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French and language ideologies in a multilingual European Union institution: Re-constructing the meaning of language choice at work

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates stances in reflective interviews to identify cultural patterns that shape the meaning of language choice within an international unit of an EU institution in Luxembourg. We employ the analytical concept of “language cringe” and propose a complementary concept, “language push,” to showcase the effects and reproduction of language ideologies in day-to-day talk about languages at work. Our analysis reveals that, within a workplace culture that encourages flexible and convivial use of multiple languages, French speakers have to deal with the effects of the “logic of honour,” which is culturally associated with the use of French in France. Based on our findings, we suggest that language choice should be considered a cross cultural dimension in multilingual environments, and that language-sensitive management scholarship should broaden its considerations beyond the traditional issues of language proficiency, namely by inspecting relational and affective factors that shape language use in multilingual workplaces.

1. Introduction

Multilingualism within European Union (EU) institutions has always been a sensitive issue (Phillipson, 2010; Wodak et al., 2012; Kraus, 2018). While each member state can select one official language for communication with their citizens, the internal language regimes remain complex and dynamic (Kruse, 2012). In the past, French held a central position as the internal language. Since the 1970s, however, English has progressively been claiming space (Sokolovska, 2016), especially after the 2004 “Eastern” enlargement (Krzyżanowski, 2010). This trend has led to political tensions (Sokolovska, 2016) and sparked political efforts to restore the role of French in the EU institutions (Chazan & Brunnsden 2016; Schoen, 2022). Against this backdrop of the political-historical context of language use in the EU institutions, the present study focuses on the language choice between French and English at the micro-level of language use in an international workplace.

While a personal language choice between two languages at work might appear to be a niche concern within the predominantly monolingual and English-focused global scholarship (Tietze, 2004; Liddicoat, 2015), motivations and effects of language choice are of significant importance in international organisations, especially in the EU institutions that promote multilingualism (Kruse, 2012; Leal, 2021). With the increasing speed and scope of international migration over the last few decades, adopting the “multilingual way of seeing” (Piller, 2015) and understanding and managing language choice may become even more vital in international business and other organisational contexts that are characterised by high international turnover and changing language policies (Garrido, 2022). To date, language-sensitive managerial research has targeted companies rather than non-profit or public organisations (Angouri & Piekkari, 2018). Moreover, research in the EU institutions remains relatively rare (Krzyżanowski, 2010; Wodak et al., 2012; Leal 2021), while showing that the language of internal communication remains a matter of personal choice and team constellation in the EU institutions. Therefore, the pragmatics of language choice merits more investigation.

2. Previous research and theory

Language-sensitive research has introduced reflection on language use and its organisational and relational implications for management research relatively recently (Angouri & Piekkari (2018); Tietze & Piekkari 2019). Moreover, research on individual exchanges in multilingual settings (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008) has revealed how language choice emerges from the

subjective perception of shifting power dynamics within interactions across different space and time scales. This has enriched scholarly understanding of how power relations influence these practices (Vaara et al., 2005), the impact of a subsidiary context on language practices (Harzing & Pudelko, 2013), or the joint influence of the geographical location and the corporate environment (Langinier & Ehrhart, 2020). Studies from multinational and cross-border companies have also demonstrated that employees can successfully challenge official language regimes they perceive as unfair or unfavourable (Trépos et al., 2016, Nekula & Marx, 2014).

That said, previous studies have often focused on the uneven linguistic proficiency linked to power struggles, that have often been interpreted with reference to the ‘native’ versus ‘non-native’ categories (Brannen et al., 2017; Woo & Giles, 2017; Śliwa & Johansson, 2014; Gunnarsson, 2014; van der Worp et al., 2018; Wilmot et al., 2023). Critical voices across disciplines and fields have meanwhile questioned the linguistic relevance of the ‘native’ aspect, exposing the socio-political implications of the terms ‘native speaker’ (Dewaele & Saito, 2022), ‘native language’ (Doerr, 2009) and ‘mother tongue’ (Yildiz, 2012), both in scholarship and practice. However, the exploration of the intention attributed to language choice, beyond the considerations of personal linguistic comfort, is still relatively rare in workplace research (cf. Nekula & Marx 2014).

That said, language-sensitive scholarship has already challenged the relevance of certain beliefs about corporate language use, developing previously established cross-cultural management themes such as team dynamics, human resource management, or corporate language strategies in international workplaces (Beeler et al., 2017). We join those efforts, taking a dialectical approach that acknowledges the mutual influence of normative structures and individual agency over them (Beeler et al., 2017). From there, we aim to broaden management perspectives beyond exclusively national cultures and languages in order to critically rethink some assumptions (Tietze & Piekkari 2019), including those shaping meaning-making in the workplace (Kassis-Henderson, 2005).

