Multilingual language trainers as language workers: a discourse- ethnographic investigation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines language trainers as language workers in an Austrian language education company. The study interrogates what the trainers’ discourses, ideologies and practices about the nature of their work are, and how these reside within the logic and discursive practices of their employer. A close analysis of interview, ethnographic and institutional data reveal that trainers get caught up between privileged and precarious working conditions. The ﬁndings emphasise that trainers identify shifting demands in language training that require them to act reﬂexively, empathetically and be able to connect the linguistic with the cultural and interpersonal. The results also suggest that the institutional discourse of the education company attempts an inclusive and emancipated diversity agenda but reproduces homogenous views of language, culture and the trainers’ work. This paper contributes to growing critical scholarship on the intersection of language, education and work in the globalised knowledge economy.

Dieser Artikel untersucht SprachtrainerInnen als SpracharbeiterInnen in einem österreichischen Spracheninstitut. Der Fokus der Studie liegt darauf, bestehende Diskurse, Ideologien und Praktiken der TrainerInnen bezüglich ihrer täglichen Arbeit aufzuzeigen, und diese mit institutionell verankerten Diskursen und Praktiken zu vergleichen. Mittels Daten aus der Feldforschung und des Spracheninstituts (Interviews, Feldnotizen, Webpage) wird aufgezeigt, dass sich die TrainerInnen in einem Spannungsfeld von privilegierten und prekären Arbeitsverhältnissen bewegen. Die Ergebnisse heben ebenfalls die sich verändernden Anforderungen an das TrainerInnenproﬁl hervor. Die TrainerInnen empﬁnden ein reﬂexives, empathisches Arbeiten und die Verbindung von sprachlichen und kulturellen Aspekten im Training als wichtig. Schließlich zeigen die Resultate, dass der Diskurs des Spracheninstituts von einem oﬀenkundig inklusiven und emanzipierten Diversitäts-Programm gekennzeichnet ist. Dieses weist jedoch eine banale und homogene Betrachtung von Sprache, Kultur und der TrainerInnenarbeit auf. Diese Studie repräsentiert ein wachsendes Forschungsfeld, das kritisch die Interaktion von Sprache, Bildung und Arbeit in der globalen Wissensgesellschaft beleuchtet.

KEYWORDS: ethnography; language work; discourse; intercultural communication; linguistic diversity; ideology; ethnography; language work

# Introduction

The relationship between language and work has become reconﬁgured in the political-economic conditions of late modernity and the global knowledge economy. Multilingual language practices in the workplace are ubiquitous, but often banalised phenomena (Duchêne, [2009](#_bookmark14)). Multilingualism is marketed as the new ‘normal’ in the professional world. Yet, English serves as the privileged and common-sense nexus of communication. In the European context in particular, individual and societal multilingualism have been recognised and promoted as cultural capital and economic assets. Further to the advancement of linguistic diversity, cultural diversity has become a cornerstone of the language education market in the twenty-ﬁrst century. Indeed, language teaching and learning take place in an increasingly marketized climate that posits language as a vehicle for participating in the employment market and for accessing services. This has given rise to the centrality of communi- cation-related work activities, or what is commonly labelled ‘language work’ (Heller, [2010a](#_bookmark14), p. 105). Critical sociolinguistic scholarship has paid attention to the celebration of certain types of mul- tilingualism and skills discourses by examining the connection of language and the ideologies and discursive practices that lead to social stratiﬁcation and the creation of inequalities in a range of workplace sites: tourism, call centres, advertising agencies, migrant communication services, and NGOs (see Heller, [2010a](#_bookmark14) for an overview). Scholars have used diﬀerent concepts such as Bour- dieu’s linguistic market (e.g. Kelly-Holmes, [2016](#_bookmark14)), language commodiﬁcation (e.g. Heller & Duch- êne, [2016](#_bookmark14); Park & Wee, [2012](#_bookmark14); Tan & Rubdy, [2008](#_bookmark14)) and superdiversity (e.g. Blommaert & Rampton, [2011](#_bookmark13)) to discuss diversity as symbolic and economic capital and the marketisation and exploitation of multilingualism from a political-economic perspective. In this type of scholar- ship, Boutet ([2012](#_bookmark13)) identiﬁes ‘language workers’ as ‘emblematic ﬁgures of late capitalism’. The central role of language workers in the global knowledge economy spawns from workers who centre language itself as their core professional activity, such as the language and teaching related profession, to domestic workers, tourism providers, and cultural producers (Thurlow, [2018](#_bookmark14)). In this sense, in today’s world of work, no work activity is without language (Barakos, [2016a](#_bookmark13)). Accordingly, this paper addresses the role of language as a feature of work practices and insti-

tutional conﬁgurations.

To date, there has been a considerable lack of research on adult language education institutes, the work of language trainers, and the role of language and culture in the construction of knowl- edge and skills. The central aim of this paper is therefore to extend the existing literature on language workers in the context of the language and intercultural training profession. Through a discourse-ethnographic study, I aim to interrogate the nature of language trainers’ routine language work, i.e. teaching languages and intercultural communication to business clients, and ask what it means for them to work with language as a resource for securing their jobs and as the object and product of their work. I also aim to engage with how the language trainers’ dis- courses, ideologies and reported practices about the nature of their work reside within the logic and discursive practices of the institution they work for. Together, such an investigation aims to contribute to uncovering the ideological forces that shape the commercially-driven reality of language learning and teaching in the workplace. To meet these aims, I will focus on one speciﬁc site: a Viennese language education institute which specialises in language courses, intercultural training and business consulting.

This paper is organised as follows. The ﬁrst section discusses the main theoretical anchor points of language, work and the global knowledge economy, which inform my understanding of the realities of language work and multilingualism. In the second section, I detail the research site, the data and methodology applied in this paper. The ensuing section of data analysis provides answers to the research aims articulated above. Firstly, I focus on the ways the language trainers’ trajectories inﬂu- ence their professional roles, experiences and practices. Secondly, I position the language trainers’ discourses, identity constructions and reported practices against the logic of the institution they work for by detailing the institutional diversity philosophy and discursive practices of the institute. The last section articulates the conclusions of this study and discusses the tensions between the insti- tution’s practices of promoting and selling interculturality and multilingualism and the trainers’ lived experiences.

