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Making meaning of multilingualism at work: from competence to conviviality

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ABSTRACT

The present study contributes to recent renewed interest in the social construction of folk linguistic knowledge and directs its focus to a multilingual workplace. The article reports on an in-depth sociolinguistic investigation in a European institution in Luxembourg. Data were collected in 2020–2021 with trainees and permanent staff in a terminology and communication unit. The data collection triangulated qualitative techniques of longitudinal interviewing, reflective drawing, writing reflection and observation. Analysis of participants' stances uncovered a varying understanding of what multilingualism means in the workplace, how it changes and to what effect. During reflective participation, the trainees heightened their sociopragmatic awareness of diversity in the meaning-making process. Moreover, they ceased to construct their personal multilingualism as proof of professional competence and started to see it as the basis of their own well-being, personal self-realisation and growth. As such, they re-coupled the social and linguistic aspect of their language use and aligned their stances with the permanent staff. This study aims to inspire more innovative approaches with a potential direct effect in multilingual workplaces, especially in those welcoming workers from monolingual or otherwise homogeneous social environments.

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Introduction

The present investigation contributes to the recent focus on folk-sociopragmatics (Bridges 2017; Rymes 2021), critically rethinking contextualised assumptions, motivation and reasoning behind daily language behaviour. It builds upon a pilot study conducted in the same workplace (as reported by Lovrits and de Bres [2021]) and is part of a larger project examining language practices in a European Union institution. The main research question asks what multilingualism means for a team of language professionals and how this understanding shapes their perception of language practices at work.

A team of language workers was chosen for this study to highlight the need for critical, constructive debate on the functions and effects of the notion of multilingualism at the interpersonal level. The analysis namely addresses one of the practical problems of the critical applied linguistic debate – the suggestion to disregard the standard language norm (Canagarajah and Wurr 2011; Kirsch and

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Duarte 2020). This may not be easy to accept in some professions, especially for language workers, since the idea of languages as separate and professionally curated systems literally pays their salary. However, the junior participants in this study still realised, they needed to rethink their initial idea of the acceptable language use in a cosmopolitan work environment.

The general perspective of this study is anchored in the social constructivist paradigm and follows its humanistic legacy which accentuates the agency of individuals in a social world they build together (Berger and Luckmann [1996] 2001). From this point of view, the analysis highlights the negotiable part of the shared social reality and demonstrates how raising meta-pragmatic awareness can alter what is considered unquestionably given. Meta-pragmatic awareness is a conscious reconstruction of meaning, allowing dialogue partners to understand each other's intentions (Verschueren 2012). However, the participants had to make explicit the often unsaid (unwritten), yet communicated intentions which referred to pragmatic background knowledge, beliefs and expectations, traditionally investigated by sociopragmatics (Yule 1996).

As for the main term, structural (or social, institutional) multilingualism will refer to a space where more than one named language is used and personal (individual and social) multilingualism to lived experience with more than one language. In previous research, personal multilingualism has sometimes been referred to as 'plurilingualism' (Ehrhart, Hélot, and Le Nevez 2010). However, the difference between the social and individual character of multilingualism is important to participants in this study – as such, the terms 'personal' and 'structural' multilingualism will be used to highlight the characteristic distinction.

This study also supports the critique of decoupling language from its social context for the purpose of selling it on the (labour) market, discussed as language commodification (Duchêne 2011; Heller 2010). However, the description of the place and sample will make it clear that constructing a sharp conflictualist opposition between the workers' and the organisation's interests would be inappropriate here, since individual development is encouraged and social experience at work is already considered an important aspect of the language use.

The presented research methodology is guided by one critical aspect in particular. Critical voices of the last decade have denounced methodological nationalism, which links state, citizenship and language (Kraus 2018) and focuses on the structural hegemonic power of state over 'its' language through 'its' citizens (Bourdieu [1991] 2001). This study does not treat participants as representatives of states or 'their' languages and, when possible, refrains from referring to participants' national affiliations. The author also adopts the critical theory's refusal of the terms 'native speaker' (Dewaele, Bak, and Ortega 2021), 'native language' (Doerr 2009) and 'mother tongue' (Yildiz 2012). Since these notions are still part of the participants' discursive space, they will be referred to in quotation marks, which are, according to Bourdieu ([1994] 1998), one of the most powerful signs of denial.

