

SCOS conference 2021: Difference

Language diversity management in the local workplace: ambiguous processes of maintaining and disrupting the norm of the native-speaking worker

Anne Theunissen, SEIN, Faculty of Business Economics, Hasselt University, Belgium,
anne.theunissen@uhasselt.be

Koen Van Laer, SEIN, Faculty of Business Economics, Hasselt University, Belgium,
koen.vanlaer@uhasselt.be

Patrizia Zanoni, SEIN, Faculty of Business Economics, Hasselt University, Belgium,
patrizia.zanoni@uhasselt.be

The way in which organizations manage language diversity in the workplace, and the (in)equality outcomes thereof, have been examined by various bodies of literature. The literatures on racio-ethnic diversity management and migrant workers have revealed how workers' labour market opportunities are limited because of (assumptions about) their lack of local language competence (Hwang et al, 2020; Risberg and Romani, 2021), and how workers who do get hired (after having learned the local language) (Alberti, 2014) may be confronted with (subtle) workplace discrimination (Boogaard and Roggeband; Dobusch et al., 2020; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011). Moreover, the literatures on offshored call centre jobs and language management in multi-national corporations have illustrated how the power of Western English-speaking customers and managers generates post-colonial and imperialist dynamics (Nath, 2011; Raghuram, 2013; Steyaert et al., 2011), in which the career opportunities of workers in other parts of the world are subjected to the extent to which they can mimic the speech of these dominant actors (Boussebaa et al., 2014; Mirchandani, 2015). However, these bodies of literature have either rarely put language at the centre of analysis of inequality mechanisms in local workplaces (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011), or have only explored the topic in contexts in which language diversity is a-priori anticipated as an inherent feature of the international workplace. Yet, racio-ethnic minority workers who are not fluent in the local language are becoming increasingly dominant in local workplaces 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 local workplaces has been seldomly explored.

Therefore, this article examines these shifting language norms through a case study of an organization in the domestic care sector which is predominantly active in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium). While the organization has traditionally relied on a Dutch-speaking local workforce, it recently started to hire racio-ethnic minority workers with limited Dutch language skills in order to address its labour shortage. Drawing on the concept of the 'ideal worker' (Acker, 1992) in the data analysis of 68 interviews with racio-ethnic minority cleaners, customers and managers, we identified 1) inclusionary norm-disrupting language management practices that question the native speaker as the ideal worker, 2) exclusionary norm-maintaining language management practices based on the native speaker as the ideal worker, and 3) inclusionary norm-maintaining language management practices based on the non-native speaker as the 'good enough worker'. The findings of this research imply that language management in the workplace cannot be (solely) conceptualised as an unambiguous

source of exclusion and discrimination (cf. Boogaard and Roggeband, 2010; Van Laer and Janssens, 2011), but rather as a paradoxical process (Adamson et al., 2020) fraught with ambivalence.

References

- Acker, J. (1992). Gendering organizational theory. *Classics of organizational theory*, 6, 450-459.
- Adamson, M., Kelan, E., Lewis, P., Śliwa, M., and Rumens, N. (2020). Introduction: Critically interrogating inclusion in organisations. *Organization*, 1350508420973307.
- Alberti, G. (2014). Mobility strategies, 'mobility differentials' and 'transnational exit': the experiences of precarious migrants in London's hospitality jobs. *Work, employment and society*, 28(6), 865-881.
- Ashley, L. (2010) Making a difference? The use (and abuse) of diversity management at the UK's elite law firms. *Work, Employment and Society* 24(4): 711-727.
- Boogaard, B. and Roggeband, C. (2009). Paradoxes of Intersectionality: Theorizing Inequality in the Dutch Police Force through Structure and Agency. *Organization (London, England)*, 17(1), 53-75.
- Boussebaa, S.S. and Yiannis, G. (2014). Englishization in offshore call centers: A postcolonial perspective. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 45(9), 1152-1169.
- Dobusch, L., Holck, L. and Muhr, S.L. (2020). The im-/possibility of hybrid inclusion: Disrupting the 'happy inclusion' story with the case of the Greenlandic Police Force. *Organization (London, England)*, 135050842097331.
- Doyle, M., & Timonen, V. (2009). The different faces of care work: understanding the experiences of the multi-cultural care workforce. *Ageing and Society*, 29(3), 337.
- Hwang, S. and Beauregard, T.A. (2020). Contextualising intersectionality: A qualitative study of East Asian female migrant workers in the UK. *Human Relations*, 0018726721989790.
- Mirchandani, K. (2015). Flesh in voice: The no-touch embodiment of transnational customer service workers. *Organization (London, England)*, 22(6), 909-923.
- Nath, V. (2011). Aesthetic and emotional labour through stigma: National identity management and racial abuse in offshored Indian call centres. *Work, Employment and Society*, 25(4), 709-725.
- Raghuram, S. (2013). Identities on call: Impact of impression management on Indian call center agents. *Human Relations (New York)*, 66(11), 1471-1496.
- Risberg, A. and Romani, L. (2021). Underemploying highly skilled migrants: An organizational logic protecting corporate 'normality'. *Human Relations (New York)*, 1872672199285.
- Steyaert, C., Ostendorp, A. and Gaibrois, C. (2011). Multilingual organizations as 'linguascapes': Negotiating the position of English through discursive practices. *Journal of World Business: JWB*, 46(3), 270-278.
- Van Laer, K. and Janssens, M. (2011). Ethnic minority professionals' experiences with subtle discrimination in the workplace. *Human Relations*, 64(9), 1203-1227.
- Veen, A., Barratt, T. and Goods, C. (2020). Platform-capital's 'app-etite' for control: A labour process analysis of food-delivery work in Australia. *Work, Employment and Society*, 34(3), 388-406.