# On language and work in the global knowledge economy

The growth of the knowledge economy, the service sector and saturated markets in developed econ- omies have led to the growing importance of linguistic resources to access markets and participate in knowledge production, transfer and consumption (Heller, [2010a](#_bookmark14), p. 103). Using Heller’s argument, the new work order has produced a new ‘word order’, and the workforce has become a ‘word force’ ([2010b](#_bookmark14)) within the context of a neoliberal knowledge economy and ensuing commodiﬁcation pro- cesses. The concept of neoliberal thought and its diﬀerent epistemological premises as an economic theory, as discourse and as an ideology has been widely discussed from diﬀerent angles (see, amongst others, e.g. Block, Gray, and Holborow ([2012](#_bookmark13)) for a comprehensive discussion of neoliberalism and applied linguistics; Flubacher and Del Percio ([2017](#_bookmark14)) on the link of language, education and neoliber- alism, and Allan and McElhinny ([2017](#_bookmark13)) on the trajectory of neoliberalism and how it is taken up in the context of migration). Following a governmentality approach, I conceive of neoliberalism here not just as an ‘ideology, or even a set of policies, but as primarily a governmentality – certain modes of governance based on particular premises, logics and power relations’ (Steger & Roy, [2010](#_bookmark14), p. 12). As Dlaske, Barakos, Motobayashi, & McLaughlin ([2016](#_bookmark13), p. 5) argue from a governmen- tality perspective, neoliberalism – as an extension of economic rationalities – permeates all domains of social life and entails the notion that ‘“humans are, could be, or should be enterprising individuals” (Rose, [1996](#_bookmark14), p. 154), embracing the values of goal-orientedness, competitiveness, ﬂexibility and responsibility’.

In this vein, today, the neoliberal worker is someone imagined as a bundle of skills, as Urciuoli ([2008](#_bookmark14)) dubs it; someone who is adaptable, subject to certiﬁcation and embodies entrepreneurial values. This ‘skilliﬁcation’ of work is accompanied by the current proliferation in temporary, free- lance, part-time work and self-employment contracts. The neoliberal worker is also morally obliged to work at self-improvement with the aim to increase their value and validity on the market (see e.g. Allan, [2013](#_bookmark13); Foucault, [1991](#_bookmark14)).

This development pinpoints the tensions between increased skills on the one hand, and more individualised, insecure work conditions, on the other. Workers thus need to continuously expand their skills repertoire to respond to the dynamics of market change (Kubota, [2013](#_bookmark14); Urciuoli, [2008](#_bookmark14)). This growing need increases the demand for a more diverse portfolio provided by those who oﬀer such skills training; this includes private language and intercultural communication institutes.

Ongoing globalisation processes have driven change in the ways and conditions under which work generally and language learning and teaching speciﬁcally takes place. The nature of work has changed due to technology, digitalisation and a global ﬂow of workers that have transformed employment con- ditions (Moyer, [2016](#_bookmark14); Roberts, [2010](#_bookmark14)). Consequently, the language teaching industry has been evolving into new modes. Given that for many business encounters, knowledge of diﬀerent languages becomes coupled with intercultural knowledge, language education institutes now increasingly address the surge in intercultural competence, specialised knowledge and corporate culture training. To exemplify for the case of Vienna, companies that oﬀer both language and intercultural communication training, especially for business clients, are quite prevalent indeed. This is shown by accessing the search plat- form Weiterbildungsmarkt (n.d.) that gives potential clients, who are interested in taking a language and intercultural competence course, an overview of such service providers.

The paradox of globalisation is that it has nurtured an interconnected, digital, mobile, ﬂexible transcultural world and social order, while at the same time these features have constructed new forms of hierarchisation and alienation (Duchêne, Moyer, & Roberts, [2013](#_bookmark14)). Darvin and Norton ([2016](#_bookmark13), p. 34) remind us of a growing ‘“naive” multiculturalism that celebrates diﬀerence through essences, while erasing inequalities’. Recent scholarship has produced similar ﬁndings for celebratory discourses on (linguistic) diversity (e.g. Del Percio & Sokolovska, [2016](#_bookmark13); Piller, [2016](#_bookmark14)). Similarly, criti- cal research into intercultural communication has ﬂagged up the reduced and essentialist treatment of the concept of culture (see, amongst others, Angouri & Glynos, [2009](#_bookmark13); Holliday, [2011](#_bookmark14); Holmes, [2017](#_bookmark14); MacDonald & O’Regan, [2014](#_bookmark14); Phipps & Guilherme, [2004](#_bookmark14); Piller, [2011](#_bookmark14)), and speciﬁcally the

equation of culture with national stereotypes in intercultural communication training literature, as Angouri’s ([2010](#_bookmark13)) work aptly demonstrates.

Such developments complicate traditional modes of sociolinguistic enquiry. Ideologies of language as a skill, as resource and as culture morph into one or become blurry. The language trainer, and language and intercultural training institutes, become a terrain of knowledge creation which is inherently linked to discursive, ideological and power processes (Williams, [2010](#_bookmark14)). This terrain pro- duces important questions and consequences regarding what types of languages and cultures are taught and sold, and how the trainers are positioned and marketed institutionally.

# The methodology

This article reports on a portion of a broader discourse-ethnographic study that deals with the pro- motion, management and lived experience of linguistic diversity in a Viennese language education institute, for which the pseudonym Lingua will be used henceforth. The multi-method and interdisci- plinary framework combines perspectives from critical discourse studies (CDS) (e.g. Krzyżanowski, [2011](#_bookmark14)) and institutional ethnography (e.g. Codó & Pérez-Milans, [2014](#_bookmark13); Smith, [2005](#_bookmark14)). CDS as a hetero- geneous discipline is concerned with the dialectical relationship between discourse and society and pro- blematises power relations and ideologies in language practices. It sees discourse as both an analytical category per se and as the means through which social phenomena become constructed, interpreted and accommodated in diﬀerent contexts and by diﬀerent actors. Speciﬁcally, I will use the concept of discourse to denote context-dependent semiotic practices that are located within ﬁelds of social action, are related to a macro-topic and encode particular belief systems (Barakos, [2016b](#_bookmark13)).