2.1. Language ideology

Previous research further suggests to consider the impact of language ideologies on communication (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2023). Language ideologies are sociolinguistic categories of socially constructed sets of beliefs which mirror, construct, that create, mirror or reinforce a social hierarchy of languages, varieties, and speakers (adapted from Woolard &

Schieffelin, 1994). While it is possible to conceptualise language ideologies as a mere set of beliefs without considering their function of social stratification (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2023), the original concept of language ideologies has a strong critical aspect, highlighting their illegitimate effects in the society (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Irvine & Gal, 2000) and in the workplace (Lønsmann, 2014). From the critical theory perspective, the main function of language ideologies is to rationalise power relations, which fortifies normative discourse on languages at the societal level and influences interpersonal interaction (Irvine & Gal, 2000).

The central issue with language ideologies lies in their manipulative character. By shaping attitudes and beliefs towards members of different cultural groups, they give rise to stereotypes and prejudice (Vivian & Brown, 1995). Essentially, language ideologies are stereotypical rationalisations that connect personal characteristics to specific language use patterns. They frame certain languages, their variations, or speakers as inherently superior while attempting to present themselves as a neutral or ‘obvious’ depiction of sociolinguistic reality, discouraging critical discussion. In this sense, language ideologies function as tools of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu, 2001 [1991]), disguising social distinctions as natural differentiations and discouraging any scrutiny of their effectiveness. Individual speakers then have to deal with the fallout, as language ideologies exert dominance over the ongoing discourse (Kraft & Flubacher, 2023).

Two main types of language ideologies are particularly relevant in this study; their description below follows Woolard and Schieffelin (1994). First, the language ideology of *purism* constructs the standard variety of language as superior to other language varieties. Per this language ideology, any non-standard expression is considered a ‘mistake’ and judged as ‘bad’. The second language ideology, *native-speakerism*, elevates the ‘natives’ over the ‘non-natives’. It places the ‘native speakers’ at the top of an imagined social hierarchy of language users, from where they are seen as having automatically mastered ‘their’ language – as though they were both the owner and the most precious source of the language. A combination of the two above ideologies then constructs the idea of the ‘native speaker’, who is supposed to be the ultimate source of the most socially preferred variety of language. Those two ideologies also create and support the idea that the ‘native’ language is automatically preferred over the ‘foreign’ language, simply because linguistic proficiency instils mental comfort.

One of the practical consequences of purism and native-speakerism is that other types of language use are framed as socially less valuable. Thus, any non-idiomatic or non-standard

language use (be it a dialect, idiolect, interference of another language, or a simple mishap) threatens the language user's social standing. This effect is further pronounced in cultures where strong aesthetic concerns and sensibilities are assigned to language use, among which Siepmann (2006) lists French culture. Furthermore, the preoccupation with potential linguistic embarrassment, as a fear that "makes members of the society uneasy or even anxious" (d'Iribarne, 2009:314), also aligns with the value of professional "logic of honour", which d'Iribarne (2009) puts forward as culturally French. In that regard, the language ideologies of purism and native speakerism are part of the socially constructed knowledge about language, within which they are manifested as a preoccupation with a 'perfect' ('native' and 'pure') linguistic performance.

While the concern with standardised or 'native' language can be observed in various cultural contexts (Gunnarsson, 2014; Wilmot et al., 2023), it is not universal. This is particularly evident in multilingual work environments (Langinier & Ehrhart, 2020; Detzen & Loehlein, 2018) and teams employing English as a shared lingua franca (Nurmi and Koroma, 2020). Previous research within the unit under investigation highlighted that non-standard language use in internal communication was perceived as an integral aspect of life in the multilingual environment (Lovrits, 2022). Hence the importance of understanding the consequences of divergent language ideologies related to the use of French within a workplace culture that aligns with the language ideology of multilingualism (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2023), favouring effective multilingualism over monolingual proficiency.

2.2. Language cringe and language push as a metalinguistic stance

We explore the intersection of two cultural perspectives in an international work environment: one emphasising a 'perfect' (French) language and the other prioritising effectively practised multilingualism, i.e., one focusing on the symbolic, the other on instrumental functions of language use (Edwards, 2009). This discursive encounter of perspectives is manifested in the metalinguistic "stances". Stances often express affective or normative values and mirror organisational and societal norms (Cameron 2004) that define what can be thought and said, encompassing "identity claims, beliefs, assessments, appraisals and other forms of evaluation and positioning" (Lovrits & de Bres, 2021: 404). Therefore, the concept of stance is useful for in-depth investigations that link individual perception (micro-level) to organisational context (meso-level) and a broader societal macro-level (Coupland et al., 1998), represented by language ideologies and differing cultural frameworks in this study.