The text structure is organised as follows. Section "Place of research and participants" will introduce the participants and the place of research. The following section on methodology will describe the steps of data gathering, reflect on research positionality, and explain how the sociolinguistic analysis of stance fits the purpose of the study. The findings will be presented in Section "Findings", starting with a contextualisation of structural multilingualism and the tendency towards English-only internal communication in the institution. Further analysis will unveil that the tendency was shaped by unquestioned assumptions on competence and efficiency in trainees. Since these assumptions have since been readjusted, the last subsection will trace the change in the construction of multilingualism and the effects of this change on the experience of the last cohort of trainees in the sample.

Place of research and participants

Data were collected in one of the units of a European Union (EU) institution in Luxembourg. The unit provides a transversal service in the field of terminology and communication, collaborating

with about 110 translators from 24 translation units (representing the 24 official languages of the EU). It is neither defined by a single standard language nor is it a political representation of a nation state; it supports the institution as a whole. Such units are typical for the institution, so the studied unit is representative of the institution in this regard. It also adds to the critical exploration of language workers' freelance experience (Codó 2018) and language awareness of language workers in business (Koller 2018).

Another defining factor of the research setting is a psychologically safe environment (Nurmi and Koroma 2020) and a flat, non-hierarchical managerial approach. The team was led as a learning organisation in which management focused on their employees learning situationally relevant information rather than standardising their work (Le Boterf 2018). This managerial style makes the chosen method of participative research possible to realise in practice, but also arguably limits representativeness (cf. a highly competitive environment, as investigated by Detzen and Loehlein 2018).

The aspects of mobility and the multilingual environment also characterised the unit as a global urban workplace (Blommaert and Backus 2013). Nonetheless, the team is not 'superdiverse'. Its members did not experience issues regarding ethnicity or religion, only one of the participants was male, and all participants had a European background. Moreover, all workers in the unit were university graduates. Otherwise, they came from different parts of Europe and their educational and socioeconomic background varied. Over the course of two traineeship terms in 2020 and 2021, 12 persons participated in the study.

This article will henceforth refer to the trainees as *juniors* and the staff (the head of unit and the tutors) as *seniors*, to accommodate situations in which hierarchy and differing work conditions may have had an effect. The seniors had at least 18 years' work experience in the institution and came from a multilingual and multicultural background, with relevant degrees in translation and terminology. They had moved around, first for their studies and then for work in various European countries, before settling down in Luxembourg where, according to the last statistical report, 180 languages are spoken (STATEC 2021). Societal and personal multilingualism had been a part of their everyday life for decades, both in the private and professional context.

In contrast, the trainees (with the exception of the Luxembourgish one) had recently come from monolingual countries and their experience was entrenched in their previous national environment (Greece, France, Croatia, Italy, Poland and Germany). The German and the Luxembourgish trainees were bilingual in their home language and English, having both studied in the United Kingdom. The trainees had a wider educational background – linguistics, terminology, translation, teaching, journalism, and media and communication.¹

The trainees applied for the internship online, knowing from the call for applications that a 'very good knowledge of English' was required. The unit did not select applicants with a B1 English level or lower. Other language skills did not play a role in the selection process. The regular duration of the traineeship was five months and its purpose was to introduce trainees to the work of EU institutions.

Method

A traditional method of research in multilingual workplaces would infer participants' sociopragmatic considerations from what can be observed in the workplace and what is described by participants in one-off interviews (Karhunen et al. 2018). Instead, a more dynamic approach has been adopted in this study, aligning with Rymes' (2021, 28) assertion that 'we can best learn about society by looking at the way we talk about our words'.

The data collection was inspired by the principles of participatory action research. These were established as a way of improving research practice in social sciences in the 1940s (Morales 2016). The initial idea was linked to small group dynamics but has since evolved to apply to various fields of humanities and social sciences, including: psychiatric micro-approach (Schneider 2012),

teacher development (Morales 2016), facilitation of community empowerment of linguistic minorities (Junker 2018), and large-scale transnational interdisciplinary research (Masson et al. 2021). What the varying participatory action projects have in common is that the researcher and participants engage in iterative reflection and action in order to empower the participants and improve their social conditions. The researcher is not a neutral listener but rather an active helper in challenging inequality. The participants are in charge of their own actions as well as what the desired ‘improvement’ should be.

