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Trajectory of a Language Broker: Between Privilege and Precarity

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Abstract:

This paper offers an ethnographic case study of Tomasz, a Polish construction worker, and his professional trajectory as well as daily work life on Norwegian construction sites. The study is based on observations, interviews, and recordings of Tomasz's daily workplace activities and interactions.

The Norwegian construction industry is characterized by socioeconomic stratification between 'local' and 'migrant' workers. The most defining feature of their stratification is employment conditions: 'migrant' workers are leased on temporary contracts by staffing agencies, whereas 'local' workers have permanent appointments. At the same time, due to a high degree of migrant workers in the industry, Norwegian construction sites are often *de facto* multilingual workplaces. This condition entails that multilingual communication and workers with the 'right' language repertoires gain some value on these sites. This value, however, can be volatile and easily appropriated and redefined, as the case of Tomasz will demonstrate. On the one hand, Tomasz, as a worker with the 'right' language repertoire, gains agency and social recognition as being indispensable. Yet, on the other hand, this linguistic valuation also enables continued differentiation and distinction between 'migrant' and 'local' workers. This study contributes to understanding workers' investments in language learning, the conditions of these investments, and how their trajectories make these investments feasible to the workers but also to the companies that hire and lease them.

Keywords: multilingualism, labor migration trajectories, language brokers, construction industry

1 Introduction: Language, Labor and Flexibility

Language and migration have always been intrinsically interlinked. For migrants seeking to establish a life in a new setting, often in other nation states, language is in many ways an entry point to social opportunities, e.g. through access to work (Witteborn, 2011). There are also studies on how migrant workers are denied access to (certain kinds of) work due to their lack of the ‘right’ languages (Duchêne, 2011; Kirilova 2013) and/or registers (Roberts & Campbell, 2005). While such exclusion may be exacerbated in a contemporary labor market where work is strongly tied to interactional performance and language work (Cameron, 2000) it also features in historical studies of work migration (Kulczycki, 1989). Under conditions of labor migration and multilingualism, whether historic or contemporary, ‘language brokers’ (Lindquist, 2015) are important figures. Brokers have the language competences to serve as intermediaries that bridge language gaps between groups of speakers. In the construction industry where neoliberal demands for flexible and temporary labor (Coe et al., 2007; Ward, 2004) cause a higher degree of transience, i.e. fleeting institutional and interpersonal relations and greater linguistic and socio-cultural difference (Mortensen, 2017), the need for brokers may be considerably enhanced. When companies temporarily lease workers from staffing agencies there is little chance that migrant workers are able or willing to learn the dominant language of the workplace. This leaves brokers, i.e. those who are willing to self-invest in learning the legitimate or working languages of the workplace, as crucial communicators ‘nodes’ (Feely & Harzing, 2003) between groups in the workplace. It is this broker function and its valuation, along with its individual and structural implications, that I wish to pursue in this article. While the broker is not a new figure, I will demonstrate how labor migration together with neoliberal practices of flexibilization and temporary recruitment enhance the need for brokers. Moreover, I will argue that despite brokers being a workplace need, the responsibility of becoming a broker is left with the individual worker.

To make these points, this article focuses on fieldwork carried out in Norwegian construction sites where workers come from Poland, Norway and Sweden. It

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specifically explores how Tomasz, one of the Polish workers, becomes a language broker. Tomasz's case study serves as an example of language brokers and their conditions. It allows for a detailed and rich description of how individual workers' trajectories, constraints and opportunities are closely linked to the particular conditions of the local labor market, in this case Norway, as well as the more general socio-political orders of a neoliberal global market.

In order to provide a contextualized picture of the language broker system the article is organized in the following way: Section 2 provides context on the Norwegian labor market and construction industry, as well as the theoretical framing of the article, focusing on self-management and self-investment as crucial processes of the neoliberal labor market. In section 3, the method, data and settings of the study are presented. From this background follows the analysis in section 4, which offers insights on the trajectory of Tomasz and his language work in construction sites, as illustrative of the language worker profiles that have been described above. Finally, section 5 will bring together the findings of the analysis and discuss their implications for how we understand structural and individual effects of language, migration and labor in a neoliberal system.

