Linguistic barriers and bridges: constructing social capital in ethnically diverse low-skill workplaces

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Abstract

The influence of language on social capital in low-skill and ethnically diverse workplaces has thus far received very limited attention within the sociology of work. As the ethnically diverse workplace is an important social space for the construction of social relations bridging different social groups, the sociology of work needs to develop a better understanding of the way in which linguistic diversity influences the formation of social capital, i.e. resources such as the trust and reciprocity inherent in social relations in such workplaces. Drawing on theories about intergroup contact and intercultural communication, this article analyses interviews with 31 employees from two highly ethnically diverse Danish workplaces. The article shows how linguistic barriers such as different levels of majority language competence and their consequent misunderstandings breed mistrust and hostility, while communication related to collaboration and 'small talk' may provide linguistic bridges to social capital formation.

Key words: Contact, communication, ethnic diversity, language, linguistic barriers, linguistic bridges, social capital, small talk, trust, workplace.

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Introduction

Within the sociology of work and immigration a focus is growing on the way in which the level of host country language fluency influences immigrants' access to jobs (Liversage 2009), wages (Ebner & Helbling 2015) and careers (Deeb & Bauder 2015). A number of analyses point to host country language competence as one of several factors influencing immigrants' and ethnic minority workers' access to new connections, social networks and opportunities (Morosanu 2015; Ryan 2011; Temple 2010; Vershinina et al. 2011). Other studies pinpoint verbal and non-verbal communication as a factor in forms of racial discrimination denying minority workers such access (Harris & Ogbonna 2015; Van Laer & Janssens 2011). Nonetheless, research has paid limited attention to the way in which language influences the formation of social capital, i.e. resources such as trust and reciprocal services embedded in social networks (Putnam 2007), in low-skill workplaces employing many non-western ethnic minority workers.

Research indicates that the workplace is an important social space for the formation of social capital across racial and ethnic lines (Estlund 2003), as well as for interethnic social trust and friendship formation (De Souza Briggs 2007; Kokkonen et al. 2014a, 2014b; Mizrachi et al. 2007; Rydgren et al. 2013). However, other studies find that workplace ethnic diversity is associated with weaker social integration (Williams & O'Reilly 1998), lower trust (Kramer 2010), more conflicts (Jehn & Greer 2013) and higher turnover (Hur 2013). One likely explanation for this discrepancy may lie in such studies typically leaving the linguistic component out of the equation linking ethnic diversity to social capital. This omission is unfortunate, given that the impact of ethnic and racial diversity on social capital is likely to differ, according to whether such workplace diversity stems from the presence of either many immigrants with weak host country language competencies or many second- and third generation bilingual ethnic minority workers, who are fluent in the dominant language.

This article elucidates the role that language plays in ethnically and linguistically diverse low-skill workplaces in relation to the formation of social capital. It draws on both intergroup contact theory (Lemmer & Wagner 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp 2011) and theory about intercultural communication concerning verbal and nonverbal interaction between people from different cultures (Jandt 2010; Scollon et al. 2012; Spencer-Oatey 2008) – the latter type of theories recently picked up by business communication researchers (Cohen et al. 2015; Lauring 2011). However, such research concentrates mainly on communication among executives and experts, adding little knowledge to the impact of language on social capital among workers in low-skill ethnically diverse workplaces.

The questions that this article seeks to answer are, firstly, whether (and, if so, how) different levels of majority language competence establish linguistic barriers that engender mistrust and hostility. Secondly, it seeks to discover whether (and, if so, how) communication and collaboration may under certain circumstances – despite such barriers – provide linguistic bridges to social capital formation across majority and minority ethnic groups. The empirical material consists of interviews with workers in two highly ethnically diverse Danish workplaces. One is a municipal parking control department employing many non-western immigrants, some with a relatively poor command of Danish. The other is a supermarket employing many descendants of non-western immigrants – employees who mostly speak excellent Danish.

