

IR - MultiLing 
Industrial relations in multilingual environments at work



Industrial relations and management of multilingual diversity at work

A comparative case study analysis in the Italian context IR-MULTILING | CASE STUDIES

ITALY, Case Study no 1

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1. Overview of the Company

This case study involves a multinational operating in the catering industry. This is a leading company in catering that provides its services in company restaurants and staff canteens, schools and hospital cafeterias across Italy. The company was established in the 1980s and today has a reputation in the sector. It is headquartered in the Lombardy Region, although it has branches and subsidiaries throughout the country (either in Southern, Central or Northern Italy). A number of support companies can also be found in Europe (mostly Central Europe).

As far as the workforce is concerned, the company employs some 6,500 workers, of whom 45% are females and 55% males (confirming that the catering industry is either female-dominated or employs a significant share of women). The company is also known for providing stable employment. This aspect is confirmed by the fact that 95% of the employment contracts concluded are open-ended. Due to the type of activity and the services provided (e.g. canteens and restaurants at companies are frequently open only at lunch) a significant share of the staff is hired on part-time employment contracts (some 60%), while only 5% of them have fixed-time employment contracts. Agency workers in this company account for less than 1%. These statistics are important as the company seems to give priority to worker retention, in that an attempt can be seen to keep workers and reduce turnover (the share of workers on open-ended employment contracts is telling in this connection). This also applies to non-national workers, who make up some 30% of the company's total workforce. Non-Italian workers mostly come from: Northern Africa, South-American (Mexico and Ecuador) and Eastern Europe (Romania). Accordingly, the languages spoken at the company after Italian (the country's language) and French and English (which are used as "international" languages) are: Spanish, Arabic and Romanian. English and French are therefore used to communicate among workers who do not speak the same language, although it is usually the case that workers either have a high command of Italian or the knowledge of the national language is not strictly required to perform their tasks (which tend to be repetitive and involve the use of the same, although specialized, terminology).

In relation to the industrial relations system, the applicable collective agreement, that is the one enforced in the catering sector and concern public premises, does not provide any references concerning the use and the learning of a language, nor does it make mention of initiatives and practices to promote multilingualism and cultural integration. Traditionally, this is an aspect that is left to the discretion of the company (via internal policies and initiatives) and/or collective agreements concluded at the company level. The knowledge of language/languages is not a fundamental requisite at the company, although of course is seen favorably by management. Nor is low levels of Italian seen by trade unions and workers themselves as a barrier to trade union activity and participation. As much as 20% of non-Italian workers are unionized and this points to a lack of interest in unionism on the part of migrant workers. As pointed out by one of the workers interviewed, this might be also due to the fact that migrant workers (especially those coming from poorer countries who are engaged in low qualified jobs) have lower expectations in terms of working conditions (pay, annual leave etc.) than their Italian counterparts. Accordingly, only rarely do they complain about work. This might be seen as a further reason for not joining the union. In-company free language courses and training are envisaged for migrant workers to learn Italian, and these seem to be the most frequent tools to deal with the language issue. To some workers and trade union representatives, another way to raise awareness about multilingualism and promote linguistic and cultural diversity at the workplace is hiring more overseas workers also in managerial positions. This is particularly true if one considers that currently non-national workers at the company perform tasks for which a low and medium level of skills is required (serving meals at the tables, cleaning, driving etc.).

2. Initiatives and Policies to deal with Multilingualism at the Workplace (from both Employers and Unions)

When it comes multilingualism, collective bargaining at national and local level in Italy does not lay down policies and initiatives concerning the promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity and the integration of overseas workers. This is a point that has been made clear during the interviews from both representatives from trade unions and the employer. *“Multilingualism, and such related issues as linguistic and cultural diversity, is not seen as a hot topic in collective bargaining. This is usually due to the fact that aspects such as discrimination based on language and language segregation are rare in our country”*¹. Indeed *“collective bargaining is usually interested in topics such as wage, working conditions, flexible work and work-life balance, which also concern migrant*

¹ P.T. (employer). Interview 20 April 2016.

workers. Multilingualism is seen as an easy one to deal with through training and courses organised by the company and the union²”.