Participants in the present study were steering the process less than is usual in traditional critical action research in minoritised communities (McIntyre 2008). Nevertheless, they brought in topics relevant to them, and it was their experiences, needs and desires that were addressed by the eventual managerial measures. The seniors had less to say in the process of identifying issues but, at the same time, they had more power over structural changes based on the research insights. The next subsection describes how data collection was organised in more detail.

The researcher arranged several phases of qualitative longitudinal interviewing in which participants were asked to reflect on topics linked to multilingualism in the workplace.² After each round of interviewing, thematic pre-analyses were shared with the participants, so the participants had the opportunity to comment on the researcher’s understanding of their accounts as well as respond to other participants’ comments. Semi-structured qualitative interviewing served as a base and further techniques were introduced to triangulate the interview data – reflective drawing, observation of several meeting discussions, and a written reflection.

The interview process started in September 2020 with an initial round of semi-structured interviews with four trainees (further referred to as T1). The aim of this round was to check what topics from the pilot project in 2018–2019 were still relevant in 2020 and what new issues considering language practices, if any, had arisen. A preliminary thematic analysis of data from the first round showed that many trainees still felt that their language expectations had not been met (as discussed by Lovrits and de Bres [2021]). After two weeks at work, the four new trainees (T2) wrote one full page (A4) about their expectations regarding language use. Based on this information, interviews were constructed with questions addressing the trainees’ expectations about their stay as well as their first impressions about the language use at work compared to their initial expectations.

In October 2020, the first round of interviews with three seniors (S1) was conducted, focusing on their view of how languages are used in the unit and at the institution. They were also asked to reflect on the topics that had arisen in the previous interviews with the trainees: the (in)formality of language use, the predominance of English at work, the proofreading of English texts, and the limitations of working from home.

In December 2020, a second round of interviews with T2 trainees employed reflective drawing (Molinié 2009). The T2 trainees were asked to sketch visual metaphors of how languages were used in the workplace. They also talked about the language use they had observed or actively participated in in the unit. The drawings served as props, while also bringing more playfulness and more open affective load to the reflection process.³

In the third round of interviews with T2 trainees in February 2021, the trainees went through a gathered collection of visual metaphors, and individually reflected on how their expectations were met during their stay and what the research participation meant to them. In total, the T2 trainees were interviewed three times. As such, the interview rounds that took place during the traineeship term will be referred to as T2.1, T2.2 and T2.3 in the text.

The topics and issues became a matter of discussion in the team and one of the tutors asked for two brief presentations of the preliminary insights for the whole unit, which were followed by a short discussion in December 2020. The researcher was asked to present the insights to the unit again in February 2021, with the aim of better preparing the team for the newly arrived trainees. The fieldwork concluded with the final round of interviews with three⁴ seniors in May 2021 (S2).

All exchanges happened online. The researcher offered alternative languages for the interviews (French, German, Luxembourgish, Czech and Slovak) and the Luxembourgish and the Slovak interviewees chose to use their first language. The remaining interviews were conducted in English. The interviewing was audio-recorded and produced 30 hours' worth of semi-structured in-depth interview transcripts (on average 1 hour each). Two tutors and three trainees were interviewed only once since they either left the unit before the next round of interviews or came when the data collection was finishing.

The researcher's active role in qualitative interviewing both limited and opened new horizons, so it was not to be eliminated but controlled (Deppermann 2013). The researcher inspected any possible effects of her mutual positioning with the participants and took care to maintain the anonymity of the information shared outside of the interview. The researcher was a relative insider in the unit (Holmes 2020), having realised two observation study visits in 2018 and a pilot project in 2018 and 2019. The researcher's access to the unit was therefore seized as a unique opportunity for a rare, in-depth, longitudinal inquiry into an EU institution. The researcher's overall experience and background positioned her in between the newly arrived juniors and the nearly-local seniors, both linguistically and professionally.

The analyses were based on the concept of sociolinguistic stance (Jaffe 2009). Stance is a complex analytic unit that allows for a layered investigation of the meaning-making process. The overall stance consists of the following aspects (Park, Joseph 2011): (1) the speaker's *positioning* (2) towards and *object* of stance (3) with an expressed *affect* and (4) *mis/alignment* to the perceived or imagined stances of other speakers. This study investigated recurrent, more stable stances in participants' accounts, following Jaffe's (2009) approach to stance as a recurrent pattern indexing broader social phenomena.

