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Organizing for an Inclusive Society: Meanings, Motivations & Mechanisms

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**Language management in organizations with racio-ethnic minority workers with a limited command of the local language: ambiguous processes of maintaining and disrupting the norm of the fluent-speaking worker**

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The diversity management literature has examined how language can be a source of exclusion, segregation and marginalisation of racio-ethnic minority workers on the labour market (Dawson, Veliziotis and Hopkins, 2018; Holck, 2018; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Some studies have revealed how organizations circumvent the problem of language management by excluding racio-ethnic minority workers who do not speak the local language from customer-facing positions, and by only hiring them for jobs in which communication is of little importance (Dawson, Veliziotis and Hopkins, 2018; Johansson and Śliwa, 2016). Other studies have illuminated how racio-ethnic minority workers may be confronted with language-based discrimination at work, even when they are (near) native speakers. For example, false

assumptions about racio-ethnic minority workers' limited language skills may block their upward career mobility (Holck, 2018), and may form the basis for subtle discrimination from their colleagues (Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011).

However, most of the insights that the current literature provides are merely occasionally generated as part of examinations of broader organisational inequality mechanisms. Extant analyses have rarely put the way in which language-based processes maintain or disrupt inequality in the workplace at the centre of analysis (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Nevertheless, racio-ethnic minority workers who are not fluent in the local language are becoming increasingly dominant in sectors with precarious, low-status and low-paid jobs, including the platform economy, the hospitality sector and the domestic care sector (Alberti, 2014; Doyle and Timonen, 2009; Veen, Barratt and Goods, 2020). Despite the increasing extent to which native speakers can no longer be taken for granted as the norm in sectors in which (customer) communication plays a crucial role, the way in which organizations deal with shifting language norms in the workplace have been seldomly investigated in the diversity management literature.

By contrast, the literature on the ideal worker (Acker, 1992) has provided significant insights with respect to the way in which organisations disrupt or maintain norms around, for example, workers' gender, race/ethnicity, and (dis)ability (Ashley, 2010; Benschop et al., 2013; Jammaers et al., 2016). It has revealed how day-to-day work processes reflect taken-for-granted assumptions about workers' social identity characteristics, and thereby structurally (dis)advantage certain employees over others. While it can be argued that language-based norms are interwoven in the organisation of work in similar ways as those of the social identity characteristics that have been explored in the ideal worker literature, the linguistic dimensions of the ideal worker have received little attention. Yet, in view of the existing evidence that language forms a source of workplace discrimination (Holck, 2018; Van Laer and Janssens,

2011), we argue that organisational inequality mechanisms cannot be fully understood when neglecting the role of language norms at work. Therefore, this article aims to investigate 1) how the employment of racio-ethnic minority workers who are not fluent in the local language in an organization in which (customer) communication plays a crucial role lays bare the norm of the fluent-speaking worker, and 2) how this norm is disrupted and/or maintained in the organization of work.

## **Method**

### *Case and data collection*

We conducted a case study of an organisation in the domestic care sector in Belgium that offers household support to customers, which is given the pseudonym SoClean. Though German, Dutch and French are the three official languages of Belgium, our case organisation is predominantly active in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, and uses Dutch as its working language. While SoClean used to solely rely on native speakers, a few years ago it decided to open itself up for candidates with a limited command of Dutch. This confronted the organization, which employs over 12.000 workers to assist around 80.000 predominantly native speaking racio-ethnic majority clients, with the challenge of managing racio-ethnic minority workers with a limited command of Dutch in a complex workplace in which communication with co-workers and customers is crucial. Based on 68 interviews with managerial actors, clients, and racio-ethnic minority cleaners, this study analyses how the norm of the Dutch-speaking worker is intertwined in the organisation of work, and how this norm is disrupted and/or maintained at SoClean.

### *Data analysis*

Working in the tradition of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2008), we took an inductive approach in our data analysis. First, we analysed our interviews, and selected those excerpts that referred to language-related practices of our respondents. Then, we classified and grouped our selected excerpts and bundled them together in higher-order codes in a process of open and axial coding, paying specific attention to the way in which the practices maintained or disrupted the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee. We distinguished three types of language-based practices: 1) Inclusionary language management practices that disrupt the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee, 2) Exclusionary language management practices that maintain the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee, and 3) Inclusionary language management practices that maintain the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee. We define inclusion as ‘the elimination of barriers which prevent employees from full participation and from using their skills to the full extent’ (Adamson et al., 2020: 4), while we define exclusion as the opposite of that (Dobusch, 2014).