2 Context and Theory

2.1 An Overview of the Norwegian Labor Market, Staffing Agencies and Worker Stratification

Norway has within the last decade experienced high levels of labor migration, and labor market sociologists identify three major reasons for this: 1) The Norwegian construction industry suffers from labor shortage. This is due to high productivity (Friberg & Eldring, 2013; Wasilkiewicz et al., 2018), but also to the fact that adolescent Norwegians deselect vocational training and prefer to follow other professional trajectories (Bals, 2017; Nyen & Tønder, 2014). 2) In 2000 the Norwegian labor market legislation was deregulated, making temporary hire, also called leasing, legal within all areas of the labor market. This was a major political deregulation and a turn towards a higher degree of flexibilization through employment liberalization (Peck et al., 2005). 3) The 2004 expansion of the European Union, to which Norway is connected as a member of the European Free Trade

Association (EFTA), created a new market of workers, and infrastructure was quickly established by staffing agencies to allow for mobile workers between Norway and the new member states. One of these was Poland, which could provide construction workers with a high level of professional training and who were interested in migrating due to opportunities for work and better salaries (Friberg, 2016; Friberg & Golden, 2014; Friberg & Tyldum, 2007). These three conditions have effectively structured a stratified market in the construction industry where ‘Nordic’, i.e. Norwegian and Swedish workers, are permanently employed by contractors, while ‘Eastern Europeans’, often indicating Poles, have to work through staffing agencies on temporary contracts and under precarious conditions (Friberg & Haakestad, 2015).

The precarity arises not only from being a day laborer, but also from the different conditions that comes with being permanently versus temporarily employed. For example, companies that uphold the European Union’s *Directive on Temporary Agency Work* –which is meant to ensure equal treatment of leased and permanent workers and was adopted in Norway in 2013 – averagely pay their leased workers the national minimum wage, resulting in an average pay gap of approximately 100 NOK (ca. 10 €) per hour between leased and permanent staff (Friberg & Eldring, 2013). In addition, temporary workers are often leased for non-skilled jobs even if they do in fact have professional training (Friberg & Eldring, 2013). Staffing agencies hire workers on so-called ‘no minimum wage guarantee’ contracts. This means that workers in staffing agencies are only paid when they are leased to a contractor. In short, temporary workers have less job security, get underpaid and are underemployed in the sense that their skills and training are not acknowledged. In short, they are in positions of precarity. However, language can become a tool for temporary workers to negotiate this precarity, for example by investing in and enacting roles as language brokers, as will be detailed in the analysis section.

2.2 Theory: Language Brokers and Conditions of Work in the Neoliberal Market

It has been theorized extensively how neoliberalism as a mode of capitalism (Harvey, 2005) creates surplus value through workers’ self-investments (Allan, 2016), which entails that workers have to be ‘entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life’ (Allan & McElhinny, 2017, p. 78). Especially for migrant workers this meta-work, i.e. the self-enterprising work on the self, often connects to learning specific languages and

registers (Roberts, 2010; Tranekjær, 2015). That migrant workers are being subjected to selection to and division of work based on language requirements is not new (Kershen, 2000), just like brokering as a practice is not new (Lindquist, 2014). In many workplaces in the contemporary construction industry, migrant brokers are necessary due to recruitment practices. Staffing agencies provide an opportunity for companies to be as flexible as possible by leasing – often cheap and often migrant – workers on a day-to-day basis. This is a business for the agency, a service for the companies, and for the worker, an opportunity for a job. Yet, due to the precarity of this work this practice is also a source of disciplinization of temporary workers who will accept and do most things out of fear of losing their jobs (Friberg & Haakestad 2015). Moreover, free mobility and significant financial inequalities between nation-states result in an opportunity and an impetus for workers to migrate to other countries for work (Duchêne et al., 2013). Frequently, these migrant workers become part of the most precarious segment of the workforce (Friberg & Eldring, 2011; Purser, 2019; Standing, 2011).