Ethnic diversity at work, social capital and intergroup contact

This article understands ethnicity as a socially constructed category based on cultural attachment, linguistic heritage, kinship and/or some physical traits (Cornell & Hartmann 2007). The concept overlaps with race, i.e. the idea of a common genetic ancestry, based on perceived physical similarities (Morning et al. 2012: 265). However, ethnicity will be the primary focus for highlighting cultural and linguistic characteristics that influence communication (Gudykunst 2004:

81). To operationalise Putnam's (2007) concept of social capital, i.e. trust and reciprocal services embedded in social relations, the article will also draw on Lin's distinction between social capital's invoking either instrumental actions (gaining resources) or expressive actions (maintaining resources) (2001: 45-46). In the latter case expected returns from social capital include receiving personal support (see Van Der Gaag et al. 2008: 38), i.e. sympathising and empathising – where, often, 'the act of communicating serves as both means and goal' (Lin 2001: 46). More specifically, the article will concentrate on interethnic social capital in the form of communications of sympathy, empathy, trust and helpfulness across ethnic groups, as well as related practical acts.

Workplaces are crucial focal points for the study of the impact of ethnic diversity on social capital for the following three reasons. Firstly, the labour market is less ethnically segregated than neighbourhoods (Ellis et al. 2004). Secondly, research indicates that working together in racially and ethnically diverse workplaces promotes 'interpersonal ties across racial lines' (Estlund 2003: 83; see also McPherson et al. 2001: 432), interethnic friendships (De Souza Briggs 2007; Kokkonen et al. 2014a; Rydgren et al. 2013) and social trust (Kokkonen et al. 2014b; Mizrachi et al. 2007). Thirdly, the workplace is often 'where migrants set about forming weak ties' with natives (Ryan 2011: 719; see also Raghuram et al. 2010; Ryan 2007).

Such research findings are in line with intergroup contact theory, which argues that interactions between members of different ethnic or racial groups – often in the workplace – may lead to a mutual reduction of prejudice (Allport 1954; Brophy 1945; Kephart 1957) and enhance intergroup trust and formation of interethnic friendships and networks (Pettigrew & Tropp 2011: 164-167). According to American social psychologist Gordon W. Allport (1954), four key conditions need fulfilling for intergroup contact to reduce prejudice: equal status in the situation, common goals, intergroup cooperation and support from authorities, law or custom. Contact must

occur within 'structurally constraining interaction spaces' such as workplaces (Rydgren et al. 2013), consuming time to produce its effects (Pettigrew 1998: 75ff).

An empirical challenge to the assumption that workplaces are important sites for intergroup contact relates to labour market trends that make work more precarious (Kalleberg 2011). If workers change jobs more often, need to hold more jobs to survive or work from home, their chances for frequent and stable collaboration and communication with their colleagues are reduced. A theoretical weakness of contact theory lies in its paying very limited attention to the importance of communication and language. This neglect of language is regrettable, as 'regular communication' and 'an understanding that develops over repeated interactions' is required for building knowledge-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker 1996: 121; see also Meer & Tolsma 2014: 464).

Moreover, lack of command of the dominant language, e.g. among marginalised immigrant women (Liversage 2009), or failure to produce dominant linguistic pronunciation in relation to accent (Nath 2011) or dialect (Eustace 2012) may lead to labour market exclusion and/or feelings of insecurity, subordination and stigma. Therefore, analysing how language comes into play in the formation of social capital is highly important, particularly in ethnically diverse low-skill workplaces: research consistently finds that less educated persons are more likely to keep 'an ethnic distance' and be less tolerant of ethnic minorities than those with more education (Carvacho et al. 2013; Hello et al. 2006).

Intercultural communication, barriers and bridges

Research on intercultural communication studies both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication (e.g. vocabulary, syntax, pronunciation, body language, gestures) in an intercultural context (Gudykunst 2005; Jandt 2010; Scollon et al. 2012). Linguistic barriers, i.e. miscommunication and misunderstandings due to differential second language competence leading to mistrust and hostility, constitute important research areas (Henderson 2010; Spencer-Oatey

2008), as do linguistic bridges, i.e. efficient intercultural communication leading to the establishment of social relations and social capital (Gudykunst 2004).

