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Orienting to the language learner role in multilingual workplace meetings

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Abstract: The modern work life is interactionally challenging. For many, work consists of short-term projects executed in transient team combinations. An increasing number of work communities operate in multilingual environments, and many professionals conduct their work in a language which is not their first or strongest. The flux of interactional and linguistic settings in workplaces requires communication practices that acknowledge the difference in the participants' language skills. In this paper, we explore such practices in a Finnish non-governmental organisation, using Conversation Analysis as our method. We focus on instances in which the professionals explicitly orient to their own or their co-participants' role as language learners during workplace meetings. The paper aims to determine how this topicalisation is performed and what consequences it has for the construction of the (professional) identity of the second language speaker. The data consist of approximately 40 hours of video-recorded meetings with Finnish, Russian, and English as the main languages. The analysis reveals that instances where the language learner role is oriented to are usually related to practical questions of choosing the language for the meeting or for a sufficiency of linguistic resources to conduct professional activities, yet they can also be used as means to construct one's professional identity. These instances share certain features, such as prior topicalisation of language issues and the use of contextualisation cues that can help to soften the potentially problematic nature of referring to the (co-participant's) limitations. The article contributes to our understanding of how to support participation and professional language learning in transient work settings.

Keywords: conversation analysis, multilingual interaction, second language interaction, workplace interaction.

1 Introduction

Increasing global mobility and high employee turnover are changing the structures of the labour market in present-day societies. The flux of the contemporary working life – including the diversity in the linguistic background of the employees and the increase of short-term, project-based work – calls for research on communication practices that are both effective in transient settings and enhance second language speakers' possibilities of participation by creating opportunities to use and learn the working language.

At the moment, workplace community as a natural habitat for interaction in the target language, or the various contexts that the ecology of a workplace can offer, are not necessarily conceptualised as professional language-learning opportunities. Rather, previous research on workplace interaction has shown that even though professionals who work in

their second language may use non-standard language and deficient formulations, participants treat each other's language production and proficiency as a private matter, not something to be openly noticed or topicalised in interaction (Firth 2009: 136; Paananen 2019: 79). This "doing not being a language learner" can be understood in light of the institutional constraints of a workplace: the primary goal of the interaction is to accomplish a particular task, not to enlarge the linguistic repertoire of a participant. Also, the institutional role that the participants orient to involves their professional positions rather than the role of a language learner, which would activate another institutional (i.e. pedagogical) setting. This is not the whole picture, however, since in some cases teaching and learning professional language can also be treated as a relevant activity, even at the expense of the progression of the professional task (Svennevig 2018). Thus, it seems apparent that there are tensions between engaging in a language-learning activity during a professional activity and displayed being a competent actor in the activity, and these tensions should be given more consideration (see Mori and Shima 2020: 28).

In this paper, we[1] investigate instances in which the linguistic background of an employee in a multilingual non-governmental organisation in Finland is made openly relevant in the meeting interaction. In particular, we will explore practices that recognise one participant's limited resources in a specific language (in this case Finnish). Such practices may be problematic in professional interaction, given that they shift focus from what the employee knows (her professional expertise) to what she does not know (her limited skills in a particular language). The paper seeks to answer the following research question: how is the language learner role explicitly oriented to in the studied workplace meetings, and what consequences does this topicalisation have for the construction of the second language speaker's (professional) identity?

As our methodological tool, we use Conversation Analysis (for an overview, see Sidnell and Stivers 2013; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018). In the analysis, four practices that topicalise the language learner role in workplace interaction are discussed: 1) expressing willingness to practise, 2) prompting to practise, 3) commenting on a co-participant's language skills, and 4) introducing a co-participant's limited resources as topic. Before presenting the analysis (in Section 4), however, we will give a short review of relevant

[1] The article has been written in equal collaboration by the authors, the order of the authors is decided by lot.

literature, including a presentation of our method (Section 2) and a fuller description of our data (Section 3).

2 Conversation analysis, workplace interaction, and second language

The challenges of multilingual workplace interaction have been studied by scholars from various methodological premises (for recent overviews, see, e.g., Angouri 2014; Hazel and Svennevig 2018). As our goal in this paper is to uncover interactional practices emerging in moment-to-moment interactions, we use Conversation Analysis (CA) as our methodological approach. CA explores the mechanisms organising social interaction by focusing on sequential, turn-by-turn unfolding interaction (e.g. Schegloff 2007). Even though mundane conversation is the primary data source in CA (e.g. Heritage 1984), the method has proved to be fruitful when investigating institutional interactions. A wealth of CA studies have focused on interactions in different institutional settings (e.g. Drew and Heritage 1992; Arminen 2005; Antaki 2011), exploring and revealing various linguistic-interactional constraints typical of various institutions.

