

Linguistic authority in the context of European mobility: addressing the empty promise of élite multilingualism

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines linguistic authority in an international department of a European Union institution in Luxembourg. Using socio-pragmatic discourse analysis, it investigates language workers' stances towards language use at work. The findings reveal manipulative effects of language ideologies – (élite) multilingualism and native speakerism – that promote a business-like understanding of the value of language(s) in a public institution. While the institution benefits from this setup, its negative effects seem more pronounced for (“routed”) workers in unstable situations of international mobility compared to those who are settled (“rooted”). The paper advocates for increased critical language awareness and seeks to sensitise stakeholders to the effects of language ideologies in professional settings. This discussion is particularly relevant for public institutions that promote multilingualism while using English as the common language of communication. However, it may also inspire other multilingual organisations in which management aims to enhance their employees' work experience.

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Introduction

As global mobility transforms work dynamics, the role of languages in organisations faces critical scrutiny across fields and contexts (Angouri and Rebecca 2018; Detzen and Loehlein 2018; Duchêne 2011; Garrido 2022; Karhunen et al. 2018). Discussions revolve around two key topics. The first emphasises efficiency within an economic perspective, or ‘market logic’ (Block 2017), focusing on the perceived challenges of information transfer and the related economic aspects of multilingualism (Brannen et al. 2014; Grin 2003; Wilmot 2022). The second issue is philosophical-political, highlighting the democratic need for linguistic representation and a general concern about the dominance of one or a few languages backed by the socio-economic power of certain states (Kraus 2018; Kruse 2012; Kruse 2012; Leal 2021; Phillipson 2010).

According to critical scholarship (Block 2017), language regimes tend to align with the socio-political needs of powerful actors, rather than with high ideals. Therefore, this study refrains from advocating for a specific language regime in EU institutions. Instead, it makes use of the philosophical concept of authority (Zagzebski 2012) to demonstrate that a critical discussion about day-to-day language use and its effects on workers' lives is needed, alongside the economic and political debates.

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In that sense, the study joins the recent trend in humanities and social sciences investigating “prosaic multicultural” (Boesen et al. 2023), while focusing on conviviality in multilingualism (Lovrits 2022).

The analysis takes a critical socio-pragmatic approach, emphasising the purpose of language use that links individual intentions (expectations) to their effects within situational and societal contexts (Blommaert 2007). Anchored in the theory of language ideologies (Woolard 2016) and drawing from critical research on language use in public institutions (Sunyol and Codó 2019; Zimmermann and Flubacher 2017), the study examines the role of linguistic authority in an international unit of an EU institution in Luxembourg. Findings reveal that, despite the well-intentioned motives of the unit’s management, their low critical awareness (Verschueren 2004) and business-like pressure limited internal linguistic authority, leading to disappointment and structural injustice.

The article primarily addresses subjects concerned by the discourse on language regime in the EU. However, this study cannot be seen as representative of the EU institutions, as preferences for certain language(s) in internal communication vary across teams, spaces, and over time (Krzyżanowski 2010). Instead, the study exemplifies patterns that can conceptually be transferred to other organisational contexts. Underlining the importance of “psychological safety” in the workplace (Nurmi and Koroma 2020), this research is relevant for management aiming to attract and retain younger talents, who seem to be more attuned to their well-being at work than previous generations have been (INSEAD 2023).

Critical discussions on language needs in the EU context

Multilingualism is a core principle of the EU (Kruse 2012). While each member state has the right to choose one official language for communication between the citizens and the EU bodies, the internal language regime is not officially regulated (Leal 2021). Replacing French, which was historically the main vehicular language, English has been gaining ground since the 70s (Sokolovska 2016). This has been criticised for imposing cultural and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 2010), endangering linguistic diversity and democratic participation (Wodak, Krzyżanowski, and Forchtner 2012), thwarting the development of the European identity (Kraus 2018), and reinforcing inequalities (Leal 2021). Nevertheless, despite emerging as a political agenda opposing the prevalence of English (Krzyżanowski 2010), multilingualism has remained a politically sensitive matter (Kraus 2018; Phillipson 2010; Wodak, Krzyżanowski, and Forchtner 2012), namely because choosing a few more languages does not lead to fairer democratic representation, but rather to “élite” multilingualism (Kruse 2012).

The adjective “élite” signifies the socially constructed value of a few ‘chosen’ languages and, consequently, their superior socio-economic value. The term multilingualism can then refer to the languages used in a certain space or by an individual. It is analytically useful to distinguish the spatial from the personal aspects, because the presence of more languages in a certain space does not necessarily mean that all the individuals use more languages (Saville-Troike 2003 [1982]), even if they have the language skills. Similarly, in a space where only one language is spoken, individuals may be multilingual without the opportunity to show it (Blommaert 2007). As this potential misalignment is particularly relevant in this study, the article also uses the term “plurilingualism,” coined in applied linguistics (Ehrhart, Hélot, and Nevez 2010) to underscore the personal side to multilingualism. While plurilingualism has been rooted in European humanistic education and intellectualism for many years (Sunyol and Codó 2019), it has also recently been framed as a “competitive advantage” within the market-oriented discourse of market logic (Detzen and Loehlein 2018). This idea is mirrored in the critical discussion of this study.