A shortcoming of traditional critical discourse analysis has been its largely text-centred approach and lack of ethnographic attention, which would better demonstrate how social phenomena unfold over time and in diﬀerent contexts (see e.g. Blommaert, [2005](#_bookmark13); Widdowson, [2000](#_bookmark14), for critiques). To overcome this limitation, Smith’s ([2005](#_bookmark14)) sociologically-grounded institutional ethnography proves relevant. It focuses on tracing people’s everyday discourses, experiences and actions of their working lives in local situated contexts and assumes that people’s ideas about diversity are produced in their own practices. Similar to CDS, institutional ethnography locates text as a central category while it also empirically examines its conditions of production and the social connections between people within and beyond institutional arrangements.

In accordance with this framework, I carried out ﬁeldwork at Lingua’s oﬃce from July to August 2015. The negotiation of access to the ﬁeld involved various steps. I used to work as a language trainer myself at this company many years back, so when I contacted the management and the director of studies, they were positively surprised to hear from my interest in conducting research on their work practices and collaborating with them. I was then invited for a meeting at the ﬁrm to present my research plan to the management who eventually agreed. The director of studies was my main anchor point and very helpful in liaising with recruiting study participants. As part of the ethics process, the company manage- ment and all the study participants signed consent forms, with which they agreed to take part in this study, have the interview conversations recorded and have anonymised quotes used in publications. The company wished not to reveal its identity, henceforth the choice of the pseudonym Lingua.

I collected diﬀerent sets of data: 12 semi-structured interviews with British and Austrian language and intercultural trainers, as well as management and administrative staﬀ, observational ﬁeldnotes of oﬃce life, institutional documents, photographs, and media material from the institution’s webpage. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on extracts from six trainer interviews,[1](#_bookmark12) ﬁeldnotes, and excerpts from the institute’s webpage. The interviews were conducted through the medium of Eng- lish and German at Lingua’s oﬃce. They focused on the trainers’ perceptions of and activities as trai- ners, the conditions, successes and ‘problematics located in [their] everyday experience’ (Smith, [2005](#_bookmark14), p. 51). I used an inductive approach throughout the research process, starting with obser- vations, then moving on to interviews and going back to observations again. After rereading my

ﬁeldnotes and examining the interview transcripts, I coded and analysed my data, which helped to reﬁne emerging patterns and themes while proceeding with the remainder of my ﬁeldwork.

Given the centrality of discourses and texts for both institutional ethnography and CDS, it is through the activity of talking about the connection of language and work that language ideologies emerge. These are understood here, as Irvine ([1989](#_bookmark14), p. 255) emphasises, as ‘the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests’. Ideologies circulate through discourses and mediate the subjective, everyday experiences of the language trainers. By attending to the local ideologies about language, work and culture, which materialise in certain discursive choices and institutional practices, it is possible to grasp the way in which the trainers’ positioning and representations about work and language resonate with the corporate legitimising discourses and practices of their employer.

# The institution in its ethnographic context

To investigate the conditions of the language trainers’ work and workplace, it is important to under- stand institutions such as Lingua not as neutral sites but as spaces of control, selection, and repro- ductive power (Codó, [2018](#_bookmark13)). Lingua is a private adult language and communication training provider in the heart of Vienna’s ﬁrst district, founded in 1961. The institute caters to individuals and business clients. It sets itself apart from other more traditional adult language schools through the focus on intercultural training, business consulting and an academy that oﬀers intercultural trai- ner education. This way, it positions itself as an ‘expert for intercultural competence’ in Austria. Lin- gua employs six permanent management and oﬃce staﬀ and a wide pool of freelance intercultural and language trainers that come from diverse cultural and national backgrounds. In recruiting, Lin- gua foregrounds the work experience and skills repertoire of its workforce. For English language trai- ners in particular, possession of the CELTA (the Cambridge Certiﬁcate for English Language Teaching to Adults) is a prerequisite for employment.

Crucially, Lingua oﬀers packaged and highly individualised products and combines three distinct business segments: language, communication and academy. The ﬁrst segment, language, covers indi- vidual, group and company language training for a wide portfolio of languages, ranging from Eng- lish, German and the major Western European languages to Russian, Arabic, Chinese, or Nepalese. The second, communication, focuses on coaching and consulting for all aspects related to corporate culture, intercultural competence and cultural awareness. The third, academy, oﬀers diverse intercul- tural and country-speciﬁc competence training courses as well as the ‘Train the Trainer’ qualiﬁcation

– training anyone can undergo to acquire the certiﬁcate of intercultural business trainer.

At Lingua, multilingualism is not only part of its product portfolio but also forms part of its internal communicative activities. My conversations with and observations of oﬃce staﬀ have shown that they are able to communicate in at least German and English, with some administrative staﬀ having Slovak, French, Italian, Spanish and Mandarin amongst their linguistic repertoire.

In the ensuing sections, I will present and discuss results from the language trainers’ interviews with the discursive practices of the institution through materials from their webpage and ﬁeldnotes. I ﬁrst focus on the ways the language trainers’ trajectories inﬂuence their professional roles, experi- ences and practices. Then, I position the language trainers’ discourses, identity constructions and reported practices against the logic of the institution they work for by detailing the institutional diversity philosophy and discursive practices of the institute.

# Language trainers and the realities of their workplace

The language trainers’ perspectives on the job as trainer and their lived experience oﬀer an important layer in understanding broader circulating ideologies of language and work in the context of the glo- bal knowledge economy. As part of the interview, we discussed the role of the language trainer and the daily routines of the work as trainer. An emergent narrative from this discussion was the

interviewees’ focus on the label ‘trainer’, and its associated values, as opposed to the label ‘teacher’, which will be discussed below.

*The discursive construction of the language trainer*

The six language trainers I interviewed all the share the same dynamic career trajectories: they are mostly younger, multilingual professionals who teach English, German and intercultural communi- cation to a highly qualiﬁed business clientele; they are university-educated, work experienced and CELTA certiﬁed; they are also mobile for the purposes of work. Many trainers have taught languages in many places of the world and have moved to Austria for a career change or for private reasons. In this sense, the trainers are ‘languaged’ workers (see Barakos, [2016a](#_bookmark13)). They are languaged into ﬂexible, responsible entrepreneurial agents whose proﬁle, identity and status are not only indexed by their mul- tiple language skills but also by their willingness to be subjects of change and movement.

