

# Language, work and migration

Multilingual workplaces as a site of study

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# Overview

- Introduction: Why study language, work and migration?
- Multilingualism in workplaces
  1. as societal discourse
  2. as workplace practices
  3. as individual concern
- Conclusion

# Introduction: Why study language, work, and migration?

# What have migration, multilingualism and work got to do with each other – and why care?

- Migration (for work) and increased multilingualism
- Practical concerns and ideological matters
- Multilingual workplaces = a site for the study of human organisation, social boundary-making, ideologies, and consequences

# The study of multilingual workplaces

- Multilingual workplace studies = umbrella term
- Most, if not all, workplaces can be studied as multilingual
- Not a particular kind of workplace
- Service, knowledge and production workplaces are all studied
- The key question: What languages are enabled and disabled in specific spaces?

# My studies of the construction industry

## Norwegian construction industry

- 2 long-term ethnographies
- Research interests: (1) the role of multilingualism in stratification processes, (2) multilingualism and teambuilding in transient communities
- Primarily Polish, Norwegian, and Swedish managers and workers
- Polish workers hired through staffing agencies

## Tunnel mining project in Denmark

- 1 short-term ethnography
- Research interest: Exploring language practices and ideologies amongst miners
- Predominantly workers from Italy and Spain, but also from other European, African and South American countries
- Workers employed by Italian contractor, working for Danish client

# 1. Multilingualism and work as societal discourse

# Migration and language as discourse

- Public discourse often constructs migration (or migrants) and language as a challenge – also in work contexts
- In Norwegian construction industry, migrant workers, multilingualism and safety risks are tied together
- A widely shared belief that increased migration led to increase in communication break-downs





Mangel på kommunikasjon i bygge- og anleggsbransjen kan utgjøre en betydelig sikkerhetsrisiko. Spesielt når det er mange utenlandske arbeidstakere og virksomheter.

Arbeidstakere fra ulike land behersker ikke hverandres språk og kjenner ikke kultur. Dette stiller ekstra store krav til arbeidsgiverne med hensyn til språk, miljø- og sikkerhetsarbeid. Dette gjelder blant annet sikkerhetsopplæring og kommunikasjon som arbeidstakerne forstår og god sikkerhetskommunikasjon

## Bedre sikkerhet for utenlandske arbeidstakere

Utenlandske arbeidstakere som ikke snakker norsk, er en utsatt gruppe for skader på arbeidsplassen. Av dem som omkom på jobb i 2014, var 30 prosent utenlandske arbeidstakere.

NTB



### Kapittel 22. Sikkerhetsskiltning, signalgivning og kommunikasjon

#### Til § 22-4. Krav til muntlig kommunikasjon

Det må til enhver tid være tilstrekkelig kommunikasjon mellom alt personale som er involvert i en arbeidsoperasjon, og kommunikasjon må fortrinnsvis foregå på norsk. Dersom det finnes arbeidstakere av forskjellig utenlandsk opprinnelse og språk på arbeidsplassen, må arbeidsgiveren enten velge kommunikasjon på det språket som alle arbeidstakere kan beherske, eller også legge opp til egnet system for gjensidig forståelse mellom arbeidstakere.

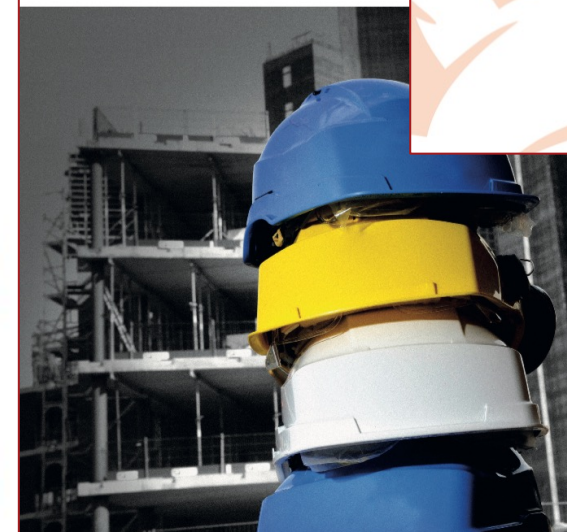
#### Til § 22-6. Særlige regler ved bruk av signaler

Arbeidsgiveren må sørge for at person som gir signaler, har fått nødvendig opplæring og øvelse om signalgivning og har god forståelse av arbeidsoperasjonen.



Forstår du hva jeg sier

Krav til kommunikasjon og språk på bygge- og anleggsplassen



# Seriousness Demands

“Unless otherwise agreed all **communication between key personnel must be in Norwegian**. The contractor must assure that workers that he and all potential subcontractors use are able to communicate in a way that does not incur safety risks. In order to prevent accidents caused by misunderstanding of information, the following principles apply:

- At least **one worker in every team** must understand and be able to make himself understood in **Norwegian or English**. [...]
- Everybody must understand the SHA plan, safety training, HMS routines, guidelines for safety equipment, safety instructions [...]. **Materials must be available in the language that the worker uses as his mother tongue if the worker does not understand the material fully in Norwegian or English.**”

(My translation, my bold)