The interviews were transcribed in the respective languages and coded by hand in English to indicate sequences where participants' stances referred to multilingualism. Following the linguistic anthropology theory, which analyses function and effect of language use (Saville-Troike [1982] 2003), multilingualism was traced both as a possibility (for instance, a desire for multilingualism or its perceived role at work or in life) and as an effect (of the real use of more languages). The stances were analysed in the context of the interviews since not all stances were explicit, particularly the potentially politically sensitive ones.

The study's anchor point is the social construction of multilingualism, which is analysed through the participants' stances on language use at work. The aspect of mis/alignment was rather peripheral as stances were not analysed in stance-turns of a dialogue but as examples of a recurring combination of stance patterns. As such, the signalling of mis/alignment did not occur as often as it would in conversation analysis. The remaining constitutive features of stance were followed to highlight how multilingualism is constructed differently from varying positioning and with varying affective load.

Findings

Structural multilingualism as a political imperative and economic concern

The EU values multilingualism on principal philosophical and political grounds and its institutions are officially and structurally multilingual (Iskra 2021). Although the pattern of language practices differs from institution to institution and unit to unit (Wodak 2013), equality of languages has been a key principle of the EU institutions since their inception (Iskra 2021). In this political context, the unit under research addresses the international public in many languages.

The seniors' stance on multilingualism at the institution focused on the political (democratic) need to include one official language from each member state but also expressed concern for the difficulty of translating and interpreting all documents into every official EU language, as illustrated below:

Excerpt 1⁵

S1: ... at the end, everything is translated in all languages. Everything legislative. Some administrative internal documents are in English, French and German, but only internal ones. Otherwise it is that languages are equal. So, if we decided to publish articles in other languages than the one working language, which is English, we would have a big problem because we would need to publish in all languages. And practically, this would not be possible.

The excerpt above describes the language regime – the institution must use all official languages for normative content. In contrast, using all official languages in daily communication is framed as a logistic problem – too expensive and complicated, thus something which ‘would not be possible’ (here with regard to publications but elsewhere in the interviews more broadly in terms of the logistics of translation).

The excerpt also shows the senior taking the position of a loyal employee for whom the structural organisation of language work is not a matter of personal opinion. However, Jaffe (2009) points out that no stance is also a stance. That said, a general acceptance of the situation can also be inferred from the context. When the seniors disagreed in the interviews elsewhere, they communicated it. They either signalled it non-verbally (by a change of intonation, pace of talk or laugh) or openly (for instance, ‘I don’t want to talk about this because I don’t want to be considered disloyal’).

Furthermore, despite the three languages mentioned above, all participants asserted that English was the predominant internal (vehicular) language used in the unit and even in the institution. It is clear that, despite the United Kingdom having left the EU, the English language has remained.⁶ Participants refer to this actuality as a rational choice and economic remedy, framing the 24-language multilingualism of the institution as an unattainable ideal. For the participants, the decision to keep English seems to be directly linked to the construction of multilingualism as both a political imperative and economic problem. The senior in the excerpt below recalled that the predominant use of English was more politically questionable when English represented the political power of the United Kingdom:

Excerpt 2

S1: I even remember ... uh, people ... in the upper hierarchy to say: ‘We will have even less problems with the Germans, French, uh, Spanish people ... Italians saying: “Why English?”’

After Brexit, relying on a language which is no longer symbolically owned or ruled by any EU member state may be more politically viable because it does not directly thwart the equality of all 24 official languages. In any case, the seniors do not appear to support the idea of adding (back) more vehicular languages to English as the current main lingua franca in the structural setting of the institution.

The juniors were much less concerned about the political connotations of multilingualism in the institution and had less information regarding the processes and their historical development. Also, unlike the seniors, they did not position themselves as representatives of the institution vis-à-vis the researcher and their utterances did not suggest any caution regarding politically sensitive stances. However, they did not question the position of English as the sole lingua franca either.

Personal multilingualism as a dichotomic value to communication in English

Although English being the main vehicular language at the institution was a non-issue for the participants, their *own* communication in English was considered personally limiting. When discussing the common stance of juniors on the topic of limitation, one of the seniors reflected:

Excerpt 3

S2: It can be the same, not only for the native English speaker, but also for somebody who is obliged to work only in English, or only in one language. You feel uh ... limited.