When talking about their work and the term ‘trainer’, the interviewees employ dominant distan- cing strategies from the more negatively connotated school context within which they situate the label of language ‘teacher’. All of the six interviewees share the association of trainer with a pro- motional buzzword, linked to anonymity, mobility, ﬂexibility, freedom, and creativity. The notion of teacher, on the other hand, is relegated to the school context and linked with more traditional attributes of respect, status, continuity of duration of work, and stability. The trainer label implies a narrower focus on skills that can be accomplished within a situated timeframe, while teacher label is associated with a longer timeframe and continuous knowledge production. This distancing and the oppositional values attached to the categories of trainer and teacher examined here provide a focal point for understanding language ideological processes. They show how ideologies about language, learning, teaching and identity underlie, and are expressed in discourses as ideas and con- structs but also as practices through which these ideas are enacted (Gal, [1998](#_bookmark14)).

Excerpts 1 and 2 below serve as exemplars and illustrate the ways in which the trainers[2](#_bookmark12) construct the label ‘trainer’ as a response to my question of what the term means to them.

Excerpt 1: Kathy (English language trainer)

K: the TRAINER is kind of a TRENDY WORD it looks good on PAPER and it makes a distinction between school and something ELSE <fast> whatever that ELSE is <fast> i don’t think that ELSE is deﬁned <fast> you could be a ﬁtness trainer <fast> <@>

I: mhm

K: you could be a zumba trainer </fast> UM it’s a little bit anonymous it doesn’t really say that much about you (.) whereas a TEACHER has a certain STANDING you know TEACHER <1sec> yeah <1sec> RESPECT straight away (.)you’ve TRAINED for a long time to do that and you’ve had a DECENT education and you know you put years of hard work in as a TRAINER […] the term teacher is related to school and they want to break AWAY from that <1sec> CONNECTION and it’s like it’s like a buzz word […] it sounds COOL when you say well we have TRAINERS we have a pool of sixty trainers and our trainers can speak seven languages <1sec> you know it SOUNDS NICE <fast>

Kathy is from London and worked in theatre and dance before moving to Vienna. She has been in Austria for more than twenty years and did her CELTA training in 2001. She has worked for Lingua since 2011. Kathy speaks German, English and French. In the extract, she discursively constructs the label trainer as ‘trendy’ and ‘cool’. She then draws comparisons to other types of trainers such as ‘ﬁt- ness trainer’ and ‘zumba trainer’, which seems to foreground the anonymity and emptiness that the word trainer evokes for her. She uses the discursive strategy of contrast (‘whereas a teacher’) to estab- lish boundaries to the teacher and school context. For Kathy, a teacher evokes stable attributes such as ‘respect’ and ‘standing’. To earn these qualities as a trainer, you would have to ‘work hard’ and ‘for a long time’, she stresses.

Excerpt 2: Michelle (German trainer)

Many are afraid of mistakes or don’t dare to say out loud what they think oh my goodness I make 20 mistakes in one sentence and that’s the diﬀerence to school (.) at school <slow> every mistake is BAD <1sec> red line we have to get rid of this <slow> and this is EXTREMELY demotivating AND I try to do the opposite in my Ger- man courses (.) <fast> bring ACROSS your information <fast> you CAN do it and if it doesn’t work right away we will keep WORKING on it and improve it but it’s basically all about motivation here [my translation]

Michelle is Austrian, speaks German, English and Spanish and did her one-month German language training certiﬁcate in Berlin before joining Lingua. Here, she gives an insight into her experience in dealing with clients’ concerns about making mistakes. In a similar way to Kathy, she draws on the discursive strategy of contrast to explain the difference of her role as language trainer and that of a school teacher, which would be about identifying mistakes as ‘bad’ and the ‘red pen’ effect to erase such mistakes. In essence, for Michelle, acting as a motivator is the cornerstone of her training work.

*Language training beyond language*

In asking the language trainers what they see as the essence of their work, they construct language training as something quite detached from language. By erasing any notions about the perfect mas- tery of language such as grammar, vocabulary or ﬂuency, they foreground the personal aspects and human agency of training and the awareness-raising of diﬀerence and diversity in their teaching practices. The shared consensus of the trainers is that ‘it’s not about language it’s about communication’.

To exemplify, in excerpt 3, Ronan, a British language trainer, hedges the role of language in language training and foregrounds the relational and interpersonal aspect of his work.

Excerpt 3: Ronan (English trainer)

PART of the skill of the TRAINER is to bring the trainees <slow> MORE than just a LANGUAGE lesson but to bring YOURSELF. So it’s a self a process of self discovery and in THIS context the language becomes relatively or becomes less important in THAT perspective (.) <1sec> the language is just the ICING on the cake <2sec> we’re RELATING and language is the <1sec> is THAT POINT

For Ronan, the language element comes as an additional enhancement of the overall training, which is mirrored in his idiomatic expression that ‘the language is just the icing on the cake’. In a later stage of the interview, he goes back to this point and stresses the therapeutic nature of teaching business clients. In fact, he says, ‘a lot of business English is not about business English. Many clients want the antithesis of Business English. They DO NOT want to know about presentations and emails’. Rather, they want ‘an ESCAPE from their business’.

Similarly, Sandra, who is Austrian and has been teaching German and intercultural communi- cation for Lingua since 2014, conﬁrms the empathetic and interpersonal skills of her work as a trai- ner. She acts as an anchor point during training. Her clients not only utilise her as someone who provides tools to communicate and practise but someone who can be drawn upon and related to as a human being. This pronounced ‘taking language out of the language training’ approach is a recurrent theme across all interviews. All six trainers identify the essence of their work to be to teach clients the ability to communicate within certain norms rather than achieving perfect linguistic competence. This aligns well with what Cameron has argued many years ago; that teaching is no longer about rules for grammatical correctness, but about conveying ‘norms for relating to other people through talk’ (Cameron, [2002](#_bookmark13), p. 68). In this sense, the trainers’ perspectives indicate that training is less about mastering a language per se, but about navigating communicative practices in a meaningful way (Blommaert, [2010](#_bookmark13)).

In her work as German and intercultural trainer, Sandra stresses that teaching for her means going beyond transmitting linguistic tools and focusing on culture, otherness and belonging.

