communication tend to interpret expressions, attitudes and behaviours according to their own cultural norms unless they understand the communication behaviours of people from different cultures. This situation may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts in the intercultural communication process (Bekiroğlu & Balci, 2014). When intercultural communication does not take place to the expected extent in societies with cultural identities where dominant or local cultural forms are dominant, intercultural communication problems arise. Stereotypes and prejudices of societies or individuals (Marshall, 1999; Bilgin, 2007; Kaçar, 2023) are among the most important causes of intercultural communication problems. The state of anxiety caused by antipathy, distrust, suspicion, anxiety, fear, security and uncertainty caused by communicating with people from different cultures (Gudykunst, 2005; Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997) and especially the ethnocentric understanding that sees its own values superior to everyone else (Kartari, 2006), groups/societies stand out as the most important factors in the formation and maintenance of intercultural communication problems. In order to reduce or solve intercultural communication problems, intercultural communication and competence should be developed, and individuals should develop empathy to reduce communication barriers when they encounter new values that are different from their own cultural values (Byram, 1997). It is argued that the elimination of antipathy and the development of empathy depend on the development of intercultural competence, cultural awareness and interaction skills, and that this plays an important role in the adaptation process of immigrants to society (Deardorff, 2006). Byram (1997), argued that developing intercultural communication skills can help individuals cope with cultural diversity by increasing their cultural awareness levels.

Developing intercultural communication can create an effective and healthy communication environment by increasing individuals' worldviews and their ability to cope with cultural differences (Byram, 1997; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). In this context, intercultural communication competence is defined as 'the knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures' (Wiseman, 2002, p. 208).

The importance of intercultural communication skills of immigrants in their communication with local population is increasing (Deardorff, 2006; Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). Especially as individuals with different cultural backgrounds, immigrants need to interact with the local people of the societies they come from, and in this process, having intercultural communication skills becomes a great necessity (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). The development of intercultural communication skills of immigrants facilitates their social integration by enabling them to communicate effectively with the local community in the adaptation process (Gudykunst, 2005).

Considering these theoretical definitions of intercultural communication problems, there is a need for more in-depth research on migrants. Looking at the studies in the literature, it is seen that the first studies on the wave of migration from Syria are generally security-oriented and aimed at rapid problem identification (Boyras, 2015; Canyurt, 2015; Akin & Bozbaş, 2020, p. 51). In these studies, especially the return of Syrian migrants and their citizenship rights have

come to the fore (Kaya & Orchard, 2020; Kayaoglu et al., 2022). Erdoğan's (2015) study on the social acceptance and adaptation processes of Syrian migrants in Turkey points to many problems. Especially recently, studies have started to focus on the analysis of the attitudes and behaviours of local people towards Syrian refugees (Güney, 2022; Lippard & McNamee, 2021). Over time, developments such as the permanentisation of Syrians, who were initially accepted as guests, and the granting of citizenship or temporary citizenship status have aroused discomfort in a large segment of the public and turned into a threat perception with the discourses in the media (Çirakoğlu et al., 2021). Studies on anti-immigrant discourses in Turkey have comprehensively addressed how this perception is shaped and its reflection on security policies Unutulmaz et al., (2017). Baban et al., (2017) analyses the exclusion and acceptance processes of Syrian migrants in Turkey in detail and discusses how this process can be evaluated in a broader socio-political context. Although there have been many studies on the problems faced by Syrian migrants, the lack of a comprehensive study that addresses communication problems in depth constitutes an important gap in the literature. Moreover, each study carries dynamics specific to its own socio-cultural and political economy context The fact that this study was carried out in the province of Şanlıurfa, which is considered to have fewer problems, is particularly significant.

It is understood from the above literature that it is important for societies that maintain different cultural lives to develop intercultural communication. Intercultural communication research has revealed that when individuals get rid of stereotypes and develop knowledge and skills in their interactions with people from different cultures, it helps to ensure social integration (Neuliep, 2016). Spitzberg & Changnon (2009) emphasised that effective communication skills are a fundamental element supporting the integration of immigrants into society. Wiseman (2002) found that developing intercultural communication skills contributes to the solution of communication problems between immigrants and local people. This study is expected to contribute to the literature by understanding the intercultural communication problems experienced by immigrants and local people, identifying the difficulties faced by immigrants in the process of adaptation with local communities and presenting relevant suggestions.