The excerpt above implies that multilingualism, from the personal perspective, means ‘not being personally limited’ and frames it as preferable compared to using English only. Seniors also often expressed their dedication to supporting multilingualism in the team and appreciation for being able to regularly use more languages at work (all used at least five languages comfortably and fluently). Speaking several languages was a personal joy for them and not any external requirement that would help them gain more power, climb the organisational ladder (cf. Detzen and Loehlein 2018), or succeed in a neoliberal market where personal multilingualism is considered an advantage (Barakos and Selleck 2019).

In contrast, trainees concluded that their experience was monolingual, despite encountering several languages at work. They used French when communicating with employees in other areas of the institution (security guards and cleaning and publishing services). Most of the trainees in the trainees spoke their first (‘native’) languages to the seniors. Nonetheless, neither of these exchanges was considered multilingualism at work in the trainees’ eyes. This finding aligns with the Anglophone trainees’ perception from the pilot project in 2018 and 2019. The juniors’ stances on multilingualism continue to revolve around varieties of English in the workplace and a widely shared disillusion about the perceived non-existent opportunity to practise more languages (regrets based on the ‘lack of multilingual experience’).

Such a situation is not unknown to the theory. A multilingual community does not necessarily guarantee personal multilingualism for every individual (Saville-Troike [1982] 2003). The intriguing aspect here is, while the seniors did not feel restrained in fulfilling their potential for multilingualism and using other languages at work, the juniors often (unhappily) did. This difference would be less surprising in a more hierarchically managed team, but in this workplace, the juniors had no clear reason for feeling restrained from using more languages. So, the situation became a matter for further exploration and a differing stance towards competence in language emerged as a recurrent issue.

Multilingualism as proof of juniors’ competence

While the juniors cared about being judged for their linguistic output in a multilingual environment, the seniors did not, and were moreover *aware* of their not caring. In the excerpt below, the head of unit spontaneously mentions the aspect of (not-so-perfect) linguistic competence:

Excerpt 4

S1: I try to practise them [languages] because if you leave a language, it leaves you. So, every time I can practise with somebody the language I know, I do it. ... And of course, there also, you don’t need to be perfect.

Similar to other seniors in the team, he says he strives for his personal best. He is concerned a language may ‘leave’ him, as if he were in a personal relationship with it. His stance is clearly personal as he does not refer to practical work requirements, which is in accordance with the further analysis.

Notably, when talking about linguistic accuracy, the seniors distinguished between and took different stances on daily communication and language products, i.e. terminology entries, translations or publications. The first was a matter of individual human experience, while the latter a matter of standardised professionalism to them. The linguistic product has to be perfect according to the standard language norm (and sometimes also nuanced in sociohistorical, political or legal terms). For these language products, the seniors rely on their colleagues – specialists (proof-readers, editors, legal departments, etc.). In contrast, human communication should primarily be effective, not perfect.

It is also worth noting that the professional linguistic outputs of the unit were never the product of one person’s work. This is what Le Boterf (2018) points out about competence in modern workplaces in the service economy – a worker has to share the organisational vision and

strive for the best solution in every situation, but competence is shown through a *common effort* adjusted to the actual needs of subjects involved in the situation. Indeed, the shared responsibility to find linguistic mistakes in linguistic outputs is what the participants emphasised as a striking contrast to the situation of freelance workers. Both trainees and seniors recounted dark stories about the pressures and deplorable conditions of (freelance) work for language agencies on the free market.

The seniors and juniors further shared certain stances on personal linguistic competence in English and their first languages, which were never under scrutiny. When it came to language choice, competence in English was simply presumed. The same indifference to actual linguistic performance applied to the first languages (often referred to as a ‘native language’ or ‘mother tongue’ by the participants). These languages were considered an ‘obvious’ and ‘natural’ choice whenever the situation allowed for them. Communicating in the first language was not associated with misunderstanding, as if it never happened.

Nevertheless, the initial perception of competence in the multilingual exchanges of the juniors was different from that of the seniors. Unlike in English and the ‘native’ languages, in which competence was not considered an issue, the legitimacy of other languages for day-to-day communication had to be ascertained as it was not ‘obvious’. Trainees internally scrutinised language competence according to accuracy and mistakes and often dropped the idea of using an alternative language. Using an alternative language triggered the assessment of competence according to the perception of fluency, mistakes, and the potential for misunderstanding and other face-threatening discursive events (Yule [1985] 2010).