As an analytical concept, stance involves three key components (Jaffe 2009). First, there is an *object* towards which a person takes a stance (in this study, the choice of language). Second, speakers take a stance when *positioning* themselves towards the object (we will talk about “language cringe” and “language push” as two types of stance positioning). Third, a stance expresses the speaker’s *alignment* or *misalignment* with another speaker or stance (personal dis/approval of other people’s stances). The analysis will focus on stance positioning in particular, through the concepts of language cringe and language push.

Language cringe represents a moment in discourse (text or talk), in which the language user is apologetic about his/her language use, thus taking a deliberately *inferior* stance positioning towards the communication partner. Initially coined in applied linguistics settings (Park, 2011), the concept of language cringe has since been applied in other contexts, such as discourse on multilingualism in Australian families (Torsh, 2020) and among Anglophone immigrants residing in Luxembourg (de Bres & Lovrits, 2021). Since language cringe has primarily been examined in the context of English, there is a need to understand this phenomenon in relation to French, and languages at work in general in multilingual settings.

The function of language cringe is to address the fear of negative social consequences fuelled by language ideologies, a fear that has been discussed as “foreign language anxiety” in management scholarship (Aichhorn & Puck, 2017). Language cringe aims to elicit sympathy and pre-empt potential reproaches regarding potential non-standard or ‘non-native’ language use (de Bres & Lovrits, 2021). It is less tied to objectively measurable performance (linguistic competence/proficiency) and more to the social evaluation and negative judgement thereof, making it a predominantly cultural rather than linguistic issue. Indeed, what is “cringey” in one culture may not be perceived as such in another. At the same time, the concept is relational rather than referential, as its purpose is to manage the socially assessed appropriateness of language use, rather than to describe objective language competence or proficiency, which can be very high (Park, 2011).

3. Methodology

This study is part of a sociolinguistic project that investigates metalanguage in a multilingual terminology and communication unit of an EU institution in Luxembourg. Building on previous findings within the umbrella project (Lovrits and de Bres, 2021; Lovrits, 2022), our study investigates reflective metalinguistic stances, i.e., stances towards languages and

speakerhood (Spotti & Blommaert 2017). We trace how a culturally constructed preoccupation with refined language performance in the French cultural context (d'Iribarne, 2009; Siepmann, 2006) comes across in a convivial atmosphere of an international workplace of an EU institution that prioritises friendly relationships in multilingual exchanges (Lovrits, 2022).

Our research treats language as a social practice (Janssens & Steyaert, 2014; Karhunen et al., 2018), while emphasising the socially constructed nature of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 2001[1964]). The present study is qualitative and interpretive (Bonache, 2021), and takes an emic approach (Szkudlarek et al., 2020). We inspect the performance and interpretation of language choice from multiple perspectives as they emerge in the research investigation. In particular, we employ the “sensitizing concepts” (Blommaert and Rampton 2011:11) of language cringe (Park, 2011) and language push (our conceptualisation). As a complement to language cringe, we coin *language push* as a novel concept in our study. Language push represents a *superior* stance positioning between persons that are otherwise on the same (social, organisational) level. Language push is represented by a unilateral decision to use or not to use a language, without agreeing on that choice with the communication partner. Eventually, the concepts of language cringe and language push, nested in the cultural frameworks of perfect monolingual proficiency versus effective multilingual communication, allow for conceptualising and answering our research question: “How is the language choice between English and French performed and interpreted in the multilingual EU institution context?” Juxtaposing the evidence of language cringe and language push in our data will allow for reconstructing patterns of the implied interpretative (cultural) frameworks that make certain individual choices self-evident to some actors, while remaining invisible to others.

Within the paradigm of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 2001[1964]), we understand “culture” as an interpretive framework of sedimented knowledge, which is organised around a core concern and followed by representations that help address situations where the core concern is evoked (d'Iribarne, 2009: 310). Culture represents a shared mental universe that allows for a common way of understanding and acting (d'Iribarne, 2009). These ways do not necessarily require legitimisation in stable environments (d'Iribarne, 2009). However, the explicit negotiation of meaning becomes particularly relevant in contexts marked by increased transnational mobility. This brings about a plurality of expectations (Verschuere, 2000), notably in teams that have to deal with the varying ideological constructions of the ideal worker (Wilmot et al. 2023).