The data explored in this study come from an expert organisation where a significant part of the work is performed in and through language. The way in which language is used at the workplace plays an integral role in the constitution of the organisation; in other words, the organisations are talked into being (e.g. Boden 1994). One central situation where this happens is various meetings where employees plan, negotiate, and decide about their ongoing and future activities with each other and with different stakeholders. The centrality of meetings as a medium of organisational talk is reflected in the growing research interest (see, e.g., Asmuss and Svennevig 2009; Svennevig 2012; Menz 2017). Previous CA studies on meetings have focused, for example, on multimodal practices (Ford and Stickle 2012; Markaki and Mondada 2012), as well as on power relations and "teaming" (Stevanovic and Peräkylä 2012; Djordjilovic 2012).

However, CA research on workplace meetings where the setting is multilingual is still emerging. Even though an expanding body of CA research has focused on linguistically asymmetric situations (e.g. Gardner and Wagner 2004; Kurhila 2006) and, more recently, on language learning in interaction (e.g. Hall et al. 2011; Kasper and Wagner 2011; Eskildsen and Majlesi 2018), mostly these studies have not been conducted in workplace settings (for

some exceptions, see, e.g., Mondada 2004; Vöge 2011; Hazel 2015). In a recent special issue on interaction in multilingual workplaces, Hazel and Svennevig name several features that need more examination:

> Whether the members in the settings described are first or second language users, whether they are fully proficient in the working language(s) of the setting, or in the institutional registers that characterize this or that workplace, whether they must negotiate language choice, or whether their linguistic competences impact on their level of engagement in a particular setting or activity, these features are often left unexamined. (Hazel and Svennevig 2018: 3)

Thus, even if a lot is already known within the conversation analytic framework about the dynamics of meeting interaction and about second language interaction (particularly in educational contexts), the role of second language speakers and language competencies in workplace contexts has not been thoroughly addressed. Our paper aims to contribute to further investigation of these themes.

For the study at hand, one additional consequential premise of CA needs to be discussed, namely, its commitment to an emic stance. One of the main principles of the CA method is that the categories used in the analysis should be made relevant by the participants *in situ* rather than being defined by the analyst. This requirement also applies to the categories of second language speaker and learner (for a discussion, see Firth and Wagner 1997; Wagner 1998). Thus, in linguistically asymmetric situations, the speakers may or may not make relevant their L1/L2 speaker roles (see also Douglas Fir Group 2016).

In this paper, the emic position of the second language speaker serves as a starting point. We are interested in when and how participants – who otherwise in workplace interaction are treated in their institutional roles as "experts", "superiors/subordinates", "trainees", etc. – orient to themselves or their co-participants as L2 learners and what consequences these orientations have for the construction of the participants' identity. In general, the category of L2 speaker/learner may be made relevant in interaction in various ways, for example, by code-switching, by translating, by adapting the complexity of language used, or by embodied means (see, e.g., Mondada 2004; Vöge 2011). In this paper, however, we focus our analytic lens on more overt practices, in which the category of L2 learner is openly topicalised in the interaction.

3 Data

Our data were collected at one non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Finland, comprising data of various types, from interviews and ethnographic observations to video recordings. The data used in this study consist of approximately 40 hours of video-recorded meetings.[2] All names are pseudonyms, and the participants have given their consent to the publication of still pictures of the data. The NGO in question is an independent non-profit organisation which operates in the field of integration by coordinating various cultural activities aimed especially at the Russian-speaking minority in Finland. The data include internal NGO meetings as well as meetings with different collaborators and stakeholders; all the meetings consist mainly of planning, negotiating, and decision-making – highly verbal activities that demand relatively advanced language skills.

The organisation under study and its meetings are extensively multilingual. While many previous studies on workplace multilingualism, especially in Nordic countries, have focused on the interplay between lingua franca English and the major language of the community (e.g. Hultgren et al. 2014; Lønsmann and Mortensen 2018; Negretti and Garcia-Yeste 2015), the linguistic diversity in our data extends to a minority language in the community. About half of the employees in the organisation have a Russian background (their language skills in Finnish vary from elementary knowledge to fluent bilingualism), and the other half consists of people of Finnish background with similarly varying abilities to communicate in Russian. The organisation supports the employees with a Russian background in learning Finnish. For instance, they have offered their employees Finnish lessons as well as more informal conversation clubs. The multilingual potential of the organisation is visible in the meetings: the employees use both Finnish and Russian – and sometimes English – to conduct the meeting activities (for a more detailed picture, see Kotilainen and Lehtimaja 2019). Code-switching between languages occurs regularly in the meetings, but it is not necessarily (or usually) oriented to by the participants.

An important feature of the data is the high turnover of the organisation's employees. During two and a half years of data collection (from October 2017 to January 2020), 28 meetings were video-recorded. Those meetings were attended by altogether 32 different people, of whom 22 were employees[3] and 10 external collaborators of the organisation (e.g.

[2] The interviews and ethnographic observations are, however, exploited when relevant (e.g. when evaluating the language skills of the employees or describing the work relations of the participants).