Excerpt 4: Sandra (German and intercultural trainer)

S: I would never separate this because language also has a lot to do with OTHERNESS and BELONGING and language teaching is of course not only about providing LANGUAGE TOOLS <2sec> but it is about the whole CULTURE, that is, why do we say what in which context, and I personally would rather combine these two much more

I: Ok

Sandra: Yes, so oﬀer a MIX I: mhm

S: And this is what I partly DO anyway because I integrate these competences <2sec> I cannot I will NEVER say I shut the intercultural trainer out. BUT the fact that these are two diﬀerent markets and the one is paid much less than the other and also from what I know [Lingua] separate these. So we have already had discussions on oﬀering JOINT concepts but the danger is that the prices will go down

We note in this excerpt that Sandra’s perception of language training encompasses the holistic notion of culture (‘it is about the whole culture’). She then constructs culture as the context of linguistic behav- iour (‘why do we say what in which context’). However, her wish to offer a dual language-and-culture concept is in direct tension with the institutional policy that focuses on keeping these two business seg- ments apart. Here, Sandra resists this institutional agenda in her own teaching practices (‘I integrate these competences’). The use of intensifying strategies (‘I cannot I will never say I shut the intercultural trainer out’) appears to evidence her affective stance towards this topic but also transmits a sense of frustration about her employer’s resistance towards a more hybrid form of language work.

*Language training as prestigious and precarious work*

In asking the trainers what it means for them to work with language as a resource for securing their jobs and as the object and product of their work, two sets of parallel discourses emerged: there are clear tensions between discourses of prestige and precarity of language work. Regarding discourses of prestige, all trainers commented positively on the practice-oriented nature of their teaching, the cli- ent-focused and tailor-made approach, the competitive hourly training rates oﬀered at Lingua, the inclusion of authentic learning materials from clients, the creativity in designing one’s own teaching materials, the building of empathetic, reﬂexive rapport with clients and the autonomy in decision- making about which courses to teach. The trainers’ perception of langue training as prestigious work is exempliﬁed by Ronan in extract 5:

Excerpt 5: Ronan (English trainer)

R: one could SEE BEING A TRAINER as AH <1sec> <slow> something very precarious </slow> […] so if your VALUES your BASIS was <1sec> well i’ve got to somehow COMPETE with other workers in the MARKET PLACE and earn as much as them and have the same kind of STATUS well i think that’s a recipe for SUFFER- ING […] but of you see it as an OPPORTUNITY to AH have ﬂexibility <fast> i mean there are many charac- teristics you could say </fast> depends on where’re you’re STANDING […] the types and variety of courses

<1sec> the ability to the mobility <1sec> so VARIETY FLEXIBILITY <slow> SO at ONE stage years ago i would have said well i can’t cope </slow> (.) NOW i say but LOOK i have FREEDOM (.) this frees me up to respond in creative ways to the words AGENCY and um CREATIVITY <1sec> being a [ ] trainer means there’s a lot of room for creativity [… ]ah there is a level of which just as a human BEING <slow> we need CONTACT and RAPPORT </slow> and so on

At the beginning of this narrative, Ronan discusses the more precarious angle of his work by drawing on arguments of market competition, earnings and status, which mirror a neoliberal market logic that has penetrated the trainer’s rationales. He then goes on to tease out the privileges that the work as language trainer entails, which are mainly centred on ﬂexibility, variety of teaching, mobility as well as having the freedom and agency to be creative and live out the human angle of training through contact and rapport.

Some of these prestigious characteristics of language work resonate with the growing literature on language coaching and the proﬁle of language coaches (Paling, [2013](#_bookmark14)). Within the speciﬁc context of intercultural communication, Dahlén’s ([1997](#_bookmark13)) critical work pinpoints the international growth of the training industry and the increasing professionalisation of teachers, consultants, coaches and trainers as so-called ‘interculturalists’ who provide training and consulting on cultural diversity and diﬀer- ence in transnational occupational contexts. Dahlén’s argument focuses on the way such intercultur- alists are represented on the marketplace and how the market logics determine the trainers’ own conceptualisation of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural diﬀerence’ and, as he argues, ‘the ways in which they handle cultural knowledge (or what passes) for it’ (Dahlén, [1997](#_bookmark13), pp. 176–177), often resulting in a ‘commodiﬁcation of cultural understanding’.

Within this context, a new language trainer agency is created with an assemblage of skills and agency becoming coupled with prestige: someone who is empowered to be creative, self-reﬂexive, able to motivate and build rapport, empathetic, and able to tailor their teaching to the clients’ wants and needs; a neoliberal entrepreneur. What is evident from these trainer representations is that, as Urciuoli ([2016](#_bookmark14), p. 477) puts it, the notions of ‘language and culture become loosely identiﬁed as parallel to skills’.

The trainers’ prestigious and ﬂexible type of work becomes destabilised when they detail the pre- carious elements of their job. An extract from ﬁeldnotes during the interview stage illustrates this point:

Fieldnote: precarities of work

Michelle, the German trainer, says that for her, the key challenges of her work are the short-term contracts, the uncertainty of renewal, no paid preparation time, lack of control over working hours, and no paid training development sessions. She admits quite emotionally that ‘of course there are months where there is not much left’. She says ‘oh God, how should I ﬁnance the next month?’

Similar to Michelle, many of the trainers I interviewed conﬁrm a shared consensus about the unwar- ranted conditions of their language work which requires them to work for more than one training institute or have other secondary sources of income. Below, Kathy provides further evidence of the perceived precarity in her work life.