In short, companies' need for labor flexibility combined with relatively easy and deregulated access to and recruitment of migrant workers creates a need for language brokers. However, the neoliberal impact does not end here. Workers also need to invest in and skill themselves with languages in order to serve as brokers. Brokering becomes part of their 'option horizon' (Willig, 2009), i.e. their opportunity for self-realization and a pursuit of 'the good life'. The idea of language as option, however, entails that the responsibility for ensuring communication in the workplace is partly or fully removed from the employer and instead becomes the responsibility of the worker who wants to strengthen her/his employability through investments and skilling by and of the self (Allan, 2016; Macleod, 1996). This duality between flexibility as a neoliberal market logic on the one hand, and flexibility as an impetus for 'responsibilized self-regulation' (Fraser, 2003, p. 169) on the other hand, is the essence of why Fraser identifies flexibility as the new form of Foucauldian governmentality: it is a disciplinization of the self that constitutes a mode of governance which turns workers' autonomy into 'a means of their control' (Fraser, 2003, p. 165). In this light, the broker in a construction site is no different from the university student who learns – and feel an obligation to learn – language and intercultural skills for communication purposes (Urciuoli, 2010; Martín Rojo,

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fc/2019; see Sabaté-Dalmau this issue) or the IT workers who blame themselves for being fired (Sennett, 1998).

The link between employability and migrants' language skills is also seen in migrant workers' own orientations to the importance of learning specific languages (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Flubacher et al., 2016) and in how refugees are trained in intercultural communication and behavior skills (Del Percio, 2016; Del Percio & Van Hoof, 2016). This entails that workers must possess a specialized set of skills, but also that they must be able and willing to continually adapt to future, potential, and new skills requirements (Urciuoli, 2008). Individual flexibility is, as Duchêne & Heller (2012) theorize, highly connected to market demands for surplus value which is created, among other things, through a flexible staff with flexible skills. Language is definitely one of the skills that can add to the worker's flexibility and hence to her/his (employability) value in the market (Irvine, 1989).

3 Setting and Data

The data for this study was generated between February 2014 and June 2015. The study applied an ethnographic (Agar, 2006; Heller, 2009) and multi-sited approach (Marcus, 1995) as I was in contact with agents from different institutions, e.g. unions, staffing agencies, contractors, as well as individual workers. My main collaborator was a contractor which I will be calling Great Buildings. To ensure a lean production flow, this contractor had a core staff consisting predominantly of Swedish and Norwegian administration and construction workers, and additional Polish workers whom they leased from two staffing agencies to make up their flexible staff (Atkinson, 1984).

In order to make a detailed and insightful account of a language broker trajectory, I will make a case-study of Tomasz, a Polish construction worker who was leased by Great Buildings. By tracing Tomasz's professional trajectory along with his daily interactions and language work, I will demonstrate how he invests in Norwegian language skills to become a valuable language worker for Great Buildings, but also for the staffing agency that is employing him. For this purpose, I will draw on video-recorded interaction data and audio-recorded interview data as well as ethnographic observations. Most of the video-recordings of interactions were filmed by Tomasz as part of his daily work in the sites. For half a year he would film work activities where

he primarily interacted with Norwegian and Swedish workers and managers. These recordings provided valuable insights into Tomasz's language work and development as a broker. In fact, Great Buildings suggested that I could focus my video recordings on Tomasz because he was a crucial to daily communication on the sites – the very fact that they singled out Tomasz is telling of his status in the workplace and the reason why I claim that he is a 'telling case' of a neoliberal language-broker personhood. As I was not allowed into the construction site, I was not able to observe the daily work there, and so the video recordings became a source of (limited) observations as much as a data source for interactional analysis (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2012).

Interviews and conversations with workers and managers were another important data source. I understand interviews and conversations as interactional moments where often dominant discourses and logics manifest as co-constructions between interactants (Talmy, 2009). The interviews were ethnographic (Spradley, 1979), i.e. I had created semi-structured interview guides (Kvale, 1997) based on prior observations that formed rich points (Agar, 2006). Most interviews were between me and one the research participant and conducted in a mix of Norwegian, Swedish and Danish. For interviews with Polish workers I had to rely on a colleague to interpret for me either partly or fully. All interviews were carried out in empty offices or common areas in the construction sites.

4 Analysis: A Flexible Language Broker in a Flexibilizing Industry

Through the case study of Tomasz, this analysis demonstrates the becoming of a language broker, how his professional mobility was both enabled and disabled, and not least his experience of this process.

