

Outcomes and recommendations from the IR-MultiLing project

Industrial relations in
multilingual environments at work





IR-MultiLing

a EU funded research project

Funded for two years by the EU Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, IR-Multiling was aimed at researching linguistic diversity at work and its effects on industrial relations in six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain and the UK.

In nearly every EU country trade unions and managers are dealing with a growing presence of workers, both national citizens and migrants, who neither speak nor read the national language fluently or at all, and who often prefer, when possible or permitted, to communicate between themselves in their own country-of-origin language.

At the same time, many of Europe's elites communicate between themselves using English as a 'universal language' and this leads to the downgrading of national, regional or migrant origin languages in professional milieux, and to career penalties where there are difficulties in accessing English language skills.

Yet the human right to use minority languages in public life is supported by the European Commission, and it is also policy to argue that *'a mobile workforce is key to the competitiveness of the EU economy'* and to advocate that *'all EU citizens learn and speak more languages' while still having 'access to EU legislation, procedures and information in their own language'*.



IR-MultiLing researched the consequences that linguistic diversity had on day-to-day work relationships as well as on employee rights and explored the responses of social partners (Trade Unions, Employers) to this issue. The analysis developed during the project is based on 18 case studies conducted across the six countries and about 180 interviews with employers, employees, trade union officers and experts.

Supported by National Advisory Groups of social partners and other experts, IR-MultiLing has added to industrial relations expertise in this little-researched area, developed recommendations for decision-makers and produced some training videos aimed at trade unionists.

Outcomes of the research



IR-MultiLing research findings confirm that responses to multilingualism vary considerably according to the type of companies and the countries considered.

Languages issues are different in each country due to migration patterns, although language discrimination is found in all countries, especially in relation to access to employment and upward mobility.

During our fieldwork, it appeared that the number of companies with very clear linguistic policies is very low. In most cases, policies were not written and were described through custom and practice. None of the companies researched had a single language culture and all had subgroups of workers speaking some unofficial languages. From this point of view, experiences were very similar from one country to another, independently of national legislation.

A hierarchical split was observed between professionals and managers working in English and low skilled workers who are only speaking their national language and the language of the host country where they are immigrant.

In the case of multinational subsidiaries, this split was even clearer. A generational divide was also noted with the younger generations having a better command of English. Furthermore, it appeared that the recruitment policies of some companies have shifted towards the recruitment of more people with fluency in both national and English languages.

During the research, an analytical framework aimed at deepening our understanding of company policies was developed. This analytical framework distinguishes three models of linguistic diversity management in companies.

The first one, the assimilationist model, is characterised by voluntarism in terms of linguistic policies and a low level of tolerance towards informal practices. In such scenarios, a dominant language is implemented by management, which prohibits or denies the use of the migrant workers' mother tongue.

The second one, the cohabitation model, is characterised by either a laissez faire attitude or an explicit use of linguistic diversity in business strategies. In this case, diverse cultural and linguistic communities are using their mother tongue but there is a very low level of interaction between each community. The third one, the integrative or 'bottom-up' model, is characterised by a pragmatic management of linguistic diversity, based on cross-linguistic and cultural communication. In such a case, there is a high level of workers' participation in decision making with high flexibility and adaptability in the use of diverse languages during work.

Our case studies revealed that assimilationist policies are by far the most frequently promoted by management in all sectors, meaning that linguistic diversity is largely ignored if not repressed. These assimilationist policies differ depending upon the organisation and the nature of work. In some cases, such policies are accompanied with some efforts from the company management to ensure that immigrant workers can at least understand the health and safety instructions and that they are integrated into the work collective. For this purpose language classes and festive multicultural events are offered to the staff. In other cases, however, no specific measures were put in place and it appeared that the workers we interviewed in such companies expressed a strong feeling of being discriminated against.

The case studies also highlighted that, in most cases, the assimilationist company policies were coexisting with an informal use of languages of immigration within the work organisation. The most paradoxical case we found was certainly the German Foundry, where the Turkish 'ghettos' are denounced even by the work council representatives while some managers learnt some Turkish to ensure efficient communications at work.

Finally, we only found two examples of cohabitation policy and one example of integrative policy, all in international hubs in Spain and Hungary. In the two cases of cohabitation policy, the linguistic diversity appeared mainly instrumentalised; high-qualified workers being precisely employed for their linguistic competencies but without specific efforts to integrate them into the work collective. In the case of the integrative policy, we could observe that it emerged directly and spontaneously from the staff in a small and very new company where staff had a voice regarding work organisation

Some efforts by trade unions to organise and integrate migrant workers were observed in all countries. In the UK and Italy, trade unions have appointed migrant trade union officials. One specific project in Germany called 'Fair Mobility' is run by the Federation of German Trade Unions (DGB) and co-founded by the ESF and German government. Nationwide there are six agencies in which multilingual counsellors advise migrant workers concerning rights and duties. In France, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) set up specific clinics at national, regional and local levels for undocumented workers.