As a result of this state of play, integration and awareness of cultural diversity are achieved through language classes and training. It is important to point out that language courses are often “field-specific”. In other words, the company provides the opportunity to attend language courses on specific terminology (catering in our case) along with those giving the opportunity to learn everyday language. This is important for two, and related, reasons. The tasks and assignments of migrant workers frequently require social interaction and communication. For example, those serving meals in cafeterias in schools and companies must be familiar with technical terminology (names of food, ingredients, terms concerning nutritional needs or possible allergies or intolerances etc.). The company is well aware of that and traditional language courses are complemented by specialised courses where workers learn special terms. One aspect that might be worth pointing out is that non-nationals are given Italian lessons, but they are also provided with the opportunity to learn another language (mostly English). This opportunity – which is evidently extended to national workers – can be explained by the fact that customers at canteens and restaurants might not speak the national language (let us think of public schools which are increasingly attended by children of immigrants). Accordingly, the need for communication, which is an important component of the working task, requires them to know at least two languages (Italian and English). As a consequence, while it might be true that speaking several languages at the company in order to fulfil the jobs or at least some of the jobs “*is not seen a required skill during the selection procedures*”³, it is equally true that “*knowing a foreign language (mainly English) becomes essential in those company branches with a large number of foreign workers eating at company canteens*”⁴. To sum up, being fluent in Italian (for migrant workers) and another language (for both nationals and non-nationals) is not considered a pre-requisite for candidates. Although, once hired, workers are asked to attend courses to gain knowledge of specific terminology related to the working activity.

Language courses are usually structured considering one’s knowledge of the language. In order to help migrant workers to learn specialised terms, they are frequently assisted on their first days and are given materials and documentation with useful terms that should be known (they are like glossaries translated into Italian, English, and workers’ native languages, mostly Arabic and Romanian).

² E.D. (trade union). Interview 7 February 2016.

³ P.P. (employer). Interview 13 February 2016.

⁴ P.P. (employer). Interview 13 February 2016.

As for initiatives put in place by unions to deal with multilingualism at the workplace, language courses are available which tend to be less specialised than those planned at the company. They are usually intended to allow workers (and their families) to achieve a command of Italian that might be helpful in everyday life. Accordingly, while language training at companies is focused on the work activity that workers are asked to perform, trade unions are more concerned with everyday language. Therefore, one might say that trade unions (more than the employer) make an attempt to deal with cultural and linguistic diversity. As one of the worker that has been interviewed has pointed out “*language training at the company is more oriented toward our work activity, while classes at trade unions are based on real situations, such as going to the store, going to the doctor etcetera*”.⁵ While not exactly a measure to promote multilingualism at the workplace, it is also interesting to point out that trade unions assist migrant workers at the time of filling documents concerning tax returns, the payment of social security contributions and other administrative procedures that might be difficult to manage by migrant workers, especially because these forms often make use of difficult terms and/or are complicated to understand for those with a limited knowledge of Italian. Another initiative established by unions that is worth mentioning is called “cultural meals”, that is lunches and dinners where migrant workers and Italian ones make food from their own regions/areas and practice the things they have learnt in class through short conversations and dialogues. Many workers have found this measure a useful one, as it gives the opportunity to learn culture and language while eating, therefore in informal contexts.

Although paradoxically, some workers who have been interviewed have claimed that union activity can also be seen as a way to promote integration and concurrently raise awareness about cultural diversity. This is because the willingness to join the unions have pushed some of the workers to learn Italian, on the one hand, and can be an occasion to share and describe their culture with other union members, on the other hand. As one of them pointed out “*I like being part of trade unions. I wanted to know more about trade union law so I had to learn Italian to read books and to share ideas and comments with my colleagues. It also happens that Italian colleagues ask about trade unions in my country (Romania) so I am happy to share my experience with them*”.⁶

Multilingual Documents and Materials

Apart from language courses and training, the most implemented initiative to deal with a multilingual workforce is to issue documents and materials in different languages. Due to the fact that communication is an important component of the tasks demanded of migrant workers,

⁵ P.T. (worker). Interview 12 January 2016.

⁶ L.P. (worker), Interview 7 February 2016.

multilingual materials play a fundamental role in internal and external communication and interaction. As seen, multilingual documents are usually issued taking into consideration that they can be a resource for a) workers whose first language is not Italian b) non-nationals who need to communicate with non-national customers c) Italian speakers who have to communicate with non-national customers. They are usually multilingual glossaries produced in three languages: Italian, English and one of the languages spoken by migrant workers at the workplace/language of the customers. Glossaries, and multilingual documents more generally, are particularly effective and are welcomed by migrant workers, especially because they are deemed as an important instrument to overcome possible barriers/or misunderstandings at work. These documents are regularly updated and consist of specialised terminology in the catering sector (name of dishes, name of food-related diseases and allergies) as well as short sentences that might turn useful at the workplace. As one worker has explained “*these documents come handy as they are easy to consult when in doubt about which term to use*”.⁷ Furthermore “*they are also easy to memorise and once you learnt the terms you won’t forget them!*”⁸. These documents concern particularly workers who wait at tables.