Excerpt 6: Kathy (English trainer)

K: the ﬂexibility and the freedom um is great <fast> and it’s really what a lot of people are LOOKING for <fast> and for me it was perfect for a long time for four years and NOW I’m ready for the next step. I’m NOT dissatisﬁed

I: mhm

K: but within the next year or so <soft> i would like it to change for me <soft> I: mhm

Kathy: I think it will HAVE to change I don’t know how QUICKLY and I don’t know how it will be for the TRAINERS. That’s diﬃcult to anticipate. Maybe they see <fast> they will lose all the freedom and I don’t know how the payment would change <fast> you’d get a lot of beneﬁts which is obviously attractive <fast> especially a lot of people who are in the country LONGER <fast> not for people who are only here for a few years or <1sec> don’t KNOW if they want to stay LONGER then <fast> the system at the moment probably works very nice for them <fast> but if they’re maybe OLDER as well or MARRIED or want to stay longer then I think <fast> a change of the system would be good for them <fast>

I: I see

K: I can’t IMAGINE how they’re going to do it. They’re gonna have to have FIXED HOURS unless they want to start paying you for your preparation work <fast> which would be lovely <fast> so that would be a big change if you actually have <soft> to BE in the oﬃce or have to be present somewhere <soft> and <fast> what are they going to do in the holidays? <fast> in summertime there is not enough work for everybody so are they going to give everybody two months oﬀ? how’s THAT going to work. A lot of QUESTION MARKS there

The substance of Kathy’s narrative unmasks concerns over insecurity about her training work. This is shown by her constant discursive oscillation between job satisfaction (‘the freedom is great’) and her voiced dissatisfaction (‘I am not dissatisﬁed […] but’), the repetitive use of the mitigating phrase ‘I don’t know’ and the discourse about change that she draws upon when talking about her own future and that of the teaching industry. At the beginning of this sequence, she foregrounds her per- sonal beliefs about change with more discursive conﬁdence (‘now I am ready for the next step’). By contrast, she voices a lot of doubt when talking about her employer (‘how’s that going to work’, ‘a lot of question marks here’) in terms of how ‘they’ are going to make an employment system work which would involve ﬁxed hours, less ﬂexibility, paid preparation time, presence in the ofﬁce as well as regulated work over the summer. Kathy’s trajectory is a particularly interesting example of the neo- liberal logic of ﬂexibility as a key skill that has penetrated her thinking and that forms part of the working arrangement that many employers, such as Lingua, promote. And yet this ﬂexibility becomes overshadowed by the shortcomings of her position.

The privilege and precarity of language work detailed through the trainers’ experiences ﬂags up a way of understanding another key aspect of the knowledge economy that aﬀects a global, mobile and middle-class workforce – that of rising insecurity. This precarity takes on a diﬀerent form and oper- ates on a diﬀerent scale to the socio-economic conditions of vulnerable immigrants, for example, seeking work to make a living. In fact, as the trainers’ accounts have shown here, it is a precarity that involves ‘fewer guarantees, more skills, and a ﬂexible schedule’ (Casas-Cortés, [2014](#_bookmark13), p. 221) and is interpellated by highly aﬀective motifs. Deﬁning precarity in such a way, it can be seen as a paradox of diversity that creates opportunities and likewise limits them. As Duﬀ ([2008](#_bookmark14), p. 2) also argues in her research on language socialisation and work, ‘many people’s career trajectories are now not only nonlinear but also quite precarious, given the pervasive social and economic changes in society, in addition to technological changes’. This non-linearity and precarity can indeed be found with the language trainers in this study.

# Promoting a multicultural corporate ethos

Language education institutes such as Lingua serve as illuminating sites in which the production of linguistic and cultural knowledge becomes meshed with corporate identity, branding, sales and mar- keting endeavours. After having charted some of the language trainers’ representations of the reali- ties of their workplace, this section analyses and discusses the institutional promotion and management of Lingua’s services and the trainers’ work, paying attention to its corporate ethos and discursive practices.

*Institutional corporate philosophy*

My ﬁeldnote below records an account of Lingua’s corporate philosophy and provides a sense of the lived culture of the ﬁrm. It highlights the company’s distinct workplace culture and the work environment. At the core of its corporate ethos is a focus on transmitting and living values of diver- sity and inclusivity, whilst also instilling a feel for being valued for both employees and customers.

Fieldnote: Arriving at Lingua’s oﬃce

I take the elevator up to the top ﬂoor and ring the bell. A young Asian front oﬃce woman welcomes me in a friendly manner and asks me in English how she could help. I respond in English that I have scheduled an inter- view with a language trainer. She looks at the room booking calendar and escorts me to the meeting room Bora Bora. She then oﬀers me coﬀee and points to the fruit bowl next to the coﬀee machine in the lounge room next door. I smile. She says that that coﬀee, water and fruit were available for anyone working here, including clients taking courses. I observe that all oﬃce doors were open and that there was lots of movement across the oﬃce, lots of contact and chatter amongst the management and administrative staﬀ. Also, I note staﬀ switching between English and German.



Figure 1. Lingua’s corporate philosophy.

As illustrated in this ﬁeldnote, the open doors, fruit bowls, free coffee and exotic meeting room names infuse a positive and exclusive feeling that appear to enhance the employee and customer experience of language and culture training at Lingua. My observations of ofﬁce life and my conver- sations with management and administrative staff have also conﬁrmed that internal communication mainly functions in German and English, with code-switching and mixing being a normalised language practice. This diversity ethos is an anchor point of the institute’s corporate agenda.

The corporate ethos is further demonstrated on the ‘about section’ of Lingua’s website, as shown in [Figure 1](#_bookmark8). This section details the major cornerstones of their corporate proﬁle, packaged as a highly individualised corporate story: Lingua aims to be practice-oriented, provide a multicultural family feeling, apply a fair price policy, and be committed and passionate. I will discuss and analyse ‘multicultural family feeling’ and ‘fairness in price policy’ in more detail as these directly relate to the work of the trainers.

Lingua’s website content is only available in German. This is surprising, given the institution’s strong focus on linguistic diversity and its recurring claims to cater for clients in international and multilingual business settings. Below are the English translations of the two central components to which the institute is committed.

Excerpt 7: Multicultural ‘family feeling’ [my translation]

We are a company that employs people from 30 diﬀerent cultures, bringing with them more than 25 diﬀerent mother tongues, and coming from diﬀerent social and educational backgrounds – and nevertheless, or rather because of this, it is possible to work together and to share common goals.

We live interculturality in our business; with all its challenges that come with it. We rise with challenges and know what we are talking about when we work with our clients because we experience it day in day out.

Here, the discursive focus on ‘family feeling’ aligns well with the small and personal ‘family’-run nature of Lingua. The family metaphor endows Lingua with a human and local touch that unites its global workforce and the corporate orientation of the institute. The recurring use of the ﬁrst-person plural ‘we’ and the abundance of predication strategies that portray Lingua in a positive and agentive light (e.g. ‘we talk’, ‘we work’, ‘we rise with challenges’) serves to construct a strong group identity and expresses alignment with its corporate values.