Linguistic barriers

Linguistic barriers to successful communication – such as misunderstandings, stereotypes and erroneous attribution of motives – fall into two broad categories. One type of barrier relates to a situation in which one interlocutor, e.g. an immigrant, is not yet fluent in the dominant language of the host country, and thus misinterprets the message due to difficulties in understanding accent, pronunciation, choice of vocabulary or grammar (Gudykunst 2004: 29). These barriers typically also work the other way around, with native speakers having trouble understanding immigrants. A second type of barrier works at the discourse level, that of cultural regularities and conventions relating to appropriate communication such as the use of greetings, orders, requests or apologies (Scollon et al. 2012). Both types of barriers may lead to uncertainty and anxiety (Gudykunst 2004), mistrust (Henderson 2010) and damaged social relations (Cohen & Henderson 2012).

Culture often intersects with group memberships based on categories such as ethnicity and social class (Gudykunst 2005; Scollon et al. 2012). Ethnic identity often comes with a particular linguistic heritage (Cornell & Hartmann 2007; Temple 2010), and speaking a particular language 'is a major way we mark boundaries between our ethnic group and strangers' ethnic groups' (Gudykunst 2004: 91). Language also facilitates social cohesion among ethnic group members (Gudykunst 2004:92). Thus immigrants not fluent in the dominant host country language may feel more secure speaking their native language. However, if they do so in the presence of members of another (dominant) ethnic group, this practice may alienate these third-party listeners (and vice versa).

Such mutual linguistic alienation likely occurs more often in low-skill than in high-skill workplaces. Highly skilled immigrants and natives are typically more fluent in a (common) second language such as English. Moreover, educational level may affect patterns of communication. Bernstein's (1973) classic analysis shows that 'middle-class' and 'working class' language differ. Middle-class language tends to use an 'elaborate code' involving verbal explicitness, i.e. direct messages not relying on shared meanings, while working class language tends to use a 'restricted code,' i.e. using metaphors and indirectness, not being verbally elaborate, and relying on shared identities (Bernstein 1973; Gudykunst 2004: 107-108). Although the validity and relevance of Bernstein's analysis are contested (Jones 2013; Pennycook 2015), some socio-linguists argue that class (linked to social inequalities in education and income) continues to matter to language (Block 2014; Duchêne et al. 2013; Vandrick 2014). Therefore, intercultural and interethnic communication likely constitutes a greater challenge in low-skill than in high-skill workplaces.

Linguistic bridges

Communication barriers in linguistically diverse workplaces may impede the establishment of social capital. Nonetheless, social contact in 'structurally constraining interaction spaces' (Rydgren et al. 2013) may lead to the establishment of linguistic bridges, i.e. forms of efficient intercultural communication that help establish social relations and social capital. Two of those bridges are i) successful intercultural 'work talk', i.e. talk oriented towards task completion, and ii) successful intercultural 'social talk', i.e. 'small talk' oriented towards maintaining or enhancing social relations.

For successful intercultural 'work talk', research indicates that to promote task completion some native speakers try to adapt their language to make it more understandable to non-native speakers (Cohen & Henderson 2012; Gudykunst 2004: 216-230). These native speakers more clearly pronounce words, adapt their vocabulary and use an 'extended code', i.e. explicate the

meaning of the message they intend to convey (Henderson 2010: 336). Moreover, they may also use words from the other party's language or in other ways attempt to express themselves in that party's language (Mizrachi et al. 2007: 156), as doing so 'guards against tribal behaviour and helps to build up emotional solidarity' (Henderson 2010: 372).

A second critical linguistic bridge in the workplace is 'small talk' and 'social talk', i.e. communication with a primarily social or affective meaning, taking place during breaks, at the start or end of the workday, or interspersed with work talk (Holmes & Stubbe 2015: 89ff). Although the topics covered in small talk may appear innocuous – the weather, sports, holiday plans – such communication is often a means of negotiating interpersonal relationships at work. Small talk has 'a unique bridging potential – relationally and interactionally' (Coupland et al. 1992: 96) – and often 'expresses and reinforces solidarity' (Holmes & Stubbe 2015: 107) among work colleagues.

Small talk also often precedes the more in-depth social talk that reveals personal issues about job-related grievances or ambitions, family matters, political orientation, etc. Social talk is important because self-disclosure may further the construction of social relations to (ethnic) 'strangers' (Gudykunst 2004: 314). Yet small talk and social talk often constitute challenges to individuals not speaking the dominant language or not knowing the cultural conventions for conducting them (Deeb & Bauder 2015: 56; Henderson 2010: 365). Nonetheless, the network-constructing potential of small talk and social talk has been established in recent research on intercultural communication, showing that interethnic social capital is often built through social rather than work talk (Charles 2007: 272; Deeb & Bauder 2015: 59).