[3] By the word *employee*, we refer to a wide variety of contractual relationships, from more or less permanent jobs to trainees and freelancers hired only for a specific short-term project (e.g. taking photos during an event, as in Extract 1).

fromFinnish cultural institutions). Of the 22 employees, however, only four worked for the organisation for the entire data-gathering period. High staff turnover may be seen as an inherent part of this kind of project-based expert work and typical in the current working life. The flux of people (and their language competencies) has consequences for language choices and practices. In this regard, the focus organisation and its meetings could be characterised as forming a dynamic language scenario (e.g. Hazel and Mortensen 2013: 4). The participants of the meetings need to continuously monitor, for example, whether or not the others understand them, and modify their actions accordingly.

4 Analysis

In this section, we will present and analyse data extracts where one participant's limited resources in a particular language are topicalised. Even though it is quite common in our data to orient to limited linguistic resources either in an implicit way (e.g. by changing language) or in relation to imminent problems (e.g. through understanding checks), explicit topicalisations of the participants' language skills remain relatively rare, in line with the observations from prior research (Firth 2009; Paananen 2019). Nevertheless, some instances of topicalisations do occur in our data, both as a result of the speaker's own actions and as a result of the co-participant's actions. These topicalisations convey the (potentially) problematic nature of such activity to different extents, portraying the second language speaker in different manners. In the following, we will present four instances of topicalisations, beginning with a fairly unproblematic case where the speaker constructs himself as a language learner, and ending in a case which displays more clearly the trouble that can be connected to instances where the language learner role is made relevant by a co-participant in a professional context.

4.1 Volunteering to practise

The first extract is from a meeting in which three long-term employees of the focus organisation (Risto, the head of the organisation; Jenni and Olga, employees) and a freelance photographer (Anatoli) plan a future event. Both Risto and Jenni are native speakers of

Finnish but can easily communicate in Russian, and Olga and Anatoli are native speakers of Russian. They can speak Finnish, but their Russian is clearly stronger. This is the first meeting of this group, so the participants have to decide what language they will use. The language cannot be pre-decided on the basis of prior mutual knowledge, since the NGO employees do not have much experience of Anatoli's language skills. This is evident in Risto's opening question: he asks explicitly which language they should use.[4]

Extract 1. I would like to practise Finnish

```
01 Risto:    ole hyvä. hhh puhutaako me suomee vai
             here you are. do we speak Finnish or
02           puhutaanko me;
             do we speak
03 Olga:     £en tiedä. hhh£
             I don't know
04 Risto:    venäjää vai englantia vai; [hhh
             Russian or  English  or
05 Jenni:                               [<mikä on helpoin>;
                                          what is the easiest
06 Risto:   >(kak my bu[dem)<
             how will we
07 Olga:               [en tiedä. hhh
                        I don't know
08 Anatoli: no oa >yritetän< (0.3) a:::
            well   let's try
09          [jo- jo- jos: se sopii [a::: teile. .hhh
            [ i-  i- if   it suits [      you
10 Olga:    [°suomea.°             [joo se sopii hyvin.
             Finnish               yeah it suits well
11 Jenni:           [↑joo:.
            [ yeah
12 Risto:   [joo.
            [ yeah
13 Anatoli: [ä::: mä haluaisin a:: ehkä a:: harjotella
                 I  would like to perhaps  practise
14          SUOmea.
            Finnish
15 Jenni:   [selvä.
            [right
16 Risto:   [>selvä;<
            [ right
17 Anatoli: .hhh[h    [jo- jos jos jos a:: se a::::
                [     [i-  if if if    there
18 Risto:       [harjo[tellaan; ehe
                 let's practise he he
```

[4] As a means to separate between Finnish and Russian in transcription, we use bold font for the turns in Russian. The English translations are in italics. See Appendix 1 for transcription symbols.

19 Anatoli: tule ongelma mä (puhun) venäjä(ksi)
comes a problem I speak in Russian

In this extract, Anatoli topicalises his position as a "not-yet-competent" speaker of Finnish. He explicitly portrays himself as someone learning Finnish (lines 13–14) and acknowledges the possibility that his Finnish skills may not be sufficient in the situation (lines 17, 19; note also the verb choice *yritetään* 'let's try' instead of *puhutaan* 'let's speak' in line 8). It should be noted, however, that this happens after the chairperson Risto has made explicit the choice of the language as a shared decision-making process. Risto mentions all three languages that are used within the organisation as alternatives (lines 1 and 4). The turn-final particle *vai* ('or', line 4) implies that even other alternatives might exist. Risto not only names multiple languages as options, but he also acts accordingly: having asked the question in Finnish, he switches to Russian (line 6). In this way, the language used for the opening question does not clearly function as an implicit suggestion for the language choice (see Mondada 2018). Thus, the chairperson has made clear that language choice is a negotiable issue. The employees of the organisation have a similarly open approach. Olga is the first to respond to Risto's question, but she merely indicates that she is not taking a stance on the question (lines 3, 7). Jenni responds as well (line 5), but instead of suggesting a specific language, she underlines ease of use (i.e. practicality) as a criterion for the decision.

It is in this situation that Anatoli takes a turn. No specific language has been suggested, and it is clear that various alternatives are possible. Anatoli comes up with a concrete alternative – Finnish (even though it is Olga who first mentions the language by completing Anatoli's turn, line 10). It is evident that this is not "the easiest" choice for him (as proposed by Jenni), given all the reservations he provides. Why does he propose a language that may put him in a disadvantageous position as a communicator?