2. Research Methodology

This section includes the purpose, significance, method, design, data collection, analysis and information about the participants.

2.1. Purpose and Importance of the Study

The wars in the Middle East increase the instability in the region and force people to migrate. Turkey has been one of the countries preferred by migrants due to its geographical location. Especially after the Syrian civil war, migration to Turkey has intensified and Syrian refugees have flooded border provinces such as Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Kilis and Hatay. This situation has brought along many socio-cultural and economic problems.

This study examines the problems faced by Syrian refugees living in Şanlıurfa in intercultural communication processes with local people with a qualitative approach. Within the framework of intercultural communication theories, it aims to understand the socio-cultural dynamics of the interactions between refugees and the host community and to offer solutions. Analysing these problems is important for developing policies to support social cohesion and integration. Identifying the communication problems of Syrian migrants has the potential to influence the future attitudes of the new regime in Syria and the relations between the two countries. This study aims to contribute to the development of immigration policies and social cohesion strategies. In order to determine the purpose of the study and intercultural communication problems, the following basic questions were asked to the participants:

- After migrating from Syria to Şanlıurfa, you became a part of a new culture. What were the biggest difficulties in communicating with people from different cultures in this process? How did/do these difficulties affect your social life?
- Which ways do you follow to overcome the difficulties you encounter while communicating? How did/do your actions in this process affect your social life?
- What emotions do you feel when you interact with people from different cultures in Şanlıurfa? What experiences have these interactions given you and how do they shape your social relations?

2.2.Method

This study is based on a phenomenological design in order to examine in depth the experiences of Syrian migrants regarding the communication barriers they experience. While Creswell & Poth (2016) state that phenomenological studies aim to reveal different personal experiences of a phenomenon, Yıldırım & Şimşek (2018) define the phenomenological design as a method that enables the discovery and interpretation of personal experiences. In this direction, our study tries to understand the communication barriers of migrants from their own perspectives and experiences.

A semi-structured interview form was used for data collection and the communication barriers experienced by the participants and their thoughts and feelings about these barriers were subjected to content analysis and divided into codes and themes. By including direct participant statements, the real experiences of the participants regarding the difficulties they experienced in communication processes and the meanings they attributed to these experiences were analysed in depth. In this way, the communication problems faced by Syrian migrants, their reactions to these problems and the emotions they feel were tried to be understood in detail.

2.3.Research Group and Data Collection Process

In this study, the research group consists of Syrian refugees/immigrants who settled in Şanlıurfa and are not active students (The location of the data collection

is presented in Figure 1). In line with the purpose of the study, purposive sampling method was preferred to reach participants who directly experienced intercultural communication problems (Creswell & Clark, 2020; Patton, 2014). A total of 34 participants from different professional groups and socio-economic levels were interviewed. However, the interviews were not continued with 4 participants who stated that they did not have problems in intercultural communication, and the demographic information of 30 participants was included in the study. Before starting the interviews, the participants were informed about the purpose and content of the study, their voluntary participation was ensured and their written consent was obtained. Arabic/Turkish/English interview forms consisting of two parts were delivered to the participants. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with illiterate or non-Turkish speaking participants in the presence of an interpreter. Participants who did not prefer face-to-face interviews but accepted to be interviewed were given the interview form and then their responses were collected.

Figure 1: Location Information of Şanlıurfa Province Where the Interviews were Conducted



The “Personal Interview Form” used in the data collection process consists of two main parts. The first part includes demographic information (gender, age, education level, etc.) of the participants. The second part includes questions about the problems and experiences of the participants in intercultural communication processes with local people. After the participants filled in the interview forms, they submitted them to the researcher and the process was completed. All participant information and data were collected in accordance with the ethical rules of the study and confidentiality principles were observed. The demographic information of the participants is presented in detail in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Information of The Participants