We focus on a culturally French context (d'Iribarne, 2009; Siepmann, 2006) that puts a lot of weight on the “aesthetic” function of language, achieved through its elaborated or “poetic” form (Cameron 2004: 314). However, this aspect should not be understood as linguistically intrinsic to the French language or speakers. Instead, those features are socially constructed (Bourdieu, 2001 [1991]) into interpretations of what constitutes professional communication. Similarly, the more “instrumental” approach to language use (Edwards, 2009) in the international unit does not simply result from the presence of multiple languages. We argue, rather, that it is shaped by metalinguistic awareness (the ability to reflect on language and its functions), flexibility, and adjustment to the communication partner (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2023). Sociolinguistics would term this a multilingual “way of seeing” (Piller, 2015).

Furthermore, together with Szkudlarek et al. (2020), we underscore the importance of context, as well as an emic approach to the investigation of language use in the workplace. The innovative potential of interpretivist approaches has slowly been gaining momentum in international business research (Szkudlarek et al., 2020). They complement the traditionally strong comparative dimension of cross-cultural management scholarship (Søderberg & Holden 2002), which is positivist and structuralist in nature, and hence implicitly static (d'Iribarne, 2009). The advantage of an interpretivist approach is that it adds a processual and dynamic aspect to the understanding of the needs of international human resources management and allows for investigating context-based issues and processes of meaning-making (Szkudlarek et al. 2020; Bonache, 2021; Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2023).

3.1. Data Collection

Our place of research represents a challenging-to-access yet highly visible setting, providing a unique opportunity for “sensitive case” sampling (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The unit under observation is international (not state-related or language-related). It provides terminology and communication services to the entire institution, while actively networking (namely with academic institutions) and promoting the work of EU institutions worldwide. The unit also experiences high turnover, welcoming a new cohort of trainees twice a year, while its staff members are also subject to mandatory employee mobility. The staff members assign, review and evaluate the work of trainees who are treated as regular junior workers in the unit. The trainees only had a short-term internship contract, whereas the staff had their work contracts with the EU institution for the lifetime.

All members of the unit participated in research, which, together with iterative interviewing, allowed for an in-depth, qualitative and reflective investigation of their motivations for language choices and the effects thereof (Holmes et al. 2016). Our participant group was comprised of workers coming from Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg and Poland, among which were eight trainees on a 5-month paid traineeship, their three tutors and the head of unit. A total of 12 people (one man and eleven women) participated in reflective semi-structured interviews, which mapped their stances towards multilingualism and language use at work. All participants had at least a C1 level in English, the default working language in the unit. Proficiency in French varied more from participant to participant (B1-C2), as it was not a job requirement at their place of work.

Our data gathering followed participatory action research principles (McIntyre, 2008) that have been employed in businesses and organisations on a larger scale since the 1980s, to investigate and steer processes of change (McIntyre, 2008). Participatory action research can yield a similar output to the collaborative management approach, but it is better suited to investigations of more loosely structured teams (Coghlan et al., 2012). The benefits of action research are specifically underscored for innovation management (Ollila & Yström, 2020). A methodological prerequisite is, as in any qualitative study, that the researchers adopt a habit of *“reflecting (on the process and progress of their research) and being reflexive (considering their shaping influence on the research and its influence on them)”* (Holmes et al., 2016: 5). In participatory action research, data are collaboratively constructed with participants, who reflect and adapt their actions based on their experiences in research (McIntyre, 2008). The researcher may challenge conventional beliefs with questions like “I wonder what would happen if...?” (McNiff, 2013:29), in our research, for instance, “... if you openly asked for another language?”.

The most important aspects of the research process are that our participants actively shaped the research agenda (the participatory aspect) with a common aim to better understand and potentially enhance their work communication (the action aspect) through their research experience (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). We gathered data in iterative semi-structured interviewing via virtual platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic. The initial round of interviewing prompted reflections on language needs, expectations, and actual language use. The topics initially set for common discussions were general – participants were asked to reflect on their language use, its motivation and effects, for instance: “Would you say that the

role of some languages has changed since you have been working in the unit?” Subsequent inquiries delved into specific aspects emerging from the interviews, such as the role of ‘native English speakers’ in the team, language formality levels, and reasons for language choice, for example: “Does hierarchy influence the choice or use of languages, and if so, how?”. The process of interviewing resulted in 30 hours of recordings – one hour long each, on average. Three staff members were interviewed twice and four trainees three times. A detailed report about the data gathering has been published in a previous report (Lovrits, 2022).