It is important to note that Anatoli not only suggests a language but also explicitly frames himself as a learner of that language. Anatoli is a new employee, and this self-topicalised language learner role displays his willingness to actively work to improve his language skills in the majority language. Instead of choosing the easy option for him (Russian), he chooses the option that will help him cultivate his language skills. In so doing, he portrays himself as a committed language learner, using every opportunity to improve his Finnish. Indexing situated identities such as being a "good learner" or a "good immigrant" have been reported, for example, in language-speaking tests (Rydell 2015); an initial meeting

with future project collaborators where the person is expected to show his competencies bears some similarities to test situations.

The co-participants accept the suggested language choice (lines 10–12), as well as the speaker's self-topicalised learner position (lines 15–16). Following Eskildsen and Theodórsdóttir (2017), the participants have made a "language contract", which may be seen not only as an agreement to use Finnish for interactions but also as a suggestion to then somehow adopt the roles of a "language learner" and an "expert".

To conclude, in this case, one participant topicalises his own limited language skills in the majority language. However, while acknowledging his shortcomings, this self-topicalised language learner position simultaneously indexes another identity – a dedicated learner of the target community's (majority) language and, more broadly, a good employee who is committed to developing his skills. The self-topicalisation of the language learner role is not treated as a delicate activity (see Bredmar & Linell 1996), although it can be noted that Risto provides his turn with a short laughter (line 18). The relationship between laughter and speaking about deficient language skills will be discussed more thoroughly with respect to the subsequent extracts, where the language learner role is being oriented to as a result of joint actions by the speaker and the co-participants.

4.2 Prompting to practise

The next extract illustrates another example where language choice seems to be driven by language-practising purposes. In this case, however, it is the co-participant rather than the speaker herself who prompts this language-learning action. Altogether six people are present in this NGO internal meeting, three of whom participate actively in this episode. These three are Olga and Risto (the same as in Extract 1), and Katja, a middle manager of the organisation and the closest supervisor of Olga. Katja's first language is Russian, but she speaks Finnish very fluently.[5]

The extract begins when it is Olga's turn to present the domain she is responsible for: the social media use of the organisation. Having stood up, she is distributing a paper she has

[5] Of the three "silent" participants, two master both Finnish and Russian. The third, a trainee, seems to have problems understanding Finnish.

written about the social media channels. She uses Russian, and she has used Russian in her previous turns.

Extract 2. Will you tell us in Finnish?

```
01         ((Olga stands up and hands out a paper to everyone))
02 Olga:   ja napisala vsjo na finskom
           I wrote everything in Finnish
03 Katja: [molodeeec £ha ha [ha .h .h .hh he he£
           well done
04 Risto: [  vaau   molode:::[ec.
             wow   well done

((omitted 14 lines between R & O in Russian while O prepares for her
presentation))

18 Olga:   £.hhhhhhhhh£ m:::::hhhhh .mt j::a poprobovala (0.6) a::
                                        I tried
19         vo-pervyh, vam (0.2) čtoby vy ponimali da i vot predstavili
           first of all to you  so that you'd understand and get an
20         nagljadno skol'ko u nas seičas suščestvuet
           idea of how many we have     at the moment
21         v socmedija aa grupp. aaam ih desjat' štuk
           groups in the social media there are ten of them
22         .hhhhhhhhhh [a:::::::;]
23 Katja:              [ budeš'  ]po-fins?ki £rasskazyvat'
                         will you tell us in Finnish
24         hi hih hih£
25         (0.5)
26 Olga:   mm ne znaju [.hhhh £ha hah .hhhhhh
           hmm I don't know
27 Katja:              [£da nenene èto ja ne   izvini£
                         well nonono   I don't sorry
28 Olga:  =čut'- čut' ne možet byt' mogu no ja ne znaju
           a bit      perhaps I could    but I don't know
29         ↑ehkä voin puhua suomea en tiedä. .hhhh
           well perhaps I could talk in Finnish, I don't know.
30         okei. meillä on: nyt tällä hetkelä m:::: (0.2) kymmenen
           okay, we have   at the moment      mm          ten
31         m::: (0.2) .t erilaisia ryh↑mä (.) some↑sa (1.0)
           mm            different groups    in social media
```

In this extract, Katja suggests that Olga could switch to Finnish (line 23), a weaker language for Olga. Given that Olga would be able to give her presentation more efficiently and effortlessly with her stronger language (Russian), the question about the change of the language may have been motivated by language learning purposes. Orienting to a colleague as a language learner in a professional context may be a somewhat delicate activity (see, e.g.,

Bredmar and Linell 1996), since it makes relevant another identity than that of the institutional professional, and entails the person being "not-yet-competent" in that domain.