Participant No	Age	Gender	Graduation Status	Marital Status
1	25	Female	University (2.)	Single
2	28	Female	High School	Single
3	19	Male	High School	Single
4	35	Female	University	Single
5	53	Female	High School	Married
6	24	Male	High School	Single
7	40	Male	High School	Married
8	27	Female	University	Single
9	35	Male	University	Married
10	51	Male	University	Married
11	34	Female	University	Married
12	60	Male	University	Married
13	38	Male	University	Married
14	34	Female	University	Married
15	19	Female	High School	Single
16	29	Male	University	Married
17	65	Male	Primary School	Married
18	24	Female	University (2.)	Single
19	32	Female	University	Single
20	61	Female	Primary School	Married
21	25	Female	Middle School	Married
22	63	Male	Primary School	Married
23	36	Male	High School	Married
24	39	Male	High School	Married
25	19	Male	High School	Single (Widow)
26	62	Female	Middle School	Single
27	21	Male	Middle School	Single
28	24	Female	University	Single
29	30	Male	University	Married
30	23	Female	University (2.)	Single

2.4. Analysing the Data

After the data obtained from the participants in Arabic, English and Turkish were translated, they were first merged into a single Word document and then the analysis process was started. In line with the purpose and scope of the study, the questions and the data obtained from the interviews, appropriate themes were identified, and coding was carried out within the framework of these themes. During the coding process, the answers given by the participants were carefully analysed and a coding chart was created to identify the most prominent communication problems among these answers. In this table, the most frequently mentioned intercultural communication problems of the participants were identified and tabulated. Then, the direct statements of the participants regarding the themes created in different tables were given. At the end of each participant's statement, the most prominent statements were numbered with abbreviations such as 'P1', 'P2'.

3. Findings

During the interviews, the participants were primarily asked the following questions: "You migrated from Syria to Şanlıurfa and became a part of a new culture. In this process, what are the biggest difficulties you faced while communicating with people from a different culture? How did these difficulties affect your social life?" These and similar questions allowed the participants to express their intercultural communication experiences in more detail. In line with the data obtained in the interviews, the prominent themes and codes from the participants' statements about communication problems are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: General and Sub-themes/Codes Related to Intercultural Communication Problems

Theme/Code	f	Subcodes
Language Problem	27	Communication difficulties, difficulties with meaning, lack of vocabulary, different pronunciation
Exclusion and Othering	15	Ethnic discourses, nationalist discourses, social exclusion, cultural incompatibility, marginalisation, lack of tolerance
Lack of Empathy	11	Difficulty in understanding the other party's situation, lack of understanding, lack of empathy
Prejudices	12	Cultural prejudices, ethnic-based discrimination, stereotypes
Economic Challenges	5	Lack of participation in social activities, social isolation due to financial difficulties, economic problems
Problems by Age Groups	3	Language problems experienced by the elderly, adaptation problems of young participants
Social Cohesion/ Cultural Compatibility	2	Those who do not have adaptation problems, ease of adaptation of those who speak the language

The data in Table 2 show that the biggest difficulty in the intercultural adaptation process of immigrants is the language barrier. The language barrier negatively affects cultural adaptation due to difficulties in communication and difficulties in meaning. In addition, exclusion and marginalisation, together with

nationalist and ethnic discourses, stand out as other important factors that make the integration process difficult. Prejudices and lack of empathy are also among the important challenges faced by migrants, and the lack of understanding and empathy on the other side deepens cultural incompatibility. In addition, economic problems and age-related problems make it difficult to participate in social life, while those who know the language are observed to be more successful in the adaptation process. Some of the prominent statements of the participants regarding the above themes and codes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Participants’ Statements on Intercultural Communication Problems