4.1. Language Brokers: A Valuable Resource in Great Buildings

As mentioned above, Great Buildings had a limited core group of permanent workers, primarily made up of Norwegians and Swedes. Whenever they had to produce a lot or had to meet strict deadlines they would lease considerable numbers of Polish workers. Staff flexibility is commonly portrayed as an essential aspect of operating in an industry where keeping deadlines is an integrated part of generating profit. Due to high levels of competition for contracts, deadlines are often strict, which require a

high level of organization and planning. Communication is valued as a central part of both long- and short-term planning and organization. One example of this is how one of Great Buildings' project leaders as well as one of the project owners would often reiterate that 'communication is our cheapest and best tool' (recordings, October 3 & 5, 2017).

For communication purposes Norwegian and Swedish workers use receptive multilingualism to interact or even adapt to the recipient's language which is rather common in all of the Scandinavian countries (Barfod, 2018). However, communication between Polish, Norwegian and Swedish workers has to take place through a language broker, i.e. a worker who spoke either Norwegian or English in addition to Polish. Such brokers ensure collective communication in the construction site through using their linguistic resources, and in return they receive certain rewards. In the long run they may very well become indispensable for the workplace due to their central role in organizing daily work and workers (Kraft, 2017). A manager commented about Tomasz's broker work that 'it is worth gold' (interview, 'Jakob', May 24, 2015). While communication is highly recognized, the workers who function as language brokers for the contractor do not have a specific title, but are simply referred to as 'able to communicate' or 'to speak the language'. This informality can be interpreted as a means of downplaying the status of the language workers, even while simultaneously emphasizing and recognizing language work.

To underline the importance of communication, managers in Great Buildings often mentioned that there was a salary bonus of 10 NOK (1 €) per hour for Polish workers who could speak Norwegian or English (fieldnotes, May 24, 2015; July 1, 2015). Moreover, speaking Norwegian was also emphasized as a prerequisite for permanent employment (fieldnotes June 2, 2014; April 4, 2015; June 1, 2015). At the same time that workers with language competences have a better chance of permanent employment, they also tend to be placed in higher positions (Friberg & Eldring, 2013). This means that the 'right' language skills becomes the basis of meritocratic competition which also legitimizes status differences between workers. In sum, the broker is necessary because of neoliberal recruitment practices aimed at ensuring a flexible labor force. At the same time, it is also a position that workers can strive for through a range of investments and skilling of their selves. The 'return' (Flubacher et al., 2018) for brokers might pertain to salaries (as in this case), work conditions,

positions, and recognition. Often, though, language work goes unpaid as workers' as communication may not be considered a core function of the workplace (Hewitt, 2015) and hence skills such as multilingualism become outcomes of individual choices and options (Willig, 2009) rather than workplace needs. To demonstrate how such conditions impact the becoming of brokers, I will for the remainder of this paper focus on Tomasz.

4.2 Tomasz's Trajectory: Construction Worker and Language Broker

All of his life, Tomasz had been living in Poland, and most of his adult life he had worked abroad. As an EU citizen he was free to move around within the member states as long as he had work. As many other Polish workers, he works abroad but lives in Poland together with his family. He typically worked for six weeks in Norway, and then spent his two weeks off in Poland. While this arrangement allowed for him and his family to have a more convenient life in Poland, it also means that he rarely was home. He was trained as a craftsman and also had experience being a team leader. Before going to Norway to work for a staffing agency, he had worked as a construction worker in Poland and Germany. When I met him at the start of my fieldwork, he had worked for this same staffing agency for the last four years. Most of this time he had been leased primarily by Great Buildings. Whenever Great Buildings leased him, they insisted that he was the team representative for the other temporary Polish workers from the same staffing agency. Jakob, one of the managers from Great Buildings, explained that Tomasz had been given this role because, 'he is good (...) and can communicate' (interview, 'Jakob', May 24, 2015). On this account, Tomasz enjoyed certain privileges whenever Great Buildings leased him, e.g. they paid him the aforementioned language salary bonus, and he was highly recognized by the on-site management as a skilled professional and a smart worker. Furthermore, he was often continually leased which provided him with more stability and income security.

While Tomasz had worked his way to a position of some privilege, at least in part based on the competitive recognition for being a broker, his first encounter with the Norwegian construction and staffing industry had been problematic. He explained that he had quit his job in Poland because he wanted to 'try something else', a highly entrepreneurial discourse (Allan 2016) focused on the self-realization potential

embedded in work. In fact, according to him he could not hold onto his first job because he did not speak Norwegian, nor English.