The delicate character of the activity is clearly displayed in Katja's turn (line 23). She starts smiling when asking the question (line 23) and ends her turn in laughter, thus framing the turn as potentially non-serious. Also, she asks the question in Russian (i.e. she maintains Olga's original language choice). Moreover, when Olga displays hesitancy (line 26), Katja rushes to back away from her suggestion: she produces multiple turn-initial negation tokens (see Schegloff 2001) and even an apology (line 27). It is worth noting that despite Katja cancelling her suggestion, Olga continues to consider it as an option; she verbalises her uncertainty of whether it would be possible for her to use Finnish, first in Russian (line 28) and then in Finnish (line 29). After her switch to Finnish, she (re-)starts her presentation in Finnish (line 30) and completes it in Finnish (not shown in the transcript).

Given the potentially problematic nature of positioning someone as a language learner in a professional context, why does Katja perform such an activity in the midst of a meeting? Again, it is relevant to note what has happened prior to her suggestion. When Olga is about to begin her presentation, she delivers a paper she has compiled, and topicalises her language choice by mentioning that she has 'written everything in Finnish' (line 2). Such "extreme-case formulation" (see Pomerantz 1986) emphasises the effort Olga has put into this language choice, and her efforts are acknowledged by both Katja and Risto through the Russian evaluative expression *molodec* ('well done'). Both Katja and Risto utter the positive evaluation in an animated manner, with a clear lengthening of the vowel in the word (lines 3 and 4), and Katja ends her turn in laughter (line 3). These contextualisation cues (Gumperz 1982) frame the utterance as humorous and can be seen as a means to deal with the fact that their evaluations are evoking contextual configurations (see Goodwin 2000) from another setting – namely, language-learning environments such as classrooms – as well as the fact that they are responses to Olga's self-praise, which is an interactionally delicate matter (see Pomerantz 1978).

In sum, even if the language learner role is topicalised by a co-participant (Katja) in this extract, it is the speaker herself (Olga) who has previously made explicit her efforts and achievement with respect to using the target language (Finnish). This has created a sequence of humorously framed appreciation by the employee's superiors, and it can pave the way for Katja's later question about the change of the language (line 23): if Olga has managed to write the presentation in Finnish, giving the presentation in Finnish can perhaps be offered to

her as the next language challenge. Nevertheless, Katja treats her suggestion as a delicate activity, as shown above.

When compared with the previous extract, we find both similarities and differences. A clear difference is that in the latter extract, the possibility to practise is raised by a co-participant, not by the person in need of practice. This difference is reflected in the formulation of the turns: Anatoli, who topicalises his own language learner position, uses declarative utterances ('let's try', 'I'd like to practise'), whereas Katja, who other-topicalises Olga's learner position, uses an interrogative formulation ('will you tell us in Finnish', Russian "intonational interrogative"; Bolden 2016), leaving the decision to Olga. Furthermore, in Extract 1 the talk about language skills is not contextualised as a non-serious topic, whereas in Extract 2 we find various contextualisation cues, such as smiling and laughing. The two cases are similar in that, before the language learner position is introduced, linguistic issues have been topicalised in prior talk, making language skills a relevant topic. The last two features – marking language issues as non-serious and their prior topicalisation – can also be found in the next extract (from the same meeting).

4.3 Commenting on language skills

The following extract begins right after Olga has finished the presentation she began in Extract 2. The participants have discussed each point after Olga has introduced them, and they have come to the end of Olga's list in the paper. The whole presentation has taken 28 minutes, and Olga has spoken Finnish the whole time, excluding some word searches and a couple of short translations into Russian addressed to the trainee.[6]

Extract 3. Well done and spoken in Finnish

```
01 Olga:   £o[kei£.
            okay
02 Katja:    [↑erittäi hyvä.
              very good
03         (0.2) ((O takes her paper from table))
04 Olga:   £hhhh hih [hih£
05 Risto:            [joo tää oli tosi hy[vä kiitoksia.
                     yeah this was really good thank you
06 Olga:                                 [£*+minä puhuin
                                            I talked
```

[6] Figures 1–3 (below the transcription) illustrate the directions of gaze of the participants.

```
                                                *glances Katja
                                                 +FIG 1
07          ja *paljon kun hhhh (0.2) .h*h[hh£
            and a lot when
               *glances Jenni          *starts walking back to her seat
09 Risto:                                    [hyvä ja,
                                             good and
10 Katja:                                      [*.hhh <£HYVIN +
                                                        well
                                              *lifts head
                                                                + FIG 2
11          [       JAKSOIT     J[A     PUHUIT     SUOME[KSI£>.
                    done        and     spoken     in Finnish
12 Risto:   [KIITOKSIA JA PUHUIT [HYVIN £SUOmeksikin.£
             thank you and you spoke well in Finnish too
13 Olga:                          [<£(oh) my go(d)£>]    [£o:[:h my£
14 Risto:                                                    [hyvi
                                                              well
15          [suomeks  [£(hoidettu)£.
             in Finnish done
16 Olga:    [£go:d£. ((laughs))
17 Katja:             [£eh he he he he hyvä Olga£.
                                   well done Olga
18 Olga:    *£@heh@ .hh[*hhhhh£
            *sits down  *takes her mug
19 Katja:               [*£tästä se alkaa. ahh[hhhh ha
                           here it starts
20 Olga:                                      [o:↑ohhhhh,
21 ?:       £hi hi [hi£
22 Katja:          [£heh [heh .hhhhhh£
23 Olga:                 [+£@m:hym@£? ((drinks from her mug))
                          + FIG 3
24          (1.0)
25 Olga:    (moi benefic) (0.2) £(uzhas)£. (0.4) hi hi hi hi
             my triumph           gosh
```



Figure 1. Line 6.