Critical sociolinguistics has explored “élite multilingualism,” while considering both personal and spatial dimensions (Barakos and Selleck 2019). Some educational institutions use the promise of multilingualism as a competitive advantage at the organisational level, to attract students from broader regions (Zimmermann and Flubacher 2017). However, the institutional discourse is not followed by policies, actions, or provision of resources, to ensure that students actually can practise

or use multiple languages. This results in an “empty promise of multilingualism,” where organisations benefit from multilingualism-oriented migration, while the mobile individuals’ expectations about multilingual practice are not met (Zimmermann and Flubacher 2017).

Language work in the context of European mobility

As geographical mobility shapes the character of modern society, workers without stable work affiliations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001) have to navigate a “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world” (George 2017). Moreover, individuals are expected to be proactive and entirely accountable for their lives, while their failures are perceived as personal rather than structural (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Kasmir ([2018] 2023:4) adds that mobility without affiliation to stable societal structures leads to pronounced “anxiety, insecurity, and feelings of un-belonging”.

In this societal context, work experience is often characterised by “routedness”. Being “routed” or “rooted” (Jackson, Crang, and Dwyer 2004, 2) does not merely represent a dichotomy between the territorial and de-territorialised, or national versus international. It further encompasses the feelings and effects of (un-)belonging when geographically mobile workers can(not) benefit from a stable work contract or, at least, from the support of their personal networks (Worth 2016).

Furthermore, transnational movement has particularly highlighted the importance of “language work”, in which language matters both as a work process and product in the global economy (Heller 2010). Primarily undertaken by professionals with linguistic degrees, language work encompasses a wide range of work types, such as brand consulting, text design, on-line marketing (Koller 2018), call centre services, translation, localisation (Heller 2010), or language training and teaching (Barakos 2019; Codó 2018). Language workers often take up freelance, contractual, or other socioeconomically precarious positions (Barakos 2019; Codó 2018), bearing the costs of linguistic upskilling while adjusting to the changing language needs in the market (Barakos 2019; Kraft 2020). The language industry has also been particularly criticised in research for offering low wages and no job security (Codó 2018, Koller 2018, Panaligan and Curran 2022).

Another aspect that fuels discussions concerning language work is the unequal socio-economic value of languages. Decades-long debates have emphasised the indispensability of English in international cooperation and transnational careers – within the “knowledge society” discourse, English is portrayed as a key driver for transnational development, progress, knowledge exchange, and international mobility (Hornidge 2013). This discourse is supported by the idea that some languages are neutral (‘anonymous’)¹, originating from ‘anywhere’ (Woolard 2016), thus allowing for smooth mobility across state borders. However, mobility is “an itinerary across normative spaces, and these spaces are always somebody’s space.” (Blommaert 2007, 73). Phillipson (1993) notes that the trans-national role of languages follows a colonial past.

In contrast (or additionally), a language considered ‘authentic’ (Woolard 2016) is tied to a specific territory and discussed as a ‘native language’. The use of the ‘native language/speaker’ category has been refuted as “native-speakerism” (Kabel 2009), also criticised for its colonial roots (Piller 2018), implied socio-political connotations (Doerr 2009; Śliwa and Johansson), and unsuitability even for language education purposes (Dewaele and Saito 2022). Nevertheless, despite the challenges to its validity across disciplines, ‘native’ varieties are often favoured in the work context (Fredriksson et al. 2006; Gunnarsson 2014). This creates tensions and contributes to a “divide” (Block 2017) through unequal socio-economic value assigned to the languages and their varieties (Panaligan and Curran 2022).

Linguistic authority and language ideologies

To address the previously outlined contradictions of competing discourses on languages, the study has chosen the philosophical concept of “authority” (Zagzebski 2012), further conceptualised as “linguistic authority” in the context of the theory on language ideologies (Woolard 2016).

Authority, according to Zagzebski (2012), is the ability to influence how knowledge is (re)produced, interpreted, and used in interaction. Authority can be built, exercised, refused, etc. Thus, a subject (person/institution) has or follows (but ‘is’ not) an authority. This study further distinguishes between internal and external authority, underpinning their relevance for the discussion on knowledge production in a democratic society (Habermas 1981). Individuals exercise their own internal authority stemming from their life in the “Community,” while the “State” and the “Market” are external sources of authority that impose themselves on individuals.

Internal linguistic authority draws on self-reflection and critical awareness, representing the individual’s control over communication and their own language-related knowledge. It legitimises action and serves as a rational prerequisite for personal *self-fulfilment* – a cognitive representation of “happiness” (Zagzebski 2012). Despite its self-reflective nature, internal authority is not selfish. It is interactive, involving dialogue, negotiation, and compromise to address contradictory information and interests. Indeed, “self-realization and self-determination are by no means merely individual goals” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001, 49).

In contrast, external linguistic authority is characterised as “a normative power that generates reasons for others to do or to believe something” (Zagzebski 2012, 102; emphasis added). This form of authority relies on impositions, such as societal or institutional regulations concerning languages. Terms like “linguagised world” (Jaspers and Madsen 2018) or ‘linguaged labour market’ (Kraft and Flubacher 2023, 372) underscore the external linguistic authority of the state within its territorial power (Bourdieu 2001) and the consequent economic value of languages in the (labour) market (Grin 2003).

