Power dynamics at work

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What is the primary aim of the dissertation and what are its most important findings?

The primary aim of the dissertation is to better understand the life-worlds of people working in a contemporary, multilingual blue-collar work environment. A basic question about such environments is whether language diversity constitutes a 'problem', and if so, what the nature of this 'problem' is. Previous studies of multilingual workplaces have shown that people do not have to speak an 'entire' language to achieve all sorts of transactional and social purposes. Moreover, scholars from an academic field known as *posthumanism* have shown that machines, among others, can help to achieve certain purposes without any need for human-human interaction. Hence, the idea that language diversity constitutes a 'problem' cannot be taken for granted. This dissertation has tested this insight through a detailed ethnographic study of workplace interactions in a metal foundry in the Dutch-German borderland, and presented a complex and nuanced picture of the degree to which different kinds of interactional purposes were (not) achieved. The overall theme of this study is *power dynamics*, a concept that captures the human-human and human-machine interactions which produce particular effects, which hierarchise the relations among the interacting participants, and which do (not) contribute to relevant purposes such as productivity, workplace safety, and job satisfaction.

One important finding of the study is that majoritised speakers in the foundry tended to find the language diversity at work more problematic than minoritised speakers. Possibly, this was because they were less used to having to adapt to a situation where people did not speak their first language(s), or because they felt that their social-economic position was threatened by minoritised speakers, while "language problems" could be used as an argument why those speakers should not be employed. Another important finding is that the *transience* of many work relations posed a bigger challenge to workplace communication and workplace learning than language diversity, partly because people had less time to build up a repertoire of shared communicative resources, and partly because the transient nature of their relations made them less motivated to do so. Finally, an important finding is that human workers in the foundry often

had more problems understanding machines than each other. Hence, it makes sense to approach the terms *language* and *language policy* more broadly, and to abandon the division between studies of human-human interaction and human-machine interaction in the fields of workplace communication and workplace learning, as studying one without the other misses an important dimension of the daily and nightly workplace reality.

What is the (potential) academic and societal contribution of these research findings?

Up until recent years, blue-collar life-worlds rarely featured in academic studies of multilingual workplaces. One likely explanation for this is the methodological challenges involved (Lønsmann and Kraft 2017, 146-147): securing access to a blue-collar work environment can be hard; the social distance between the researcher and the participants can be large (e.g., in terms of gender, ethnicity, or language); and loud sounds can make it difficult to record workplace conversations. Hence, the mere fact that this dissertation has dealt with multilingualism in a blue-collar work environment, and that it has shared and reflected upon how the author gathered relevant data there, is already a contribution to existing academic research in and of itself. Moreover, its discussion of perspectives from both majoritised and minoritised speakers, and its discussion of the interactional role of machines are unique within existing linguistic ethnographies of blue-collar work environments.

Ultimately, the dissertation has aimed to contribute to better understandings of blue-collar life-worlds in this way, which may lead to better informed (language) policies. As the COVID-19 pandemic has underlined, many blue-collar jobs are crucial, and many are done by minoritised, first-generation migrant workers. Moreover, as the metal foundry is located in Limburg, where the population is not expected to grow significantly anymore, or even to shrink (Statistics Netherlands 2020b), migrant workers can be an important asset for the economy and society. Hence, it is not only in the interests of migrant workers themselves, but also in the interests of majoritised workers, and of different companies and the wider society to develop a better understanding of power dynamics and their effects, and to discuss how power dynamics can become a force for the good, so that 'local' and migrant workers both feel happy to take on

a blue-collar job and stay in this region, thereby contributing to the sustainability of its economy and society.

With regard to the perspective of majoritised speakers, the research has shown that many of them were dissatisfied with the language diversity in the metal foundry, despite the fact that many messages from the company's management were written in the majoritised language (Dutch) only, and despite the management's efforts to make clear that minoritised speakers were expected to learn Dutch over time. One reason for this was that they were well aware that this was not likely to happen, at least not during times of economic growth. Thus, they had to adapt to a specific linguistic diversity at work anyway. Several majoritised speakers also explained that the increased language diversity was part of a broader development, which made them feel that people had less respect for them nowadays, and that companies such as the metal foundry did not fully represent their interests anymore. Hence, it became clear that language policies should not only address communication issues, but also the issue of whether the interests of different people are sufficiently considered. My suggestion would therefore be to not only aim for a more inclusive language policy, which follows the principle that as many messages as possible should be understandable for as many workers as possible, but also for an open communication about the reasons behind this policy. Managers could state, for example, that opening up to more language diversity can help a company to increase its production and make (more) profit, which can be invested in higher wages and more permanent contracts. In and of itself, such communication is not sufficient, but if, and when, it is part of a broader set of practices, which all underline that a management cares about its workers' interests, people's job satisfaction is more likely to increase, while possible social tensions are more likely to decrease.