I quit the job from one day to another and I couldn't afford to, to come back after a month and a half or two months uuuummmm with nothing. So some kind of anger or perseverance a:::nd this Norwegian, well I had to learn it in order to, to somehow (do) this job. (interview, 'Tomasz', June 24, 2015. Translationⁱⁱ)

According to Tomasz, it was this experience of hardship that made him decide to learn Norwegian. While the agency profited from Tomasz's language skills they did not wish to invest in them, and hence this was left to Tomasz. So, he took courses, did daily readings, watched Norwegian TV, and listened to Norwegian-Polish audio books – spending his own money and sparse leisure time. Accounts of language-related difficulties and gate-keeping as well as overcoming these challenges are also described in other studies of migrants (e.g. Bremer et al., 1996; Piller & Takahashi, 2011), while Norton captures the idea of language learning as investment in her work on migrants (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Peirce, 1995). In the excerpt, Tomasz positions himself as an active agent who has to persevere by learning Norwegian. In this way, language learning offers him an agency to control his own trajectory. It is hardly surprising that this is desirable for migrants who are to a great extent subjected to structural professional and hence socio-economic limitations. Of course, returning to Fraser (2003), Tomasz's pursuit of agency through self-investments in learning Norwegian also shapes him to become the kind of worker coveted by the contractor.

Tomasz's investments and the work they enabled him to carry out led one of his closest leaders in Great Buildings to describe him in the following way:

[He] is a role model ... for how the Polish workforce **must** and **should** conduct themselves. So he is top of the line. If Tomasz is at the top, then there are many who reach eighty percent - most are at fifty, fifty-five. ('Nils', interview 'Tomasz', June 24, 2015. Translationⁱⁱⁱ)

The quote shows a strong recognition of Tomasz, but also an equally strong devaluation of most of the other Polish workers who are collapsed into a generic category of ‘the Polish workforce’ and are assigned a value ranging from 50-80 % of Tomasz’s value. Apart from the clear valuation taking place here, the statement also wipes away the extraordinary commitment Tomasz is undertaking through extensive extra work to *learn* Norwegian and then *employ* that language in his daily work life to ensure that the workplace’s teams can communicate and coordinate despite language barriers.

4.3 Obtaining Linguistic Proficiencies through Daily Work Interactions

Investments in language happen outside as well as during work hours. As part of his daily workplace activities, Tomasz improves his linguistic skills by turning work situations into learning spaces with the aim to acquire pieces of speech, like technical terms (Svennevig, 2018). In these situations where Tomasz is skilling his self, his interlocutors are central. In other words, his entrepreneurship cannot take place in isolation, but has to be supported by colleagues. In this way, it becomes akin to a workplace-minded community of practice where old-timers socialize newcomers (Wenger, 1998). Still, while the interlocutor is very important for the facilitation of the skilling-practice, it is generally Tomasz who orients to and initiates learning opportunities. This means that Tomasz creates a learning space where he may engage with his interlocutor who temporarily becomes an *ad hoc* language teacher. Different from socialization in a community of practice, these learning spaces are meant to provide a skill that might provide access to becoming a member of the community. Having access to these encounters then provides a significant advantage in terms of learning and are also conditioned by Tomasz already having some Norwegian language skills.

In Excerpt 1 below, I will demonstrate how such skilling is carried out. The excerpt exemplifies types of situations where Tomasz seizes an opportunity to develop his Norwegian repertoire. The persons interacting are Tomasz and Johan who is a Swedish project leader. Just prior to the excerpt, Tomasz has asked Johan to order some materials. Johan repeats these items in lines 27, 29 and 31. Tomasz provides receipts after Johan’s first two turns (lines 28 and 30), but after Johan has said ‘*ekspanderbult*’ (line 31) Tomasz chooses not to acknowledge Johan’s contribution

with a receipt. Instead he turns the activity into one of self-skilling as he uses the communicative situation to practice the ‘correct’ pronunciation of ‘*ekspanderbult*’ (lines 32 onwards).

