

Industrial relations in multilingual environments at work (IR-MultiLing)

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Five key objectives

1. Establish the trends in the presence of multilingualism at work.
2. Understand the effects of multilingualism on industrial relations at the workplace.
3. Develop an analytical framework to help explain strategic decisions by employers and trade unions in relationship with management of multilingualism at work.
4. Complete an effective comparison of the national contexts and outcomes and present recommendations to employers, trade unions and policy-makers.
5. Produce a training DVD/YouTube film for trade unionists showing different ways of overcoming the obstacles to participation by multilingual minorities.

Project methodology

- A six country study : France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, UK
- Desk research (15-page reports covering trends and regulatory regimes concerning multilingualism and employer and trade union policies)
- 3 case studies in each country, 30 interviews in total – oral history
- Frequent relationships between research team and advisory boards composed of third party organisations

Outcomes of desk research (1)

- Issues raised by multilingualism at work revolve mainly around the 3 following points :
 - 1) English is becoming dominant in a growing number of situations to the detriment of national languages ;
 - 2) In the case of immigrants, the lack of command of the national language is a factor of discrimination.
 - 3) The place of regional languages varies from a country to another.

Outcomes of desk research (2)

- The problems raised by linguistic diversity arise differently according to working environment.
- These issues remain largely unexplored, and when they are addressed this is because of work efficiency or safety issues.
- The issue of the respect of employee rights is rarely raised (apart from the angle Health - Safety) and trade unions are not very active in this field overall.

Case study methodology (1)

- **Several difficulties:**
 - Scale of observation (sector / company)
 - Criteria of choice for sectors / companies
 - Access to the most pertinent interlocutors
 - Comparability
- **A flexible research design**
 - Choice of scale left open
 - Choice of sector aimed at covering the diversity of situations between the 6 countries, while highlighting national traits.
 - Notion of management of diversity
 - Varied ways of accessing fieldwork
 - Common template

Case study methodology (2)

- **Four type of economic activities:**
 - International hubs,
 - service industries,
 - public services (health care),
 - traditional industries.
- **2 trade unions surgeries for immigrant workers.**

Outcomes of case studies: Company policies

- Company policies often not formalised in written;
- Official practices vary to some extent from a sector to another:
 - English as vehicular language in international hubs, national language for contracts and use of language abilities for clients
 - National language as working language in service industry and traditional industry at execution level of execution. It is mixed with English - and / or the language of the mother company – at managerial level.
 - National language in public services.

Outcomes of case studies:

Limits of Cies language dominant practices

- The use of a vehicular language doesn't solve all issues of communication. Part of them are cultural.
- Informal use of mother languages observed in all companies, often facilitating work relationship & wellbeing.
- Most of companies use to ignore linguistic abilities of their staff.
- In companies with strict dominant language policies: more issues of discrimination and tensions between groups of workers.

Outcomes of case studies: experimentations and successes

- As part of diversity policies, some companies are organising socials with the aim of sharing cultures, some language classes in host country language and support to new comers;
- But only a few companies offer free & varied language classes during working time.
- Very few examples of companies where staff are encouraged to learn each other language and allowed to use different languages in the same conversation to enhance mutual understanding.

Outcomes of case studies

Trade unions actions

- Very marginal cases where TU appear to contest company practices;
- Hardly no collective bargaining on the topic, appart on health related issues;
- TU are juggling themselves with linguistic plurality:
 - Top down practices in most cases: leaflets in different languages, language classes...
 - Very marginal bottom up practices encouraging workers not speaking the national language to take part in TU policy.

Conclusions

- Use of language at work mainly remains a vehicle for discrimination and for exploitation;
- Language issues are paradoxically unspeakable: taboo;
- Innovative practices are extremely rare and temptative but show that cross cultural and linguistic communication could be a way to explore.
- Issue of workers and social partners language and culture training is key.