Furthermore, external authority can turn to discursive *manipulation* in order to sidestep potential resistance stemming from reflective free will (Fuchs 1993), while still feeding off of its legitimacy. Manipulation can sideline internal authority or make external authority look like internal authority, either by making the option of internal linguistic authority less apparent or by creating the illusion that external authority effectively addresses individual needs. As such, manipulation can be understood as the main function of *language ideologies*.

Language ideologies are mental indexes that group socially constructed beliefs, reflecting, constructing, and reinforcing a social hierarchy related to languages, their varieties, and speakers (adapted from Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). Language ideologies shape ‘normative expectations and explanatory accounts’ (Blommaert and Rampton 2011, 14) and influence beliefs about how language works and should be used (Cameron 2004). The beliefs manipulated by language ideologies are typically presented as common sense, which inhibits the potential resistance to free will and limits internal linguistic authority.

Methodology

This study is part of a broader project examining metalanguage within a communication and terminology unit at an EU institution in Luxembourg. The umbrella project comprises three sociolinguistic studies, with the present article serving as the final contribution. The main research project evolved from a pilot study conducted in the same workplace, previously detailed in (Lovrits and de Bres 2021).²

Research took place in an international, cross-disciplinary unit providing terminology and communication services. The unit, collaborating with over a hundred translators across different units, maintained an informational website for a global audience. The participant group consisted of sixteen trainees on a paid traineeship (typically lasting five months), along with four staff members (trainees’ tutors and the head of the unit). The staff members had over 18 years of experience, came from multicultural backgrounds, and resided in Luxembourg. The trainees, except for the Luxembourgish one, had recently come from abroad to do their traineeship. All participants had university degrees in linguistics, translation, education, journalism, social media, or marketing. They were proficient in English (C1+) and had working proficiency in at least one other language. With the exception of the head of unit, all the participants were women.

Table 1. Codes and theorised effects.

First-order code	Effects of external linguistic authority	Effects of internal linguistic authority	Manipulative effects > social and individual injustice
State	Common good	Comfort	Politicization Native-speakerism > Discrimination based on origin
Market	Efficiency	Achievement	Commodification Marketisation Businessization > Depersonalised competitiveness
Community/ Persons	Social cohesion	Belonging	Self-doubt > Insecurity Exclusion > Un-belonging

Data gathering in 2020–21 took place online due to Covid-19 restrictions, following an in-person pilot from 2018–19. The employed semi-structured interviews were iterative, which allowed for deeper insights as participants discussed their research experience among themselves between interview rounds. (However, some participants were interviewed only once, due to the high turn-over rate in the unit.) Additionally, interviewing included discussions over the participants’ reflective drawing of metaphors (Molinié 2009), in order to make the iterative interviewing more engaging and facilitate affective stances (Jaffe 2009), i.e. affective positioning towards languages and speakerhood, similar to the study by de Bres and Lovrits (2021). Participants’ drawings (Figure A1. in the Appendix) were not considered data in the present study. Instead, they served as prompts during the interviews. Now, they visually illustrate the arguments presented in this article.

Interviews were led with respect to participant perspectives, facilitating deep reflection on language use in the workplace. Initial topics were broad, prompting reflections on language needs, expectations and actual language use. Further inquiries included more specific aspects that had emerged during interviewing, namely the role of ‘native English speakers’ in the team, following up on the previous findings (Lovrits and de Bres 2021), the levels of language formality, and reasons for language choice.

Guided by participatory action principles (McTaggart 1997; McIntyre 2008), the researcher was not merely an observer; rather, she encouraged participants’ reflections by offering alternative perspectives, such as: “What would happen if you asked for an alternative language?” The action aspect of research involved shared learning with the aim of intentional improvement (McNiff 2013), which was manifested in certain changes to the standard practices in the unit, as will be outlined in this text. These changes were also detailed in previous reports (Lovrits 2022; Lovrits et al. 2024).

The interviews were one hour long on average, resulting in 37 recorded hours. Audio recordings were transcribed and coded in their original languages (mostly English, one Luxembourgish, one bilingual Czech/Slovak). Coding started deductively by identifying stances in which the participants referred to one of the sources of linguistic authority. The inductively assigned first-order codes (Market, State and People) were inspired by the theory of communicative action (Habermas 1981). For an overview of the codes and theorised effects, see Table 1 below:

The study aims to answer the following research question: “How does linguistic authority feature in participants’ stances towards languages and speakerhood at work, and with what implications?” By focusing on the aspect of linguistic authority, the analysis sought to identify the perceived and intended effects of talk about languages and speakerhood (Spotti and Blommaert 2016), and to interpret them within a broader institutional and societal context (Blommaert 2007).

Findings

The presentation of findings begins with an overview in section 6.1, introducing the types of linguistic authority linked to the desired effects of language use. The next two sections describe manipulations that limit internal authority and its implications: first, the “businessization” (Pagano 2017) of

languages resulting in vain expectation of multilingualism in section 6.2, and second, “native-speakerism” related to the state’s hegemony over ‘its’ language (Bourdieu 2001) in section 6.3. Finally, section 6.4 introduces a contrasting perspective that resisted the respective discursive manipulations.