Excerpt 1

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

In line 32 of Excerpt 1 we see the initiation of a side-sequence and a shift in the interactional topic, from what to order to how to pronounce what to order. The shift in Tomasz’s orientation is first and foremost clear from how he in line 32 repeats Johan’s contribution (line 31) with rising intonation, a try-marker used to seek acceptance or rejection of the pronunciation, rather than a falling intonation which would simply indicate confirmation of Johan’s turn. That the goal of the interaction has changed becomes even clearer due to the exchanges of the word ‘*ekspanderbult*’ (lines 33, 34) between Johan and Tomasz. In line 35 Johan shifts strategy and focuses only on the prefix ‘*ekspander*’ / ‘expand’ and explains its meaning (line 38), then adds the noun head ‘*bult*’ / ‘bolt’. From line 40 onward the focus is once more on repeating pronunciation. The repetitions show that it is important for Tomasz to require not just the technical term but also the pronunciation of it. His privilege as a language broker is not merely dependent on his acquisition of new words, but also of his performance of showing engagement with learning Norwegian. This performance is crucial to the positive valuation he receives from Great Buildings’ managers. Moreover, many of the Polish workers who have receptive competences are described by the Norwegians as knowing no Norwegian at all. As imprecise as this may be, it illustrates clearly how important it is to be able to *produce* speech in Norwegian. Moreover, pronunciation always indexes one as a migrant (Blommaert 2010; Gumperz 1982; Jacquemet 2013), a category that Tomasz has good reasons to try to distance himself from considering the stratified labor market in the Norwegian construction industry. In short, the learning activity is connected to self-skilling to become more employable, as well as to the performance of being a diligent, integrating worker rather than a migrant worker.

Since this practice is not directly related to carrying out the immediate task, but rather directed towards acquiring skills that will enable work in the long run, it can be

considered another form of Tomasz's investments into his linguistic value as a worker. In the following section, I will demonstrate what Tomasz uses these skills for in his everyday work life.

4.4 Tomasz's Functions and Roles as a Broker

Tomasz's functions as a broker varied significantly, not least with regard to the sites he was working in. When he worked in big construction sites with several levels of management and a mix of Swedish, Polish and Norwegian workers, his primary broker function was the facilitation of communication across language barriers. This meant that he communicated and coordinated work together with Great Buildings' team representatives and foremen. In addition, he would bring information to his Polish colleagues and organize their work in accordance with the instructions he had agreed on with Great Buildings' managers. He did relatively little brokering in the sense of direct interpretation between workers who spoke different languages. This was not coincidental but reflects the internal (neoliberal) structure of the workplace where different groups of speakers were kept in separate teams in order to ensure inter-team communication efficiency.

As a broker Tomasz also facilitated social cohesion. This function was particularly salient in the smaller site. Here there was less linguistic variation since all of the workers were Polish. Still they did have a Swedish project leader, Johan. As Johan did not speak Polish, Tomasz had to resume more functions and responsibilities in his position as a language broker. For example, the managerial privileges and obligations of making choices about the production or creating social cohesion within the workplace were often delegated to him. Johan explained to me that this was more efficient since Tomasz, as a member of the team of construction workers, would know of everything going on in the site and would also be able to communicate with the other workers, and then in turn inform him about progress, problems, etc.

Excerpt 2 below is an example of how Tomasz is asked to act on behalf of the project manager and let the Polish team know that their work is appreciated.

Excerpt 2

[PLEASE INSERT EXCERPT 2 HERE]

In Excerpt 2 Johan underscores, through several turns, that the team of workers are doing a really good job (lines 25, 26 and 32), and two times (lines 24 and 28) he instructs Tomasz to convey this recognition to them. Since Johan does not speak Polish he is dependent on Tomasz's mediation, which puts Tomasz in a position where he serves as an extension of the project management and has to take on certain management responsibilities, in this case acknowledging the team's work. Having to do this kind of work also strengthens Tomasz's broker role as a management role towards his Polish colleagues. However, it is also clear from Excerpt 2 that this is not the role relationship between Johan and Tomasz. The former is clearly telling the latter what to do, and Tomasz simply acknowledges with 'yes' after each of Johan's turn which tells little about how he feels or thinks about this task.