Figure 2. Line 10.



Figure 3. Line 23.

This extract includes a fairly extensive sequence where both Katja and Risto praise Olga's oral skills in Finnish (lines 10–19), thus orienting to Olga as a user/learner of Finnish rather than to her professional competence. While being more extended, this extract nevertheless exhibits a feature familiar from the previous extracts: before the turns that make relevant the language learner role, there has been talk about language. Also, as in Extract 2, the topicalisation of the language learner role can be seen as a result of joint actions by the speaker and her co-participants, and the whole episode is produced through laughter and smiling voices.

Having finished her presentation, Olga receives a positive assessment, first from her primary supervisor, Katja (line 2), and then from the head of the organisation, Risto (line 5). These assessments seem to concern the professional content in Olga's presentation; Katja is still glancing at the paper while producing her turn, and both Katja and Risto utter their assessments with a serious voice, without smiling. In her next turn, however, Olga introduces

a language matter by mentioning that she ‘talked a lot’ (lines 6–7). While saying this, she first looks with a smile at Katja (Figure 1) and then toward Jenni (on the other side of the table), folding the papers in her hand. It is only after Olga has verbalised how much she talked that she starts walking back to her seat (line 7 onwards). Given that the language of her presentation has been discussed beforehand (Extract 2), Olga’s comment (lines 6–7) seems to be related to the fact that she has been able to talk in Finnish for a long time. This is again a type of self-praise, as Olga is presenting herself as a successful language learner and an employee who is ready to accept challenges; the delicate nature of the self-praise is reflected in her smiling.

Risto and Katja also interpret Olga’s smiling voice turn (lines 6–7) in relation to her speaking in Finnish. Olga’s turn triggers her superiors to begin the praise-sequence. Katja lifts her head from the papers (line 10; Figure 2) toward Olga and begins her turn in a highly animated manner. Katja utters the turn in a slow tempo, articulating the words clearly and loudly and smiling throughout the turn (lines 10–11). Risto adapts to this tone of voice in his two assessment turns (lines 12, 14–15). The animated voice quality seems to playfully reflect teacher and foreigner talk, thus introducing an “other” voice in this context in a Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin 1986).

The institutional relationship between Olga and her superiors, Katja and Risto, is not that of a language learner and teacher, yet in this sequence Katja and Risto adopt the role of language experts, as they assess Olga’s oral language skills as well as her efforts and perseverance as a language learner. The assessment could even be seen as the third part of an (extended) pedagogic IRE sequence (e.g. Mehan 1979): first, Katja has initiated the sequence by requesting Olga to provide a language sample, then Olga has responded by providing it, and now Katja produces an evaluation by assessing Olga’s performance. Olga’s position as a learner in a learning process is made very explicit in Katja’s turn in line 19 (‘here it starts’). Olga aligns with this position: she topicalises her efforts through various exclamatory expressions (lines 13, 16, 20, 25). The extended nature of this sequence can be seen as reflecting Olga’s initial hesitancy about whether or not she could give her talk in Finnish (Extract 2). Now she has shown that she could, but it has required a major effort from her (e.g. ‘my triumph’, line 25). Through their praising/exclamation utterances, both the speaker and her co-participants jointly construct the identity of a “heroic learner who overcomes adversity” (Kalliokoski 2019). This is done non-seriously by echoing utterances from other contexts (Bakhtin 1986: 91), and all the participants smile and laugh while uttering their turns. Displaying Olga’s qualities as a language learner (e.g. courage, determination) can also

be a means to jointly endorse her qualities as an employee. The participants' demonstrations and assessments of linguistic competence can be used to establish their qualification for the professional position (Day and Kristiansen 2018: 104).

Although Extracts 1–3 illustrate different instances in which the language learner role is made relevant in interaction, they also have similarities. First, when the language learner role is oriented to in professional conversation, it is the speaker herself who topicalises it, or if it is a co-participant, the speaker has topicalised language issues in prior talk. Second, the sequences that involve positioning a co-participant as a language learner are contextualised with a smiling voice, laughter, and possibly other prosodic cues. As our last example, we present a case which does not follow the same pattern, and discuss the consequences of that.