Other documents used to manage the issue of multilingualism concern employee rights and take the form of leaflets and booklets distributed by trade unions. They are usually translated by more experienced workers speaking the same languages as those used for the documents (mostly Arabic and Romanian). It is important to stress that trade unions also hold meetings chaired by senior workers (i.e. those who have been living and working at the company longer) where younger migrant workers are made aware of their rights (mainly in terms of wage, leave, holidays etc.). Originally an informal practice, these meetings are now well-established and are hailed by younger employees. This is because younger workers already know their older peers so they trust them. This point is made clearly by one workers we interviewed “*when you listen to your older colleague you know they know what they are talking about. Moreover, I feel free to make questions, also privately, because I know I can trust them*”.⁹

Finally, documents explaining rules concerning health and safety are translated into English and at times into the main languages spoken by migrant workers (again, Arabic and Romanian). However, there is a trend to use English (and in some cases French) to issue OHS documentation for non-nationals. Non-native speakers of Italian think that these documents written in English are sufficiently clear, especially because they are often accompanied by signs and images: “*I don’t think it is necessary to translated all documentation on occupational health and safety into my*

⁷ S.F (worker). Interview January 2016.

⁸ S.F (worker). Interview January 2016.

⁹ L.P. (worker). Interview March 2016.

*native language (Arabic). English usually does and the images used frequently don't need further explanation!"*¹⁰

Multilingual Meetings and Events

According to the interviews conducted, meetings held in different languages are rare. This is because migrant workers have a sufficient level of the working language (generally Italian, at times English) or because there is always another worker acting as translator and/or interpreter. Therefore, one might rather speak of meetings held in one language where one worker serves as translator for those who might have difficulties understanding. Consequently, the use of the expression “multilingual meetings” seems inappropriate in this context. As stated by one worker *“Multilingual meetings are not that necessary. Here we generally get the meaning of everything that is said. When in doubt we ask senior colleagues to make sure we got the meaning of the words right, or we ask the speakers to repeat what they said”*.¹¹ The interview just provided also explains why professional translating and interpreting services are seldom used. The company turns to external linguistic experts only when strictly necessary, for instance when a need arises to explain and translate highly technical documents containing difficult terms that need to be disseminated among workers. Instructions to operate particular or newly-bought machinery and special procedures concerning health and safety at work are nice examples in this connection. Accordingly, an attempt is made to avoid external language services when possible and to rely on internal resources (employees with command of the working language).

The same can be said of trade union meetings that are frequently held in Italian with senior workers from the company or other union delegates serving as translators. One aspect that might be worth exploring – which in part has already been covered earlier – is that migrant workers willing to join union activities feel they need to learn Italian other than making use of other people acting as translators. They want to master the language because they want their voice to be heard. One of the workers interviewed recounted an interesting story about a migrant worker from Romania who became a delegate and was invited to speak at a meeting. He wanted to make a good impression so he learnt its address by heart. The worker told that the other union members really appreciated the delegate's efforts and congratulated him on his address. *“The attempt on the part of the delegate was seen as a way to integrate and fill the linguistic and cultural gap. This is why this attempt was highly appreciated”*.¹²

¹⁰ S.P. (worker). Interview January 2016.

¹¹ M.T. (worker). Interview October 2015.

¹² S.L. (workers). Interview December 2016.

3. Further Comments

The analysis conducted in this company that operates in the catering sector has revealed a number of interesting aspects. The first aspect that should be stressed is that multilingualism is not at all an issue, neither in collective bargaining nor in the industrial relations arena. While acknowledged as a matter of interest, representatives from the company, trade unions and workers themselves do not perceive multilingualism or cultural diversity as high on the agenda. To be more precise, the interviews conducted point to the fact that the actors involved are aware of the strategies to promote cultural diversity and operate in a multilingual context. These strategies are well known and appear to be effective in overcoming the problems that might arise from a multilingual workforce. Managers, union representatives and workers are well aware that the ability to communicate in the national language (or a foreign one, mostly English) is a requirement for a number of tasks (e.g. serving at tables) and have put in place adequate measures. Communication and social interaction are essential elements of certain occupations within the companies, and the setting up of in-house language courses (to gain knowledge of specialised terms), training, and job-shadowing initiatives appears to be rewarding.

On their part, trade unions have learnt that the involvement of senior workers to build confidence and trust among younger peers is effective. The latter feel they can trust their colleagues and are more willing to participate in trade union activity, although statistics show that unionism among migrant workers in this company is not an attractive subject. This is not always the case, though. Examining the interviews of workers who are also union members, we are under the impression that they try to overcome the “language challenge” not because of a real need. After all, there are many resources trade unions can turn to in order to communicate with them (for instance through workers acting as translators). Yet workers want to learn Italian because “they want to matter” and want to be heard. Accordingly, while multilingualism is certainly seen as a positive aspect, knowing the national language can be certainly an asset for migrant workers, either in social or union life.