It is beyond any doubt, however, that social cohesion was important in Great Buildings, and it is therefore not surprising that Tomasz is also being enrolled for this purpose. Generally, the managers in Great Buildings liked to emphasize that they worked with flat structures and team spirit. The latter was also one of the company's official corporate values. Altogether, these values were: Civil conduct, Structure, Team Spirit, and Customer Focus (taken from 'Great Buildings' website, accessed August 27, 2018. My translation). Especially team spirit was envisioned as an important part of the work environment. Flat structures, as opposed to a managerial hierarchy with distinct rights and responsibilities, were promoted, and the management philosophy was 'to build a good team' (interview, 'Jakob', May 24, 2015). Jakob told me that this might include firing managers that practiced micro management, as this was in opposition to the company's ideal of putting responsibility and trust in all employees to be able to carry out their work properly (conversation with 'Jakob', October 13, 2014). Jakob explicitly commented on Tomasz's team-building function and on why he was better than his predecessor: 'And the Poles who Tomasz works with here, they feel they are respected by Tomasz. He doesn't rule everything extremely strict like his (the one who was here before). They get respect, in other words.' (interview, 'Jakob', May 24, 2015. My translation).^{iv}

This kind of language brokering then brings a different function into this particular type of language work. The language broker becomes a management substitute and is a central part of fulfilling the contractor's vision for the work

environment. Even if Great Buildings cannot communicate with most of their Polish staff, the company's values (and the implicit sense of 'being good') can still be upheld and disseminated via brokers. This can be important for contractors since they are in competition with other companies over getting the best workers from the staffing agencies.

4.5 Tomasz's Views on Being a Language Broker

As mentioned earlier, Tomasz received material as well as symbolic rewards for his work as a language broker. However, he expressed that he was not very happy about the remuneration for his language broker work. In our conversations he would also frequently bring up that he had applied for a permanent job with Great Buildings, but had not gotten it. He believed that this was due to him still residing in Poland while working in Norway; this practice of residing in another country than Norway was highly common for both Polish and Swedish workers in Great Buildings. While this practice did not prevent the Swedish workers from getting permanent employment, Tomasz believed this to be the reason why he did not get a permanent appointment seemed the ultimate goal, which also kept him apart from Great Buildings' permanent team; he daily interacted with them, he paid several visits to the on-site management offices every day to talk to managers, and, unlike his Polish colleagues, he wore working clothes with Great Buildings' logo, rather than that of the staffing agency.

During an interview he told me that language skills were an important, though not required, qualification when the staffing agency recruited new people. The reason for this was that contractors had a selection principle, namely that they would not lease workers from the agency if none of these workers spoke either English or Norwegian. This selection principle was, according to Great Buildings, necessary to ensure that production did not become inefficient or dangerous, both aspects of the competition that contractors are submitted to in the industry. According to Tomasz, the staffing agency was well aware of this and knew they needed to provide contractors with language brokers. He also emphasized how this became an extra workload for him – one that he was not completely at ease with:

I know that my Norwegian is very weak. But he [the manager from the staffing agency, *ed.*] thinks I can deal with everything. And I

have to be running like a dog around this construction site.

(interview, 'Tomasz', June 24, 2015. Translation_v)

The quote reflects Tomasz's perception of the amount of work that his manager in the staffing agency expects him to carry out. He compares this to a dog running around. While the simile is effective in terms of depicting a very busy work life, the image of the dog also has connotations to a serving creature doing its master's bidding. It is for sure a rather different perspective from those of some of the managers. A bit later, having been asked by the researcher if he gets extra money for his language work, he adds:

Maybe I have a bit more, maybe a bit more than a bit more, but it is not proportional to this [communication work, *ed.*]. And then again, the one who speaks Norwegian or English very well would not go to an agency. He will go directly. (interview, 'Tomasz', June 24, 2015. Translation_{vi})

It is noteworthy how he assesses that he does not get enough extra money for his language work, but also that he expresses a belief that workers who speak Norwegian well have the option to avoid being employed through a staffing agency. Again, this underlines how the ultimate goal, at least for Tomasz, is permanent employment directly under a contractor and how he believes the realization of this option to be connected to language skills. Speaking Norwegian, then, is an opportunity to escape the precarious conditions of a neoliberal labor market and some of its institutions, particularly the staffing agencies.