Sources of linguistic authority in the workplace context

When participants thought about their professional outputs, language was always a standardised language backed by a **state**, as illustrated by the metaphor of knights at a round table (N°8). Nonetheless, participants did not politicise language use. They never positioned themselves as fighting for the language (political) interests of any one state. The focus was rather on the rights of people in each respective state, described by one senior as: “the basic right of any EU citizen to be informed in their own language.” External linguistic authority stemming from state thus aimed for a linguistic **common good**, achieved through the curated use of standardised languages.

Furthermore, internal linguistic authority referring to a state-guaranteed language was linked to the perception of **comfort** in a local language use by the local people. That said, participants themselves wished to get out of their linguistic comfort zone by using languages in which they did not feel ‘local’. This wish was exemplified in metaphor N°2, which depicts languages as islands surrounded by ocean. According to the trainee-author of the metaphor, the ocean should be crossed despite personal discomfort in ‘foreign’ languages.

Next, external linguistic authority that followed the **market** logic (corporate-like needs of the institution) was linked to the notion of **efficiency**. This framed multilingualism as a costly organisational problem of multiple translation, similar to discussions in international business (Brannen et al. 2014):

Excerpt (1)³

S2: We would have to bother very much the translators who would have to revise everything we write in their language. So, this would really destroy the (...) uh productivity of our communication.

Within the market logic, English was framed as the default language choice, as its use prevented unnecessary organisational costs. As such, participants justified this choice by following the external authority of the institution, which was similar to business organisations in its need for efficiency. English was considered most efficient for the changing environment, because it allowed for the inclusion of more or other people in the future (in forwarded emails or with unfinished work). This was particularly relevant in this workplace, as it had a high turnover rate.

Furthermore, internal linguistic authority related to the (labour) market logic framed languages as proof of professional **achievement**. The head of unit was particularly admired by trainees for the number of languages that he could use:

Excerpt (2)

T2_3: I think for anyone- of course, especially for language professionals or at (the unit)- so, reaching, like, (the head of unit’s) abilities to really switch from one language to another in a matter of seconds is something that everyone should be- should be jealous of.

Internal linguistic authority, framing plurilingualism as personal achievement that can be compared among persons (evoking pride, but also competition), was more present among trainees than staff members. The above-mentioned “jealousy” of language repertoires will be particularly important for the discussion in section 6.3.

As a **community**, the unit represented the source of external linguistic authority for the trainees. Aiming for **social cohesion** through the use of languages, the staff enacted friendly flat management, while supporting what the management scholarship calls “collective competence” (Le Boterf 2018). Consequently, trainees felt that the collective check of language outputs saved them from

“the translator’s nightmare” of mistakes and enhanced their internal linguistic authority and willingness to explore new ways of work conduct (innovation) in general:

Excerpt (3)

T2_2: So they always encourage you to try and do stuff even if you’re not perfect and it applies to languages too.

Additionally, a visual metaphor of social cohesion (N°13) likens the use of language to a peaceful meadow stream; indeed, the unit was commonly pictured as a sort of “refuge”. Comparisons were made to other units and organisations that provide a “national service” in one language – considered “intellectually limiting” – and to the translation industry, which was described as stressful and exploitative. Nonetheless, both claims were also challenged in the interviews, as will be exposed in section 6.3.

Eventually, stances featuring internal linguistic authority that addressed individual needs were linked to **belonging**. Languages were purposefully used for personalised communication, i.e. as a means of creating personal bonds. For instance, in order to create a personalised first impression, external subjects were approached in their local languages. The feeling of belonging was also present in reflections about sharing a ‘native’ language:

Excerpt (4)

T0: You can talk about like different areas or nights out or whatever. So I think it’s kind of like that. Yeah, exactly, it’s more than the language. It’s like coming from the same area.

It is noteworthy that belonging was evoked as a shared territorial context *alongside* the linguistic aspect. Moreover, the excerpt above links the use of a ‘native’ language to the feelings of interpersonal relatedness without any reference to the territorial (state) control. This is an example of internal linguistic authority, contrasting with the territorially defined linguistic characteristics of a(n) (‘authentic’) language (Woolard 2016) that will be discussed below. After presenting linguistic authority in the context of the workplace under investigation in this section, the following two sections will expose discursive manipulations that prioritise sources of external linguistic authority and their effects in the workplace.

Businessized languages

Participants’ reflections on language and multilingualism often followed a business-like logic. To describe that aspect, this article adopts the term “businessization” (Pagano 2017). Businessization represents corporate-like “assembly-line mentality”, which focuses on quantity rather than quality of work outputs in non-business environments (Pagano 2017). It encompasses the “marketization” of languages (Zimmermann and Flubacher 2017), and may lead to their “commodification”, as discussed in the theoretical background of critical theories (Heller 2010). The implied overvaluation of the market logic (Block 2017) is particularly relevant for the discussion of the functioning of a public interest (non-business) institution, as the European Union’s primary aim is to “... promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples.” (TEU [1992] 2016). Indeed, economical aims only come in paragraph three of the cited grounding document.