Furthermore, the celebratory discourse on multiculturalism evokes an inclusive workplace cul- ture. The line of argumentation supporting this multicultural take is intensiﬁed by the use of num- bers (‘30 diﬀerent cultures’, ‘25 diﬀerent mother tongues’) and is based on the following rationale: because we employ multicultural staﬀ with diverse backgrounds, we know what we are doing. Fol- lowing Piller ([2011](#_bookmark14), p. 24), the way the multicultural is conceptualised here is through ‘celebration of cultural diversity’. Lingua then moves from the discourse on multiculturalism to interculturality, which is framed as cultural diﬀerence and otherness that is problematic (‘with all its challenges’) but that can be overcome (‘we rise with challenges’) through intercultural communication training. The listing of the stereotypical traits of the multicultural ‘family’ workforce, based on the staﬀ’s ori- gin, languages, social class, and education background, exacerbates this cultural diﬀerence which is at the heart of essentialised and reduced categories that are common in intercultural communication

literature (see Piller, [2011](#_bookmark14) for a genealogy of the concept of multiculturalism and intercultural communication).

Pertinent to the study here, the other cornerstone of Lingua’s corporate philosophy is ‘fairness in price policy’ which relates to the discourse of precarity that is prominent in the trainers’ narratives.

Excerpt 8: Fairness in price policy [my translation]

Services are always provided by people, within a certain time. We cannot clone our experts, nor can we expand the 24 hours of a day. We do not contribute to the price spiral, which keeps scaling down, because the expertise of our employees has a value. In this way, we also contribute to avoid escalating the precarious working conditions.

Here, Lingua draws on common-sense arguments about service work by linking it to its humane and also fallacious character (‘we cannot clone our experts’). Simultaneously, the company remedies the boundaries of its trainers’ work and discursively constructs them as ‘our experts’. This valuation of employees as experts gets folded into the whole brand of Lingua which repeatedly positions itself as an expert throughout its corporate story. Lingua’s discourse on expertise is coupled with ideologies of ‘fairness’, as the heading of this excerpt suggests. The institution bluntly acknowledges the existing ‘precarious working conditions’ of language trainers. Yet, it does not counter these working arrange- ments in its practices, as we have learnt earlier from the trainers’ experience of their work, by, for example, offering long-term contracts. In fact, as this excerpt shows, Lingua remains vague in what form the value of expertise is remunerated. This hedging of responsibility makes apparent the troublesome dialectic between the human and ﬁnancial interests in business. In fact, it renders the well-intended claim of ‘fairness’ an empty signiﬁer. The fairness claim also ﬂags up the logic of current work regimes where employers accept the status quo, i.e. precarious work conditions, and even acknowledge malpractices, i.e. price dumping, but does not counter them in any meaning- ful way.

*Institutional regulation of services and workers*

In order to understand the complex relationship between Lingua as an institution and its language trainers, I will further examine the ways the company regulates its diverse product portfolio and how the trainers’ wok becomes institutionally regulated and coordinated via a range of discursive prac- tices. [Figure 2](#_bookmark9) and excerpt 9 illustrates how Lingua’s separate product portfolio is interlocked with the job proﬁle of the trainers as portrayed on their webpage:

Excerpt 9: About us section [my translation]

Lingua stands for the development of intercultural competence and is a strategic bridge between our segments language, communicating and academy. Our philosophy is driven by a strong commitment to quality.

We are permanently trying to integrate current ﬁndings from research and corporate practice into our work and research and develop them ourselves. Each of our trainers is only working for one speciﬁc segment, i.e. either in language training or in consulting and training of intercultural competence. For each of these seg- ments, a separate education and profound expertise in theory, practice, didactics and method is needed. Language training is not automatically culture-speciﬁc training and vice versa.



Figure 2. About us section.



Figure 3. Lingua’s three business segments.

Here, Lingua’s corporate story is situated within an ideology that separates language from ‘commu- nicating’ and intercultural training. This ideology is packaged within a discourse on expertise that Lingua draws upon to promote its distinct business segments, i.e. language training, consulting and intercultural training. This expertise unfolds discursively by expressions such as ‘current ﬁnd- ings from research and corporate practice’, ‘separate education’, and ‘profound expertise’. Through- out this excerpt, Lingua builds a rationale for employing separate trainers for each segment by an ‘either – or’ rhetoric, which seems to suggest that expert knowledge can only be rendered by expert trainers in their speciﬁc ﬁelds. In a common-sensical way, the company argues that language and culture training are not to be put on the same level.

This approach of separating the language work from the intercultural work is also visible in the overview section of the institute’s product portfolio. [Figure 3](#_bookmark10) displays the way the company discursively and visually demarcates the language segment, which covers all language-training related aspects, from the communicating segment, which covers business and intercultural com- munication consulting, and from the Academy, the intercultural communication training segment.

While language and intercultural training come with distinct prerequisites, the institutional strong demarcation reveals a conﬂict of interest to the trainers’ practices. I have previously illustrated this with the case of Ronan (see excerpt 3), who believes that teaching is about the relational and interpersonal aspects of communication and not merely language, and Sandra (see excerpt 4), who resists erasing the intercultural from the language aspect of her work. The separation of this product portfolio further demonstrates the problematic approach Lingua adopts in treating language, communication and culture as distinctly sellable entities.

