

Julia de Bres

# Cross-border workers and linguistic mobility

One of Luxembourg's statistical peculiarities is that almost half of the workforce does not live in the country. Research has shown that Luxembourg residents appreciate the economic benefits that this cross-border phenomenon brings to the country, but when it comes to the linguistic and cultural impact of cross-border workers, they tend to demur. Here, cross-border workers are more likely to be framed as a threat to Luxembourg society, and to the Luxembourgish language in particular<sup>1</sup>. The trope of the arrogant French bakery worker incapable of selling – or at least unwilling to sell – a croissant in Luxembourgish is no doubt familiar to all. But what is the linguistic reality of cross-border workers? What are their attitudes towards multilingualism in Luxembourg, and how do they cope with language diversity at work?<sup>2</sup>

## The myth of the monolingual cross-border worker

Given that cross-border workers live in countries where there is one official state language (France and Germany) or a system of territorial multilingualism (Belgium), it can be assumed that they are generally less multilingual than Luxembourg residents, who have been educated and socialised in a highly multilin-

gual context. Indeed, for the most part, the cross-border workers who took part in our research do not report the quadrilingual (or quintolingual...) skills to which Luxembourg locals often lay claim. But they are far from monolingual. Every cross-border worker but one in our study had learnt at least one language in addition to their first language, a third of them

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two languages, a third three languages and some even six or seven. In this case, virtually all the cross-border workers have a multilingual profile. Furthermore, not all the participants use exclusively one language at home, with a notable reported frequency of bilingualism in French and another language (e.g. French and Tunisian, French and English) or in German and a German regional variety (e.g. German and Saarlandish, German and the Eifel dialect).

## Multilingualism at work

Cross-border workers in Luxembourg are therefore not necessarily the monoglots they are often portrayed to be. But what about their language practices at work? It is apparent that one cannot generalise about the nature of multilingualism at work in

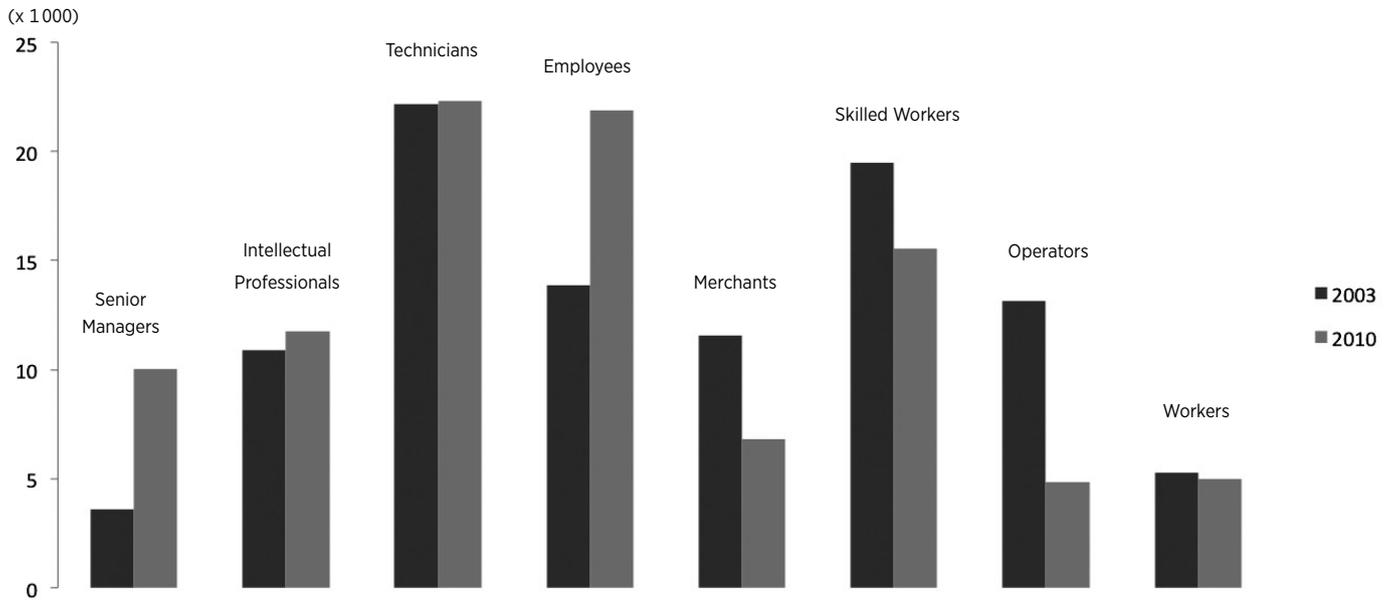
Luxembourg. The languages used by the cross-border workers we spoke to vary strongly between workplaces, with some workplace environments almost monolingual and others bilingual or multilingual. Influences here include the national origin of the company, the nationality mix among its employees, the nature of the work involved, and official workplace language policies, among other factors. The actual degree of multilingualism with which cross-border workers come into contact at workplaces in Luxembourg thus varies considerably, as do the linguistic resources that they bring to these working environments. Nevertheless, none can escape dealing with multilingualism at work to some degree. In terms of which languages they come into contact with at work, French is present at every workplace, but in only in very few cases is it the only language used. In general terms, French is the most frequently used language, followed by Luxembourgish, German, English and Portuguese.

Most cross-border workers are able to speak their own first language at work. This does not mean, however, that they never use other languages. The majority report often speaking two or more languages in the course of one day. This multilingualism comes in the form of a wide range of multilingual practices, including accommodating to the language of others, using a lingua franca, switching between languages and engaging in spontaneous

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Julia de Bres is Associate Professor at the Institute of Luxembourgish Language and Literatures at the University of Luxembourg.

