Linguistic diversity in the international workplace
Language ideologies and processes of exclusion
Lønsmann, Dorte

Published in:
Multilingua

DOI:
10.1515/multi-2014-0005

Publication date:
2014

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Linguistic diversity in the international workplace: Language ideologies and processes of exclusion

Abstract: This article draws on a study of language choice and language ideologies in an international company in Denmark. It focuses on the linguistic and social challenges that are related to the diversity of language competences among employees in the modern workplace. Research on multilingualism at work has shown that employees may be excluded from informal interactions and from access to power structures on the basis of language skills in the company’s language(s). The data discussed here show that in the modern workplace, employees’ linguistic competences are diverse: international employees often have competence in the company’s lingua franca but lack skills in the local language while some ‘local’ employees lack competence in the corporate language (typically English). This can lead to the sociolinguistic exclusion of either group. In conclusion, the article relates these processes of exclusion to two language ideologies: one about an essential connection between language and nation and one about a hierarchy of English users.

Keywords: linguistic diversity, language ideologies, social identity theory, multilingual workplaces, social exclusion

1 Introduction

One consequence of the increasing transnational mobility in the age of globalisation is that a large number of workplaces are becoming international and multilingual. This article presents results from a study of language choice and language ideologies in an international company1 in Denmark (Lønsmann 2011). The article focuses on two types of employees with very different language competences, namely ‘the international expert’ and ‘the blue-collar
worker'; the first with, typically, near-native competence in English and the second with competence in the local language only. By way of illustration, data from two representative participants will be discussed in detail. Special attention is paid to the local majority language Danish and English as it is used as an international lingua franca, and to the relationship between competence in these two languages and social inclusion and exclusion in the workplace. The article furthermore shows how these processes of language-related social exclusion are related to specific language ideologies. The aim of the article is to draw attention to 1) the diversity which is a key characteristic of the multilingual workplace, and 2) the social consequences of this diversity, specifically in the form of social exclusion related to language competence and language ideologies.

Previous studies reveal a number of linguistic and social challenges for the international workplace related to language competence. In a series of studies based on the case of a Finnish multinational, Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999b) found that language functions both as a barrier and a facilitator in the company. As most of the international contacts in their study were focused around staff with competence in the corporate language English, this led to the conclusion that the most powerful people in the company were those proficient in English (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari 2002). In their work, in addition to English, the parent company language, Finnish, was central in the organisation with Finnish expats in subsidiaries functioning as language mediators. This meant that the status of the Finnish staff was strengthened, while non-Finnish staff felt disconnected from decision-making and critical information exchanges (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999b: 429). Furthermore, communication clusters emerged around multilingual employees, and Marschan-Piekkari et al. conclude that language skills in English or Finnish can supersede the official organisational hierarchy leading to the existence of a shadow structure within the company based on language skills (see also Mahili, this issue). Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999a: 383) also found that employees who do not acquire competence in the corporate language are excluded from participating in company-wide activities and confined to local operations. This has implications not only for the individual employees, but also for company performance: exclusion from corporate training courses prevents employees from gaining the requisite technical knowledge and from the ensuing networking possibilities which could enhance informal communication and knowledge transfer across units. The Finnish studies have shown how language skills are closely connected to power in multinational corporations. Interestingly, it is not just mastering the corporate language that can bestow power upon employees, but also the parent company language.
In an interview study of 14 Danish companies with English as a corporate language, Tange & Lauring (2009) found that speakers of the same language tend to gather informally, a phenomenon they call *language clustering*. In their study, this tendency was especially strong in relation to Danish since this was the mother tongue of the majority of employees. As a result of this language clustering, international employees found themselves excluded from informal interactions. Tange & Lauring also described a process of *thin communication*, i.e. when the amount of informal small talk decreases due to language problems. They argued that the introduction of English as a corporate language results in a decrease in the amount of communication in the company because non-native speakers withdraw from non-essential exchanges in English. In other words, people withdraw from gossip and small talk, and knowledge-sharing on an informal level disappears. In a literature review, Welch et al. (2005) also concluded that language use in international companies may lead to social exclusion, e.g. when employees discuss issues in the parent company language rather than the corporate language.

Lüdi et al. (2010) investigate language representations and practices in a pharmaceutical company in Switzerland, i.e. a context of considerable linguistic diversity. While the official discourse in the company positions English as the corporate language, other languages are important as well. Studies of the linguistic landscape and of job ads reveal that while English has growing importance, the local languages, especially German, are also used on signs and are requested in job ads. Lüdi et al. also show that language choice depends on the immediate context and on participants’ linguistic repertoires. In their case, whereas the general internal communication, such as the internal magazine, is trilingual German, French and English, scientific communication is only in English, reflecting the use of English as the lingua franca of international research. Interestingly, however, recordings from two research departments show that French in one and German and Swiss German in the other play important roles in spoken interaction. Other languages than English and pluri-lingual practices are thus shown to be successfully employed in pursuit of efficient communication in this workplace setting.

One characteristic of many studies (e.g. Ehrenreich 2009; Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999a, 1999b; Welch et al. 2005) in the field is that they focus either exclusively on the management level (in their research questions or choice of informants) or on blue-collar immigrant workers (e.g. Goldstein 1997; Holmes 2000) in contexts where English is the majority language. However, the diversity which is characteristic of international workplaces today remains somewhat under-researched (with the above-mentioned work of Lüdi and his associates as an exception). This is a gap this article aims to address. The article
takes an ethnographic approach, using extensive observations in addition to interviews, which has given access to a variety of interactions, including both formal and informal talk. At the same time, the inclusion of employees at all organisational levels, from vice president to cleaning staff, means that the current study is designed to capture the diversity which is at the core of the international workplace.

The article is divided into the following sections: after this introductory section comes a section on language ideologies, their social constructionist potential and their relevance for the present study. The third section introduces social identity theory and its relevance for the analysis. The setting is presented in section four, while the fifth section presents the methodology. The results of the analysis are presented in section six, while section seven presents the conclusions and possible applications of the study.