Multilingualism in a Food Processing Company in Italy

ITALY, Case Study no 2

1. Overview of the Company

This case study is concerned with a private company operating in the food processing sector (food manufacturing, transformation of raw ingredients, etc.) that is headquartered in Northern Italy but has branches in some European countries (The Netherlands and Switzerland). The company was founded in the 1970s and presently employs some 3,000 workers. The gender composition of the workforce is as follows: 41% women and 59% men. Some 10% of employees were born overseas and recognized themselves as migrant workers (or non-Italian nationals). At the company, they are

mainly employed in the supply chain (manufacturing of raw materials), cooking and transport activities, while no overseas worker is occupied in managerial positions. Migrant workers are mostly from Northern Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt), Central Africa (mainly Cameroon), and Latin America (Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil). Accordingly, the languages spoken at the company other than the national one (Italian) are 6: French, Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, and a variety of French spoken by Cameroonians. Intercultural communication among colleagues takes place through the use of English and French, the languages used to facilitate communication and interaction between national and non-national workers. It must be stressed that Italian is frequently used with a number of workers (especially those coming from Latin American countries), due to its proximity with Spanish. There is no specific policy requirement in terms of knowledge of Italian. A basic knowledge of the language is considered enough to understand the main information at work (health and safety regulations, trade union rights and so forth). However, a good command of English and French is required, either for internal communication and relationships with clients/suppliers and external parties (although this is not frequent).

In relation to industrial relations, the company makes use of the main forms of contractual relationships. In other words, the most common contractual schemes to employ staff are: open-ended employment contracts (70%), fixed-term contracts (20%), part-time employment contracts (5%) and employment agency contracts (roughly 5%). The rest of the workforce either works on call or through internship agreements (mostly young people who are tested and subsequently hired on a permanent basis). Significantly, migrant workers are usually hired via temporary agencies and after some time they are offered fixed-term employment contracts or open-ended ones. In order to help migrant workers familiarise themselves with the tasks assigned, job-shadowing activities are usually carried out, along with training and other forms of work-based learning initiatives. Tellingly, no initiatives dealing with multiculturalism or with the promotion of cross-cultural values strictly speaking are in place (at least at the company). This might be due to the fact that workers are well integrated into the working and social environment, an aspect that has been confirmed by the interviews conducted. Speaking of trade union presence and activity, some 80% of workers are unionised. The number of unionised female members is roughly the same as male workers. Non-Italian unionised members account for some 20% of the total. Our understanding is that the reason for such a low unionisation level among non-nationals can be ascribed to a number of factors: either they are not interested, they perceive trade unions mostly as a “national matter” (*“it involves too much politics and Italian politics is complicated!”*¹³) or they are satisfied with their working conditions. In no case was language seen as an obstacle to exercise employee rights,

¹³ A.M. (migrant worker). Interview April 2015.

either because they have sufficient command of Italian or because the documentation was clear enough (when not translated).

2. Initiatives and Policies to deal with Multilingualism at the Workplace

(from both Employers and Unions)

It is important to point out at the onset that national collective agreements do not provide any reference and/or terms concerning the promotion of multilingualism and multiculturalism. However, and importantly, initiatives favouring the cultural and linguistic integration of non-national workers can be set out in collective agreements concluded at a company level (which is not the case here), internal policy (to which we had no access) and, more frequently, through agreement between trade unions and employers on a case-by-case basis.

On the employer's side (but these measures are also shared and/or implemented by the union) some initiatives that can be seen as traditional are in place to promote migrant workers' integration. As said, no in-house seminars/workshops were envisaged to raise awareness of multiculturalism or multilingualism. The impression is that having a multicultural/multilingual workforce is not perceived as a problem to be dealt with or an issue of particular significance, but it seems as an aspect that can be easily handled, also in practical terms. Again, linguistic and cultural diversity is not felt as an "aspect requiring particular attention", perhaps because migrant workers tend to integrate rapidly into the new working environment. Yet one of the main concerns that emerged from the interviews was that of enabling migrant workers who do not speak or have insufficient knowledge of the main/national language to access all the information needed in terms of health and safety, trade union rights, contractual conditions etc. "*It is important that non-national workers and national ones are placed on the same footing and access the same information so the former do not perceive or feel they are treated as 'second-class individuals'*".¹⁴