3.2. Data analysis

Electing to explore emergent information in depth, rather than follow a pre-structured investigation, we have taken a micro-focused interpretivist approach and investigated one phenomenon from a variety of perspectives. As our study is based on a purposeful, i.e., non-representative sampling (Smith, 1984), it does not aim to “*reflect a single, converging explanation (as is typically done in qualitative positivism), but [...] show how the same phenomenon is experienced and viewed from a plurality of viewpoints and perspectives.*” (Bonache, 2021:42). To present this plurality in a coherent, concise, and transparent manner, our analysis identified the need for a new concept, which we coined within the theory of sociolinguistic stance and termed “language push”.

The participants’ stances towards French and French speakers emerged as an important topic, so we decided to proceed with a micro-analysis, in order to unveil how the particular language choice between English and French is performed and interpreted. In the first step of the analysis, we used *f4analyse* software to identify transcript segments containing stances toward French or French speakers as the *objects* of stance. Next, we identified participants’ *positioning* that we later interpreted as instances of language cringe and language push. Our further analysis followed the socio-pragmatic tradition (Blommaert, 2007), which aims to establish discursive links between individual intentions associated with a certain language use as well as the actual effects thereof in the given social context.

The analysis of the sociopragmatic intentions and perceived effects of stance positionings began with a communicative situation between two trainees, one of whom apologized in advance for her French mistakes, prompting the other to switch to English in response. Based on the theory of sociolinguistic stance, we identified these mutual positionings as instances of language cringe and theorized language push. Subsequently, our analysis linked the stance

positioning of other people to the initial situation and interpreted the language choice in the institutional context as a fallout of the “logic of honour”. The process of linking plausible interpretations in one concise picture that interpretatively exposes the plurality of reflected motivations and perceived effects of the same situation (Bonache, 2021:42) is described in detail in the findings section below.

4. Findings

When reflecting on language choices at work, our participants did not make reference to the local context. Their relative disconnection from the local context aligns with previous research indicating that the workplaces of EU institutions are more akin to a “microcosm of Europe” (Wodak et al., 2012:159). In the workplace context, where all workers were either actively plurilingual or at least striving for a multilingual experience at work, English was unanimously considered to be the default vehicular language, as exemplified by one trainee’s verbatim:

Excerpt 1

... something happens and I feel like: "Oh, okay now we have to talk about- you know- let's go back to English", to our safety zone, in a way.

Reflecting on the reasons for the predominance of English in their work, our participants came to a shared conclusion that mobility across a wide European area pushes for one vehicular language, which happens to currently be English for them. Although no single EU member state can impose ‘its’ language onto others, the participants’ views aligned with Kruse’s claim (2012) that languages are a matter of member states’ political interest. Regarding the adoption of vehicular English, one of the staff members noted:

Excerpt 2

It- it wasn't imposed or- imposed authoritatively, it was bottom-up, but keep in mind that part of this .. bottom (*laughing*) were the MEPs [members of the European Parliament] and, uh, the- um, the governmental representatives, the experts in the- in the different bodies of the European Union.

The above excerpt exemplifies the unit staff's view of English. With characteristic playfulness (expressed through linguistic amusement at the unintended pun on 'bottom' in the above extract), the staff members framed English as a common language, recognised both across and within the institutions as a result of the democratic process of developing language preferences within the EU institutions. However, as our further analysis demonstrates, the idea of English as a 'default' language may not have been universally recognised within the institutions.

4.1. Discursive cringe followed by discursive push

Our analysis of instances of language cringe and language push starts by a reflective recollection of a language choice between two trainees – Elodie and Margaret (all names henceforth are pseudonyms). Elodie, coming from France, was considered a 'native French speaker' in the unit. For Margaret, French was a 'foreign language' that she wanted to practise at work. As Margaret anticipated that simply starting to speak a 'foreign language' might be frowned upon, she first performed a language cringe, apologising for her imperfect French. She gives her reasons in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 3

I feel always the need to talk French. I really love French but I'm afraid of talking it. I mean, because I don't feel secure about the knowledge of the language yet. And I have people who know French- I have the friend trainee who's our colleague and French is her mother tongue and I have also other people who speak French and they are now friends. But I feel the need to add, every time that I see them- to move forward after the "bonjour"- to say I'm sorry for my mistakes, I am not used to talking French...

Margaret, wanting to use French but fearing the social rejection of her mistakes, talks about apologizing for her French. That should elicit a discursive green light to use the language without losing face, which is a function of language cringe previously identified in applied linguistic research (Park, 2011). However, Margaret's language cringe did not elicit the expected effect.