Participant	Participant Statement
P2	“My biggest problem is the language. Otherwise, I don’t have too many problems of harmonisation with people from the culture I come from.”
P4	“I experience communication problems related to language. When people speak different languages, it is difficult to understand each other. Since we do not understand each other, we naturally have some problems.”
P5	“I have difficulties in communication because of the language. I have difficulty understanding words in a different language...”
P7	“The biggest problem I have is the language problem. There are also stereotypes and prejudices against Arabs. I also have problems depending on the level of economic development of this region.”
P8	“Our biggest problem is exclusion. Although we belong to the same religion, we are often excluded because we come from different geographies and cultures. I am a dentist and I have a practice. Although I offer treatment at very reasonable prices, no one except Syrians come to my place.”
P9	“...It is the exclusion of people from different identities and cultures. Some people marginalise us because they do not want our presence here. When I sell goods in the market, very few local people shop from me. My presence in the market is not wanted very much. They develop attitudes and discourses as if I am interfering with their work.”
P19	“I experience communication problems due to language differences and lack of respect for others who are not my own”
P24	“As I do not speak the language, I face many difficulties in daily life. Despite the same religion and some cultural commonalities, I often feel that we are not welcomed with tolerance. I run a small grocery shop, but Turks generally do not prefer to shop from me. Although I also sell Turkish goods, the number of Turks among my customers is almost negligible. Even though my shop is very close to their homes, most of them pass me by and prefer to shop in shops further away.”
P29	“I have difficulty in understanding because of the language, I communicate less because of prejudices. They do not put themselves in our shoes, they say that we fled the war in fear. They often say that we should go back to Syria and fight.”
P22	“Since I do not speak the language, I cannot understand what the people around me are saying. I am also in a difficult economic situation and the aids given are unfortunately not enough. My relatives also have the same problems. Since there are not many local people in the neighbourhood where I live, I have great difficulty in communicating with people who are not like me. Therefore, I feel that I am becoming more and more isolated.”
P14	“Since I speak the language and we live in similar geographies, there is not much difference in our cultures. Therefore, I do not have too many problems.”
P27	“I don’t have much of a problem in terms of communication because I speak Turkish. Although I don’t face any major difficulties on my own behalf, as a lawyer, I observe that other Syrians are sometimes subjected to exclusion. Especially in recent times, the widespread use of hate language in the media exacerbates this situation. These discourses in the media cause the host population, who initially live in peace, to foster feelings of hatred over time.”

In the interviews, language barrier, exclusion, prejudices and economic difficulties were the most frequently emphasised problems. The language barrier negatively affects social cohesion by creating difficulties in communication; difficulties in understanding and misunderstandings are frequently experienced due to the lack of understanding of different languages. Another important problem was expressed as exclusion and marginalisation. Participants stated that although they belong to the same religion, they are not tolerated, they are exposed to prejudices due to cultural differences, and local people avoid shopping or receiving services from them. Economic problems were mentioned as another main factor making it difficult to participate in social life. Participants, especially business owners, stated that they experienced exclusion in the market and trade areas and that their presence was undesirable due to economic competition. While some participants stated that they experience less integration problems due to their language skills or cultural similarities, those who do not speak the language experience greater difficulties in communication and social life. Hate speech in the media stands out as another factor that strengthens the sense of exclusion.

The themes and codes related to the participants' answers to the questions "Which ways do you follow to overcome the difficulties you encounter while communicating? How did/do your actions in this process affect your social life?" are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Themes and Sub-Codes Related to Communication Difficulties and Their Effects on Social Life

Theme/Code	f	Subcodes
Trying to Understand	27	Learning culture, Patience
Empathy	15	Empathising, putting yourself in the other person's shoes
Responsibility	11	Cultural responsibility, social responsibility
Tolerance	12	Cultural tolerance, understanding
Non-bias	5	Free from prejudices, open-mindedness
Respect	3	Respect for the other person
Patience	2	Patience
Cautious Behaviour	1	Behaving with cultural sensitivity
Exclusion	1	Cultural exclusion, Social exclusion

Table 4 shows the main attitudes and behaviours developed by the participants to overcome the difficulties they encounter in intercultural communication. While the participants try to adapt with positive approaches such as trying to understand, empathising, taking responsibility, tolerance and respect, they also emphasise characteristics such as non-prejudice and patience. Topics such as cultural exclusion and cautious behaviour point to the social difficulties experienced by some participants. Some of the prominent statements of the participants regarding the above themes and codes are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Participant Statements on Communication Difficulties and Their Effects on Social Life