Specifically, there is no internal policy requiring the use of Italian at the workplace (there is nothing like the "English-only rule" that can be found in companies in some US states, for example). Of course knowing Italian, even at a basic level, might help in terms of communication. The company does not provide any "entry test" or evaluation of workers' Italian level. Initially, this is done informally, while it is more specific at a later stage, for instance at the time of attending language courses (be they organised by the company itself or by the union). In-company language courses are then the most common initiative put in place by the company to deal with multilingualism. Depending on employment status, they are usually free of charge (mostly for workers on open-ended or fixed-term employment contracts). This means that they are paid by the company and are usually organised through external consultants and language experts who operate at the business

¹⁴ R.B. (HR manager). Interview February 2015.

premises in working hours or after work, depending on the willingness of workers and the number of participants. As one of the trade union representatives reported *“language classes at the company and those organised by the union are intended to give migrant workers practical knowledge. So at these courses you can learn how to respond to emails professionally and also how to go to a store and buy what you need. Of course learning a language also involves an understanding of the cultural dimension. But that is implicit!”*¹⁵.

No particular linguistic resources are used at this company to overcome language problems. Signs containing information (for example in relation to health and safety, guidelines or instructions) are usually written in Italian and translated into English where necessary. Thus English (apparently more than French) is used for communication among workers speaking different languages. According to the HR manager interviewed, the most important aspect for the company is that migrant workers are well aware of occupational health and safety legislation, both to protect workers' safety and to avoid sanctions and penalties. In this connection, language classes and interpretation services play a key role: *“We try to make sure they are familiar with OHS regulations because their wellbeing is our main concern. In this sense, penalties and sanctions concerning work-related accidents are incredibly high and we want to avoid paying for something that can be easily prevented through the promotion of good practices”*.¹⁶

As for unionism, it might be useful to highlight that in no case has language been seen as a hindrance to access information concerning employee rights and, more importantly, participation in union life. Some of the workers interviewed are union delegates – at times they serve as union representatives at the workplace – and they wanted to stress that language is not relevant to make career in trade unions. They want to point out that culture, and thus language, does not matter if you can “do the job”. When asked if language could constitute a barrier to integrate immigrant workers in the trade union, one of the workers interviewed – who is also a trade union delegate – argued that *“Well, not necessarily. If you're good at doing your job, you can provide a significant contribution to trade union activity, regardless of whether you are proficient or have only a sufficient command of Italian. What matters is your commitment to your fellow worker, and this goes beyond languages and cultures”*.¹⁷ The other point that is useful to make is that non-Italian trade union delegates feel they represent *“all workers”*¹⁸ not only *“those from their own countries”*.¹⁹ It is therefore interesting to note that participating in union activities, and being

¹⁵ F.A (trade union representative). Interview March 2015

¹⁶ R.B. (HR manager). Interview March 2015.

¹⁷ S.T (worker). Interview February 2016.

¹⁸ S.T (worker). Interview February 2016.

¹⁹ S.T (worker). Interview February 2016.

appointed as a representative, can become a source of pride for many workers from abroad and can certainly help to integrate.

Multilingual Documents and Materials

As explained below, documents can be provided in English (mainly), French (more rarely) and in one of the languages spoken by non-nationals if the perception arises that some piece of information might not be clear or has not been understood by workers whose first language is not Italian. Notwithstanding this, it seems that the English language still plays a dominant role in cross-cultural communication. Most information is usually provided in English and Italian and the impression is that “translation into other languages” of the documents is seriously considered only when strictly necessary, being that the information provided in English seem to be enough and sufficiently clear. As pointed out by the HR manager “*we do not have special requirements or a specific policy concerning language. It really depends on the circumstances that emerges on our daily activities. We have materials and information produced in other languages but most of them are written in English as migrant workers at our company either have a good knowledge of English or know Italian sufficiently to understand what the document is about*”.²⁰

The same can be said of materials concerning employee rights, leaflets, notices etcetera disseminated by trade unions. They tend to be produced in Italian and translated only when strictly necessary. Again, this is not a form of discrimination (“*We are well integrated into the working context and do not perceive any form of discrimination*”²¹ as one of the workers interviewed has argued) but there is an awareness that overseas workers’ command of Italian is enough, and when not, alternative and informal practices are in place to allow them to access all the information they need in terms of wage, leave, sick pay and other employment-related issues.

Multilingual Meetings and Events

When needed, multilingual meetings are often set up. But it seems useful to define what multilingual meetings are in this context. On these occasions, peers with a good knowledge of French and English act as translators or interpreters for oral communication (e.g. general description of assignments and operations). Only rarely are professional interpreters employed to operate in these contexts. This might be due confidentiality reasons or because migrant workers appear to be more comfortable with being assisted by co-workers, with whom at times they interact

²⁰ R.B. (HR manager). Interview February 2015.