## **Findings**

Our findings revealed that the way in which SoClean managed language in the workplace involves an ambiguous process of simultaneously disrupting and maintaining the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee.

### *Inclusionary language management practices that disrupt the norm*

The first type of practices that we identified, are inclusionary language management practices that disrupt the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee. These practices allowed racio-ethnic minority workers with a limited command of Dutch to enter and participate in the organization without needing to adapt themselves. For example, while traditionally candidates who were not fluent in Dutch would be automatically excluded from the selection process, as of ‘the beginning of 2018 (...) [it was] no longer require[d to] be able to speak and write Dutch as a

condition to hire people' (Coach 2). While this enabled SoClean to hire more workers to address its labour shortage, it also confronted staff members with linguistic challenges, as the presence of workers who were not fluent in Dutch laid bare how the norm of Dutch as a working language was embedded in the organization of work. In order to address these challenges, staff members engaged in spontaneous language practices, such as HR personnel circumventing Dutch-based selection tests. This disrupted the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee.

'That is an additional barrier, the staff sheet (...), which is in Dutch. [Candidates] are required to bring that to the job interview, during which they receive a short introduction of SoClean in Dutch. After that, they have to do a written test, which is in Dutch too. (...) I usually don't do that, because I know that these people will be exhausted by the time that the job interview starts. (...) We should not create extra barriers. (...) We are faced with a shortage, so we have to make people enthusiastic about SoClean' (Manager 4).

Other types of norm-disrupting language management practices that were implemented at SoClean to allow racio-ethnic minority workers to fully participate in the organisation, include initiating free language courses for managerial staff in order to support racio-ethnic minority cleaners in English and French, translating organizational documents into other languages, and asking colleagues who speak the same language to translate for each other during team meetings and trainings. These practices promoted the inclusion of workers who were not fluent in the local language.

*Exclusionary language management practices that maintain the norm*

The second type of language management practices that we identified, are exclusionary language management practices that maintain the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee. While a few organizational documents that were most frequently used by racio-ethnic minority cleaners had been translated into French and English, most of the written communication in the organization was in Dutch. Moreover, as managerial staff was only required to speak Dutch, and language trainings were merely organised on a voluntary basis, racio-ethnic minority workers with a limited command of Dutch were frequently confronted with language barriers. Overall, Dutch was largely maintained as the working language of the organization, which resulted in organizational mechanisms of exclusion.

‘Actually, all communication is still in Dutch. To give you an example, one of the first times that Kitty [a racio-ethnic minority worker with a limited command of Dutch] had a training, she received the invitation on paper in Dutch. She did not attend that training, and I called her, and she said: “I have received the invitation, but an invitation isn’t obligatory, right?” That’s what she thought. (...) The invitation might have specified that it was obligatory to attend, but I don’t think that she had translated it word for word’ (Coach 2).

Furthermore, most of SoClean’s language-based practices not only maintained Dutch as a working language within the organization, but also privileged Dutch as the main language of communication with customers. Whereas the organization was obliged by law to protect its employees against customer discrimination, it explicitly categorized customer requests for a Dutch-speaking worker as a valid, non-discriminatory demand.

‘If a 90-year-old [customer] prefers a cleaner who can speak Dutch, so that they can have a little chat, that’s something that we take into account, so that we don’t send someone who can barely say ‘good morning’. (...) This is not about background or origin (...), but just about being able to have a chat’ (Coach 7).

These language management practices reflect how the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee is embedded in the organization of work at SoClean. They generated exclusionary mechanisms in which racio-ethnic minority workers with a limited command of Dutch were prevented from fully participating in the organisation.

*Inclusionary language management practices that maintain the norm*

The third type of language management practices that we identified, are inclusionary language management practices that maintain the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee. SoClean created possibilities and incentives for racio-ethnic minority workers to learn Dutch, in order to facilitate communication processes with colleagues and customers. For example, racio-ethnic minority workers could request a Dutch language coach, who would teach them Dutch during their working hours.

‘We can give language coaching to people. (...) This implies that they practice Dutch two hours per week, but then especially focused on their job. For example, naming products, how do you communicate with customers who write notes, how do you ask for new multi-cleaner, these kinds of things. (...) A while ago, one of my employees had a performance appraisal, and she could name a few words that she didn’t know before. If her customer would ask her to clean the skirting boards, well, before she

wouldn't have known what skirting boards are, and now she could understand what the customer wanted' (Coach 3).