In all countries, multilingualism rarely forms a specific and independent topic for trade union policies and for collective bargaining, apart from when it comes to health and safety issues. Moreover, language issues were rarely mentioned in collective agreements dealing with management of diversity or discrimination.



Recommendations from the IR-Multiling team

Tackling direct and indirect discrimination at the workplace and enhancing labour safety

Problem addressed	Recommendation	Responsible actors
Discrimination at workplace based on knowledge and use of language creates obstacles in hiring, promotion and task delivery for non-native speaker workers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognise language as an area of direct discrimination 2. Legislation and incentives to develop appropriate language policies 3. Internal audits on language qualifications and careers 4. Codes of practice 5. Organisation/Company policy on language use based on commitment to value linguistic diversity and support (host) language training 6. Level of language requirement specified for each job in relationship to the job specifications 	EU, Member States Employers
Broader EU norms setting instruments or national equality policies do not recognise the links between linguistic diversity and disadvantages at the workplace	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide a supplementary section to the EU Charter of Diversity focused on language diversity at work 2. National frameworks for monitoring equality should make explicit reference to language 	EU Governments
Limited knowledge and exclusive use of main language generates dysfunctions in workflow and violations of safety regulations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Encourage peer support and local language courses (free and in working time) 2. Co-ordinate with education providers locally 3. Training plans aimed at developing language skills 	Employers Trade unions at local level Education providers

Increasing understanding of the significance of language in enabling working environments and productivity

Problem addressed	Recommendation	Responsible actors
Lack of recognition of linguistic/cultural plurality at company level	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural awareness campaigns and training 2. Audit and register of languages spoken by employees. 	Employers Trade unions
Lack of positive approach to or knowledge of language issues by employers in management of diversity.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide evidence of good practice and its impact 2. Develop multicultural training that promotes awareness and mutual understanding 	EU, researchers, running projects on Diversity Management Trade Unions

Making representatives of labour equipped with knowledge and tools to promote progressive workplace practices

Problem addressed	Recommendations	Responsible actors
Low-level awareness of language related issues by trade unions at local/national/EU level result in low migrant participation in labour organisations.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Awareness and training for trade unions 2. Involve migrant workers as trade union representatives 3. Establish network of Advice Centres 	Trade unions at national level Local Administrations/Training Departments EU/MS through trade union initiatives
Linguistic differences often turn to conflicting interests within organizations undermining solidarity among groups of workers.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Awareness sessions (e.g. Forum Theatre) 2. Inclusion of workers from different linguistic backgrounds at the negotiation tables 	Trade union Employers Employment agencies

Six training videos available for workers and trade unions

The project was committed to producing videos for training purposes to be used across Europe, primarily with trade unionists but also other parties with an interest in the issues.

The pedagogy adopted for the training proposed here is derived from the works of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and theatre director Augusto Boal. Central to Freire's thinking was that people's ability to think and speak for themselves is typically submerged or 'silenced' by the dominant culture. That does not mean that people are literally silent but that what they say is what they think they are allowed or expected to say. He talked about education as being for liberation, emancipation or transformation.

Following Freire's work, Boal developed the Theatre of the Oppressed method based on the involvement of spectators in the resolution of the dramatic plot. At any moment of the play, spectators, prompted by a joker, could become an actor and implement their own solution directly on the stage. Such catharsis has a liberating effect and gives voice to those who have been deprived of it.

The following IR-MultiLing videos and the training handbook are available in the six languages of the project:
(see: <https://goo.gl/LGcW6l>)

1. **Actimel:** cleaning staff are given a new product to use. Their health and safety is at risk because they don't understand the very limited information they are given.



2. **Darling:** a new employee discovers that the supervisor will not use her proper name. She feels disrespected.

3. **Packing:** there is tension between a new migrant worker and an established local worker about how fast to work. The trade union representative does not want divisions between workers.



4. **Toothbrush:** a misunderstanding between a hotel guest and a housekeeper means she may lose her job.

5. **Join the union:** Why? Why not? A group of workers discuss reasons for joining or not joining a union.



6. **The union clinic:** individual members who are migrant workers bring their problems to branch official. When he asks the full-time official if the union can help, it is clear that union policies mean that this is unlikely.

Visit IR-MultiLing Website:

www.irmultiling.com

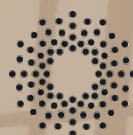
In the United Kingdom, the research team was composed of:

- John Gabriel - London Metropolitan University
- Alex Krouglov - London Metropolitan University
- John Eversley - London Metropolitan University

The National advisory board was composed of:

- Susan Cueva – UNISON
- Rosa Crawford – TUC
- Ann Carlisle – Chartered Institute of Linguists
- Teresa Tinsley – Alcantara Communications
- Kirsi-Marja Kekki – TUC - Unionlearn

IR - MultiLing 
Industrial relations in multilingual environments at work



**LONDON
METROPOLITAN
UNIVERSITY**