²¹ T.T. (Worker). Interview January 2016.

outside work. This technique is seen as quicker and more effective for oral communication. Another resource that is often used to deal with communication/language barriers is reliance on migrant workers with good knowledge of Italian who serve as interpreters for workers from the same country of origins. They know Italian either because they have been living in Italy longer (most of cases) or because they have attended some free Italian classes organised by trade unions. The employer has stressed that *“While non-professional interpreters might do for informal communication, official documentation is usually translated by professionals who are familiar with the subject of the documents being translated”*.²² In this connection, one aspect that it might be worth pointing out is that the documents/materials translated by external professionals are usually checked carefully by those in charge at the company, not so much in terms of editing but to make sure they comply with the “company language” and that migrant workers familiarise themselves with it.

At any rate, no case has been reported so far at the company of misinterpretation or ambiguities in terms of understanding of work content, tasks or assignments. This aspect was confirmed by all the workers interviewed during our fieldwork. More specifically *“I always get help to understand sentences that might be problematic”*²³, *“the documents we receive that are well written and properly translated. Of course there might be some culture-bound aspects that needs clarifying, but in that case we can ask more experienced colleagues who speak our native language to help them out to understand that”*²⁴. As pointed out previously, Spanish speakers are usually at an advantage because Spanish and Italian are often similar (particularly when producing written and oral messages). Two workers whose first language is Spanish claimed respectively *“Multiculturalism and multilingualism are not really an issue, especially at work. We tend to get along with national workers, as we feel we share the same cultural values”*²⁵ and *“When we need something Italians are always there to help!”*²⁶.

In other cases, English is used as lingua franca. So rather than a multilingual meeting, we can talk of “international” meeting where the use of English enables quicker communication and interaction and is more practical than making use of translation/interpreting services. As one of the workers interviewed has observed *“English is frequently used in multicultural communication. I do not have any preference in terms of language use. While I generally prefer speaking in my original language,*

²² R.B. (HR manager). Interview February 2015.

²³ C.A. (worker). Interview July 2015.

²⁴ S.S. (worker). Interview August 2015.

²⁵ F.A (worker). Interview June 2015.

²⁶ S.A (worker). Interview June 2015.

*I also like to push myself and try to speak both English and Italian. This is the only way to learn a language”.*²⁷

3. Further Comments

The analysis of the interviews conducted on workers, employers and trade union representatives from the present case study seems to underline three aspects that are worth stressing. The first one is that in this company the “language” problem does not seem to pose particular challenges in terms of industrial relations. In other words, while there are initiatives and measures to promote multilingualism, or better, understanding of rights and duties on the part of migrant workers, the attempt to promote integration and full access to necessary information appears to be successful. This point is particularly clear if one looks at the interviews, as nothing points to any conflict between the parties concerned (unions, employers and employees). In other words, there is an awareness of the issues and this is handled through traditional measures (language training and courses, informal practices, as well as an effort on the part of migrant workers to learn the language). The second aspect that seems interesting is that the low level of unionization among non-nationals is by no means the result of “poor knowledge” or “limited command” of the language, but it is due to external factors (an aspect that has been summed up by one of the workers interviewed when he says “*Union life is too political!*”²⁸). Consequently, migrant workers do not join the union simply because they *do not want to*, for a number of reasons. Yet there are some exceptions. The examples provided concerning non-nationals acting as trade union delegates demonstrate that, sharing the same language and the same culture might help, but it is not a requisite to play an active role in trade unions. Finally, it seems worth pointing out that, while not regarded as a main tool to promote multilingualism and favour integration, the setting-up of cross-cultural strategies (maybe with the help of professionals such as “linguistic mediators”) to facilitate communication and move beyond cultural barriers has been seen as a useful initiative to put in place. Both workers and trade unions have pointed out a need to “*turn to a professional*” to help them ease the path towards integration, understand (and appreciate!) cultural and linguistic differences. Of course this does not mean that the measures currently implemented are not sufficient. In the words of those interviewed, the recourse to professionals in the field may speed up and certainly systemise the process of integration of non-nationals.

Multilingualism in an Italian Company operating in the poultry industry

ITALY, Case Study no 3

²⁷ S.A (worker). Interview March 2016.