With regard to machines, the dissertation has identified several possible additional ways to enhance people's job satisfaction. As many workers spent a major part of their work shifts with machines, these non-human co-workers were clearly relevant in this respect. Besides that, the dissertation has shown that machines had a valuable potential for workplace communication, as they could (partly) take over certain human communication tasks, for example by indicating how to work safely. In this way, machines could even help to overcome possible language barriers at work. At the same time, however, the dissertation has shown several examples of people struggling to understand machines, and of machines

negatively affecting people's job satisfaction, for example by not adjusting to someone's working speed, or by not providing a sufficient explanation for a technical problem. One fundamental question is whether machine designers should ultimately aim for a replacement of human workers, or whether machines should rather be considered a valuable addition to the human work experience. Either way, by sharing observations such as the ones from this dissertation, machine designs may be improved, so that they become better at contributing to inclusive workplace communication as well as to safe and satisfying work experiences.

All in all, it has become clear that the insights from this research may not only be relevant for this particular metal foundry, but for other companies as well, and perhaps even for organisations beyond that. In fact, building upon a common representation of cross-border regions in Europe (the so-called *Euroregions*), this dissertation has proposed to consider the metal foundry as a "laboratory of European integration". Indeed, many major news topics of the European Union came together in this workplace, including economic crises and recoveries, labour migration from East to West, refugees from Syria, and resistance to such migration from 'local' majoritised populations. Hence, the metal foundry could be considered a critical case for the question of whether different people in Europe, in addition to machines (or any other technology for that matter), can live, work, and become economically productive together. My ultimate answer to this question is that this is possible, as long as certain conditions are fulfilled. Inclusivity is essential in this respect, because it can make people feel that they matter and belong to a specific organisation, but it is crucial to understand that inclusivity is not just an interest of specific minoritised speakers, but an interest of everyone. Therefore, the first step is to consider whether the social-economic and sociolinguistic interests of different individuals are sufficiently represented in an organisation, and if this is so, the next step is to show them that this is indeed the case.

Finally, with regard to the process of gathering relevant fieldwork data, and with regard to (historical) management practices in the metal foundry, the research has highlighted several advantages of being able to speak Limburgish. A political implication of this finding is that it should not be considered 'useless' or 'irrational' if someone wishes to learn Limburgish as a second language, or if parents wish to raise their children in Limburgish. Hence, one recommendation is to develop a societal infrastructure in Limburg that enables people to learn and teach Limburgish if, and when, they wish to do so.

For which target group are the research findings interesting and/or relevant?

As follows from the discussion above, the findings can be interesting and relevant for many target groups, including fellow academics, company managers, (language) policymakers, machine designers, blue-collar workers and their representatives in labour unions, as well as other workers who are dealing with diverse languages and technologies today.

In which way can this target group be informed about the research findings?

Two chapters of this dissertation have already been published as open access, peer-reviewed articles in two different well-read academic journals, and a third one has been recently submitted to another such journal. In addition, I have published an essay about language policy in Limburg in the *Veldeke Jaarboek*, an annual popular-scientific publication from the regional cultural and dialectological organisation Veldeke Limburg.

I have given 29 presentations about my research project during my PhD trajectory, ranging in duration from seven minutes to two hours. Eight of these presentations took place at national, and nine at international academic conferences, seminars, and workshops. Besides those talks, I have given four presentations for colleagues, and another four presentations for undergraduate students from Maastricht University. Finally, I have given four presentations for broader, non-specialist audiences, such as a research pitch for a political representative from the Dutch province of Limburg.

In the final year of my PhD trajectory (2020), I have suffered a few setbacks due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, for example, my supervisors and I planned to organise a conference for different societal stakeholders at Statistics Netherlands (CBS), during which we would exchange academic and professional perspectives on the topic of multilingualism in blue-collar workplaces. Unfortunately, this turned out to be one of the very first events from CBS and Maastricht University that was cancelled due to the pandemic, but we plan to set a new date for the event once this pandemic is over. Another example is a two-months research stay at the University of Copenhagen in May and June 2020, which was cancelled for the same reason.

When it comes to the metal foundry, I have been maintaining email contact with two Human Resource (HR) managers and two production workers since the end of my fieldwork. Overall, the foundry has had many personnel changes since then, and the COVID-19 pandemic makes it difficult to give a presentation there at the moment, but I still plan to visit it again once the circumstances allow it. Afterwards, I will also publish a popular-scientific or journalistic text about my research, so that a broader non-academic audience can learn about the findings of this dissertation as well.