Participant	Participant Statement
P2	“I try to understand them. I even watch their TV series or read their history. I try to have a sense of responsibility towards the culture you come from.”
P3	“At first I was surprised at different people, but then I started to wonder about their cultures and learn about them. In fact, as you learn and communicate, you witness that the other people change.”
P4	“I try to be tolerant, open to learning and understanding. The local people here may have differences in customs, traditions and values, but I believe that respect and understanding will build bridges.”
P5	“I try to find common interests with the other person. Hobbies or subjects that bring us together improve the dialogue. I try to communicate in a way that highlights what we have in common.”
P6	“I respect different cultures, I try to use clear and simple language, I try to speak slowly, I avoid using complex terms.”
P7	“I try to empathise when communicating with people from different cultures. Thanks to my empathy, I have fewer conflicts with people from the opposite culture.”
P8	“Even though I know that I am excluded, I try to understand others. I see that people's impatience towards Syrians has increased recently. I try to approach them with empathy and tolerance.”
P9	“There are many prejudices against Syrians. I was much younger when I came here. People here cannot understand that young people run away from the war. They think I am a traitor. I try to understand all this, empathise and try to be without prejudice.”
P13	“I try to act sensitively because I am a teacher.”
P24	“I make an effort to understand and try to be patient and empathise and try to overcome difficulties.”
P25	“I put myself in their shoes. I react by thinking, 'What would I do?'”
P29	“I try to be understanding and tolerant, because I feel responsible for this.”
P12	“I always act cautiously towards other cultures.”

According to the participants' statements, trying to understand and empathising are the most frequently emphasised themes in communication with different cultures. Participants found it important to understand and empathise with other cultures. For example, some participants stated that they tried to understand other cultures through activities such as watching TV series and reading history with cultural curiosity. The sense of responsibility was especially evident in the teachers and other participants, and they tried to approach the cultural adaptation process with empathy by taking responsibility. In addition, tolerance and non-prejudice are important values frequently mentioned by the participants. In addition to this, some participants stated the need to act cautiously in the face of cultural differences, while others shared their experiences of exclusion. However, in general, it is understood that the effort to establish dialogue by finding common interests plays a key role in the intercultural adaptation process.

The themes and codes related to the participants' answers to the questions “What do you feel when you interact with people from different cultures? What kind of emotions and experiences do these interactions give you?” are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Themes and Sub-Codes Related to Emotions and Experiences

Theme/Code	f	Subcodes
Wealth/Enrichment	9	Enriching life, gaining a different perspective
Excitement	5	Exciting experience
Satisfaction	4	Satisfaction
Happiness	3	Be happy
Personal Development	2	Developing social intelligence
Pleasure/ Enjoying	2	Satisfaction and pleasure
Strangeness	1	Unusual or complex experience
Difficulty of Understanding	1	Difficulty in understanding in some cases

In Table 6, the data from the interviews show that the participants experienced different emotional and experiential themes in intercultural communication. The most frequently emphasised theme was enriching life and gaining different perspectives. Participants often described this process as an exciting and gratifying experience. Positive emotions such as happiness, personal growth and enjoyment were also expressed. Rarely, unfamiliar experiences and difficulties of understanding were mentioned. It is seen that migrants have both positive and complex experiences in their intercultural interactions. Some of the prominent statements of the participants regarding the above themes and codes are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Participant Statements on Emotions and Experiences

Participant	Participant Statement
P3	“It is exciting for me to communicate with different cultures, sometimes it can be strange.”
P4	“Interacting with people from different cultures makes me happy and enriches my life.”
P5	“Dealing with people from different cultures makes me happy and excited. I enjoy discovering new ideas and cultures.”
P7	“Interaction with different cultures offers me an enriching experience.”
P9	“I find it exciting to understand the world of different people, differences are exciting to me.”
P10	“Dealing with different cultures makes me happy and gives me pleasure.”
P13	“It is a pleasure to meet different cultures.”
P14	“People from different cultures make me happy and enrich me.”
P25	“Communicating with different languages and cultures makes me happy.”
P28	“I may find it difficult to understand, but I find this experience enriching.”
P29	“Dealing with different cultures makes me feel good and enriches me.”
P21	“I believe that interacting with different cultures improves my social intelligence and creates in me a sense of love and familiarity.”
P22	“Interacting with different cultures gives me pleasure.”