²⁸ S.A (worker). Interview January 2015

This private company has been operating in the poultry industry for more than 50 years, and it currently holds a dominant share of this sector. Its core business concerns the production, distribution and sale of poultry meat and related products, particularly eggs. They produce up to 500 million eggs per year, which are packed, distributed and sold to consumers across Italy in less than 48 hours. Although headquartered in Northern Italy, the company has branches throughout the country and mostly operates at a national level. As far as the workforce is concerned, the company has 300 employees working at its premises. In terms of gender composition, workers are mostly males (some 65%) while female workers account for 35% of the total workforce. Non-national workers make up 12% of the total number of employees at the company, with their country of origins that include Vietnam, Albania, Bulgaria and Romania. Consequently, a number of languages are spoken at the company other than Italian (Romanian, Bulgarian, Albanian, and Vietnamese). Generally speaking, intercultural communication takes place through the use of English, although non-nationals tend to have a good knowledge of Italian. For this reason, instructions are mainly given in Italian, as are information on health and safety and union rights, while English is used at times or in particular circumstances.

Concerning industrial relations, the company can be seen as one promoting stable employment. In this sense, 90% of workers are employed through open-ended employment contracts and only 10% of them have fixed-term employment contracts. They all work full time. The applicable collective agreement is the one used in the manufacturing sector. Although unions do not have a strong presence, there seems to be much cooperation between the employer and the union representatives – especially in relation to non-national workers – to promote cultural and linguistic integration. This may be one of the reasons why there are no reported cases of issues arising from multilingualism (e.g. discrimination, problems related to misunderstanding of rules and provisions, and so forth). Non-national workers seem to be well-integrated, even those from Vietnam, whose cultural background presents the most significant differences with the Italian one. Most workers are not unionised, although they can benefit from Italian courses and other related activities held by unions. One aspect that is evident is that non-nationals are not interested in trade union activity, often because they believe it is risky to expose. This aspect explains why no foreign workers at the company holds union roles. Despite their poor participation in trade union activities, non-nationals do not suffer from discrimination resulting from language, nor do they perceive they are underrepresented or treated differently in terms of rights and/or opportunities.

2. Initiatives and Policies to deal with Multilingualism at the Workplace (from both Employers and Unions)

Like case studies No. 1 and 2, collective agreements only provide general provisions and fail to lay down or to make reference to initiatives aimed at favouring the promotion of multilingualism and multiculturalism. As a result, the development of these initiatives are at the discretion of the employer or the unions and are devised on a case-by-case basis, depending on the needs of the parties (employers and employees). Whereas necessary, the company might offer traditional measures (e.g. language classes) to promote non-nationals' integration, while workshops or seminars are not perceived as useful and/or necessary to make the workforce aware of multiculturalism or multilingualism. This might be down to two main reasons. On the one hand, the impression is that non-nationals seem to assimilate Italian culture and integrate rapidly. On the other hand, the tasks required by non-national workers tend to be repetitive and mechanical, so little knowledge of Italian is required to perform them. This is a point that has been raised during the interviews with migrant workers. As one of them argued "*I work on the production line, so I only need to know little Italian*".²⁹ Another worker recounted that "*I am a driver and distribute products locally. I needed to learn Italian not to perform work strictly speaking, but to pass the test to get the Italian driving licence*".³⁰ Accordingly, multilingualism is not perceived as an obstacle to everyday work. Therefore, non-nationals tend to speak their own language when interacting with colleagues from their same country, while they use their knowledge of Italian to communicate with others. As said, this does not seem to be a problem when it comes to trade union rights, contractual terms, and health and safety regulations. "*technical information is either provided in their language, in English or communicated through informal practices (e.g. workers speaking the same language)*"³¹, so all workers are perfectly informed. While the employer could provide all the necessary linguistic services to help migrant workers understand highly technical information, translations from peers is a particularly widespread practice, especially because non-national workers feel more confident when interacting with people from their own countries. "*They come from our country, they know how it feels to be here and we try to stay united*".³² But again, the manual nature of the tasks assigned to them does not call for fluency in Italian. This case study is particularly relevant as it represents a nice example of how non-nationals can achieve rapid social and professional integration, to the point that speaking a different language is no longer seen as "an issue to deal with". Consequently, non-national workers make an effort to learn the national language – although on a level needed to perform their duties – do not feel underrepresented or discriminated against in terms of union activities, and are well aware of all their rights and

²⁹ P.F. (worker). Interview February 2016.

³⁰ A.B. (worker). Interview May 2016.

³¹ A.L. (HR manager). Interview April 2016.