2 The performative aspect of language ideologies

Within linguistic anthropology, language ideologies are defined as ‘beliefs, or feelings, about languages as used in their social world’ (Kroskrity 2004: 498). Furthermore, language ideologies are seen as situated in specific socio-cultural contexts, i.e. language ideologies are seen as grounded in social experience and as subject to the interests of their bearer’s social position (Gal 1998: 320; Gal & Irvine 1995: 970). This means that multiple and potentially conflicting language ideologies are likely to co-exist in a society. Examples of some widespread language ideologies include the ‘one nation, one language’ ideology in which nation and language are seen as inextricably tied together, and the ‘standard language’ ideology, which is the belief that one and only one variety of a language is correct – and positively evaluated – while other forms (dialects) are negatively evaluated (Milroy 1999: 174–175). In this ideology, languages and language varieties are seen as organised hierarchically with some varieties being more prestigious than others.

Language ideologies are defined as both determined by power relations and as being instrumental in creating them (Seargeant 2009). According to Gal, different ideologies provide different representations of the social world. Furthermore, the power of ideologies

... resides not only in their ability to constitute social groups and subjects (positionality), but also in their ability to valorize one position, one group and its practices or knowledge over others; to formulate – but also to elide, preclude, or disable – possible forms of action. (1998: 320)
From this perspective, language ideologies contribute to social categorisation and to ascribing positive and negative value to social groups and practices. This social constructionist potential is explicated by Seargeant, who defines ideology as ‘any entrenched system of beliefs which structures social behavior’ (2009: 40) and language ideologies as ‘the structured and consequential ways in which we think about language’ (2009: 26). The emphasis in these definitions is on the relationship between ideology and behaviour. More specifically, Seargeant argues that ideology structures social behaviour, and therefore language ideologies have consequences in the social world. Eagleton calls this ‘the performative aspect of ideology under its constative guise: ideology creates and acts in a social world while it masquerades as a description of that world’ (1991: 19, in Woolard 1998: 11). Woolard also recognises this potential of language ideologies when she discusses the way language ideologies ‘transform the material reality they comment on’ (Woolard 1998: 11). It is this performative or transformational aspect of language ideologies which I want to investigate in this article, particularly as it pertains to language competence and social exclusion.

One way of theorising the performative potential of language ideologies is to view it in terms of semiotic processes which interpret and rationalise sociolinguistic complexity (Gal & Irvine 1995: 972). One such process identified by Gal & Irvine is erasure. Erasure is what happens when individuals, activities or sociolinguistic phenomena which do not fit the language ideological schema are unnoticed or explained away. Gal & Irvine give an example from a Hungarian village where most families are categorised as either craftsmen or farmers. The two categories of families have different speech styles which are seen as displaying their respective natures, e.g. the farmers’ plainness in speech is thought to show their controlled and restrained manner, whereas the elaborate and ornamented speech style of the craftsmen is believed to be a display of the same inherent character traits. What also happens through such a categorisation is that differences within each group are ‘erased’; differences in wealth are for instance completely ignored.

In the analysis I draw on the performative aspect of language ideologies to explain processes of social exclusion. In addition, I have found it useful to include a social-psychological perspective on the link between social categorisation and exclusion. This perspective will be outlined in the next section on social identity theory.
3 Social identity theory

With roots in social psychology, social identity theory (SIT) (Augoustinos & Walker 1995; Tajfel 1978) explains how individuals make sense of the social world by carving it up into social categories or groups. In the terms of SIT, groups we are members of are in-groups; other groups are out-groups. Groups stand in a status relation to each other, and these relations are determined through comparisons between groups, in SIT terms, social comparisons. Accordingly, subjects strive to enhance their social identity, and this is done through social comparisons. If we can compare our in-group favourably to relevant out-groups, the in-group becomes positively valorised, and through our identification with this group, our positive social identity is enhanced. If an individual cannot compare the in-group favourably to other groups, he or she can resort to a number of strategies, e.g. seeking to leave the original group for a more positively valued group or trying to change the status of the group.

In relation to the language ideologies perspective on social categorisation and exclusion, SIT is helpful because it can further the analysis, and to some extent explain why certain groups or categories are negatively evaluated.

4 The setting: Three levels of context

Just as language ideologies are situated in socio-cultural contexts, so too in ethnographic studies are language practices assumed to be influenced by the context while at the same time influencing that context. One level of context which is relevant for the interpretation of my data is the often-invoked global market in which companies find themselves. Increased international communication has influenced many areas of life, but very prominently the corporate world where communication with partners, customers and clients in other countries is not just commonplace, but necessary for many companies. In addition, the trend of transnational mobility for work purposes means that in many companies, the workforce is made up of employees from a variety of national, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

A second level of context relevant for the present study is the particular sociolinguistic milieu in Denmark. While the vast majority are native speakers of Danish, English has a strong presence in the everyday lives of Danes. 90 percent of Danes see or hear English every day or every week in films, television, music and advertising (Preisler 1999). In addition to this cultural presence, the increasing internationalisation of higher education means that Eng-
lish is now frequently the course language at Danish universities (see also Hultgren, this issue), while the increasing internationalisation of the corporate world has led some large Danish companies to introduce English as a corporate language. The strong presence of English has led to concerns about so-called domain loss, i.e. concerns that English will replace Danish in some areas of society, e.g. higher education and the corporate world (Danish Ministry of Culture 2008). Most Danes consider themselves proficient in English; however, 20 percent have little or no English skills (Preisler 1999, 2003). The majority of these English-have-nots are between 50 and 75 years old, but the phenomenon is also encountered among younger people. This means that a minority of every generation is unable to communicate in English. This is problematic because English will continue to be present in the everyday lives of Danes. Furthermore, rather than expecting this problem to disappear with future generations, it could be expected to grow if the influence from English increases. Preisler concludes that ‘this large minority of English-have-nots is increasingly suffering from a new variety of functional illiteracy’ (2003: 125) (cf. figure 1 below).