In the statements of the participants, it is seen that interaction with different cultures generally creates feelings of happiness, enrichment and excitement. Most participants stated that these interactions contributed positively to both their personal development and social life. The participants, who stated that meeting different cultural values excited them and enriched their lives, emphasised that these interactions broadened their perspectives on the world and helped them develop themselves. Positive emotions such as contentment and pleasure were also commonly expressed, indicating that participants perceived intercultural interactions as mostly enjoyable and fulfilling experiences.

On rare occasions, some participants experienced complex emotions, such as a feeling of awkwardness or difficulty in understanding; however, these negative emotions generally paled in comparison to the positive experiences and did not affect the participants' positive outlook on intercultural interactions. In general, cultural diversity provided the participants with new experiences and contributed positively to their social lives.

4. Discussion

In this study, intercultural communication problems encountered by Syrian immigrants in their interactions with people from different cultures were analysed using a semi-structured interview method. Codes and themes were created by considering the participant statements and the literature, and the most important phenomenological experiences of the participants were included. Following the coding in accordance with the content analysis, the participants' statements are presented descriptively and a summary of the findings that stand out in the participants' statements is given. One of the most important problems in intercultural communication is the language barrier. Ward & Kennedy (1999) emphasised the role and importance of language in intercultural communication and stated that language barriers lead to misunderstandings and adaptation problems among individuals. Language barriers not only hinder the communication process, but also cause the formation and maintenance of stereotypes between individuals and societies.

In the findings obtained, it is understood that the social adaptation and integration processes of Syrian immigrants are difficult due to language barriers. It has been determined that Syrian immigrants are misunderstood in their communication with local people due to language, they have difficulty in communicating, and pronunciation differences cause misunderstandings and negatively affect their cultural interactions. This situation reinforces Berry (1997) finding that language skills are important factors affecting the inclusion of immigrants in socio-economic and cultural life. Language barriers cause more than just the inclusion of individuals and groups in cultural life. Othering and stereotypes in societies, ethnocentric attitudes and behaviours are motivated by language. Studies conducted with different ethnic groups in different places have found that language barriers cause discrimination and make intercultural communication difficult (Safi et al., 2023; Safi & Atish, 2024a). In this study, it has been observed that Syrian migrants living in Şanhurfa are excluded from social life, especially because they do not speak the language, and this makes

their integration into society more difficult. It is understood that Syrian migrants in Turkey experience significant intercultural communication problems despite being in close spatial proximity to Turkish society and sharing some cultural commonalities. This study's results align with other studies that address similar issues (Safi et al., 2023).

However, some studies on Syrians in Turkey have obtained different results. In a study conducted by Apak (2014) in Mardin in 2014, it was found that Syrian migrants did not experience serious difficulties in the adaptation process. There may be many reasons for this. The first reason is that Mardin has maintained tolerance Çetin (2007) due to its ethnic and religious diversity throughout history. The fact that different language and belief groups have been living in harmony in Mardin for a long time and that there are kinship ties between the communities on both sides of the border continues to exist in harmony with cultural differences. Another reason is that the Kurdish and Arabic languages spoken by Syrian migrants are widespread in Mardin, which has greatly reduced communication barriers and accelerated the adaptation process of migrants. A third reason is that the studies conducted in the first period were far from reflecting the feelings of the people. At first, the Turkish people welcomed all immigrants coming from Syria to Turkey, but when the period was prolonged and some social problems were experienced, the process of marginalisation began. So much so that in the general elections held in 2023 and local elections held in 2024 in Turkey, many politicians developed their discourses on sending Syrians away. For these reasons, the first studies on Syrians (Baban et al., 2017; Boyraz, 2015; Canyurt, 2015) do not fully reflect the real feelings of the public and Syrians. Despite the linguistic and ethnic diversity in Şanlıurfa, the rising nationalist discourses in recent years, the migrant conflicts between the opposition and the government, and the hate language in the media make the cultural cohesion between Syrian refugees and the local population difficult.