4.4 Delayed topicalisation of limited resources

Our last extract illustrates a situation where a co-participant topicalises the limited language skills of a "learner" in a manner that diverges from the three previous extracts. The meeting in question was recorded in the premises of a Finnish museum that collaborates with the NGO. The five participants, who meet for the first time here, are three NGO representatives – Risto, Katja, and Jelena – and two people from the museum, Ulla and Sari. Jelena is a recently recruited part-time employee with expertise in museum pedagogy. She works in Katja's team. The head of the organisation, Risto, has had some contact with her but it is not very frequent. Jelena's first language is Russian; she has quite good passive knowledge of Finnish but does not speak it very actively. Ulla and Sari do not know any Russian, and the meeting has been held mostly in Finnish with Jelena contributing almost exclusively in English. The extract comes from the end of the meeting.

Extract 4. Is there something that you didn't understand?

```
01 Katja:  kiit[os yhteistyö ja hyvää [joulua,
           thank you cooperation and merry christmas
02 Ulla:       [hyvää joulua?   £eh   [heh heh heh£
                merry christmas
03 Risto:                             [joo.
                                       yeah
04 Sari:   hy[vää jouluai[kaa [kaikille.
           merry christmas time to all
05 Katja:    [.hhhhh     [↑jo-[o.
                           yeah
06 Risto:                [.mt ja nyt viimeks ku me
```

```
                          and now last time when we
07          lähettii (.) museosta X pois nin (.) nin
            left          from museum X   so      so
08          tota (0.2) käytiin tätä keskustelua ni, .hhhh
            PRT        we had this conversation so
09          Jelena ei my- ymmärtäny ihan kaikkee ↑nyt mä
            Jelena didn't understand quite everything now I
10          kysyn sult suaraa ku ollaan kaikki läsnä et
            ask you directly since we are all present that
11          onko jotain mitä et ymmärtänyt.
            is there something that you didn't understand
12          (0.5)
13 Risto:   .t onks #jotain sulla mieles*sä# .hhh (0.2)
               is there something in your mind
                                      * J gazes up
14          u tebja est' čto-to, čto ne ponjal(.)
            do you have something that you didn't understand(masc)
15          ne ponjala *ili byli .hhh [čto-to hotja]
            didn't understand(fem) or was something you'd like to
                      * J turns head down
16 Jelena:                             [#a:::#, hhh ]hhh
17 Risto:   by vy-*vyjasnit' kak my vse na meste
            clarify  while we are all present
                  * J scratches head
18          (0.3)
19 Jelena: .hh[hh
20 Risto:     [*elikä ny ku ollaan kaikki
               so now that we are all
               *gazes S and U
21          p[aikalla ni onko nyt kysyttävää että,
            present so is there now anything to ask PRT
22 Ulla:     [n:ii.
              yeah
23 Risto:   .hhh (0.2) *#että tota:#. (0.2) onks jotain (.)
                        PRT   PRT           is there something
                       *gazes J
24           sulla mielessä.
             in your mind
25           (1.3)
26 Jelena:   .hh no, (1.0) I ↑think that↑ I I understand (0.5)
27            maybe::: (0.3) seventy procen[ts,
28 Risto:                                  [£eh
29           >he he he [he heh<£
30 Katja:    £ha  hi   [  heh  he he hi£
```

The meeting is about to finish – the participants have been thanking each other and wishing each other Merry Christmas – when Risto suddenly brings up a prior conversation from another context where Jelena's limited skills in Finnish had become evident (lines 6–9). After this, Risto poses Jelena a question: is there something she did not understand during this

conversation (lines 9–11). Such a question, especially with the parallel drawn to the prior occasion, emphasises Jelena's limited Finnish language skills.

Risto's question causes problems to the progressivity of the interaction. As no immediate answer follows (the pause in line 12), Risto reformulates the question in Finnish (line 13), after which he switches to Russian and produces the same question in that language (lines 14–15, 17). In the middle of his Russian turn, Jelena displays hesitancy through vocal and embodied means: she turns her head down (line 15), utters a hesitation sound (line 16), and scratches her head (line 17). Having completed the question in Russian, Risto turns toward the collaborators and translates it into Finnish (lines 20–21), after which he turns to Jelena and once again repeats the question in Finnish (lines 23–24). At this point, Jelena has been asked the same question several times, both in Finnish – the primary language of the one-hour meeting they have conducted – as well as in Russian – her first language – and she has provided no answer. The explicit framing of Jelena as someone "who may not understand everything", as well as her failing to respond to a question, contributes to portraying her as a not-yet-competent speaker.

Compared with the previous extracts, this extract follows a different pattern. First, Jelena is attributed the role of a not-yet-competent speaker without herself indexing this identity and without any language issues discussed in prior talk. A question about problems of understanding is sequentially surprising here, since it emerges "out of the blue" without being related to anything Jelena herself has initiated or a problem in interaction that needs to be resolved. Second, the "language talk" is not framed with contextualisation cues (e.g. laughter, smiles), as is typical in our data. The absence of contextualisation cues contributes to treating Risto's turns as genuine information-seeking questions. From this perspective, the negative polar question (line 11) is challenging: it is rather difficult to say what it is that one has not understood, especially within a long conversation that has come to an end (in this respect, Risto's question differs from an explicit request for confirmation of understanding; see Tranekjaer 2018). Third, the turns that orient to Jelena's limited language skills are addressed to a wider set of participants. In Extracts 1–3, the primary recipient is the participant whose language skills are talked about (Anatoli and Olga). In Extract 4, however, Jelena is not just being asked a question but also being staged for the audience; Risto refers to her in 3rd person (line 9) and verbalises the conversational action he is about to perform ('now I ask you directly since we are all present', line 10). This resembles institutionalised staged performances (Rydell 2018), where language is produced for the overhearing audience. Both the sequentially unexpected location and the formulation of the turn make it