The third level of context for the present study is the company Lundbeck. Lundbeck was founded in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1915 and has grown from a small Danish pharmaceutical company to a multinational corporation with over 5300 employees in 58 countries (at the time of my fieldwork in 2006). In the late 1990s, a time of rapid international expansion, the company introduced English as a corporate language, but without ever defining this further. The company has no language policy. Despite the degree of internationalisation, several employees describe the company as still being in a transitional phase, on its way to becoming international.

My fieldwork was conducted at the headquarters in Copenhagen, Denmark, which is placed in Valby, a suburban/industrial neighbourhood. The Lundbeck compound is a large fenced enclosure with approximately 50 buildings. In addition to offices, laboratories and production halls, the site also houses a large canteen. Access to the compound is through one of two manned gates, and visitors are picked up at the gate and accompanied around the site. Security is an important consideration due to concerns about confidentiality regarding the

2 See Lønsmann (2011) and Preisler (2005) for reactions to these concerns about domain loss. 3 In a questionnaire, 856 respondents were asked to what degree they felt they were able to handle a number of situations in English, e.g. explain the way to the nearest bus stop, follow a film in English without subtitles or read a book in English. 52–53 percent responded that they can handle these situations to some extent or to a large extent, while 70–74 percent feel that they can handle the ‘easier’ situations, e.g. explain the way to the nearest bus stop (Preisler 1999: 25–27).
research taking place within the compound. In some ways the Lundbeck headquarters is like a small town with its own guards, caretakers and gardeners as well as its own mail delivery system, canteen and shop. Approximately 1700 of Lundbeck’s employees work at the headquarters. The largest group of employees in Valby conduct research and develop new products. Another large group is employed in the production department. Other departments include marketing, purchasing and a number of support functions such as human resource management, service and IT.

The headquarters has a very diverse workforce, in terms of national, educational and linguistic backgrounds. The majority of the employees are Danish, but a minority of international experts work in research and marketing. Some of the international employees come from Lundbeck subsidiaries and are working at headquarters for shorter or longer periods of time; others have been recruited directly to the headquarters. The largest group of foreign nationals appears to be Swedes, many of whom are cross-border workers living in

---

4 It was not possible for me to obtain information about employees’ nationality, since Lundbeck keeps no records of this.
Sweden. Other nationalities at Lundbeck include at least American, Australian, British, Canadian, French, German, Mexican and Turkish, and probably a number of other nationalities represented by a very small number of employees. In addition, a number of ‘regular’ immigrants (i.e. who did not come to Denmark for the purpose of working at Lundbeck) also contribute to the diversity of the workforce. Immigrants or refugees who have come to Denmark from, for example, Iraq, Gambia, Germany and the Faroe Islands a number of years ago are also part of Lundbeck.

Most of the employees in research and development are either research scientists or laboratory technicians. In the production part of Lundbeck, employees include unskilled workers filling positions such as service assistants or warehouse workers, tradesmen such as carpenters or plumbers, as well as engineers. In marketing, most employees have university degrees, the majority with a business background, but some with a medical or scientific background. Among the Lundbeck employees we also find, for example, IT specialists, secretaries, veterinary nurses, accountants, lawyers and security guards. To sum up, the educational level and the types of jobs at Lundbeck range widely. Most employees at Lundbeck, but not all, speak Danish. Most of those are native speakers of Danish, but Danish is used by both native and non-native speakers, by beginners and advanced learners. Most employees, but again not all, speak English. Unlike the Danish speakers, most English speakers are non-native speakers. English varieties can be Australian, British, American or other, and again they are used with varying degrees of competence and fluency by L1 and non-L1 speakers. Some of the Danish employees have good English skills, e.g. the marketing managers who work closely with the subsidiaries on a daily basis. Others find English challenging, but still use it in their everyday work, e.g. the lab technicians who work with international research scientists. A minority, typically in blue-collar jobs, have virtually no English skills. Among the international experts all are proficient in English, while their Danish proficiency varies from those who are able to use Danish for some purposes at work to those who have chosen not to learn Danish at all. In addition, a number of other linguistic resources are in play, as some employees are native or foreign speakers of Arabic, Faroese, German, Spanish or Swedish.

5 Methodology

The dataset this article draws on comes from five months of ethnographic fieldwork at the headquarters of Lundbeck. The aim was to collect data from as
many different types of employees as possible, reflecting the widest possible range of language competences and language practices. I therefore included six different departments in the data collection, namely the IT support department, a marketing department, a research department, the communication department, the service department and the health and safety department.

The full data set consists of five months of field notes based on ethnographic observations, 25 ethnographic interviews with employees from the six departments, 67 hours of self-recordings and 177 emails from the research department and the IT support department, different types of written material (e.g. the employee magazine) and five focus group interviews with participants from a wide range of departments. In addition all 70 participants filled in questionnaires with background information. In the first phase of the fieldwork, I spent a day a week in each department (apart from the communication department which where I only spent a brief period initially). This means that I was present in, for instance, the service department over a period of two months, spending one working day with each informant. Later some of the same informants participated in a focus group interview.

The full data set was used in three analyses: a micro-analytic study of the factors involved in language choice, an ethnographic analysis of themes relating to language choice and a discourse analysis of language ideologies. In this article, some of the results from the ethnographic analysis are presented in the form of case studies of two types of employees. This analysis draws on Spradley’s (1979, 1980) methods of ethnographic analysis, including domain analysis, taxonomic analysis and componential analysis. The analysis presented here focuses on the domains of employees, language competence, problems because of English and reasons for feeling inhibited. Section 6 presents results from the discourse analysis of language ideologies. In this article I focus on two ideologies: languages and varieties as organised hierarchically and the ‘one nation, one language’ ideology. While all the language ideologies found in the full data set and their underlying beliefs are to some extent interrelated, for the sake of clarity I will focus on these two. The full list of ideologies found in the study is presented in Appendix 1.

The analysis in this article draws on a subset of data consisting of interviews and observations from the research and marketing departments (for the perspective of the international expert) and the service department (for the perspective of the blue-collar worker), as well as the five focus group interviews. Since the space provided in this article only permits me to present a few examples, the excerpts presented in the analyses have been chosen because of their representativeness of the corpus as a whole.
6 Language competence, language ideologies and social exclusion

Based on an ethnographic analysis of observation and interview data, the following two case studies aim to illustrate the relationship between language competences and social in/exclusion for the two types of employees that constitute the focus here, namely blue-collar workers and international experts.