## Professions of Cross-border workers (2003 and 2010)



Source: Enquête Frontaliers 2003, CEPS/INSTEAD; EMF 2010, CEPS/INSTEAD et CNRS (Gerber, Drevon, 2012)

translation. Sometimes cross-border workers also activate or develop language skills in the Luxembourg context. It can be the case, for example, that a French cross-border worker can use his/her skills in the *platt lorrain* from over the border in France to almost effortlessly adopt Luxembourgish on coming to work in Luxembourg.

### Challenges and opportunities

Overall, multilingualism is viewed as a challenge for the task-based aspects of work (e.g. causing misunderstandings and limiting efficiency), but as an asset for the more relational aspects of work (e.g. facilitating communication and improving relationships between employees). Attitudes towards multilingualism seem to be related to the extent to which cross-border workers possess the language skills necessary for their specific workplace. For those who do not, multilingualism at work has several pitfalls, including limited access to information, reduced quality of communication, feelings of exclusion and limited career options. Among those who have the linguistic resources required, benefits include contact with people of other cultures, the excitement of an international environment, using and developing language skills, cognitive benefits, clarity of communication, broader relationships

and flexibility. People accustomed to less linguistically dynamic environments appreciate these elements. As one Belgian cross-border worker comments: 'I immediately adhered to the Luxembourgish model which is to not ask yourself too many questions about language and to simply try to speak together, no matter what language is used... In the country I come from, as we keep seeing on the news, that is not always the case.'

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For some cross-border workers, the multilingual situation of Luxembourg represents one of the attractions of coming to work in the country. Most choose to work in Luxembourg because of economic incentives, such as higher remuneration, better career opportunities, and more favourable working conditions. But they also provide other reasons, including some related to language: 'I knew that there were several languages present in Luxembourg. And I said to myself 'well, perhaps this will also be an opportunity for me to use the linguistic baggage I have, and to try to explore new horizons on a linguistic level.' Another person acknowledges that:

'My feeling was that it was more exciting to go to a country where there are several languages, where it is more international, than to stay in Germany and in fact in Bavaria, where I even speak the dialect.'

### Attitudes towards Luxembourgish

We were surprised to learn that as many as two thirds reported having learnt Luxembourgish either formally or informally at some point during their working life in Luxembourg, and that half of those who had not learnt it, would like to do so in the future. However, recordings of interactions among cross-border workers and their colleagues at work show that Luxembourgish is not used to a fluent degree. Nevertheless, several engage in practices that could be situated on a continuum proceeding from more minimal to more extensive uses of the language. For instance, some cross-border workers use Luxembourgish greetings (even with other cross-border workers) or the odd word in Luxembourgish related to their work, for instance *Pabeier* (paper) in an office, or *Mëtsch* (pastries) in a supermarket.

Others are able to understand the language when used by others, and would then respond in their preferred language, a practice linguists call 'receptive multilingualism'. Some take a further step and

use longer sequences of Luxembourgish mixed in with other languages. In general, cross-border workers often seem to be able to engage in unproblematic multilingual interactions involving Luxembourgish, even if their own skills in the language do not permit full fluency. At least in part, these uses of Luxembourgish appear to operate as a way of fostering solidarity with Luxembourgish colleagues. Those who use Luxembourgish in these ways mention the benefits they experience, in terms of relationships with their colleagues and clients, professional opportunities at work, and a sense of belonging in the country. Certainly, the willingness of cross-border workers to speak Luxembourgish remains a controversial topic, but it is evident that the stereotype of the 'cross-border worker who does not respect the Luxembourgish language' does not apply to many of the cross-border workers in our study.

**A nuanced picture**

These results disrupt several commonly held stereotypes about cross-border workers and language in Luxembourg. The cross-border workers we spoke to were not monolingual, they were not in Luxembourg 'just for the money', and they had more contact with the Luxembourgish language than many would expect. In classes at university, students often remark that it is impossible to be monolingual in Luxembourg, that simply being in the country prompts us all to activate multiple linguistic resources as we simply go about the activities of our daily lives. This is no less true for cross-border workers, who, as part of their personal mobility, also become quite a lot more linguistically mobile.

The increasing presence of 'foreigners', be they residents or cross-border workers from the surrounding regions, is undoubtedly having an impact on the language situation of Luxembourg. Whether the presence of multiple languages at work is considered a 'problem' in workplace contexts, is very much a matter of individual perspective. Migrants are an essential feature of the Luxembourg economy, and critical to its continued prosperity. As well as bringing benefits to Luxembourg,

cross-border migration brings benefits to cross-border workers, who are able to earn higher salaries, make the most of the wider range of professional opportunities available in Luxembourg, and benefit from the international character of the country. The results of our research suggest that linguistic and cultural aspects need not necessarily be seen as a casualty of this more economically motivated cultural contact. With some adaptation from both sides, both cross-border workers and local residents can communicate effectively at work in highly multilingual and multicultural environments, while maintaining respect

for the distinct linguistic and cultural character of the country. ♦

1 Christian Wille, *Dimensions socio-culturelles et constructions d'espace de la mobilité transfrontalière des travailleurs dans la Grande Région SaarLorLux* (PhD thesis), Luxembourg, Université du Luxembourg/ Université de la Sarre, 2011.

2 Julia de Bres and Anne Franziskus undertook a FNR-funded project that ran from 2009-2013 ('Dealing with linguistic diversity: the language ideologies and practices of cross-border workers in Luxembourg'). They used a mixed data set of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and recordings of face-to-face interactions between cross-border workers at 35 workplaces in Luxembourg.

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