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Overcoming barriers, bridging boundaries and deconstructing borders in multilingual settings: une perspective comparative

Introduction

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When we read in the call for papers that the aim of the VALS-ASLA Conference 2016 (Geneva, January 20-22) was to examine "the role of language use in the construction of boundaries," we reacted with excitement. Sharing an interest in workplace interactions, which we investigate from our two different disciplinary perspectives (Linguistics and Management Studies), we decided to propose an interdisciplinary panel that would address not only the construction, but also the *deconstruction* of language boundaries in multilingual professional contexts. Four scholars and a discussant from different disciplinary and geographical backgrounds joined us in our initiative, which ended in an acceptance of the proposal and a fruitful panel session of four presentations and a discussion. Motivated by the positive outcome of our endeavour, we submitted a proposal based on our panel to the editor in chief of the bulletin VALS-ASLA. It is to our great pleasure that the bulletin's scientific committee accepted this interdisciplinary and internationally oriented editorial project.

The present volume focuses on interactions in different multilingual professional contexts. In a new global economic order where there is a profound restructuring of economic organisations across state boundaries (Williams 2010), language choice and the way it is used can hinder or enhance cooperation among co-workers (Lüdi et al. 2013, 2016). It can also affect the performance of the company as a whole (Chen, Geluykens & Choi 2006; Welch & Welch 2008).

As a matter of fact, the workplace is not only a physical space where people work, but also a social space where people meet, interact and build relationships (Zhu 2014). In the multilingual and multicultural labour market, "language practices are even fundamental for the construction of cultural and linguistic boundaries, in the sense that it is through language use that cultural and linguistic group memberships are identified, problematised and negotiated and thus barriers between organisational members are established, modified, reinforced or deconstructed" (Yanaprasart 2016: 94). This may explain the reason why for a long time researchers on language diversity in the workplace have focused on the effects of "language barriers" (Holden 1987).

When it comes to overcoming language boundaries, social tensions between social actors arise because of different language ideologies. These are related to the diversity of the meanings of language use and their implications. Some view language speaking as using "standard language," which implies a monological norm based on a notion of relatively fixed and stable language borders. From this perspective, language is just a tool of communication based on the conception of transparency, and the choice of a common language constitutes the best way to promote international understanding.

Others assert that what prevails in transnational business activities is valorising language diversity resources so as to bridge the gaps, cross linguistic borders and give equal access to all participants in interactions whatever their respective competences. In this view, communicating in multilingual contexts is not about "perfect" language knowledge, following the ideology of standardisation emphasising homogenisation, sameness and stability (Cogo 2012), but all about "pragmatic" language use that allows finding practical solutions to immediate problems.

Furthermore, when languages come in contact, they are so deeply intertwined that it is difficult to determine the boundaries between the different languages involved (Makoni & Pennycook 2012). Various studies have investigated the effects of such hybrid language use on communication and collaboration in multilingual professional contexts. Mondada (2004: 21) showed that plurilingual practices mingle with "issues such as displaying expertise, constructing collegial relationships, accomplishing efficient collaborative work and organising specific participation opportunities." Gaibrois (forthcoming) concludes that from the perspective of its users, hybrid language allows to exchange information more effectively, to feel more comfortable in interactions as well as to have more possibilities to express voice and participate.

In the study of how language and group barriers can be transcended in multilingual companies (Harzing & Feely 2008; Harzing et al. 2011), a number of studies have elevated the roles of individuals with the "right linguistic capital" (Williams 2010: 85) to be able to exploit "the system of differences" socially and linguistically. To denote the extensive involvement of culturally and linguistically

skillful people in professional communication and their significant value to the team, terms such as "cultural broker" (Michie 2003), "cultural translators" (Jordan 2002), "intercultural speaker - mediator" (Byram 2008), "brokers between cultures" (Kramsch 1998), "language brokers" (Tse 1996), "boundary spanners" (Barner-Rasmussen et al. 2014), "bridge individuals" (Harzing et al. 2011), "language nodes," "language mediators," "bridge builders" (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999) or "multilinguacultural transcenders" (Yanaprasart 2015) have been coined.

The aforementioned terms, "nodes, brokers, bridge builders, boundary spanners, border transcenders", as well as the character of a border or boundary and its dynamic change (Yanaprasart forthcoming) are mostly metaphorically described. Boundary, barrier or border is evolving constantly and progressively through contacts between different linguistic and communicative patterns. The question is to know better how these linguistic actions are described and explained by encounters, which processes take place at the border, and what the consequences of such activities are.