6.1 The blue-collar worker

The typical blue-collar worker in the corpus has a Danish background, works at the production line or with cleaning, left school early and has had little or no further education. Such a worker also has very little knowledge of English. Gitte, who represents this group here, is a typical blue-collar worker with a Danish background. She has been at Lundbeck as a service assistant for two years, but has worked in cleaning her whole life and was nearing retirement at the time of data collection. She works in the service department at Lundbeck, which employs around 100 blue-collar workers who clean the buildings at Lundbeck, staff the gate and do groundskeeping. The majority are Danish with a small minority of immigrants from Gambia, Germany, Greece and the Philippines. In Gitte’s team of six service assistants, one has German as L1 and one has Faroese, but both are proficient in Danish (self-reportedly at intermediary and fluent level respectively) and both report speaking Danish at home. When asked in the background questionnaire about language use at work, all six answer Danish. When asked about other language competences, only one claims to have some English proficiency (‘A little. Only spoken.’). No other language competences were reported. Gitte says about her language use at work:

5 Unlike the international experts who are in Denmark with the specific purpose of working at Lundbeck, these employees have all been in Denmark for a number of years before applying for this job (and will stay after leaving Lundbeck).

6 Languages other than Danish and English play a minimal role for the team of service assistants I observed. I did not hear any other languages used during my observations. In the focus group interview Gitte says that Ursula, the native German speaker, sometimes says a few words in German to which Gitte responds: ‘[jeg] siger hvad siger du nå ja siger hun så lige pludselig/I say what did you say oh yeah she suddenly says then’. Apparently, both Gitte and Ursula herself see such code-switches as dispreferred behaviour. By her own account Gitte responds to such code-switches by signalling a lack of understanding, and Ursula reacts as if she had broken a norm by switching into German. When Gitte tells this story, Ursula reacts by chuckling and adds: ‘men vi har det godt vi forstår hinanden det tror jeg/but we are on good terms we understand each other I think’ and Gitte confirms: ‘det gør vi/that we do’.
Although she may in fact have very limited receptive English skills, for most purposes her own feeling – that she does not know any English – is accurate, and she would belong in the group of Danes with very little or no English competence that Preisler labels ‘English-have-nots’ (2003).

Nevertheless, Gitte, as all other employees in that group, encounters English at work every day. Occasionally she meets foreign visitors who ask her for directions within the compound, to which she responds by pointing or signaling that she does not understand. More importantly, every day she encounters signs and posters in English. She also encounters English on the computer, which is very noticeable for Gitte and the other service assistants who are required to check their email every morning. Although all emails from their own department are in Danish, other emails are in English. All computer programs are also in English. What, then, do the service assistants with very limited English skills do? Gitte says:

(2) *der kommer tit nogle engelske mails som vi ik- vi bare lukker ned for vi kan ikke forstå dem sletter dem simpelthen ik*
‘we often get English emails which we can’t we just close because we can’t understand them just delete them you know’

(3) *man prøver men man er ikke sikker på når man trykker på noget om det nu er rigtigt og så kommer der en eller anden engelsk advarsel et eller andet åh hvad skal vi nu gøre ik så ved vi ikke hvad vi skal gøre man er helt ude af den så tænker man ej hvordan kommer du ud af det så nogle gange må man slukke maskinen for at komme helt væk fra det ik for ikke at ødelægge noget*
‘you try but you are not sure when you press something if it’s right and then some English warning pops up something oh what do we do now you know then we don’t know what to do you are completely out of it

Ursula’s ‘but we are on good terms’ immediately following an account of her use of German further suggests that code-switching to German is ‘risky’ behaviour, something that could jeopardise the working relationship. Ursula does in fact use a German word (‘wert/value’) later in the interview in what appears to be a word search sequence for the Danish word for ‘pH value’. This is resolved by Bente, one of the other service assistants, supplying the Danish translation. So while German is very occasionally used by Ursula, Danish is firmly established as the medium of interaction in the team.
then you think well how do you get out of this then sometimes you have to turn the machine off to get away from it you know so that we don’t destroy anything’

As these examples show, the service assistants delete emails in English without reading them, and if they meet a message they do not understand, they turn off the computer for fear of destroying something. During the days that I observed the service assistants, it also became clear that some of them simply do not use the computer at all. A computer was set up in the break room for them to use, but of the six-person team I observed only three who used the computer during my fieldwork days. It is important to note that the service assistants who used the above strategies when faced with computer problems in English were in fact very motivated to learn how to use a computer. They all participate in computer courses through their union, and they stressed that this was very interesting – and that it was in Danish. At work English is a barrier, they said, because it is too much to learn to use the computer and to do it in English.

Their lack of English competence thus kept them from the basic information pertaining to their work provided in emails and on signs, but it also prevented them from educating themselves by using the computer. Furthermore, the service assistants perceive their lack of language skills to be a disadvantage in relation to their careers. During a discussion among Gitte’s work team about the possibilities for social mobility that English skills would give them, her colleague Thea says:

(4) og så kunne der måske være at man kunne komme lidt længere end bare rengøring ja at man kunne søge noget andet hvis man kunne det engelsk også på computeren ik og så længe du ikke kan det så må du jo så blive dernede ‘then you might be able to go a little further than just cleaning you could look for something else if you knew English also on the computer right and as long as you don’t know it you have to stay down there’

English skills would allow them to look for a different job, and not just a different job, but a better one, as implied both by Thea saying they could ‘go further’ and by her use of ‘down there’ when she talks about their current work in cleaning. This perspective, which links English competence with social mobility (Angouri & Miglbauer, this issue), is part of an ideology in which language
skills are regarded as valuable, especially by those who do not have them (see Appendix, following section 5).