In the interviews, multilingualism was discursively framed as the unit’s advantage in building a competitive workforce. It was put in contrast to the presumed limited perspective of monolingualism in political or language units and monolingual countries. Thus, similar to other public interest organisations (Sunyol and Codó 2019; Zimmermann and Flubacher 2017), the possibility of multilingual exchanges was used to attract collaborators who then worked either low-compensation (trainees) or volunteer jobs (external subjects like university students).

However, many trainees left the unit disenchanted over the actual lack of multilingual experiences. This was most concisely expressed in reference to metaphor N°3, depicting the Greek proverb, “when you hear of many cherries, hold a small basket”:

Excerpt (5)

T1: So, you are in a multilingual country and you are in the professional workplace- which is multilingual, so you expect many languages to be heard, to be exercised, to be practised (..) and then you realise that you come to reality- a daily reality- where you need a small basket. Because the main language used is the lingua franca [English].

Participants shared a belief that the workplace conditions (external linguistic authority) were not favourable to the use of languages other than English. However, further analysis revealed that both the perceived lack of internal linguistic authority aiming to achieve multilingual practice as well as the need for multilingualism were, for the most part, an effect of language ideologies that “businessized” languages.

First, vehicular English was framed as the ‘obviously’ default language through corporate logic and market terminology. A trainee reflects (over metaphor N°1):

Excerpt (6)

T1_1: English could be the money, like the currency, because we need a currency to buy and to, like, do all of these transactions. / ... / [Other languages] are like, the billboards that you have- when you’re passing around down the road- you have something like- it- it grabs your attention. It can be funny, it can be useful sometimes, but it’s not something that (..) really changes your direction.

English had undisputed value for the organisation, while other languages were seen as mere entertainment. In the ideological logic of language ‘anonymity’ (Woolard 2016), English was considered a “safe choice” and the default language, which could be used with anyone and assured efficiency within the institution.

Consequently, as English seemed to be the sole important language for the institution, the need for a multilingual experience was considered a personal whim. Internal linguistic authority could only be used as a personal preference, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

Excerpt (7)

S1: When we realise: ‘Ah, you speak Luxembourgish, may I speak to you to train my Luxembourgish a little bit?’, then we do that, a little bit. But on a completely personal level.

Thus, in a potentially multinational *organisation*, for which multilingualism is the foundation, multilingual exchanges could only happen if individual workers made a *personal* effort (if they exercised internal authority). That said, while staff members used their internal authority to speak other languages at a “completely personal level”, trainees often did not dare to ask to practise other languages, even when they shared an alternative language with co-workers.

Furthermore, the temporariness of junior job contracts emerged as a salient structural condition limiting trainees’ linguistic authority. They did not have much time to create relevant personal bonds that would support their perception of their own linguistic authority. Moreover, they did not know where they would land their next job, nor did they know what languages they would need for work in the coming months. Interestingly, the precarity of the trainees’ temporary contracts came as a surprise to the staff, as illustrated by an excerpt from an interview with the head of unit:

Excerpt (8)

S2: So, I can say it as a head of unit, because it doesn’t concern the institutions. But in big companies, they abuse the system to- to hire people with a low salary. And usually they stay one to two years, and then they let it go because they- (..) normally, they should have more money and (..) the companies are- are not willing to give it.

R: Okay.

S2: In the institutions, it’s different. But in the companies, I have experienced it very much. Also, our trainees, we try to find for them the posts. [He gives examples.]

R: Um, they don't get permanent contracts, um, in the institutions. As well. (...)

S2: Now, we try to open to the- to the- to the trainees who are in- we have opened the possibility to do some, uh, exams. And then they are on the so-called CAST lists from where we choose every time we can have a contract available. [He gives details.]

R: Mhm, mhm. Just (..) the CAST lists are again temporary- temporary contracts. (..)

S2: Um, yeah. (...)

In an attempt to showcase good practice in the institution, the head of the unit condemned exploitation in the language industry, whereby employers only offer short-term contracts to the young workforce. However, the temporary character of work has come to light as the actual condition for trainees in the unit, similar to what was pictured as exploitation in business.

Ultimately, despite considering English as the only important language at work and not daring to use any others, most trainees still longed for a multilingual experience. This was because they considered plurilingualism to be a competitive advantage in the labour market, particularly in the EU institutions. They shared a generalised 'the more the better' belief, which featured the influence of the ideology of multilingualism:

Excerpt (9)

T2: It's important that we know as many [languages] as (*laugh*) we can, just to get in, because the competition is really high.

Nonetheless, in the context of their actual English-only experience and the push to move across countries for short-time jobs, plurilingualism represents only a symbolic token in the hiring process. The trainees aimed to capitalise on the gate-keeping function of plurilingualism in the labour market. It was an elusive entry ticket to a job, not a means to fulfil their actual needs. Only two languages are typically required for jobs in the EU institutions, and once the applicant "gets in", their work is mainly in English. This was also the case for the traineeship.

Additionally, trainees mentioned a preference for learning French and German (in their free time and at their own expense, unlike staff with rolling contracts, who could attend language courses offered by the institution during working hours). The trainees linked their wish to learn those two languages to their usefulness in the EU institutions, which demonstrates their perception of the two languages as "privileged" in the internal communication of the institution (Kruse 2012). This also points to the construction of an élite plurilingualism that preferentially comprises English, French and German.

