Language brokering and power relations at a blue-collar workplace in Sweden

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Blue-collar workplaces are a growing field of investigation within sociolinguistics, often targeting the mobility of workers and the local management of linguistic and semiotic resources at work (see Gonçalves & Kelly-Holmes 2020). In this presentation, we report from a city maintenance company in Sweden that recruits workers both from the local community and from Estonia. The context features two countries with different linguistic landscapes; considerable wage differentials between the countries; the demand for short-term labour at the company; and the altogether isolated and language-marginal work tasks of the migrating workers.

The study demonstrates how a bilingual manager constitutes a link that makes work migration possible at the company, as he recruits from his transnational network, facilitates all the contacts with the company, and acts as a language broker in his daily management of the Estonian group. The migrating workers do not need Swedish for professional reasons, as long as the manager is within easy reach. Yet, four out of the six recruited workers at the company belong to the manager’s closest family, and we discuss how the recruitment from the manager’s transnational network implies that he is both capitalising on social relationships and creating a social support network in the receiving country for everybody involved. The study promotes our understanding of the interface between migration, multilingualism, and language brokering in the understudied blue-collar workplaces and dissects the social and economic values of linguistic resources in work migration across the Baltic Sea.