### 6.2 Erasure of the English-have-nots

In this section the focus turns to the language ideologies which influence the social in/exclusion of the blue-collar workers. Language ideologies are performative in their ability to structure, create and transform the social world (cf. section 2). One way they do this is by categorising people into groups and by ascribing positive or negative value to these groups. In the focus group interviews the informants discuss beliefs about different kinds of English and different English users. These beliefs are all part of a language ideology which is based on the implicit assumption that language varieties are hierarchically organised (see Appendix section 3). At Lundbeck the informants are concerned with placing different varieties or uses of English into such a hierarchy. In the interviews they talk about native-speaker English as ‘correct’, ‘proper’ and ‘good’ English, and as better than non-native varieties. A British accent is invariably described in positive terms, such as ‘en pæn engelsk accent’/a nice English accent’. In the following example, Stine, a Danish research employee, talks about a colleague who is married to a Brit and therefore speaks ‘rigtig britisk engelsk’/real British English’. Stine continues:

(5) **man kan faktisk ikke høre hun er dansk og der er min fornemmelse nogle gange at de andre de tør ikke rigtig sige noget fordi hold da op hun er simpelthen så god**

‘actually you can’t hear that she is Danish and my feeling is that sometimes the others are afraid of saying anything because oh my she is just that good’

The fact that you cannot hear that the colleague is Danish is clearly a positive quality here even though it sometimes intimidates her co-workers so much that they refrain from speaking English in her presence. This ‘language hierarchy’ ideology is part of the ‘standard language’ ideology, which holds that there is only one correct form of a language and that variation from this standard form is equated with bad language (Kroskrity 2004: 502; Milroy 1999: 174). While the ‘standard language’ ideology is most often discussed in relation to dialect variation, in this case the variation in question is the use of English by non-native speakers. Put briefly, variation from native speaker standards is viewed negatively, while native speaker standards are positively valued and seen as something to strive for.
Although these beliefs about the supremacy of native-speaker English are not contested, it is notable that they are nevertheless not shared by everyone. The positive evaluations of native-speaker English are frequent among very proficient speakers, less frequent among less proficient speakers and not mentioned at all by the English-have-nots. Thus it appears that a certain level of English proficiency is required for this topic to come up in discussions.

The underlying assumption about a hierarchy of English use and users also reveals itself in the way that informants frequently remark upon the English proficiency of different national groups and compare them to each other. Most salient are the beliefs that everyone in Denmark speaks English, and that Danes are very proficient English speakers:

(6) engelsk det er det vi alle sammen kan
    ‘English that is what we all know’ (Kirsten, Danish communication employee)

(7) altå de mennesker der er ansat i Lundbeck kan jo læse engelsk der er jo ikke rigtig nogen som ikke kan
    ’people who work at Lundbeck can read English there really isn't anyone who can't’ (Line, Danish IT employee)

(8) you can perfectly well live in Denmark without speaking a word of Danish you would still be able to go to a supermarket or to a restaurant and things like that because everybody understands you (Andreas, international research employee)

The analysis of the whole corpus shows that these beliefs are shared to a very large degree and only infrequently contested. And as can be seen from the above quotes, not only do Danes make these assertions, but the international employees do, too. Danes are constructed as very proficient English speakers, and this case is often made with a comparison to the English skills of other non-native speakers. In all cases, Danes compare themselves favourably to other non-native English speakers.

In this variant of the ‘standard language’ ideology, native varieties of English are placed at the top of a language hierarchy. Danes rank themselves just below native speakers in the hierarchy, with other non-native speakers of English positioned far below. Since the informants are talking about workplace communication, the Danes often compare themselves with colleagues in the

---

7 British English seems to be placed a step above even other native varieties although this is only touched upon briefly in my material.
subsidiaries, where particularly the French are often singled out as being less proficient and less enthusiastic English speakers. And it is clear that a comparison is taking place, e.g. in this excerpt:

(9)  

hvis jeg ringer til en fra Estland jamen så ved jeg jo at jeg mit engelsk er jo fantastisk godt i forhold til ik (laughs)

‘if I call someone from Estonia well then I know that my English is amazing compared to theirs right (laughs)’ (Line, Danish IT employee)

As a consequence of such a language ideology, which constructs ‘Danes’ as a homogeneous group, the actual diversity in English competence among Danes is overlooked. In terms of Irvine & Gal’s semiotic process of erasure, what happens is that an ‘ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible’ (2000: 38). This is what we see when all Danes are constructed as proficient English users: Danes with little or no English skills become invisible, or in Irvine & Gal’s term, they are erased, and so are the problems even quite proficient English speakers may have. The prominence of this language ideology means that language choice is not always consciously considered. As with most language ideologies, this ideology is present as an underlying assumption, which means that it is usually not reflected upon. The false understanding that everyone speaks English well may lead to unnecessary exclusion of employees without English skills, simply because people do not consciously consider their language choices or think about the consequences they might have. If everyone speaks English well, the choice of English can hardly have any negative consequence.

While the exclusion of the typically blue-collar English-have-nots is one consequence of this ideology, they are not the only group affected by it. Not all white-collar employees are very proficient English users; some of them may also experience comprehension as well as production problems. The prominence of an ideology which categorises Danes as very competent English users means that not only is the group of English-have-nots forgotten, but also that the comprehension and production problems of less proficient English users remain hidden under the surface. They are not considered an issue.

Interestingly, some informants are aware that not all Danes are very proficient English users. This does not, however, keep them from endorsing the apparently contradictory belief that everyone at Lundbeck is a proficient English speaker. Line, for instance, says about informing the IT users at Lundbeck of security updates:
(10) *jamen så er jeg ikke sikker på vi fanger alle de danske Valbybrugere hvis vi skriver kun på engelsk ik så derfor skriver vi den på begge to begge sprogene*

‘but I’m not sure that we get the attention of all the Danish users at <headquarters> if we only write in English therefore we write it in both in both languages’ (Line, Danish IT employee)

In the same interview and quoted above, Line expresses the belief that everyone at Lundbeck can read English and uses that as an argument for only distributing IT newsletters in English. Other informants make similar apparently contradictory statements in the focus group interviews. It seems that the belief that all Danes are proficient English users applies when informants are speaking in general terms. When they are reminded of or themselves think of specific examples from their own lives, they become more aware of the variety of English skills in the company and in Denmark at large. In the next section I turn to a very different type of employee at Lundbeck, both in terms of job description and language competences.