Instead of reassuring Margaret that speaking non-standard French would be fine, Elodie performed a language push for English. From the theoretical lens of stance positioning, Elodie took a superior discursive position in communication with an otherwise socially equal partner, by unilaterally deciding on English as the right language of communication. Elodie mentioned that she was often an addressee of language cringe related to French. She giggled and seemed uncomfortable when talking about the language cringe addressed to her:

Excerpt 4

I just speak English because (..) I don't want to embarrass the person in front of me either. I start to speak French and- and they just tell me (*giggling, acting*): "I don't speak French very well, I'm sorry!"

To Elodie, the language push for English was an obvious reaction to the language cringe related to French. The possibility that a language learner might wish to speak French “not very well” was not an option that Elodie considered, let alone negotiated.

That said, the traditional assumption that individuals favour their ‘native’ language for the sake of linguistic comfort and communication control does not apply to this situation. If language proficiency and one’s own ‘native language’ comfort were automatically the decisive factors, Elodie would have chosen her ‘native’ French, while Margaret would have favoured English. They both did exactly the opposite: Margaret wished to step out of her comfort zone and practise her imperfect French, whereas Elodie opted for English so as not to cause social discomfort to her colleague.

Despite the shared intention to foster friendly communication, the enactment of language cringe and language push had negative consequences for both trainees. Elodie felt uncomfortable as the recipient of language cringe and attempted to rectify the situation with a language push for English. Unfortunately, Elodie was unaware of Margaret’s desire to step out of her comfort zone, as Margaret did not dare to openly request that they communicate in French. The implied language ideologies in their mutual stance positioning hindered an open negotiation of their language choice, as they provided ‘obvious’ interpretations of the other’s stances.

Moreover, it might seem that Elodie had the upper hand in the situation, drawing on her

superior ‘native speaker’ position, while the practical effects were unfavourable only for Margaret. However, Elodie’s language push for English cannot simply be interpreted as an expression of “power in and over discourse” (Wodak et al., 2012). The next subsection will continue to build a thick description of the context for Elodie’s language push for English, exposing that the language push happened in a discursive space, where the choice of French, especially by French speakers, was generally frowned upon due to cultural stereotypes. Thus, Elodie’s decision to choose English also represents her own face-saving strategy.

4.2. The trainee peer-group context

Within the peer group, Margaret’s wish to practise French was rather an exception. Other trainees repeatedly shared unpleasant experiences that they had when using French outside of the current work context. The trainees talked about disliking French people’s fixation on ‘proper’ French, while keeping with the stereotype that French people ‘misbehave’ when communicating with someone whose French is non-standard:

Excerpt 5

Well, I know that’s the first foreign language every French person learns, that’s English. Um, and we also had one of the former trainees. She’s got her last day today. She’s French. And we talked about it and she said, yes, that she also thinks that French people often pretend that they don’t understand English.

The trainees collectively held a stereotype of French people pushing for ‘proper’ French in Luxembourg and France, presenting those experiences as a recurrent topic of small talk among the trainees. Although Elodie was considered a dear colleague who used English “as a native”, the nature of the trainees’ discussions about French and French speakers still fortified the French stereotype – Elodie was simply a singular exception to the rule. This represents a form of language ideology manipulation known as “erasure” – this occurs when generalised beliefs about a social group persist, even when individual experiences with its members contradict stereotypical views (Irvine & Gall 2000:38). Within the peer-team context that harboured strong stereotypical biases against French speakers, choosing English served as a face-saving strategy for Elodie’s position in her peer group, fighting off the negative stereotype of a French

person who unilaterally imposes ('proper') French on their communication partners. Additionally, Elodie could see a further reason for choosing English that is demonstrated in the last section of this chapter.

4.3. The staff members context

In contrast to the negative stances among the trainees, staff in the unit positioned themselves towards their own use of the French language with an explicitly *positive* affective load. Those who had worked in the institution for over two decades even linked French to what one of them called "*the old good days*", suggesting nostalgia for a time when French was more widely spoken in the institution. They also felt fully proficient and comfortable in French. Furthermore, the staff in the unit actively encouraged multilingual exchanges at work, often mentioning that they were consciously trying to use all the languages they knew as much as possible. All staff members spoke at least three languages fluently, were affectively invested in personal multilingualism, and encouraged it in their trainees. The unit also had a habit of using the local languages of their external partners:

Excerpt 6

And uh .. we gave also, at least, uh, I would say 15 courses to universities. [...] And we give it each time, uh, in the language of the university. [...] So, this, we try. When we can, we try to .. approach people in their language.

In contrast to the staff members' emphasis on adjusting to communication partners, self-actualisation, and a learning-oriented approach within the unit, a different perspective emerges in the mainstream institutional discourse. This perspective centres on the comfort of the speaker's own 'native' language, as observed in an article in the internal journal of the Court of Justice of the EU (Stryhn Meyer, 2020:20): "*In interinstitutional joint committees, it is common practice to use both French and English, thus giving the members and invited experts the possibility to choose the language in which they feel more comfortable.*" This framing of language choice aligns with the traditional focus on comfort and proficiency in international workplaces.