Overcoming the focus on linguistic mistakes (the language learner’s lens) and the accompanying fear of losing face as a competent worker, had to be supported by a special dose of ‘bravery’. Even speaking to colleagues required this type of consideration, as reflected on by one of the trainees:

Excerpt 5

T2.2: Yeah, I think about (*smiling*) the- wha- what language to use with them every time (*giggle*) depending on how I feel, uh, on the specific day. If I feel brave, I’m just gonna go in Italian. (*laugh*)

This type of internal self-check was further pronounced in the juniors’ communication with the seniors. While the juniors observed that the seniors were much more confident using other languages, the juniors initially linked the higher level of confidence to the higher hierarchical position. In their eyes, the seniors could afford to use languages they did not speak with a ‘native’ or perfect standard language accuracy, simply because their seniority meant that they did not have to prove their professional competence through language. If the trainees judged their own or other trainees’ linguistic competence as ‘weaker’, they regularly preferred not to use the alternative language and resorted to what they considered the ‘default’ with automatic legitimacy – English:

Excerpt 6

T2.2: Uh, and you- when you’re just a trainee, and you uh don’t know everyone that well, and you are not spending time together in the office, it’s hard to build that ... relationship with permanent staff members that is going to be, like, close enough, personal enough for you to start thinking about: “Today, let’s maybe switch to a different language.” You just keep everything to a short email just to get things done because you know that they’re busy. So you’re just going to use English because that’s the most efficient way of working.

The abstract above denotes personal closeness, which is supposed to compensate for the lack of seniority (and the related lack of confidence in their own competence). This sentiment recurred in the juniors’ interviews, mirroring the seniors’ focus on familiar communication. Indeed, the trainees were initially missing the confidence and the human aspect of communication. However, the following two sub-sections will present the change in stances after trainees had the opportunity to rethink their intent and the real effects of their language behaviour, so as to discuss them in the team.

Multilingualism as open-mindedness and flexibility in languages

Initially, both the trainees and seniors considered the trainees' 'monolingual English' usage to be an inevitable state of affairs shaped by the needs of the organisation. With the exception of one trainee who had studied critical sociolinguistics, the participants initially considered their language decisions as obvious or automatic non-decisions, as in the following example:

Excerpt 7

T1: So, I don't know, I don't really think about, like, what's going on. How do I decide? It's just natural, I would say.

Trainees from the T1 team only participated in one-off interviews and had no opportunity to reflect on the 'naturalness' of their decision. However, the T2 trainees could revisit and discuss stances towards languages and their use at work and they found untapped potential. After the initial interview, two of the four T2 trainees were confident enough to ask for an alternative language for their own practice. One of them mentioned this as one of the defining moments that changed her perception of language use. In the last interview, she elaborated on what she had learnt about languages and multilingualism during the traineeship:

Excerpt 8

T2.3: I feel that working in a multicultural team makes me feel more confident in using my working languages. I feel like more open minded. (...) So I feel this kind of ... uh, flexibility in my- in my way- in my relationship with languages. (...) I'll just mention the example that when I realized that I could talk to (name of the assistant) in Spanish- I- I could do that, so I did. (*smiling*)

Taking a positive affective position towards her new understanding of multilingualism, the trainee refers to a situation in which she was initially afraid of making too many mistakes and was therefore reluctant to talk to a member of the permanent staff in Spanish. The decision to do so was so important to her that that she mentioned it as the example showing her learning outcome. It marked the change in the trainee's stance on multilingualism, now understood as open-mindedness and flexibility with languages instead of the perfect, seemingly monolingual performance in many languages.

Indeed, mistakes were initially a big topic for the terminology trainees, who were also translators and teachers. Their realisation, that language use in real life is governed by the rules of effectiveness rather than accuracy, was shared by the other T2 terminology trainee. When she was asked what she had learnt about multilingualism during her stay, she responded:

Excerpt 9

T2.3: Um, that you have to strive for perfection if you need ... your language skills to be perfect, so depending on your needs- on your personal needs, but in a- ... in a multilingual environment, there's nothing bad. No one is there to judge you if you make mistakes so ... you can live multilingualism in a more relaxed way and in a funny way where everyone can learn from each other and even though the communication is not perfect because we may not understand each other- but simply because our representations of- ... uh, of the word are different- uh, it doesn't mean that there cannot be effective communication.