### 6.3 The international expert

Most of the international experts at Lundbeck work in marketing or research, have a postgraduate degree and have native or near-native command of English. Peter is one such expert. Originally from Germany, he has been at Lundbeck a little over a year. He works in a marketing department in an international environment which also includes a Swede, an Austrian and an American. Both English and Danish are used in the department, as are German (between the two native speakers) and Swedish (by means of receptive multilingualism [ten Thije & Zeevaert 2007] where the Swede speaks Swedish to the Danes, who in turn address him in Danish). Peter has been offered unlimited individual Danish tutoring and has made the most of it. He now has some command of Danish and is able to use it for at least some communicative events at work. When he first arrived at Lundbeck, however, his lack of Danish skills meant that he was excluded from participation in social events:

(11) *they have a lot of social clubs here like wine clubs and sports clubs and things like that and all these things are just in Danish it’s not in English so they actually exclude people if they don’t speak Danish*

Peter experienced that Danish was important on a personal level. He says that ‘learning Danish really opens you in your world in here’ and that ‘people can
get much more less distanced as soon as you talk Danish’. All in all, Peter has experienced a considerable difference socially since he started using Danish.

The experiences of other international employees are consistent with Peter’s:

(12) when the lunch starts I mean you know the barriers go up in some ways because they [the Danes] do switch (William, international marketing employee)

(13) when everyone is filing in [for a meeting] or at coffee breaks it’s a switch straight back from English to Danish so there is still that kind of barrier if you really want to integrate with your colleagues (Kate, international research employee)

These examples all deal with informal situations. Micro-analyses of 37 hours of recorded interaction from the research department, another department with a relatively high proportion of international employees, do not, however, show any differences between breaks and more formal situations. Danes do switch to English to include their colleagues in informal situations. And the international employees also find themselves excluded from work activities because they are in Danish. Peter initially had negative experiences in meetings with a majority of Danes:

(14) often I had the feeling that when they wanted to discuss something they actually turned into Danish so I was sitting around there and didn’t understand a word and it was sometimes I actually even had meetings where I actually left and said okay if you want to talk Danish fine but I’m leaving I’m not sitting here and listening to Danish and that actually happened

Even though Peter’s status as an internationally recruited marketing expert is high in the company, his role as a foreigner, and initially as a non-Danish-speaking foreigner, leads to him being excluded from important work activities.

Danish is also used routinely in the company in more planned events, for instance the introduction courses offered to new employees. At the time of my fieldwork these were only offered in Danish. The choice of Danish for these communicative events meant that the non-Danish-speaking employees were barred not just from obtaining crucial information, but in the case of the introduction courses also from the ensuing networking possibilities. Marschan-Piek-kari et al. (1999a) also reveal this issue in their study and conclude that this
may damage a company’s performance, as these networking possibilities could enhance informal communication and knowledge transfer across departments. It is interesting, however, that while Marschan-Piekkari et al. found that employees who do not acquire competence in the corporate language are excluded from participating in company-wide activities, in my study the lack of Danish, the local majority language, leads to the same type of exclusion. English is often seen as the language for international communication, especially in the corporate world. When English is introduced as a corporate language, this is often taken to mean that only English is necessary. As mentioned in section 4, the use of English as a corporate language in several large Danish companies has been seen by some as a threat to the Danish language (see Lønsmann 2011 for a longer discussion of the debate). In this context it is particularly important to note that Danish actually has an important role at Lundbeck. The local language is so valuable and so frequently used that even high-status employees are excluded if they do not understand Danish.

Peter recalls that when he first arrived, the Danes were (mostly) very willing to switch to English. This willingness to accommodate diminished over time, however. While it may seem as though the lack of Danish skills is a temporary problem for new international employees, the issue is more complex. Not all international employees are interested in learning Danish. Some assume that since the company has English as a corporate language, English will suffice. Others make an effort initially, but find it too difficult to make time for language classes. And in some departments, Danish classes are limited to a few weeks or months after arrival, leaving the employee with a bare minimum of Danish competence. In addition, this international workplace setting is characterised by transience: participants change all the time, some people leave and others join the company. This means that there will always be employees with no Danish skills who will experience exclusion as a result.

Exclusion due to a lack of Danish skills is not only a problem in interactions, some international employees also perceive it to be a barrier to career advancement in the company:

(15) I would say there is a huge pressure [to learn Danish] not in this way that people are coming and telling you you should learn Danish but the pressure is when you want to make career when you want to know what is going on when you want to be fully integrated in the company not in the society in this company you have to learn you have to speak Danish and you have to understand it like a Dane otherwise we have no chance (Nicole, international research employee)
It is difficult to say if this really is the case in the company, but at the time of my fieldwork the top tier of management consisted solely of Danes. And simply the fact that the international employees perceive this to be the case may have consequences for their career choices. If they see themselves as having no chance of advancing unless they understand Danish ‘like a Dane’, then maybe they are more likely to pursue a career elsewhere. This also has implications for the company, who will then find it harder to retain these international experts long-term. These results confirm the findings of Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999b) who link competence in the parent company language with power and status. Just as the non-Finnish staff in their study felt disconnected from implicit power structures based on language competence, so do the non-Danish staff here. The next section discusses how the exclusion of non-Danish speakers is linked with a particular language ideology.