Research design and methods

The analyses in this article are based on empirical data consisting of interviews and observations among employees in two Danish ethnically diverse low-skill workplaces. In Denmark ethnic

diversity usually refers to the presence in a school, neighbourhood or workplace of ethnic minority non-western immigrants and their descendants. In this study 'ethnic minorities' thus refers to this group of people, i.e. non-western immigrants who have settled in Denmark to live and work, and their descendants, i.e. the 'second or third generation'. The five most common countries of origin for such ethnic minorities in Denmark, listed in descending order of numbers, are Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Pakistan.[i]

The workplaces selected were a supermarket service department staffing the cash registers and a municipal parking administration department employing street-level patrolling traffic wardens. The workplaces were selected for interviewing according to two criteria. Firstly, they had to be highly diverse in terms of having a large share of minority ethnic employees (Williams & O'Reilly 1998: 81ff). Secondly, given the focus in intergroup contact theory on the importance of collaboration towards a common goal (Pettigrew & Tropp 2011), the workplaces had to vary in terms of cooperation among the employees. Thus, as each check-out clerk works alone at the cash register, very limited cooperation was assumed in the supermarket, while more cooperation was assumed in the parking department, as the traffic wardens (in principle) were supposed to patrol the streets with a partner. Observations and interviews later revealed that in practice these assumptions about different levels of collaboration had to be nuanced. Thirdly, these workplaces had to employee low-skilled workers.

In these two workplaces, a total of 31 semi-structured interviews of 40-60 minutes were conducted from May through November 2012. The respondents were a representative sample of the employees in each workplace. In the supermarket 14 interviews were conducted with seven ethnic Danish and seven minority ethnic workers. In the parking department 17 interviews were completed with nine ethnic Danish, one western immigrant and seven ethnic minority traffic wardens. A distinction between immigrant generations was not part of the sampling strategy, although the

research later revealed that most of the minority workers in the parking department were immigrants, with some far from fluent in Danish, and that none of those interviewed had immigrated to Denmark before the age of 20. In contrast, in the supermarket only one of the interviewed ethnic minority workers had immigrated to Denmark as an adult; all the others were born in Denmark or had arrived as small children. Most of these workers were fluent in Danish and bilingual to some extent.

In each workplace the interviews were conducted as part of a short stay of about one week, providing an opportunity for talking informally with the employees, observing their work and interactions, and participating in some meetings. In each department three managers were also interviewed (in total, six of the 31 interviews). All interviews were conducted in Danish. To increase trust in the interview situation and to obtain reliable information, the inquiry initially pursued a loosely structured 'free-wheeling' questioning strategy that gradually became more structured (Adler & Adler 2002; Svendsen 2006). Firstly, the interviewees were asked to describe their work tasks, their experiences in collaborating with colleagues, and social relations at the workplace in general – the aim being to generate data on social capital indirectly. Later in the interview they were asked directly about trust ('to what extent do you trust your colleagues?') and reciprocity ('to what extent do you receive help from your colleagues'?). They were also asked about their best and worst collaboration experiences, and their experiences with good and bad colleagues, and whether ethnicity mattered to those experiences.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded with the programme Nvivo. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all names of the interviewees have been changed. The subsequent data analyses were inspired by concepts of social capital such as 'expressive actions' (Lin 2001) and 'personal' (Van Der Gaag et al., 2008) and emotional support. The analyses therefore focused

on identifying expressions of empathy or sympathy, trust and helping behaviour, e.g. inter-collegial sharing of advice about work or family conflicts (Van Der Gaag et al. 2008: 46-47).

Collaboration and communication around the cash registers

The first case was a large supermarket, more specifically the service department, with approximately 200 employees primarily staffing the cash registers. Slightly more women than men worked in this department, and most were in their late teens or early twenties. As in many other parts of the retail sector, there was high employee turnover. The supermarket had won several awards for its recruitment strategies promoting ethnic diversity – strategies that were apparently relatively successful, also in the sense that most of the interviewed employees expressed both inter-ethnic trust and support.