In addition, many studies have shown that the language used and the content produced by the media marginalise Syrians, develop exclusionary discourses, increase xenophobia and negatively affect social cohesion (Türk, 2019). In the news about Syrian refugees in the Turkish media, it is seen that 'negativist' content is generally included and Syrians are represented with discriminatory and marginalising discourses (Doğanay & Keneş, 2016; Gölcü & Dağlı, 2017). In this study in Şanlıurfa, the negative perceptions of local people towards Syrian refugees largely reinforce the discourses of the people in other regions and are similar to the negative representations of the media. Therefore, the increase in ethnocentric discourses and the spread of hate language deepen the lack of empathy towards Syrians and make social cohesion difficult. These findings reveal that the integration of migrants is not only due to language barriers, but that the cultural and socio-political structure of the society also significantly affects this process. Although the return of Syrians has started after the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, it will take a long time for all 3.5 million Syrians to return. Therefore, the participants' expressions and discomfort suggest that permanent political processes are needed for the integration and harmonisation processes of migrants in Turkey. The findings of this study show that there are no measures to eliminate intercultural communication barriers regarding migrants. The attitude

of local people towards Syrians strengthens this situation (Saçan, 2017).

Despite the communication problems, it is understood that Syrian immigrants try to empathise and understand the culture of the local people by avoiding prejudice against the culture of the local people, act with a sense of responsibility, and pay attention to be tolerant and respectful in order to overcome the intercultural communication barriers they experience. Karaman et al., (2023) draw attention to the necessity of increasing the empathy levels of local people in their study. Ward & Kennedy (1999) pointed out that empathy and tolerance in intercultural communication increase cultural adaptation. According to the findings of the study, it is understood that Syrians make an effort to communicate with the local people and act carefully. However, the expectations and perspectives of the public from Syrians stand in a different place. In many parts of Turkey, it is understood that local people do not want Syrians and see them as other and foreign (Eser & Uygur, 2019; Güney, 2022; Şimşek, 2020; Türk, 2019) The results of these studies show that negative perceptions of local people towards Syrian refugees are widespread and constitute a major obstacle to social cohesion. Şahin & Kocadayı (2022), on the other hand, argued that some concrete steps should be taken to prevent cultural conflicts and social violence between Syrians and Turks and made some suggestions in this regard. Therefore, it is not enough for Syrians to have positive feelings towards the local people; the public, the press and policy makers should also change their perspectives.

Research shows that Syrian refugees face prejudice and discrimination in Turkey despite sharing the same religion. The fact that cultural cohesion decreases as the duration of Syrians' stay increases reveals that religious brotherhood is not enough to reduce prejudices and discrimination. After the regime change in Syria, the issue of Syrians in Turkey returning to their country has become the most important agenda item for the public and the opposition. The prolonged stay of Syrians in Turkey disturbs a significant part of the public and shows that the effect of religious brotherhood has weakened. In a study conducted in the Netherlands, it was found that the role of religion in creating social identity and boundaries makes cultural adaptation difficult (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al., 2021). In this study, looking at the experiences of immigrants, it is seen that different ethnic groups belonging to the same religion also experience identity problems and cultural adaptation problems. Therefore, it can be said that religion is not a sufficient factor in ensuring cultural integration and cohesion today. It is understood that the discourses of the ruling party based on religion and civilisation are not sufficient to eliminate the negativities. This study and other studies show that religion alone is not enough to ensure cultural cohesion and overcome prejudices.

‘Economic problems, although not directly related to communication, can be considered as an indirect factor that increases communication problems. Although the participants do not directly complain about economic difficulties, economic difficulties stand out as an important factor that makes communication difficult, especially for elderly individuals. Apak & Artan (2024) pointed out that Syrian elderly groups are more disadvantaged and experience more problems than other groups. These findings indicate that the socio-economic status of Syrian migrants in Turkey is at a lower level compared to the Turkish society. Previous studies

conducted in different regions of Turkey also support this; for example, Arslan et al., (2017) and Akın & Bozbaş (2020) addressed Syrian migrants' low income, employment difficulties, and difficulties in accessing social rights. However, a significant segment of the host population in Turkey believes that Syrian migrants are in a privileged position compared to Turkish citizens and that the state prioritises them in many areas (Siviş, 2022). This perception makes the tensions created by economic difficulties even more evident in communication and deepens the communication problems between local people and migrants. Unutulmaz et al., (2017) states that anti-immigrant discourses in Turkey increase the concerns of local people about migrants' access to economic resources.