6.4 The ‘one nation, one language’ ideology: ‘We speak Danish because we are in Denmark’

As the above analysis shows, Peter and other international experts experience exclusion from both social and work activities due to a lack of Danish skills. The non-Danish-speaking international experts’ experiences with exclusion can be linked with a prominent language ideology which constructs Danish as not only the default language choice in the company, but the only natural language in Denmark (see appendix 1, section 1). In the focus group interviews, informants frequently stress that Danish is the natural language in Denmark, and this belief is often used as an argument for choosing Danish the way it is here: ‘vi er jo8 trods alt danskere det er en dansk virksomhed/after all we are Danes it is a Danish company’ (Thea, Danish service employee). Danish is the natural choice; it is what should be used because we are in a Danish company, because we are Danes and because we are in Denmark. This ‘Danish because we are in Denmark’ ideology contributes to the social categorisation in the workplace in

---

8 The meaning of the Danish particle ‘jo’ is difficult to capture in English. In the literature ‘jo’ is referred to as a ‘dialogic particle’ (Mortensen 2010). According to Mortensen, such dialogic particles manage the expression of justificatory support in interaction because they orchestrate points of view in the discourse and evaluate them against each other (2010: 95). ‘jo’ has no direct translation equivalent in English, but Mortensen (citing Hansen & Heltoft 2011) explains the meaning of ‘jo’ in this way: ‘jo carries an abstract polyphonic instruction which can be formalised as I hold a specific point of view (p) and you do not hold non-p, and will therefore not contradict me’ (2010: 96). In other words, in dialogue ‘jo’ is often used to express an expectation of consensus, as is indeed the case in the above example.
such a way that it constructs a divide between the in-group ‘Danes’ and the out-group ‘foreigners’, and between Denmark and other countries. Furthermore, it constructs an essential link between language and nation and is as such a local version of the ‘one nation, one language’ ideology (Gal & Irvine 1995: 968; Woolard 1998: 16).

In only two examples do Danish informants contest the ‘Danish because we are in Denmark’ ideology. Contradicting the other members in their focus groups, they claim to find it strange that Danish is chosen for large meetings which have international employees in the audience or to not even think about it when they receive an email in English. These statements come from employees who work in an international environment or whose job involves international contacts. Coincidentally these employees are also the employees who rate their own English competence highest. It seems, then, that those Danes who are most proficient and most used to using English are also more accepting of it.

The ‘Danish because we are in Denmark’ ideology is most clearly seen in discussions about foreigners learning Danish. The dominant belief here is that foreigners should learn Danish if they intend to live in Denmark and that the foreigners’ willingness to learn Danish is important in relation to their social integration (rather than their actual achieved competence in Danish). In other words, the attitude of foreigners to learning Danish is constructed as very important. Being interested in learning and using Danish is regarded positively and is seen as a willingness to integrate into Danish society. Foreigners who explicitly express an interest in learning Danish are thought to be easier to talk to as they signal that they want to get to know the Danes. Choosing not to learn Danish, on the other hand, is viewed very negatively, so much so that it is clear that much more is at stake than just intelligibility.

In the following example from the focus group interview with five Danish lab technicians, Lisa and Sofie are talking about a co-worker who has not displayed much interest in learning Danish, which has forced Lisa to communicate with him in English. This leads to the following exchange:

9 Transcription conventions:
[right] overlap
Eng- self-interruption
<pseudonyms inserted by the researcher
<paraphrases line-by-line paraphrases of the Danish part of examples are provided in English in italics immediately after the original>
The lab technicians here reach the conclusion that international employees who are not interested in learning Danish are not welcome. They link the rejection of Danish lessons with a lack of willingness to integrate. Drawing on social identity theory helps us make sense of the importance accorded to willingness to learn Danish. The underlying assumption here is that learning Danish or not is about social identity, about wanting to be a part of the group or not. The Danes perceive international employees who do not want to learn Danish as rejecting their offer to be a part of Danish society, or in other words to be a part of the ‘Danish group’. In the terms of social identity theory, foreigners who choose not to learn Danish are seen as a threat to the Danes’ positive social identity since these ‘foreigners’ do not value the Danish-speaking out-group highly enough to want to join it. Instead they prefer the somewhat problematic status of a non-Danish-speaking ‘foreigner’. It is this perceived threat to their positive social identity which makes the Danish employees reject the ‘foreign-
ers’ in turn, which is what they do when they say that the ‘foreigners’ who do not want to learn Danish should go home. Arguably, this perceived threat is one reason why many Danish employees so openly espouse the ‘Danish because we are in Denmark’ language ideology.

The international employees at Lundbeck, the scientists and marketing staff who have been recruited from around the world, also express the belief that you should try to learn the language of the country you live in. They are clearly aware of the salience of this ideology at Lundbeck. One international employee labels it ‘the “well you’ve been here for so many years you should be speaking Danish”’, suggesting by the use of the definite article that this is a well-known ideology at Lundbeck – or perhaps in Danish society at large. The addition of the definite article also reveals that when she says this, she expects the other participants in the focus group to be familiar with the ideology, which is presented as shared among the majority of this group. Those international employees who have learnt Danish are aware that putting in an effort towards learning and using Danish is important in relation to their Danish colleagues. For instance, one international employee reports that when the non-Danish scientists in their linguistically mixed research department started to make a point of using Danish in meetings and for presentations, this resulted in an improved working environment. In the focus group interview with international employees, the majority of the informants share the belief that it is the attitude towards learning Danish rather than the actual achieved competence that matters:

(17) if I came into Denmark and said I had no interest in learning Danish then that shuts the door whereas if you come in and you say I'm very interested in Danish and you put in an effort then they're very much more sort of friendly and open and willing to help with that how you sort of present to the Danes from that perspective is very important (Michelle, international research employee)

One participant expresses a more conflictual view. She has chosen not to learn Danish, despite working at Lundbeck for six years. She says:

(18) would it have been better if I’d have learnt the language of course do I feel stupid that after six years am I not slightly embarrassed yes of course I am I would love to have learnt it but I mean it's just I it's not it has not been an issue (Julia, international marketing employee)

On the one hand, Julia says that she is embarrassed to not have learnt any Danish, which suggests that she does agree with Michelle on the importance
of learning Danish. On the other, she says that ‘it has not been an issue’, and at another point during the interview she firmly states that she has not found her choice not to learn Danish to be an integration issue, neither in the company nor outside. To summarise, the ‘Danish because we are in Denmark’ language ideology categorises international employees in Denmark into those who make an effort to learn Danish and those who do not. And it attributes positive value to the first group, and negative value to the second group. These categorisations and valorisations have an impact on language choice and therefore on social inclusion and exclusion as a result of language choice. The assumption is that foreigners should learn Danish, hence it is not necessary to switch to English once the international employee has been in Denmark for few months. One informant refers to this period as the ‘grace period’ during which people are willing to speak English. After this point it is the international employee’s own responsibility to have learnt Danish.