As mentioned above, the concern with the *speaker's own* (potentially 'native') comfort was in direct discord with the unit's pride about their members' constant learning and ability

to shift between languages according to their communication partners. Tina, a staff member from the unit comments on this issue in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 7

I mean, there are still situations where we have people in- in meetings who are just more comfortable in French, especially our French colleagues are sometimes- so well- don't have that- um, don't feel at ease- uh, with- with languages, especially with English (..) et cetera. And they, um, continue to speak in French and the others speak in English.

Tina's above reference to "feeling at ease" mirrors a mainstream institutional discourse that considers English and French to be equal alternatives for the internal purposes of the EU meetings, where both are used legitimately in order to ensure the speaker's language comfort. Nonetheless, the language comfort tied to the speaker's use of their 'native French' is not the only implication made in Tina's stance, as signalled by her expression: "especially with English". There is no linguistic ground for which the French speakers would have a problem "*especially with English*".

Taking into account the historical and political context of the role of French in the EU institutions, the choice to speak French can also be understood as a symbolic result of the politicised "struggle" between French and English (Chazan & Brunsden, 2016; Schoen, 2022). From Tina's perspective, however, the language push for French in big meetings was rather amusing. Her slightly condescending stance aligns with the unit's cultural framing of language choice as proof of the individual ability to learn and to adjust to the dialogue partner. Tina deliberately came back to the topic a few minutes later in her interview:

Excerpt 8

Like, I have this other colleague (*smiling*) well, she is capable- we're in a meeting with 20 people, and she's still able to say: "I speak- um, I will be speaking French."

(laughs).

It is unlikely that her French colleague intended to achieve amusement when they chose to speak their ‘native’ French in a big meeting where everybody else spoke English. By way of the language push, Tina’s colleague might have tried to promote more French in the EU institutions, following a cultural pattern of the “logic of honour” that restrains the readiness to discursively accommodate, even in situations of professional service (d’Iribarne, 2009). Alternatively, they could simply have chosen French for their own comfort. No matter the actual reason, Tina laughed when she recalled it.

Furthermore, the unit staff’s particular concern with the language push for French resulted in their concerted nudging for more English vis-à-vis the French colleagues outside the unit. One of the staff members even smirkingly talked about a meeting during which they had redirected communication from French to English. This happened after they had asked what language to use and their French *superior* expressed the wish to use French:

Excerpt 9

So we did the meeting in French, because it was just me [names of two colleagues], and her, so we could speak French. Although, again .. there [gives a smirk and starts to speak more quickly] when we started to do the presentation- because we had prepared a presentation- a PowerPoint presentation- which was in English, so, we switched to English again. [widely smiling]

Indeed, the staff in the unit intentionally avoided using French with their French colleagues, despite preferring to use French with their non-French colleagues. They cited various reasons for passing on French with the French colleagues; for instance, the writing process would be quicker in English because they could “*skip the French formalities.*” Indeed, the “logic of honour” (d’Iribarne 2009) requires formalities in French, drawing on the importance of status in French culture, which is mirrored in elaborate linguistic performances (Siepmann 2006). The unit’s staff tried to avoid this by pushing for English, despite being proficient enough to write formal French. Indeed, they felt ‘native-like’ in French, and were notably more comfortable in French than English. They continued writing in English, even when their French colleagues responded in French.

At this point, we can loop our interpretation back to Elodie’s language push for English. It is clearer now why Elodie considered English to be a “safe” language choice. She was also a French person working in a workplace culture that promoted multilingualism, with a staff that found their French colleagues’ language push for French amusing, and actively resisted it through their language push for English.

5. Conclusion

We investigated language choice in an EU terminology and communication unit in Luxembourg, aiming to understand how the language choice between English and French is performed and interpreted. First, our analysis unveiled uneven discursive positioning among socially and organisationally equal communication partners, which could not be explained by personal or organisational status. The unequal positioning stemmed from language ideologies, i.e., socially constructed sets of beliefs which mirror, construct and reinforce a social hierarchy of languages, varieties, and speakers (our definition adapted from Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). The effects of language ideologies were exposed as two stance positionings – language cringe (Park, 2011) and our newly proposed concept of language push.