Work-related communication

A young male ethnic Danish supervisor, Claus, recollected his appreciation of collaborating with and his respect for a female ethnic minority supervisor in the 'service office' (a small office at one end of the row of cash registers for overseeing work at the check-out counters):

> She had a very good grasp of details. Furthermore, she was studying law, making it easier for her to reply
> if one had any kind of question. She was also very good at praising and criticising if need be. I think that
> she was very capable. [Age 19, 4 years of experience]

Claus was not the only employee to recount such an experience. A female ethnic Danish check-out operator, Lise, reported that her mother and brothers were very hostile towards ethnic minorities. However, having worked for the supermarket for a number of years, she said:

> In my family, it's only me who likes them [ethnic minorities] because I work with them. I think they are
>
> so nice. Somebody like Mohammad, he does a lot to help me. So I can't just say I hate you … although
>
> you help me. [Age 18, 1.5 years of experience]

The help that Mohammad had provided consisted, for example, of being willing at short notice to replace Lise on a shift. Lise had also learned some Turkish words both at work and through a Facebook group set up by the department managers. While the group was to promote work-related communication, e.g. for shift swopping, small talk frequently took place. Lise said: 'So when we sit in our small group on Facebook, we just sit and write Turkish and such. It's really strange.' Despite some ambivalent feelings, the use of those 'strange' words had become part of Lises' sympathy- and trust-based interactions with some of her minority colleagues.

A final example of the impact of work-related communication on social relations comes from Aydemir, who now worked in the kiosk but was previously in customer service. Answering the question about his best collaboration experience, he mentioned communication with his customer service colleagues:

> It was in customer service if you were stuck with an angry customer. Then we just swapped customers
>
> and said: 'I stop – now you take over'. Then we passed on the customer and solved the problem. [Age 25,
>
> 5 years of experience]

Aydemir said that he found it 'cool' working in a multi-ethnic workplace. Like many other employees he referred to 'a good atmosphere' in the workplace. Neither he nor others would likely have referred to 'a good atmosphere' had they not trusted and felt trusted by their colleagues.

Small talk and social talk

Customer service was a place where interethnic communication relatively often took place and where work talk and social talk were intertwined. Anita said that she had developed ties to both

ethnic Danish and minority ethnic colleagues via work in customer service and that work there often opened a space for the sharing of feelings:

> It's because those are the ones I'm standing with a lot.…. You create some closer ties. You know more about each other. I have colleagues where I know nothing about what they do when they go home. Often when we talk, we talk privately, and I can say, like: 'You know what? I'm not sulking or anything, I've just had a really bad morning. In half an hour I'm on again.' [Age 50, 5 years of experience]

When the service workers relaxed together around a tiny table in a small coffee break room – mentioned in many interviews as a contrast to the solitary, repetitive work behind the cash registers – communication and small talk also promoted personal support. One female ethnic minority check-out operator, Amina, reported:

> Sometimes it can be stressful to work behind the check-out counter … especially if we are busy with a lot of customers and lifting a lot of heavy goods. So the thirty minutes we spend in the coffee break room help a lot, and we become more relaxed … also chatting with each other in a nice social atmosphere, getting to know each other. Then time runs quickly, and one has a little more energy to sit behind the cash register again. [Age 53, 4 years of experience]

The bolt-hole coffee break room was indeed a bit of a melting pot for check-out operators on break, i.e. a social space where employees mixed across ethnicity, age and gender. Hence the employees' informal interaction and small talking while relaxing together, away from the humdrum tasks at the cash register, promoted interethnic personal support.

Conflicts with linguistic dimensions

Nonetheless, conflicts with an ethnic and linguistic dimension also existed in the supermarket. One conflict arose because some of the female ethnic Danish check-out operators perceived some of the young (ages 16-17) ethnic minority men in the internal service subsection – who brought sales

receipts rolls, change etc. to the cash registers – as 'sluggish'. They also criticised these young men for not living up to 'Danish language only' company rules. These check-out operators also criticised a female ethnic minority manager for not taking complaints about these service workers sufficiently seriously and accused her of not doing so because some of these young men were her relatives. One check-out operator, Helle, also criticised this manager for not living up to the company's 'Danish only' rules.