5 Discussion: A Janus-faced Practice

Labor migration results in a problem of precarity for the migrant workers and a problem of workplace communication for the company, in this case a Norwegian contractor interested in leasing migrant workers as well as the staffing agency providing these workers. Language brokers solve the latter problem, and in doing so resolve (part of) their own precarity. Even though the language brokers have a central and highly flexible role in the workplace, the path to this role is one of competition and personalized responsibility as it is not supported by the staffing agency and only

encouraged through incentives from the contractor. In short, becoming a broker rests solely on workers' self-investments and self-skilling. The outcome is linguistic flexibility which leads to functions of the language broker that is not only related to communication but also management functions, e.g. the creation of social cohesion. This underlines the language broker's willingness to be flexible, as well as the self-regulation needed to become a flexible worker in the sense of acquiring language skills that help the daily running of a workplace based on conditions of staff flexibility. Since the language broker in a sense creates surplus value, his position becomes more stable and he receives privileges in the sense of symbolic as well as material recognition. This privilege is obtained through pursuing the sociolinguistic regimentation required by the neoliberalized Norwegian construction industry. In addition, the language broker system is an important part of the reproduction of a socioeconomically stratified labor market between temporary, often migrant, and permanent, often local, workers that leaves the majority of migrant workers under precarious work conditions while a few 'make the cut' as language brokers. Studying the trajectories of these migrant workers provides us with insights about migrants' self-investments and self-management with regard to language. It also shows how they are rewarded, or not, short-term as well as in the long run. Studying trajectories thus allow us to gain understandings of language within migration and labor studies that build on the recognition of structures as well as agency and how these impact on the individual worker's life. In conclusion, since brokers are the result of deregulation of workers' labor conditions, and flexible recruitment practices, and as such the primary product for staffing agencies, studying their trajectories means studying how language plays into a neoliberal economy. Language in many ways becomes yet another way for precarious migrant workers to rid themselves of precarity by realizing their options. However, it is exactly the idea of options and self-realization that makes the continued use of staffing agencies, deregulation and precarization – features of a neoliberal economy – possible. In short, the broker's struggle to reach a position of privilege from a position of precarity enables the continued precarity of the majority of migrant workers in the construction site.

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Bionote

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i Names of individual participants and companies have been changed for purposes of anonymisation. All research procedures conformed to the ethics of academic work and informed consent was granted by all participants to generate and use all data for scientific dissemination purposes.

ii Original: 'Ale chciałem spróbować czegoś innego. Przyjeżdżając tu, no:::, coś się zostawiło w domu, pracę się z dnia na dzień rzuciło, i nie mogłem sobie pozwolić na to, żeby wrócić po półtora czy po dwóch miesiącach yyyyy z niczym. Więc taka nawet jakaś złość czy samozaparcie w sobie iii ten norweski no musiałem się uczyć, żeby, żeby tą pracę jakoś tam.'

iii Original: 'Det er et føredøme ... for hur dem polske arbeidskraften skal og bør oppføre sig. Så han er top of the line. Hvis tomasz er på toppen, så er der mange som når opp til åtti procent. Merparten ligger på femti, femtifem.'

iv Original: 'Og de polakkene som Tomasz jobber med her, de føler de får respekt av Tomasz. Han styrer det ikke sånn steinhart som hans (han som var her før). De får respekt, med andre ord.'

v Original: 'Zgadza się, mhm yyy Im jest wygodniej załatwić y klienta takiego jak Great Buildings gdzie wpuszcza 15 ludzi a jeden umie dwa słowa po norwesku. No przykładowo tak jak ja, no ja tam może jakoś się dogadam, cho, aczkolwiek ja wiem, że mój norweski, to jest bardzo słaby. Ale on już wychodzi z takiego założenia, że ja już załatwię wszystko I ja tu muszę latać jak pies po budowie.'

vi Original: 'Zgadza się, mhm yyy Im jest wygodniej załatwić y klienta takiego jak Great Buildings gdzie wpuszcza 15 ludzi a jeden umie dwa słowa po norwesku. No przykładowo tak jak ja, no ja tam może jakoś się dogadam, cho, aczkolwiek ja wiem, że mój norweski, to jest bardzo słaby. Ale on już wychodzi z takiego założenia, że ja już załatwię wszystko I ja tu muszę latać jak pies po budowie.'

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