Following Park (2011), we defined *language cringe* as a stance that involves deliberately *inferior* positioning among equal dialogue partners. In contrast to language cringe, we theorised *language push* as a stance that features a deliberately *superior* positioning among otherwise equal dialogue partners. Language cringe aims for the authorisation to use a certain language, whereas language push represents a unilateral decision to use or not to use a language. Both of these stance positionings aim to prevent a “loss of face”, which would be based on (potentially politicised) rationalisations upheld through language ideologies; namely purism, native-speakerism, and multilingualism (de Bres, 2014). Our conceptualization aligns with prior research on ideological constructions of the ideal worker (Wilmot et al., 2023), revealing a contrasting tendency—the native language being viewed as an inappropriate choice in a multilingual team.

As a plausible explanation of the differing meanings related to language cringe and language push, we have identified cultural differences between a (multilingual) cultural framework of the unit and a (monolingual) French context. We put into contrast the cultural framework that is characteristic by a multilingual mindset or “multilingual way of seeing” (Piller, 2015), i.e., drawing on conviviality, flexibility, and adjustment of language in

(multilingual) social and workplace contexts (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2023; de Bres & Lovrits, 2021) versus a more norm-focused (monolingual) French cultural framework that prioritises individual control and command of language. We claim that both language cringe and language push are unhelpful effects and re-enforcement of language ideologies, while their cultural embeddedness represents another layer of the context for their interpretation. We found that language choice can be a more complicated aspect of cross-cultural communication than it may seem, while “multilingual and monolingual ideologies still dominate social orders with major consequences for individual speakers” (Kraft & Flubacher 2023).

We further demonstrated a practical implication of culturally embedded moments of language cringe and language push. One trainee, Margaret, missed the opportunity to practice French at work due to her language cringe being misinterpreted. Her French colleague, Elodie, performed language push for English, to fight off challenges related to the aftermath of the culturally French “logic of honour” (d’Iribarne 2009). The trainees felt intimidated by the reactions of French speakers to their imperfect French and refused to use French at all, while the unit’s staff preferred an imperfect yet convivial multilingualism over the pursuit of perfect mastery and elegance in language use.

In terms of practical relevance, our study has demonstrated that differing assumptions about language use at work remained hidden unless its members were prompted to negotiate language choices, instead of taking their interpretations for universally granted. Indeed, the unit’s management incorporated the topic of open discussions about language use into their onboarding agenda for new trainee cohorts, since explicit talk about language choice and its effects has proven vital in our research. Furthermore, this analysis exposed the effects of the culturally constructed “logic of honour” (d’Iribarne 2009), in which the (monolingual, French) idea of professionalism came across as a reluctance to adjust discourse in a multilingual, international workplace. Therefore, we propose that this aspect should be considered in international teams. Additionally, the fact that tension related to the choice of French was raised as a topic by the participants themselves, not previewed by the researchers, demonstrates the relevance of an emic approach (Szkudlarek et al., 2020) and participatory action research in management research (Ollila and Yström, 2020).

While qualitative, context-dependent and interpretive results cannot be generalised, they can offer a novel perspective on lived experiences and the scholarly understanding of these (Jonsen, Fendt, & Point 2018). Thus, our study may inspire further explorations in research

and practice that can help intercultural teams understand and manage communication, particularly by going beyond the difference of communication styles linked to high or low contexts (Hall, 1990) and monolingual standards (Wilmot et al. 2023) towards open negotiation and consideration of the situational context of cross-cultural communication. Blommaert and Rampton (2011) call this the “management of ignorance”. It refers to measures that help to identify the missing or differing knowledge in communication. We suggest considering the differing expectations about when and how much to adjust one’s language choice to the needs and wishes of a communication partner as part of “constructive intercultural management”, which aims to leverage opportunities in linguistic and cultural diversity rather than focus on its constraints (Barmeyer et al. 2021).

Based on our findings, we propose that language-sensitive management scholarship may further expand its focus beyond traditional considerations of proficiency and personal comfort, heading towards a more cooperative perspective on language use as an enactment of self-actualisation, life-long learning and cooperation. Our study particularly points towards the importance of relational and affective factors that co-shape (the meaning of) language use and, consequently, relationships in multilingual workplaces. Language cringe and language push are unhelpful effects of language ideologies and means of their further perpetuation. Management measures have the potential to alter the inferior and superior stance positioning, while nudging towards open discussions about language choice and its effects. Moreover, we contend that understanding the effects of language ideologies, which are manifested in both national (territorially-bound) and workplace cultures, can enhance critical language awareness in international teams (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2023). This, in turn, can foster greater cultural agility, characterised by the “tolerance of ambiguity, resilience, curiosity, perspective-taking, relationship-building, and humility within a cross-cultural context” (Caligiuri et al., 2022).

6. References

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