In the excerpt above, the trainee stresses the personal character of linguistic needs, showing that she has liberated her personal reasoning from the generalised explanations. She reflects on learning that multilingual communication can also be a social experience of joy, mutual support and acceptance. She also points out that misunderstanding is not solely a matter of linguistic accuracy but can also happen because people may have different ideas about how the world functions around them. On the contrary, the non-standard use of language or a mistake does not necessarily make communication less effective. Both T2 terminology trainees concluded that their language competence is of no concern to anyone but themselves. As such, they gained the 'flexibility of open-mindedness'.

Multilingualism as a safe harbour and normality

Towards the end of the data gathering process, the trainees' reflections began to include more intimate topics. In this regard, the two T2 communication trainees also amended the ideal of language accuracy, but their stance was less linguistic and more personal. Approaching their language competence from a slightly different angle, they found that they were able to overcome their inner feeling of personal inadequacy. In her final interview, one of the T2 communication trainees suggests that the most important thing new trainees should know is not to be afraid to use more languages in the multilingual environment:

Excerpt 10

T2.3: I would say uh ... to be confident, not to be- not to be scared. And um to explore different possibilities and to always look for, uh, some ways of.. um, progress, I don't know, improvement, this is a really good opportunity to start maybe learning a different language, uh, because in this environment, you just naturally feel the need to learn languages.

The 'natural' need to learn languages seems to be a social effect rather than a non-reflexive assumption, as was the case in the initial interviews. The trainee felt good among people who loved using many languages, so she wanted to do so too, to share the joy with them. The potential for financial gain or a hierarchical pay-off in the future was not important at that moment, it was rather her experience of multilingualism as social togetherness.

The last of the four T2 trainees made the most profound realisation when tracing her learning curve from her early school years, where she was shamed by teachers for mixing languages as a bilingual child, to her traineeship, where she expressed gratefulness for the multilingual experience that had brought her peace of mind:

Excerpt 11

T2.3: ... the teachers actually thought it was bad to raise someone bilingually and it would just confuse me and ... they basically told me that I was just stupid. (...)

Most often in my life then, people would actually ask me, do you feel more (*nationality*) or you do you feel more (*another nationality*)? And um ... that was really hard for me growing up, because it was like a little bit of an identity crisis? (...)

I would really enjoy to stay in a multilingual environment. Because sometimes it just- You know, if you're like the only half (*nationality*) person in your small town. Then you feel like the alien, like the outsider. And here, everyone can speak more than one language. So it did really ... um, it made me feel like I'm normal?

This last excerpt shows the burden that must be carried by certain individuals due to the effects of language ideologies encountered in early childhood. It also demonstrates that a well-managed multilingual environment can act as a healing space. Over the course of the traineeship, the trainee began to feel that she was neither an intruder nor a failure, but a competent professional who belonged in the workplace. It is remarkable that the trainee developed this feeling of normality in a mostly virtual workspace during a global pandemic. It also shows the level of respect trainees were given, despite working there as juniors for only five months.

Conclusion

This study employed triangulated qualitative research techniques to look for answers to the question: what does multilingualism mean to a team of language professionals and how does this shape their perception of language practices at work? Five types of constructions of multilingualism helped to build an understanding of the situation in the workplace and the needs of the trainees coming from monolingual social environments. First, structural multilingualism was considered a political imperative and economic concern. Next, personal multilingualism was constructed as

a dichotomous value to communication in English, then treated as proof of juniors' competence, further re-invented as open-mindedness and flexibility, and finally embraced as a safe harbour and normality.

The structural multilingualism was constructed as an economically impractical political imperative. For internal communication, English was seen as an easy alternative. Moreover, the politically driven need for multilingualism in the institution seems to have been further outmatched, in favour of English, by the extended work-from-home restrictions in 2020–2021. Thus, despite the commitment to multilingualism on the political level, the monolingual regime of using one internal language was perceived to be the right choice for the *institution* – a decision the participants did not contest.

However, their stance changed when they switched their positioning and the situation 'English versus multilingualism' was judged from a *personal* perspective. The monolingual use of English became a factor that unpleasantly limited desired personal multilingualism. Moreover, participants understood personal multilingualism to be a self-confident performance in several languages, as well as an act of personal closeness, but the confidence and familiarity were initially lacking in the juniors, which limited them to English. The seniors did not care about making mistakes in their day-to-day communication, so they could not imagine this being an issue for the juniors, whereas the juniors felt insecure using their full language repertoire and focused on maintaining their 'professional face', both in front of peers and seniors.