7 Conclusions and applications

The article has argued that the international corporation is a diverse linguistic setting where the employees come with a variety of language competences. While some are competent in the local majority language, in this case Danish, but not in English, others are competent in English, but know very little of the local language. In addition, other languages may play a role. As the international corporation can be characterised as a transient community where participants change continuously, this linguistic diversity is a permanent condition. The data have shown that language competence can be linked to social exclusion. For the blue-collar worker with no English skills as well as other Danes with limited English skills, their lack of language competence means that they are excluded from obtaining basic information at work, and they believe that their lack of language competence prevents them from looking for a better job. Language ideological background assumptions play an important role in relation to the processes of exclusion. An unquestioned assumption about the existence of a hierarchy of English users is behind the belief that all Danes are very proficient English speakers. This belief constructs Danes as a homogeneous group with regard to English competence and as such leads to a situation where the challenges of Danes with few or no English skills are overlooked.

In addition, the international experts experience social exclusion as a consequence of a lack of language competence, in their case a lack of Danish. For them the exclusion takes the shape of a lack of knowledge-sharing and a belief

Brought to you by | Roskilde Universitetsbibliotek
Authenticated | dl.ibc@cbs.dk author's copy
Download Date | 1/30/14 1:27 PM
that they cannot advance within the hierarchy of the company. In this connection, the local version of the 'one nation, one language' ideology contributes to the processes of exclusion by constructing Danish as the only natural language in Denmark and by creating boundaries between ‘Danes’ and ‘foreigners’ and between foreigners who display an interest in learning Danish and those who do not. A consequence of this language ideology is that Danes are less likely to switch to English in interactions with internationals who have been in Denmark longer than a few months since they are supposed to have learnt Danish.

Two further aspects of linguistic diversity in international workplaces are worth commenting on. Firstly, it is evident from my study that employees in this international workplace need to be proficient in both the local majority language and in English in order to have access to all communicative events and to be integrated socially. As we can see from the above case studies, unless employees are proficient in both, they experience different kinds of exclusion in the workplace.

Secondly, the belief that all Danes are proficient English users is challenged when employees are made aware of specific examples of non-proficient English users. This and other examples reported in the full study (Lønsmann 2011) indicate that an important key to overcoming challenges related to exclusion is raising the awareness of language issues among the employees. If language issues are discussed instead of being ignored during the recruitment of international employees, their expectations are less likely to be disappointed upon arrival, as is often the case when employees assume that ‘we have English as a corporate language’ means that learning the local language is not necessary. If language issues are discussed locally in departments where employees have different linguistic repertoires, pragmatic solutions can be found to most of these issues. One example of this is from a research department where the head of department has implemented a language policy for department meetings which takes the diverse language competences in the department into consideration. The meetings are ‘ideally English’, but lab technicians are allowed to present in Danish with English slides. This solution allows the less proficient English users to contribute without completely excluding the non-Danish speakers. Finally, if the notion that all Danes are very proficient English users is brought to people’s attention, most of them can find plenty of examples proving that this belief does not accurately reflect reality. This consciousness could hopefully contribute to minimising social exclusion related to language ideological background assumptions.

In conclusion, by focusing on both blue-collar workers and international experts this article has provided insights into the linguistic diversity of interna-
tional workplaces. The article has shown that diverse language competences in combination with language ideological assumptions about a language hierarchy and assumptions linking nation and language may lead to social exclusion of certain types of employees. Furthermore, increased language awareness has been pointed to as a possible remedy for social exclusion. Since this area has not yet been fully explored, the impact of language awareness can also be an avenue for further research into the linguistically diverse workplace.

Appendix

Themes found in the language ideologies analysis (organised into background assumption as headline, and examples of how it manifests itself in sets of explicit beliefs about language below)

(1) One nation, one language
   - Danish is default in Denmark
   - Foreigners who intend to live in Denmark should learn Danish
   - Learning/using Danish is being cooperative
   - Learning Danish is necessary for social integration

(2) People’s mother tongue is their natural language
   - Speaking (and reading) English is an effort for non-native speakers, asking people to switch is asking a lot
   - English should not be used among Danes when no foreigners are present
   - It feels uncomfortable to speak English among Danes
   - English among Danes is foolish
   - People are more comfortable in their mother tongue, talk more, joking only possible in mother tongue, can express themselves better
   - English can be distancing and formal (from the perspective of Danes), also in a positive way
   - Irony and humour are inextricably linked with specific languages

(3) Standard language and language hierarchy
   - Native speaker accents are positively valued, Danish accent negatively
   - Native speaker English is prestigious and the only norm
   - There is such a thing as ‘correct’ or ‘proper and good’ English
   - All Danes are proficient English speakers
   - Other non-native speakers, e.g. the French, are less proficient than Danes
   - Not mastering the standard is connected to face loss and feeling stupid
   - English is arrogant

(4) English is the international language
   - English equals international and international equals English
   - English is the only possible choice for communication with non-Danish speakers or international communication
   - The amount of English used is a measure of how international the company is
   - Danish is for local matters (in opposition to English and international/global)
– Danish is appropriate for non-work related activities, i.e. not prestigious
– English is necessary for international communication

(5) Language skills are positively valued
– Learning a language is a positive asset
– Saying you don’t understand Danish is embarrassing
– English is prestigious among non-users
– English is linked with career opportunities/social mobility (by those who don’t speak it)
– Danish is linked with social mobility (by those who don’t speak it)

Bionote

Dorte Lønsmann is an Assistant Professor at Copenhagen Business School and a member of the LINGCORP research group. Her research interests include English as a global language, language ideologies and language choice. She wrote her PhD thesis on the use of English as a corporate language in Danish companies and has also published on language and identity in the computer gaming subculture. She currently investigates language ideologies and social categorisation in multilingual workplaces.

References


Mortensen, Janus. 2010. Epistemic stance marking in the use of English as a lingua franca. Roskilde: Roskilde University, Department of Culture and Identity, PhD thesis.