> A lot of people are very uncomfortable if one is in the coffee break room with two who speak Turkish, and one sits there alone. Our boss, Rula, says that they aren't allowed to do that but even she speaks Turkish once in a while. She shouldn't. [Age 20, 2 years of experience]

Indeed the ethnic minority manager Rula being criticised expressed keen awareness of the potentially alienating effects of speaking a (minority) ethnic language that few of the Danish employees would understand:

> I'm thinking a lot about not speaking my own language. I also have these youngsters who may talk a bit of slang, puh. Well, then, I can stop them and say: 'Listen that jalla-lingo belongs at home, and here at [supermarket] we speak Danish.' [Age 29, 13 years of experience]

The formation of interethnic social capital clearly took place in this workplace, despite the solitary nature of the primary work tasks, i.e. work behind the cash registers. This effect was likely due to work-related and, in particular, small and social talk occurring 'around' the cash registers. Work-related communication and (especially) small talk and social talk functioned as linguistic bridges to personal support across ethnic groups.

Nonetheless, linguistic barriers also existed – particularly around ethnic minorities' occasionally speaking their minority language – creating mistrust between certain groups of employees. Moreover, the high turnover and changing hours in this retail sector workplace – with,

typically, a great many young employees working part-time – may have impeded the formation of stronger forms of interethnic social capital linked to the formation of interethnic friendships.

Traffic wardens, factionalism, and interethnic (mis-)trust

The second case, the municipal parking department in a large Danish city, was a workplace where collaboration among the employees constituted an integral part of the job to a higher extent than among the check-out operators. The traffic wardens typically worked in pairs (although in practice they often split up on the street) and collaboration consisted, for example, of helping one another reach the correct parking regulations decision on the street or of standing by if a driver became verbally or physically aggressive. The department had a long pre-history within the municipal administration and had only gradually become more ethnically diverse over the last ten years. More than 40% of the 120 employees belonged to ethnic minority groups, and a large share of these were relatively recent non-western immigrants or refugees.

Interviews quickly revealed that many employees mistrusted their colleagues and felt that they did not obtain due help or support from their colleagues. Interviews with both managers and employees indicated that two recent changes in the workplace had contributed to fueling greater mistrust among colleagues. Firstly, output demands for the entire department, i.e. the number of fines imposed on illegally parked cars, had been raised during recent years. Secondly, for ethical and political reasons management had actively been seeking to provide job opportunities to members of marginalised ethnic minority groups. However, interviews with managers revealed that hiring workers among ethnic minorities had also been part of management's efforts to alter what they had perceived of as a relatively lax work ethic prevailing among some of the ethnic Danish employees. Hiring ethnic minorities as part of these efforts also created the potential for inter-ethnic tensions and mistrust.

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Work-related communication

The increasing ethnic diversity in the department had also made respect for the company language policy ('Danish only') a contentious matter. As with the supermarket, in this department some ethnic Danish employees also criticised ethnic minority colleagues for speaking a foreign language and criticised management for failing to uphold the language policy. The ethnic Danish shop steward was one of those annoyed with this situation:

> First I say, please don't, I have a duty to report it [to management] (...) I can't be bothered to sit up there
> [in the canteen] and listen to … is it me that they are laughing at or what? I can't be bothered, and we
> have this policy. Some have been mad at me for half a year, but now we speak again. Somehow it's my
> duty as a shop steward to make sure that things go by the rules. [Age 57, 8 years of experience]

Several ethnic Danish employees said that they found it a problem, especially on the street, if a colleague spoke a second (foreign) language to a driver because they as listeners would not know what was said. This lack of understanding might, for example, become a problem in relation to witnessing a conversation during which the driver becomes violent. Concerning phone conversations with ethnic minority colleagues, a female ethnic Danish traffic warden added:

> You call and tell them that you just passed by a fight and don't go there. And the feedback you get shows
> that the person didn't understand a bloody thing from what you said. That's not really good. [Age 62, 10
> years of experience]

Among ethnic minority workers, very few mentioned their own level of Danish as a problem. However, some hinted at linguistic challenges that might affect their work and especially their social relationships with their colleagues. One ethnic minority traffic warden, Hamza, spoke about his troubles understanding the banter and thus trusting his colleagues in

another workplace, where he worked not long after arriving in Denmark:

> I couldn't participate in any of the conversations because I didn't speak the language. One day I said: 'OK, now it's time to knock off, I want to go home'. Then somebody said to me: 'Well, are you running away?' And I say, what is that supposed to mean? I took it like, 'are you running away?!' as an accusation. Later I understood that it's just a way of saying, 'are you leaving now?' [Age 34, 4 years of experience]

An ethnic minority traffic warden, Ismael, who had been in the Danish labour market for many years, said that he often assisted other immigrants in the parking department in grasping both the explicit meaning of criticism, and/or the implicit meaning of the banter of their Danish colleagues:

> Those who don't speak the language, that's a problem. They often come and ask me: 'Now he said this to me, he was pissed off.' I say: 'There is nothing to be angry about, he meant no ill, it's just such and such.' So I explain it to him in another way, and then he calms down. [Age 59, 6 years of experience]

Several ethnic minority employees sensed hostility and negativity from some of their (older) ethnic Danish colleagues if they imposed (too) many fines. One ethnic minority traffic warden, Sulejman, recalled: 'I've been called "heartless", sometimes I'm "so sick in the head"; sometimes I'm called an idiot because I impose so many administrative fees. Sometimes I'm just a "workhorse"'. Although perhaps those labels were just dry banter, Sulejman understood them as literal criticism of his person and his work. The consequences were a sense of lack of trust and lack of helpfulness.

Small talk and social talk

Communicative difficulties also restrained the ability of small talk and social talk to function as linguistic bridges furthering the construction of interethnic social capital. One female ethnic Danish traffic warden, Britta, said about a male ethnic minority colleague:

> He speaks Danish very poorly. We both drive a motorcycle, and he really wants to talk about those things. Sometimes I just give up because it takes incredible effort to understand and listen. Sometimes I just refrain from continuing the conversation or from asking questions because it doesn't make sense. [Age 26, 4 years of experience]

Another female Danish traffic warden, Mette, also expressed frustration at the extent to which foreign languages were spoken in the canteen in the parking department:

> I feel it's sad that some sit and speak foreign languages in small groups. It can easily be misunderstood as if they talk about others (.…) I think it often ends up being a little factious. [Age 47, 1 year of experience]

Despite the ethnic factionalism among the traffic wardens, in this workplace collaboration over time between individuals belonging to different ethnic groups had contributed to the construction of interethnic social capital. One ethnic minority traffic warden, Zaïd, said that it took several years before he understood and felt accepted by his ethnic Danish colleagues – a period during which he often had to endure harsh remarks and racist jokes. However, now he felt part of a small family characterised by intimate small talk and reciprocal support:

We collaborate a lot, and it works really well. Especially here after, well, like 5-6 years. Some of those

help me (….) Every time we come to work, we greet each other and we talk, and maybe we joke around.

It's routine, it's like a small family meeting all the time (….) Maybe sometimes we misunderstand things,

humour, or something culture-specific. But when you understand it, I think it helps with a lot of things.

[Age 44, 5 years of experience]

Interviews indicated that similarity in age and length of employment attenuated differences linked to ethnicity. Shared interests, experiences and empathy were the engines driving ethnically mixed (ethnic Danish and ethnic minority) networks, in which members assisted one another professionally and personally. One female ethnic minority traffic warden, Lael, provided an example:

I have some very good colleagues. We really get along well. Not in everything, but we sit at the same

table, chat and we have a comfy time at lunch. When we're at the same post we make sure to make the

rounds together (…) I've had a lot of problems with my husband, so I've had some really bad days

coming to work. But two of my colleagues have really supported me, trying to tell me what to do or what

to say. [Age 44, 6 years of experience]

Overall, in this particular workplace perceptions of threats and status conflicts impeded the construction of interethnic social capital, especially between older ethnic Danish employees and younger ethnic minority employees. Management aspirations to raise productivity through the hiring of ethnic minorities fuelled dislike and mistrust between some of the ethnic Danish and some of the ethnic minority employees. Intertwined with this driver of conflict, linguistic barriers linked to different levels of majority language competence and cultural conventions contributed to the mistrust and hostility between these groups. Even so, collaboration and interaction over time led some to linguistic bridging and hence to even trust and reciprocity between some members of these groups – especially among persons of the same age with overlapping life experiences.