Med mindre annet er avtalt, skal all kommunikasjon mellom nøkkelpersoner i prosjektet foregå på norsk. Leverandøren skal sørge for at arbeidstakerne han og eventuelle underleverandører benytter kan kommunisere på en slik måte at manglende kommunikasjon ikke utgjør en sikkerhetsrisiko. For å unngå at det skjer ulykker fordi ikke alle forstår informasjonen som blir gitt, gjelder følgende:

- Minst én av det utførende personell på ethvert arbeidslag skal kunne forstå og gjøre seg forstått på norsk eller engelsk. Dersom flere utfører oppdrag sammen, skal vedkommende i tillegg forstå og gjøre seg forstått på et språk alle de andre på arbeidslaget forstår og kan gjøre seg forstått på.
- Alle på byggeplassen skal forstå SHA-plan, sikkerhetsopplæring, HMS-rutiner, verneprotokoller, sikkerhetsinstrukser, SJA, sikkerhetsdatablader, bruksanvisning for verktøy og arbeidsutstyr, varselskilter mv. Materialet skal foreligge på det språk vedkommende arbeidstaker bruker som morsmål, såfremt arbeidstakeren ikke forstår informasjonen fullt ut på norsk eller engelsk.

Ved brudd på ovennevnte plikter har byggherren rett til å stanse arbeidene i den utstrekning byggherren anser det nødvendig.

# The point

Multilingualism and work is constructed as a serious safety matter for institutions and workers. Solutions are based on language ideologies that prioritise the national language and to some extent English.

# 2. Multilingualism as workplace practices

# Managing multilingualism: Some common practices – and complications

- A corporate language (often the national language or English) is one strategy
- Choosing the right corporate language may be tricky as managers and groups of workers can have different language needs
- A corporate language might even erase some needs
- A language broker is another, or an additional, strategy

# The language broker

- A worker who connects the multilingual workplace
- A worker who possesses a rich multimodal repertoire and professional knowledge
- Rarely a formalised role, but often highly recognised by management
- The role may cause tensions in work teams, because it may promote linguistic skills over professional skills
- A role that enjoys both privileges and challenges

## A professional does(n't) need language: Workers' perspectives

- A profession has a universal language so a good professional doesn't need language ('Roberto' and 'Diego')
- For everyday purposes you don't need to be able to communicate but when you have to train new workers it becomes essential ('Nikos')
- The workers are good at what they do and that makes communication easier – and there is always someone who can communicate with all ('Isabella')



## Language for safety work, communication for socialisation

"There's different people coming into the teams at different times with different language backgrounds, and as the client our concern was that the safety regulations were available to everyone in a language they understood or with a translator that could make that xx, and I think the Esperanto thing is, as Claudio said, was more... these guys are down in the TBM eight hours a day six days a week together it's a little family and they learn to speak to each other in whatever way they can and then they learn each other's languages, which is fascinating."

- CEO for project client

## Communication is something different than speaking the language

"So communication is something different than speaking the language. You don't need to learn the whole language to communicate with another person. This is, I mean this is the basic idea of what is going on down there. Everybody tries to communicate and everybody tries to make some effort, and in this way you, you just take, you grasp a little:: one word from here, one other word from there xxx and try to make some kind of mix, that everybody's communicating and everybody's, relaxing, happy."

- Mining worker and engineer



# The point

A corporate language (on its own) won't do the trick. More languages are needed.

# 3. Multilingualism and work as an individual concern

# 'Tomasz'

- Construction worker and team leader
- Early 40'ies
- Lives with family in Poland
- Currently working in Norway (prev. in Poland and Germany)
- Works 12 hours a day for 3 weeks, 1 week off
- Hired by staffing agency, leased by same contractor for many years (eventually hired permanently by this contractor)
- Speaks Polish, German and Norwegian
- Language broker

# The advantages of speaking 'the language'

«It's more convenient for them [the staffing agency, *ed.*]. They hire 15 people. And then maybe one of them can say two words in Norwegian. For example me. I can probably communicate, but I know that my Norwegian is really bad. But I can take care of everything [communication, *ed.*] and I have to run around this construction site like a dog. Perhaps I get a bit more [salary, *ed.*]. Perhaps I get a bit more than a bit more, but it doesn't compensate all the work I do. Moreover, someone who speaks Norwegian or English really well wouldn't be in a staffing agency, they would be employed directly [by a contractor, *ed.*].»

(Interview w. 'Tomasz', June 2015, my translation)

# The point

Investments in language learning for work is tough, and while employers might believe they value and reward such investments, individual workers can experience it as a form of exploitation.

# Conclusion: Multilingualism and work – present and future

## Summary of points

- Language and communication is an issue from the national policy level to everyday work practices
- Communication in the multilingual construction site requires a lot of language work
- Many languages are used, but the ideology of a 'national-and-international language' dominates and instils a language hierarchy
- Language and communication are keyed in with issues of safety and efficiency
- Language work holds economic, professional and social potential – along with exploitative aspects – for those who can carry it out (e.g. language brokers)
- Specific languages are desired by employers, but language learning often becomes an individual responsibility

# Questions

- What is a multilingual workplace?
- Is a shared language always necessary for the job?
- Who is responsible for the multilingual workplace?
- How does the workplace organise its multilingualism?
- How to ensure a more equal multilingual workplace?



# Thank you

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