Native-speakerism and leveraging speakerhood

The staff inadvertently deepened the trainees' dread of the looming, post-traineeship job hunt by stressing the role of 'native' English. While the staff allegedly valued "other accents", the British variety of English was openly preferred. The 'native English' trainees were traditionally assigned proof-reading tasks. One of the trainees recalls:

Excerpt (10)

T2_3: And what I was also asked was that some people use American spelling, but at [the institution] we are supposed to use British spelling.

Some trainees took their linguistic inequality in English for granted, referencing the (language ideology) of 'authenticity' of language (Woolard 2016), which seemed to legitimise the preference for British English for international readers. Others felt that the privileged 'native English' position was unjust: their English proficiency was on a professional level, but this was "not enough". This was in spite of the fact that the unit addressed a global audience, not citizens in officially English-speaking countries – let alone the United Kingdom specifically. As the 'non-native English'

felt helpless in a competition that favoured their ‘native English colleagues’, they repeatedly resorted to excluding their ‘native English’ colleagues by speaking languages the ‘native English’ did not know, as discussed in the pilot study (Lovrits and de Bres 2021).

The tensions were only indirectly and cautiously pointed out in the main research interviews, without reproaching anything or anybody. Still, trainees in the main research were framing multilingualism as more important than ‘native English authenticity’. This extended the “English divide” (Block 2017) to a “language divide” – not only was the value of English varieties compared, but ‘native English’ was also counterposed to multilingualism, in an attempt to “leverage” the ideology of multilingualism and balance out the favourable positioning of the ‘native English’ trainees. This then resulted in the exclusion of the ‘native English speakers’, which other trainees considered “fair”:

Excerpt (11)

T2_3: We’re not saying it, but of course, the English language in the unit- So, they [native English speakers] may feel more um (...) important, but not in a positive way. / ... /

Yeah, I can understand that maybe only native English speakers could be- could feel (...) uh (...) um, excluded. Like, excluded from multilingualism? Um, feelings of inferiority- (...) but, you know (*smiling*), we’re feeling inferior because they’re native speakers. They can be- they can feel infe- inferior because they’re not multilingual speakers. So, it’s fair! (*giggling*)

Contrary to what is implied in the excerpt above, the ‘native English’ trainees could not be monolingual, since a working proficiency in two official EU languages was required for the traineeship. However, their ability to use other languages was suppressed by the combined effects of businessization and native-speakerism. Although the ‘native English’ trainees often showed deference and praised everybody’s level of English, it was not enough to mitigate their positioning as supervisors of their fellow trainees’ outputs.

Critical internal authority resisting manipulations

Despite the above-described pattern of constraints and tensions, one trainee was able to resist the effects of businessization and native-speakerism. The bilingual Luxembourgish trainee drew metaphor N°4, which was eventually deemed to be the most fitting depiction of how languages were used in the unit, both by the staff and trainees: (Figure 1)

While discussing the above drawing, the trainee expressed her internal linguistic authority, referring to the unit’s community as its source. She described how the unit had claimed ‘ownership’ of the variety of English they used at work:

Excerpt (12)

(LU) Also, et ass net d’ Englesch- net méi datt Englesch, wa mer an der Schoul geléiert hunn. Datt Englesch, wa mir op der Aarbecht schaffen, ass eent Englescht .. vu- (...) am Fond- (...) eist Englesch. Datt heescht, d’ ass- (...) D’ Englesch datt geschwat gëtt ass [the unit’s] Englesch.

(EN) So, it’s not the English- not the English we learned at school anymore. The English we use at work is the English (...) of- (...) in fact- (...) our English. That means, it is- (...) The English we speak is [the unit’s] English.

(author’s translation)

Escaping the manipulative dichotomy of ‘anonymity’ versus ‘authenticity’ of language (Woolard 2016), the English described above is both ‘authentic’ (linked to an experience and history from somewhere) and ‘anonymous’ (allowing for trans-border mobility and intercomprehension). While individual language use differs due to varied backgrounds, knowledge, and previous experiences, everybody “produces flowers”, which is what the organisation needs. Moreover, the trainee explicitly refused British control over the English language outside of the United Kingdom. Indeed, enforcing spelling standards outside of the state’s territory can be understood as linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1993), of which the trainee was aware thanks to her sociolinguistic studies and personal ties to a former British colony.