difficult for Jelena to provide an answer. However, Jelena deals with the difficult situation by switching to English and by reversing the question in a positive direction: instead of telling what she did not understand, she tells that she understood 70% (i.e. the majority) of the conversation. At this point, all the participants start laughing. Laughter seems to function as a kind of remedy to the awkwardness of the situation (Haakana 2010; Vöge 2011).

In sum, this extract illustrates an interactional situation in which an employee's language skills are referred to in a way that hinders rather than facilitates her participation in interaction. This is in contrast with the previous cases, where limited language skills were oriented to in a way that created opportunities and supported the second language speaker's participation. It is evident that orienting to deficiencies in someone's competence, such as limited language skills, is a delicate activity, but as shown through the examples, such activity can be either empowering or stigmatising, depending on the sequential environment and the linguistic, prosodic, and embodied practices that are deployed.

5 Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we have discussed instances in professional workplace meetings where another context – that of language learning – has been evoked. More specifically, we have examined how the language learner role is oriented to in workplace interaction and what consequences this topicalisation has for the construction of the L2 speaker's professional identity. Workplace meetings represent institutional interaction; talk here is associated with an inferential framework particular to that organisation, and the meetings are goal-oriented (Drew and Heritage 1992). However, even if the goal of the meetings in our data is not related to language learning, language issues or linguistic asymmetry are made relevant in interaction for various reasons. In the following, we will discuss the features that these instances share.

In our data, language issues or linguistic asymmetry are usually topicalised in relation to practical questions of language choice and the sufficiency of linguistic resources to conduct professional activities. Topicalisation can be done by the second language speaker herself or by her co-participants. Our analysis has shown that self-topicalisation of the learner role (as in Extract 1) can be less problematic than other-topicalisation; if the learner role is topicalised by a co-participant, the situation is more delicate. However, this delicacy can be tackled in several ways. First, the topicalisation may be built on language issues that the

"learner" has introduced in prior talk, so that the learner position is created gradually, as a result of joint action by self and other (as in Extracts 2 and 3). Also, the sequences that involve positioning the co-participant as a language learner are often contextualised as non-serious by means of various cues, such as smiling and laughter. Previous research has shown that both laughter and smiling are used in interactions to handle problematic or delicate activities (see e.g. Glenn and Holt 2013: 15–16; Haakana 2010: 1509). In second language conversation, laughter has been reported to occur in cases that may threaten the second language speaker's status as a competent member of the category of interactants (Kurhila 2006: 150–151). More specifically, in meetings, laughter generated due to orientation to multilingual identities can be considered as a tool to tackle infringements of local social norms (Vöge 2011: 260). Thus, laughter can be seen as one means to deal with the tensions created by the clash of the two institutional roles – namely, a competent professional and a not-yet-competent language learner.

Even though positioning the co-participant as a language learner is a delicate matter in professional interaction, such positioning does not necessarily cause problems for the progress of interaction; rather, it can promote participation and thus offer the speaker an arena to extend the boundaries of her language skills (as in Extract 2). The problems arise if the learner role is imposed on a person without concern for the delicacy of the situation. In those cases, the topicalisation of the learner role may prevent rather than promote participation, as may be seen in Extract 4, where the conversation is halted by the question topicalising the linguistic asymmetry, which is not linked to any prior turns.

In addition to opportunities to participate in interaction, the language learner role and talk about limited linguistic resources are related to the speaker's professional identity. In the analysis, we have shown that by orienting to a speaker's learner position, it is possible to index qualities (e.g. commitment to learn, stress resistance) that can positively contribute to one's professional identity. On the other hand, orienting to the limitations of someone's language skills can shift focus away from their professional competence and can even be experienced as stigmatising. When the speaker is topicalising herself as a (successful) language learner, she has to deal with the risk of self-praise, whereas topicalising others as language learners in workplace meetings runs the risk of treating them as incompetent professionals. Thus, the language learner position can have both positive and negative qualities, and the interactional consequences depend on who topicalises the position and in what way.

Overall, we hope to have shown that even in multilingual transient professional settings, talk about language competences is possible, though not necessarily customary or simple. Despite the challenges, we see it essential to develop ways to talk about linguistic limitations and the ways to overcome them, in order to make sure that people from different backgrounds and with varying language skills are able to participate as effectively as possible. From the point of view of society, flexible linguistic practices in workplaces ensure the participation and exploitation of the linguistic and cultural capital of multicultural employees. From the point of view of an individual, the possibility to learn language even in the work life is crucial, not only because it promotes participation in the individual's current workplace, but also because of her future career prospects and possibilities of becoming a full member of society.

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