Aiming to explore various language strategies and practices that multilingual employees put in place to transcend perceived barriers, this volume adopts a comparative perspective in various ways. First, the volume represents a platform for an interdisciplinary exchange between specialists in Linguistics, Management scholars and Education experts who share a research interest in language use in multilingual workplaces. Furthermore, it highlights numerous comparable aspects on the theoretical, methodological and empirical levels to better understand practices of language use in linguistically diverse workplaces and their effects on collaboration and cooperation. Findings from different national contexts (Austria, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Serbia and Switzerland) will be compared.

By examining language practices, this volume addresses the following questions:

- 1) Under what circumstances and in which context is language diversity considered a barrier and by whom?
- 2) How are practices of overcoming language barriers related to power issues?
- 3) What are the power effects of knowing and using certain languages to transcend language boundaries?
- 4) How are top-down policies and bottom-up strategies interrelated to deconstruct or reinforce language borders in professional communication?
- 5) How do monolingual or plurilingual solutions impact participants' language ideologies and the construction of their professional and that of group identities?
- 6) Which understanding of language do the various practices draw upon?

The aim of Wilhelm Barner-Rasmussen's exploratory paper is to broaden the theoretical understanding of the role of "boundary spanners," their language and cultural skills, their motivations in spanning group boundaries in international organisational contexts, as well as the positive and negative impacts of plurilingual boundary spanners on the day-to-day operations of international organisations at group and inter-unit levels.

While a frequent discourse about the need to manage linguistic diversity in the workplace is that "language is always a first barrier," the contribution of Patchareerat Yanaprasart points out that although such a "barrier" implies certain differences in policies, strategies and approaches related to the plurality of language-use ideologies, language can become a major instrument to push boundaries, to move people and to stretch their comfort zone to achieve their best. Since a team leader often plays a crucial role in the development and negotiation of the communicative norms that characterise the working team, his or her decision in using only one or more languages at work, in the work or for the work can have a significant impact on linguistic environment inclusiveness.

The research of Marlene Miglbauer examines the circumstances under which the use or non-use of languages facilitates transcending or reinforcing boundaries in international business settings. If implementing a *lingua franca* as the corporate language does not automatically lead to a full adoption within the company, the use of various languages in the workplace, in the maelstrom of language diversity, can make visible an interrelationship between language choice, language boundaries and identity construction.

Proposing to shift the focus from individuals' language skills to the role people's perspective on language diversity plays in overcoming language barriers, Claudine Gaibrois's article pays particular attention to the consequences of these perceptions for crossing language boundaries. Her study documents that language boundaries might be constructed or overcome depending on employees' perspective on multilingual encounters. While conceiving of communication in multilingual settings as fights between speakers of different language backgrounds contributes to construct boundaries, perceiving communication in multilingual settings as matters of inclusion or collaboration contributes to create participation possibilities and constructive cooperation.

By presenting examples of common practice to overcome barriers, bridge boundaries and deconstruct borders at the workplace, Sabine Ehrhardt interprets these practices as centripetal or democratising forces as they try to reduce the distance between people of different origins by creating inclusive spaces. Her contribution to a comparative perspective comes from the field of ecolinguistics, a rather new discipline which tries to combine various interdisciplinary approaches in the field of communication, especially in complex environments, with a high diversity of linguistic systems.

Silvia Melo-Pfeifer analyses the meanings of "authenticity" when university students portray a teacher, although multilingual, as a non-native speaker of the teaching language. In the context of language education, "authenticity" is interpreted as an academic language ideology based on the norm of the dominant native speaker and closely related to a rhetorical construction that states the acceptability and productivity of errors and other linguistic deviations when useful for academic purposes (academic "linguistic opportunism").

In the last chapter, Georges Lüdi discusses conceptions of multilingualism and plurilingualism. The author claims that with the current heteroglossia of linguistic territories and the increasing loss of boundaries between languages, social multilingualism represents the norm rather than the exception. Consequently, individual plurilingualism is a rising phenomenon in the global workplace. He therefore calls for a revision of current linguistic theories.

Lastly, based on these contributions by researchers from various national, geographical and disciplinary backgrounds, common red threads and complementarities as well as tensions and contradictions will be identified in the conclusion of this volume.

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