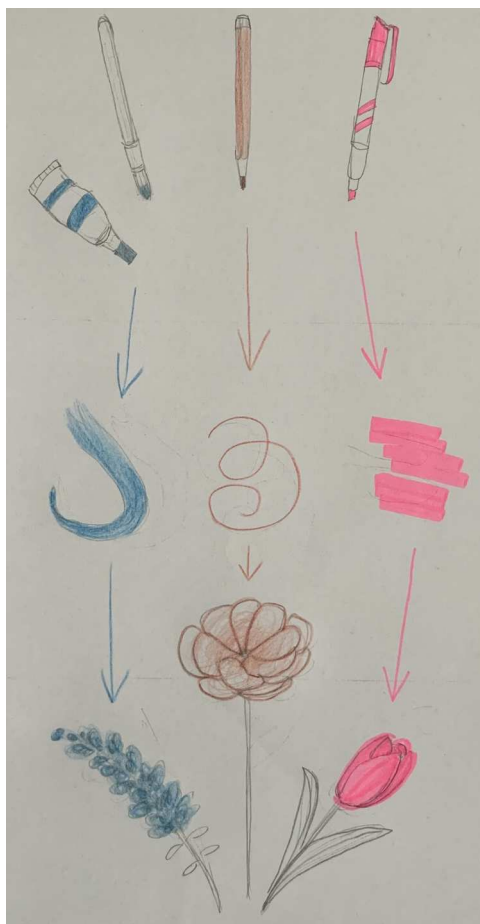


Figure 1. Flowers Metaphor.

Further aspects might have helped the trainee to make sense of the language situation at work. The trainee's university degree in sociolinguistics supported her critical metalinguistic awareness and, unlike her trainee colleagues, she did not experience the pressure typically associated with a temporary work placement abroad. She was Luxembourgish and not "routed", meaning that she had ready access to her personal networks and she was not considering a future career abroad. Last but not least, she had studied in the United Kingdom; thus, her English was considered 'native English'. As a result, she could have used any number of language ideologies to her advantage. Instead, she offered an empowering metaphor to her colleagues, with the aim of overcoming native-English-speakerism and the businessization of languages in the unit.

Ultimately, her critical reflection was welcomed, as participants saw this time as an opportunity to experience a state of heightened awareness about the social effects of language use. Sociolinguistic theory would categorise these effects as "metalinguistic wonderment" (Rymes 2021). One of the seniors regretted the quantity-oriented focus, which did not allow them to act upon what they understood as important for the unit members' linguistic well-being at work:

Excerpt (13)

(SK) S2: Je to veľká škoda že proste musíme produkovať. Musíme produkovať, ale môžeme- mohli by sme produkovať (*úsmev*) takým (...) normálnejším tempom, no. Aby sme mali čas sa i zastaviť a trochu porozmýšľať.

(EN) S2: It's a great pity that we simply have to produce. We have to produce, but we can- we could produce (*smile*) at a (..) more normal pace, yeah. So that we would also have time to stop and think a little bit.

(author's translation)

Prior to their participation in the research, the staff members did not see that the trainees' conditions for using more languages at work were different to their own. However, the iterative and dialogic character of the research gave them the time to reflect and gain more critical awareness. As a result, the staff realised that the trainees' work conditions were limiting and that trainees' internal linguistic authority needed to be nurtured. Therefore, the staff added the topic of multilingual experience to the onboarding procedure and decided to refrain from their celebration of a 'native English' trainee's presence in the team.

Discussion and conclusion

This article shows how language ideologies limit internal linguistic authority by making individual needs seem invisible, unattainable, or unimportant, thus reducing people to their role of workers – either fulfilling the business-like needs of an organisation or representing the linguistic interests of the state. In light of the findings, a critical inspection of linguistic authority is vital in the debate on social justice in the organisation of language work, within the broader discussion about “a conceptualization of Europe that emphasizes its social dimension as opposed to a view of Europe as a market, a demos or an ethnos.” Stråth (2011:, 36). Meanwhile, the task of employing internal linguistic authority is left up to potentially vulnerable individuals, presumably mainly women, who take up more precarious jobs (Worth 2016).

The findings of this study showed that multilingualism was elusive for many trainees in the omnipresence of English in their work. Those who managed to use more languages tended to frame plurilingualism as a competitive advantage, measuring up to the presumed monolingual 'native English' proficiency. Their legitimate need for personal achievement was perceived as fierce competition, as types of speakerhood were positioned against the backdrop of the legitimate organisational need for efficiency. This then spiralled out into a businessized fixation on the financial aspects of languages.

However, the negative effects of businessization and native-speakerism had different implications for the “rooted” and “routed” workers. The internal linguistic authority of the “rooted” participants, i.e. staff members and the Luxembourgish trainee, did not seem to be particularly affected. They employed their internal linguistic authority to fulfil their language-related needs without being pressured by the unpredictability of their next job (location). In contrast, the “routed” trainees framed their language use in the context of their insecurity and uncertainty regarding their future job and its location. They understood that having proof of the right language skills could be their entry ticket to a new job and thus felt torn between the expectations set by (élite) multilingualism and the ('native English') monolingualism.

Furthermore, the analysis unveiled an aspect that has previously been discussed as “linguistic imperialism” (Phillipson 2010) – requiring the use of British English – in a multinational institution when addressing an international audience. As long as participants could rely on the collective competence in the unit, most of them did not question the official discourse on the inevitable need for a 'native English' check. They believed that (British) English native-speakerism was an expression of care for the professional output. It is thus important to point out that any type of 'native speaker' criterion, including the terms “native-level” of “first language”, is not acceptable as a hiring requirement under EU law (European Commission 2004). If essential for institutional communication, the use of English should be consciously and consequently liberated from native-speakerism.