Another example of such an approach is that Lingua oﬀers target-country speciﬁc intercultural training under the metaphor of ‘becoming business ﬁt’ for China or for India. As [Figure 3](#_bookmark10) shows, Lingua oﬀers culture and country-speciﬁc training (‘Kulturspeziﬁsche Trainings’). Such training mainly follows a model of cultural coherence that imagines cultures along structured and organised principles. Amongst using other models, the Thomas ([1996](#_bookmark14)) framework of so-called Kulturstandards

/ Cultural standards forms an essential part of the intercultural training programmes oﬀered by Lin- gua and serves as an orientation pattern to understanding the distinct features of the ‘Fremd-Kultur’

/ the foreign culture and the ‘Eigene Kultur / one’s own culture’ by comparing concrete cultures. My conversation with Susanne, the company manager, explains, Lingua’s position on using this speciﬁc approach in intercultural training:

Excerpt 10: Susanne (Company Management)

We are strongly following this MODEL of erm Thomas <soft> you probably know it too </soft> […] a psy- chologist, Germany erm Thomas and he says that <slow> ok there is one’s HOME culture and the FOREIGN culture and there are overlapping situations <slow> and <slow> and these overlapping situations are mostly about similarities which we quite like anyway when dealing with the other (.) Yes but then there are also MANY things that are DIFFerent and this model says to act interculturally involves making a new THIRD cul- ture out of the other TWO CULTURES and this is a really DIFFicult story but that’s the direction that the train- ing courses take

As the intercultural trainers I have worked with in this study conﬁrmed, in these packaged courses, there is a preoccupation with facts and national cultures as a baseline for diﬀerences in business communication and a focus on the business customs, habits, and folklore of everyday life (Kramsch, [1993](#_bookmark14), p. 24). To exemplify, the course ‘Business ﬁt for China’, which Lingua oﬀers on their website, teaches what Lingua labels ‘China Basics’ (its people, geography, language, customs) and includes a comparison of China and Austria in terms of diﬀerences in culture, mentality and business, oﬀers advice on how to deal with cultural diﬀerences in China and behavioural advice by pinpointing essential diﬀerences in ways of thinking and being, and oﬀers strategies for organising and implementing Chinese business trips to Austria.

By oﬀering intercultural training distinct from language training, Lingua’s approach keeps the culture out of the language training, based on its understanding that culture is akin to the trans- mission of information which can only be delivered by an intercultural expert. That the language trainers conceive the notion of culture more nuancedly, as part of the immediate context of commu- nicative practices, remains a moot point. Overall, this essentialism is masked by the overt discursive focus on living diversity and multiculturalism as part of Lingua’s institutional ethos, as seen in the previously discussed extracts.

# Conclusions

This study has aimed at providing an insight into the increasingly complex conﬁgurations of language and work in the adult language training profession. It has focused on language trainers’ discourses, ideologies and reported practices about the nature of their work, and how these reside within the logic and discursive practices of the institution they work for. Findings problematise the work of the language trainers that undergo an increased professionalisation process with high expectations for global qualiﬁcations and professional credentials. The trainers’ subscription to the label trainer instead of teacher and their appreciation of the required ﬂexible and creative skills set are indicative of the broader neoliberal logic that have penetrated the workers’ thinking and that are part of their employer’s working arrangements (see Urciuoli, [2015](#_bookmark14)).

The study has foregrounded an issue where the role of language trainer both empowers and con- strains work at the same time. While the company constructs and promotes the trainers’ work as ‘language work’ in the narrowest sense, i.e. teaching language, the trainers understand themselves as doing more than ‘language’. In fact, the ﬁndings emphasise that the trainers draw on an assort- ment of skills in language training that require them to act increasingly reﬂexively, aﬀectively, empathetically and with the ability to connect the linguistic with the cultural and interpersonal. Fur- thermore, it is within the entrepreneurial agency of the trainers that the prestige of the trainer job materialises. However, within this skills constellation, the trainers get caught up between privileged and precarious working conditions. These form part of the reality of today’s work order and are shaped by, and shaping, neoliberal governmentality. While the trainers value their job under the ban- ner of ﬂexibility and freedom, the non-linear, non-permanent, and unregulated working hours and pay conﬁrm that language work is performed under conditions of increasing uncertainty.

In comparing the trainers’ insights to the institutional discourse, work precarity and privilege are perpetuated by the education company through its promotional discursive practices. The analy- sis has borne out that Lingua utilises the website as a platform to promote and sell expert knowledge

as a corporate quality that makes it and its workers unique. It also attempts an inclusive, well- intended and emancipated diversity agenda for its corporate ethos and workforce. The notion of multiculturalism is embraced within a classic celebratory agenda. And yet, the positive articulations of corporate goals and priorities, which focus on providing expert trainers and expert service work, conceal the existing ideologies about language and culture as separate and bounded sellable entities. Culture is constructed in narrow, ethnocentric terms and treated as distinct from language, and expertise in intercultural competence is promoted as the means to overcome cultural diﬀerence (Piller, [2011](#_bookmark14), p. 24). Based on these orthodox ways of seeing language and culture, we can argue that this type of institutional discourse furthers the neoliberal agenda of the language and intercul- tural education market, and fundamentally the language of this market (Flubacher & Del Percio, [2017](#_bookmark14)).

While I do not want to discard the fact this language education company associates value to its multicultural and multilingual workforce, I advocate caution in the orthodox ways of conceiving (and ultimately selling) language and culture teaching in this currently rather uncritical framing. The trainers’ perspectives in this study open an important way to dismantle ideological ways of thinking about language and culture. Their insights demonstrate an inherently reﬂective and critical pedagogy, with which they partly go beyond their institutional remits and call for a dialogue between language and intercultural communication training, which has hitherto remained ignored. To con- clude, there need to be signs of transformation where education sites initiate a debate with their trai- ners to reach a better understanding of its workforce problematics and a critically engaged understanding of the ﬂuidity of language and culture as something that is ‘created, negotiated and recreated in situ as people engage in talk and other forms of social interaction’ (Ladegaard & Jenks, [2015](#_bookmark14), p. 5).

Future discourse-ethnographic studies should continue to disrupt essentialist and common-sen- sical forms of knowledge creation at the crossroads of education and business. There is also a need to keep examining issues of privilege and precarity as they pertain to the intersection of language and work, with a critical understanding of their political-economic, social and ideological underpinnings.

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# Notes

1. The interview transcriptions are based on the VOICE (Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English) con- ventions. See <http://www.univie.ac.at/voice/documents/VOICE_mark-up_conventions_v2-1.pdf>.

Transcription conventions key:

CAPS = capital letters for words or phrases with particular prominence and emphasis

<fast> = speaking mode (e.g. fast, soft)

I = interviewer

(.) = brief pause in speech (up to a half second)

<1sec> = longer pauses [Lingua] = anonymised name of institution

<@> = laughter […] = situational noise

1. Pseudonyms are used for all cited informants and the institution throughout the paper.

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