This study helps to explain the existence of intercultural communication problems between Syrians and the people of Şanlıurfa. The communication problems faced by immigrants and their adaptation to situations of exclusion are in line with Kim's (2017) Intercultural Adaptation Theory. This theory emphasises that although individuals experience difficulties in contact with different cultures, they develop new social and emotional skills during the adaptation process. It is understood that the participants tried to develop positive emotions and behaviours such as empathy, efforts to be without prejudice, responsible behaviour and respectfulness.

Finally, based on the findings obtained from the questions asked to the participants, it is understood that intercultural communication provides them with an enriching and exciting experience, they enjoy it, and it is effective in developing their personal and social intelligence. This situation is consistent with Homans' (1958) Social Exchange Theory. According to this theory, the rewards that individuals obtain in social relationships reduce the impact of the negativities experienced. It is understood that the positive emotions and experiences gained from intercultural communication overshadow the negative experiences and create an opportunity for cultural harmony. Legal, social, cultural and economic regulations should be increased to maintain social peace and justice.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Focusing on the experiences of Syrians, this qualitative study found that language barriers are one of the biggest problems in intercultural communication. When cultural differences are added to language barriers, it is seen that adaptation becomes difficult and ethnocentric perceptions are formed. Unless effective cultural integration of migrants is achieved, Turkey and the region may face several risks of conflict risks.

The results show that linguistic and cultural harmonisation has not been sufficiently achieved. Therefore, all segments of the society and the media should adopt an empathy-enhancing approach. The consequences of the destructive policies of the Assad regime and torture reveal the depth of the problems in the region. All institutions and individuals, especially the opposition, should avoid stereotypes and develop tolerance and understanding.

Although a temporary government has been established in Syria after the Assad regime, it is understood that the region will be subjected to manipulations for many years. In this context, it is important to overcome language barriers first. In conclusion, in order to ensure intercultural harmony, language barriers should be removed, human values should be adopted, economic conditions should be improved and media discourse should be regulated. Language education should be restructured in a way to increase cultural awareness, and media content should be created in a way to support empathy.

Suggestions for Academia:

- This study emphasises the need for interdisciplinary research on language barriers faced by migrants, with a particular focus on Syrians. It suggests that psychological and field experimental research can provide valuable insights into the reasons behind these language and related problems. In order to obtain more generalisable results, mixed method studies should be conducted using a sample from Şanlıurfa province. In addition, a similar study should be conducted on the experiences of local people living in Şanlıurfa. Field studies covering other regions of the Southeast are also recommended for a comprehensive understanding of the intercultural communication challenges faced by migrants. The text also suggests future research to examine the effects of Turkey's dialogue bridge with Syria and the change of the Assad regime on the perspectives, integration processes and intercultural sensitivities of Syrian migrants in Turkey.

Suggestions for Local Administrators:

- Comprehensive language training programmes should be organised to improve migrants' language skills and increase their cultural awareness. These programmes can be effective in supporting social cohesion by building bridges between local people and migrants. In addition, intercultural activities such as festivals, workshops and social projects should be organised to bring people from different cultures together and interact. Large-scale awareness-raising campaigns should be organised to combat social prejudice and exclusion, thus promoting a culture of empathy and tolerance.

Recommendations for General Authorities (National Policies):

- • To support the integration of migrants, it is recommended that comprehensive social policies are established at the national level. These policies should include initiatives such as language training, employment opportunities, and cultural awareness programmes. Public awareness-raising programmes are also suggested to reduce prejudices against migrants and increase cultural understanding. Collaboration with media and educational institutions is essential to create a positive public perception of Syrian refugees. Negative representations of Syrians in the media should be counteracted through positive news content, TV series, cinema, and public service announcements. In order to accelerate the integration process, it is important to ensure coordination between local and national administrations and develop open and transparent

joint strategies. Establishing a friendship and integration process with Syrians will help facilitate effective communication in all aspects in the future.

These recommendations aim to help migrants overcome language barriers and social difficulties, as well as to strengthen social cohesion and intercultural dialogue. Promoting empathy, tolerance and mutual understanding will lead to a more harmonious coexistence of both migrants and locals and will contribute to making the region safer in all aspects.

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