Indeed, when trainees started to reflect on their individual position and competition in the future hiring process, the inequality created by native-speakerism became evident to them as well. Consequently, the study demonstrated that the attempt to counter-balance the ideology of native-

speakerism by the ideology of (élite) multilingualism did not alleviate the burden, but rather added to feelings of un-belonging and exclusion. It highlights that exercise of internal linguistic authority necessitates critical reflection. Although the workplace was generally a psychologically safe environment, this did not prevent the adverse effects of language ideologies. While the participants were university-educated language workers, some with extensive experience in multilingual settings, only the trainee with a critical sociolinguistics background resisted the discursive manipulations. This highlights the strength of language ideology manipulation and the importance of critically informed language education.

Therefore, aligning with the call for more critical awareness in EU translation studies (Leal 2021), this article emphasises the need to acknowledge certain effects of language ideologies that perpetuate inequality and to support internal linguistic authority. Reflection and cultivation of critical metalinguistic awareness (Verschuere 2004), i.e. conscious reconstruction of meaning and effects of language use in the social and situational context, is needed to identify the source(s) of ideological manipulation. This article argues that limiting manipulations of language ideologies can facilitate the revitalisation of “the repressed capacities for expression and communication” (Habermas 1981, 580–581, author’s translation).

Ultimately, participants in this study intended to pinpoint a difference between the people-oriented management in the unit and the product-oriented approach of the language industry. However, the difference turned out to be smaller than originally believed. The system of short-term engagements assures a stable influx of international workers who offer up-to-date knowledge while only being paid symbolically. As the contracts are short and English is the dominant language at work, early-career workers are left accountable for their linguistic self-skilling based on labour market demands. This does not differ from practices in the business sector, despite the fact that the aim of the EU practices is not financial gain, and certainly not at the expense of young transnational workers. In this context, it is not enough to be aware of the manipulation when challenging state linguistic hegemony (Bourdieu 2001) or acknowledging the limitations of market logic (Block 2017). Internal authority has to be supported by a change in structural/societal conditions (Zagzebski 2012, 234–235), because some kind of “active management” is necessary in a context of conflicting demands and a world of uncertainty (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001, 50).

Notes

1. ‘Simple’ quotation marks indicate a term with a language ideology background from which the author wishes to keep a distance in this article. “Double” quotation marks indicate a citation.
2. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of Luxembourg’s Ethics Review Panel (ERP 20–025 WorkLingEU).
3. **Transcription conventions:**
 - ? = rising intonation
 - . = falling intonation
 - (*laugh*) = paralinguistic features
 - this = stress
 - (..) (...) = pauses of varying length
 - [] = implicit reference
 - / ... / = omitted text
 - = truncated speech
 - R: = researcher
 - S1: = senior; first interview
 - S2: = senior; second interview
 - T0: = trainee; pilot study
 - T1: = trainee; 1. term
 - T2_1: = trainee; 2. term – first interview
 - T2_2: = trainee; 2. term – second interview
 - T2_3: = trainee; 2. term – third interview

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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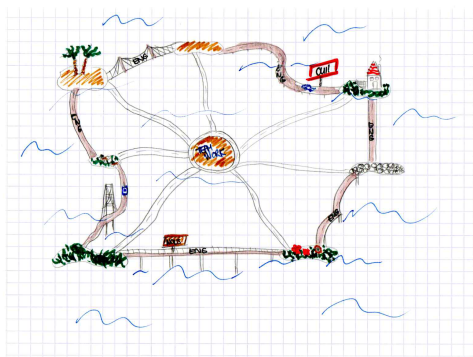
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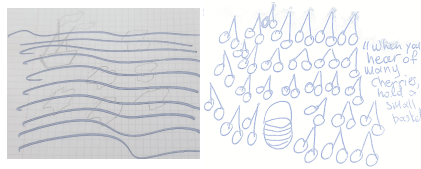
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Appendix

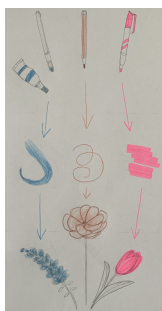
1. Islands Leading to Teamwork



2. Moving Between Language Islands and 3. Picking Cherries

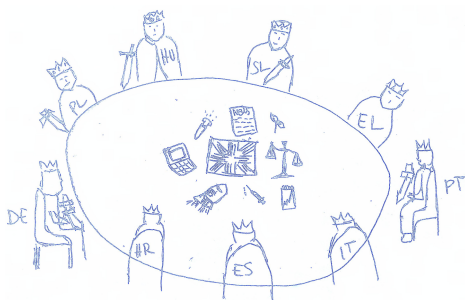


4. Flowers

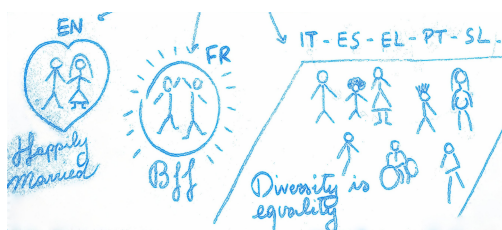


5. Language Bubbles (with a photo) 6. Labyrinth (with IT tools and projects) 7. Family (not visual) Football team (not visual)

8. Knights at a Round Table



9. Belonging in Diversity



10. Alone with IT Office Tools



11. Meadow Stream



12. Assembly Line (not visual)

Figure A1. Metaphors – Overview.