Other examples of norm-maintaining inclusionary practices are producing a pictogram booklet with images and their corresponding words in Dutch, which workers could use during their day-to-day activities, and providing workers tips, such as 'listen to Dutch-speaking radio programmes, use Dutch subtitles' (Coach 5), to improve their Dutch language skills in their leisure time.

Whereas at first sight these inclusionary language management practices seem to empower and support racio-ethnic minority workers with a limited command of Dutch, a more thorough analysis reveals that these initiatives are at the basis of organisational inequality mechanisms. While the language trainings for managerial staff were organised on a voluntary basis, SoClean put pressure on racio-ethnic minority cleaners to work on their language skills, and expected them to substantially improve their Dutch within the first few years after getting hired.

'She was a lady of Slovak origin, who didn't speak Dutch. Her work was kind of OK, but there were communication problems. (...) We had started a support trajectory with her, and we told her: "Look, you have to work on your Dutch. As your employer, we have the right to demand that from you" (Manager 1).

This shows that the inclusionary norm-disrupting practices that racio-ethnic minority workers initially encountered when entering the organization merely constituted a temporary form of 'tolerating' their lack of knowledge of Dutch. Workers' inclusion was conditional, in the sense that they had to assimilate to the norm of the Dutch-speaking worker over time if they wanted



to stay in the organization. Alternatively, they could ‘compensate’ their limited language skills by displaying a good work ethic.

‘I have a Turkish lady in my team. I have a good relationship with her, because she works hard. You know, everything depends on the combination of different elements, because you notice, this is a hard worker, and the customers are satisfied with her. Her language skills are not fantastic, but I have more patience with her, because I know that she tries to do her best and that things go well’ (Coach 4).

This reveals that racio-ethnic minority workers who were not fluent in Dutch were confronted with a series of inclusionary and exclusionary language management practices that initially disrupted but eventually maintained the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee. Whereas they were provided the time and support to assimilate themselves to that norm, the difference-embracing approach with which they were welcomed in the organization did not intend to maintain language-based diversity.

### **Discussion/conclusion**

This research investigated how the employment of racio-ethnic minority workers who are not fluent in the local language in an organization in which (customer) communication is crucial lays bare the norm of the native-speaking worker, and how this norm is disrupted and/or maintained in the organization of work. Our contribution is twofold.

First, our findings reveal that organizational language processes are complex, multi-faceted phenomena that can simultaneously support and undermine the inclusion of racio-ethnic minority workers with limited local language skills. While the extant literature has shown how language predominantly forms a source of exclusion (Dawson, Veliziotis and Hopkins, 2018)

and discrimination (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011) in the workplace, this research has revealed that language-based processes can generate contradictory outcomes for racio-ethnic minority workers. In line with the idea of broadened organizational notions of required competence to stimulate inclusion, as promoted by the diversity management literature (Janssens and Zanoni, 2014), SoClean no longer implemented fluency in Dutch as a criterium for workers to get hired to allow racio-ethnic minority workers with limited local language skills to enter the organization. Yet, while the entrance and initial employment of these employees was facilitated by inclusionary language practices, they co-existed with exclusionary practices, such as allowing customers to request a Dutch-speaking cleaner, that prevented racio-ethnic minority workers with a limited command of Dutch from fully participating in the organization. These findings connect to the idea that (language-based) inclusion is a paradoxical ‘process fraught with ambivalence and ambiguity and one that goes hand in hand with exclusionary dynamics’ (Adamson et al., 2020: 8).

Second, this study has illuminated how the embeddedness of local language in the organization of work challenges the inclusion of workers who do not speak that language. The inert nature of Dutch as a working language at SoClean was reflected in a broad variety of facets that could not be swiftly changed, such as the organization’s predominantly Dutch-speaking customer and staff base, and its Dutch-based written communication. The continued privileged status of Dutch as the preferred language in the organization was also visible in the idea that workers with a limited command of Dutch needed to compensate for their ‘lack’. The perseverance of Dutch as the dominant language in the organization illuminates how SoClean got stuck in certain modes of organizing work that could not escape the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee. Therefore, eventually the inclusion of racio-ethnic minority workers with a limited command of Dutch in the organization was made conditional (Tyler, 2019) upon their assimilation to the norm of the Dutch-speaking employee. Similar to the ways in which the

extant literature has revealed how norms of the ideal worker are embedded in the organization of work (Ashley, 2010; Benschop et al., 2013; Jammaers et al., 2016), our research has shown that the rootedness of language in organizational processes renders workplaces resistant to language-based change, which results in the reproduction of inequality mechanisms at work.

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