³² A.B. (worker). Interview March 2016.

entitlements. On its part, the company shows willingness to provide linguistic assistance (of any kind), but this support appears to be superfluous due to foreign workers' rapid integration. Translation services – via external consultants – are welcome when it comes to official documents: *“If I have to translate documents from my language into Italian and vice versa I can always count on the help from company”*,³³ and trade unions also provide this kind of service. Yet the most widespread means to overcome linguistic barriers is relying on friends and acquaintances, also outside of work: *“If I am given a document that is not clear and do not want to ask my principal for assistance, I can always rely on friends and relatives”*.³⁴

The only reference to language policies consists in signs and instructions translated into different languages whereas required by law (e.g. instructions for special machinery, equipment, and when engaged in particularly dangerous activities). *“We use special machines at the company to process raw materials and/or to pack eggs which might be dangerous. So in order to prevent mechanical hazards, we produce instructions in Italian and English, in compliance with health and safety legislation”*.³⁵

As for engagement in trade union activity, the non-nationals interviewed are not particularly interested, nor do they feel that language might represent a problem when it comes to safeguarding their rights. Those interviewed barely attend union meetings and they are happy with their current working conditions. The impression is that they think they are given higher levels of job security and stability than in their home countries, an aspect that results in poor participation in union activities. Aspects such as remuneration, shift work, and working on weekends do not represent topics to be discussed and or dealt with, as long as they are not treated differently from national workers. Although most non-nationals are employed as labourer or manual workers, they are not of the opinion that the lack of proficiency in Italian constitutes an obstacle to their career. Education, rather than language, plays a part in this. In addition, non-nationals are not willing (or perhaps do not show any ambition) to advance their career, as they only seem to be interested in *“making a living”* and *“putting food on the table”*.³⁶

Multilingual Documents and Materials

Documents and other reading materials are usually provided in Italian, and translated – usually in English – only if they concern technical information. The company does not have any policy or guidelines regarding the production of documents in languages other than Italian. Depending on

³³ T.T. (worker). Interview May 2016.

³⁴ J.W (worker). Interview March 2016.

³⁵ T.B (HR manager). Interview April 2016.

³⁶ C.B. (worker). Interview June 2016.

the circumstances, they can be translated if really necessary. Workers' knowledge of Italian is generally sufficient to grasp the general meaning, so support – in the form of informal practices and/or professionals – is needed only for highly technical terminology. Also in this case study, the impression is that speaking different languages at the workplace does not represent a serious issues and is dealt with easily.

The same holds true for trade union materials (leaflets, statements, notices) that are usually circulated in Italian without this being considered a form of discrimination. Non-nationals are well aware of their rights and the material disseminated by trade unions is usually easily understood without the need to be translated. Accordingly, speaking a different language is not deemed to be an obstacle to entitlements and benefits. “*We understand the materials provided by the employer and trade unions, even without translation aids*³⁷”. In other cases, documents are produced in the national languages and provided with a translation of the most technical words.

Multilingual Meetings and Events

Meetings and events are often held in Italian, due to the fact that the Italian command of non-national workers is sufficient to understand and interact with their peers. This is a further confirmation that “the language problem” at this company is not felt as a serious one and can be easily managed, although some 10% of workers speak a language other than Italian. Also in this case study, one useful resource is reliance on those workers whose Italian is fluent, so they can act as interpreters in meeting with co-workers from the same country. This is a widespread practice also in the other companies surveyed for case studies 1 and 2. Only rarely do non-national workers need/require professional interpreters, because they consider their (compatriot) workers to be more reliable and feel they can trust them more. If in doubt about the meaning of words, speakers are asked to repeat what they are said, or senior colleagues explain the concept in plain language. Like the two companies examined in case study 1 and 2, no case has been reported so far at the company of misinterpretation or ambiguities in terms of understanding of work content, tasks or assignments.

3. Further Comments

This case study might lead one to ask if multilingualism – or, rather, having a multilingual workforce – might be considered as a problem to deal with. The interviews conducted with non-

³⁷ F.A. (worker). Interview February 2016.

national workers, HR managers and union representatives show that speaking a different language than the national one (Italian) shall not be seen as a hindrance to the promotion of overseas workers' rights, social and professional integration. While not interested in advancing their career, non-national workers at this company are only preoccupied with achieving a level of Italian enabling them to understand work instructions and assignments, to operate machines and working tools and to get a grasp of their rights and entitlements.

While the company is willing to offer translation resources, their use is limited, for non-national workers either have a good command of Italian or rely on co-workers from the same countries to serve as interpreters if information is not clear. They do not believe that the fact they have their presumed limited knowledge of Italian might be a source for discrimination as far as working conditions, remuneration, union rights are concerned. Nor do they feel they are isolated because they might have difficulties speaking/understanding Italian. The fact that most non-national workers are employed as blue-collar workers (thus performing low-skilled tasks) enables them to “survive” even without a full command of Italian.

Generally speaking, communication between non-national workers and national ones takes place in Italian, and this aspect is not necessarily a negative one. While a risk arises concerning misinterpretations and misleading information –but no cases have been reported so far in this connection – this might help overseas workers to understand the national language more rapidly and to integrate quickly.