Given that only the trainees who participated in the longitudinal interviewing changed their perspective, and no change was observed or reported in the seniors' behaviour during the time of the trainees' interviewing, it is likely that it was the opportunity to reflect in research that triggered the change in the trainees' construction of multilingualism. The seniors did not notice that the trainees felt hindered in their language choice. Only through the researcher's additional questions on motivations and perceived effects of language use did the trainees realise that they had limited themselves. While they were initially guided by their learned aversion to 'mistakes', they later decided to move their mental focus from competence to conviviality, which better balanced their expectations of language use and its potential in the workplace.

Analysis revealed that it was less the structural conditions and more the trainees' personal interpretation of other peoples' stances (the presumed judgement of their professional competence) that limited their use of alternative languages. The trainees identified their internal acts of self-language policing and have decided to be more confident with languages in their day-to-day lives. When they realised that they could refuse the applied linguistic lens focused on the mistakes, they started to guide their use of languages with newly gained confidence in their own communicative skills, emphasising mutual understanding. They ceased to construct multilingualism as proof of professional competence and started to see it as a fundamental aspect of their own well-being, personal self-realisation and growth. In so doing, they aligned their stances with those of the seniors and so re-coupled the social and the linguistic aspect of language use in day-to-day life, feeling freed and more comfortable using their whole personal linguistic repertoire. Striving for accuracy ceased to be a criterion for communication and instead became a personal joy or specific professional aspiration.

That said, participants often declared their 'love for languages' with reference to their professional position as language workers. Language as a system with standard norms was at the core of their thoughts on multilingualism. They have not renounced the existence of separate languages and their link to member states. However, they drew a line between linguistically precise professional outputs and day-to-day communication, where multilingualism can lead to self-actualisation and create affective personal bonds.

This study aims to inspire more innovative approaches with a potential direct effect in multilingual workplaces, especially in those welcoming workers from monolingual or otherwise homogenous social environments. The first is employing the participative research method in workplaces. In this study, participants felt free to talk about their work experience and to

experiment with the use of languages because the workplace management was friendly, open-minded and acknowledged the importance of life-long learning at work. However, this aspect may limit the relevance of the findings in highly competitive or strictly regulated workplaces. Another approach is to engage in longitudinal and in-depth interviewing while refraining from methodological nationalism. Ceasing to see the participants as representatives of standardised named languages allowed for new perspectives and a profound understanding of the sociopragmatic processes happening in the workplace.

Ultimately, the participants in this study are sending a common message to managers, teachers, and learners: multilingualism is a social experience in which self-confidence and conviviality matter more than the number of languages and their standards. State-guaranteed language norms have a particular place, but it is not one from which they can automatically rule all human experience. They remain a reference for specialised tasks and outputs of translators, terminologists, or professional proof-readers, but language in real life is about more than linguistic performances measured against standard language norms – even in the life of high-profile language workers.

Notes

1. This way of presenting the participants has been adopted to ensure the anonymity of the individual participants.
2. All participants have given their written informed consent to become part of the study before their first interview. The participants have also been given an opportunity to review the submitted manuscript. The study has obtained ethics approval by the Ethics Review Panel of the University of Luxembourg on 26 June 2020, under the reference ERP 20-025 WorkLingEU.
3. Since the drawings did not directly contribute to the analysis or interpretation conducted in this study, they will not be included in the data presented in this article.
4. Two of them had already been interviewed as (S1).
5. Transcription conventions are as follows:
 - ? = rising intonation
 - . = falling intonation
 - (*laugh*) = paralinguistic features
 - this = stress
 - = pauses of varying length
 - [] = implicit reference
 - (...) = omitted text part
 - = truncated speech
 - R: = researcher
 - S1: = senior - first round
 - S2: = senior - second round
 - T1: = trainee from the 1. term
 - T2.1: = trainee from the 2. term – first interview
 - T2.2: = trainee from the 2. term – second interview
 - T2.3: = trainee from the 2. term – third interview
6. Malta and Ireland are bilingual countries with English as the second language. However, only one official EU language can be chosen per member state. In this case, Maltese and Irish were chosen, respectively.

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