Conclusion and implications

This study leads to the conclusion that in low-skill workplaces characterised by linguistic diversity, communication problems have a small impact on the completion of work tasks but a large impact on social relations. Large disparities in the employees' levels of majority language competence tend to establish linguistic barriers that engender mistrust and hostility among both ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities. The lack of understanding at both the concrete linguistic competency level and that of cultural conventions impedes the interpretation of the intentions of other parties, with mistrust, neglect and hostility as the results. Despite such barriers, communication and collaboration may provide linguistic bridges to interethnic social capital formation. Small talk and social talk are two concrete linguistic manifestations of such bridges. Nonetheless, such bridges are most easily established if the parties have overlapping demographic characteristics such as age, gender or familial situation (Ryan 2011: 721).

Given these conclusions, the first contribution of this study is to the literature on diversity at work. Unfortunately, communication barriers receive marginal attention in the literature on diversity at work (see, e.g. Roberson 2013). The literature on intercultural communication analyses some of the communication problems arising in ethnically diverse workplaces (Gudykunst 2004; Scollon et al., 2012). However, that literature often takes as its point of departure highly skilled workers who may be proficient in a second language (typically English) and whose misunderstandings therefore occur at the level of cultural conventions (Cohen & Henderson 2012; Henderson 2010). Business communication research generally gives limited attention to low-skill workplaces where miscommunication relates to both lack of basic majority language competencies (pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar) and different cultural communication conventions.

The second contribution of this study relates to the literature on intergroup contact (Lemmer & Wagner 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp 2011) and social capital in the workplace (Morosanu

2015; Ryan 2011). Both of these areas of research pay rather scant attention to the linguistic

characteristics of majority and minority groups interacting in the workplace (Deeb & Bauder 2015

is an exception). A comparison of two workplaces in this study shows that the less communication

barriers matter, the greater the chance for the formation of interethnic social capital. Higher levels

of trust and reciprocity in the supermarket were likely related to lower linguistic barriers present in

that workplace, because the ethnic minority workers there were more fluent in Danish than the

immigrants working in the parking department. However, the analysis also showed that the

formation of interethnic social capital is a process requiring an understanding of other factors such

as the relationship between management and employees and potential conflicts between

management and specific ethnic majority or minority subgroups of employees. Moreover, the time

dimension is also important. Hence, the mistrust entailed by linguistic barriers appears, at least

among some individuals, to diminish over time as ethnic minorities (especially first-generation

immigrants) gain greater linguistic proficiency and confidence, and as natives become more

accustomed to their manner of communicating, e.g. accent, vocabulary and syntax.

In terms of implications for practice, the role of management is important.

Management defines the language rules of the workplace and is responsible for implementing them.

Thus management could choose to provide adequate language training for ethnic minority workers

with a weak command of the dominant language, as well as providing intercultural communication

training for ethnic majority workers – i.e. training them to speak slowly and pronounce clearly, to

use an accessible vocabulary, to not take intentions or a common life world for granted, and to

follow up messages with questions to ensure that a common understanding has been reached

(Cohen & Henderson 2012). Trade unions also have a role to play. Comparative research has shown

that Danish, compared to British, trade unions are relatively cautious when dealing with questions

of ethnic inequality and labour market discrimination (Wrench 2004). Nonetheless, unions

everywhere could provide similar intercultural communication training to shop stewards to give them a better understanding of conflicts – and how to avoid them – in ethnically and linguistically diverse workplaces.

This article has sought to open a discussion on the impact of ethnic and linguistic diversity on social capital in low-skill workplaces. Its findings provide knowledge about the way in which communication mediates between skill level, ethnicity, and social capital – knowledge valuable to both researchers and practitioners. Most importantly, practitioners' failure to act on linguistic barriers may easily result in enduring – and unnecessary – mistrust and hostility between ethnic majority and ethnic minority workers.

Notes:

[i] Ranking based on authors' calculations, using population data (FOLK1) from Statistics Denmark as of first quarter of 2016. Available at www.statistikbanken.dk.

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