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Labour mobility across the Baltic Sea: Language brokering at a blue-collar workplace in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In this case study we investigate the role of transnational networks and language brokering in labour migration within the European Union. By describing the working days of Estonians hired by a city maintenance company in Sweden, we demonstrate how language skills and network ties of a manager enable work migration in the local context. Most of the recruited workers belong to the manager's circle of family and friends. The manager is thus both capitalising on his social relationships and reinforcing a social support network in the receiving country for the individuals involved. The article 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. The data consist of ethnographic observations of daily work routines, video recordings of interaction, and interviews. (Labour migration, multilingualism, manual work, language broker)*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary organisation of work in the global economy leads to an increasingly multilingual working life (Gonçalves & Kelly-Holmes 2020a). Multilingualism is seldom encouraged in itself, but short-term contracts, high levels of mobility, and earning differentials between countries, as argued by Pennycook (2020), place workers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds together. In the European Union, countries have experienced an increase in internal migration from East to West after the enlargement of the union in 2004 when ten new Eastern countries joined (Recchi 2015). The largest proportion find work in the construction industry, manufacturing, tourism (hotels and restaurants), and domestic and cleaning services (Recchi 2015:70), that is, predominantly 'blue-collar' workplaces. Within the EU, migration is made easy by the *free movement of workers* established in its Treaty, which gives EU nationals the right to work in another country. Citizens only need a valid passport to enter another EU state and may start working immediately upon arrival, as local work permits are not mandatory.[1]

Blue-collar workplaces are a growing field of investigation within critical sociolinguistics (Pennycook 2020), often targeting the role of language within the globalised economy (see e.g. Duchêne 2011; Heller & Duchêne 2012), the mobility of workers in insecure and underpaid jobs (see e.g. Hess 2020), and the local management of linguistic and semiotic resources at these workplaces (for recent contributions, see Gonçalves & Kelly-Holmes 2020a). However, we know little about the actual processes and dynamics of the linguistic working life of migrating blue-collar workers within the EU, and the role of language in manual work migration is generally understudied.

In this article, we present an ethnographic case study of a city maintenance company in Sweden, Green Leaves,[2] 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. Situated on opposite sides of the Baltic Sea, the two EU countries Sweden and Estonia have close trade and business contacts. In 2020, about 9,600 Estonians resided permanently in Sweden,[3] and about 15,000 additional Estonian citizens were estimated to work in Sweden (the total Estonian population being 1.3 million) as cross-border commuters, circular migrants, or posted workers (Amelina, Carmel, Runfors, & Scheibelhofer 2019).[4] People from Estonia are most likely to have studied English or Russian at school,[5] and generally do not speak Swedish on arrival. Estonian is a Finno-Ugric language, genetically unrelated to the Indo-European language Swedish.

The study targets the role of a manager at Green Leaves and how his linguistic and social work plays out within the macro-social context of labour migration within the EU. The questions we address are: (i) What is the role of language in work migration at the studied company? and (ii) What are the social relations and potential power asymmetries at stake in the recruitment of Estonians at Green Leaves, and how do they relate to individual linguistic repertoires? We demonstrate how the manager Jaan 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. We also demonstrate that the linguistic repertoire of the broker provides added value to the company, and that the migrating workers do not need the language of the larger society for professional reasons, as long as he is within easy reach. Yet, four out of the six recruited workers at the company belong to Jaan's closest family, which means that he is both their manager and a family member. We discuss how the recruitment from Jaan'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 (see also Pécoud 2010). By doing this, we aim at a holistic understanding of the manager's recruitment practices and the adherent language brokering activities, the asymmetric power relations due to different language skills, as well as the mechanisms of

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social and linguistic scaffolding for family and friends on the European labour market.

The study underlines the need to look into language practices and language management in different contexts, including blue-collar workplaces (Lønsmann & Kraft 2018), where 'workers perform their jobs "backstage" …, not always readily visible, and thus potentially easily forgotten, excluded from academic scrutiny' (Gonçalves 2020:331). Building on investigations of how multilingualism occupies a particular place in the management of labour within the new globalised economy, such as shown in Duchêne's (2011) research of an airport and Kraft's (2017) study of construction sites, the current study targets a sector where manual work is characterised by solitary tasks and loose ties both to the management of the company and other employees, which increases the workers' social vulnerability in the receiving country and makes the role of a language broker all the more relevant. By observing language brokering and the functioning of professional and social ties across national borders, this single case study contributes to the understanding of the interface between language and migration in the understudied and often less problematised settings of blue-collar work.

In the following, we first present what is on the frontline of studies of multilingualism in blue-collar work environments, including theoretical considerations concerning the often transient setting, the language-marginal work, and the recruitment of workers with similar ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Then we present our data and methods before launching into a detailed account of the work at Green Leaves, and how language brokering at the company enables mobility of family and friends on the transnational blue-collar work market.

MOBILITY AND MULTILINGUALISM IN BLUE-COLLAR SETTINGS

The term *blue-collar work* is used here according to Gonçalves & Kelly-Holmes (2020b:2), who define it as working-class labour in sectors such as manufacturing or agriculture, but also temporary low status service work that incorporates some kind of physical labour, often paid by the hour. The maintenance workers in this study are considered blue-collar due to their physically strenuous work tasks (cleaning the streets, emptying rubbish bins, etc.) that do not require special training, are paid by the hour, and are often carried out in noisy environments (when cutting lawns, leaf blowing, laying paving stones, etc.). As a further characteristic of blue-collar work (Pennycook 2020), some of them also wear highly visible safety clothing, which sets them apart from other people in the public spaces in which they perform their tasks.

The key person in our article, the manager Jaan, started his career at the company as a manual worker, but at the time of our study, he has advanced in the hierarchy, and is now responsible for one of the districts in the city and in charge of coordinating a team of twenty-five manual workers. Language has become his primary work

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tool, and he carries out the tasks at his desk at the office or in the car. He is thus no longer a blue-collar worker, but a manger who assigns tasks, checks finished work, and recruits new workers to the company.

Transient and language-marginal jobs

Many modern blue-collar workplaces are characterised by transience (Mortensen 2017) due to short contracts and high levels of mobility. This has several consequences for language use, as work settings, projects, tasks, and team-constellations appear, change, and dissolve. For instance, Hovens (2020) demonstrates that newcomers are believed to be short-lived in the steel industry, and that existing workers therefore lack motivation to support their learning processes. Theodoropoulou (2019) demonstrates that workers with diverse language backgrounds at a construction site in Qatar develop a shared repertoire over time. In our study, some of the Estonian workers are recruited on an hourly basis, some have seasonal contracts, and some have gained permanent positions at the company, including our focus person Jaan. Transience in team structure is thus characteristic of our setting.

A second salient aspect in studies of manual work and multilingualism is that blue-collar work is often considered 'language-marginal' (McAll 2003 in Gonçalves & Kelly-Holmes 2020b). It is based on manual rather than communicative skills, and knowledge of specific languages is seldom considered an added value in recruitment (McLaughlin 2020; Pennycook 2020). Opportunities to acquire a new language while working are usually rare (Piller & Lising 2014), and, likewise, there are few opportunities for migrants to practise the languages of the receiving society during work (Strömmer 2016). Learning the language of the surrounding society is, however, not necessarily a priority for temporary workers (Gonçalves 2020; Sherman & Homoláč 2020), due to, inter alia, short contracts and continued cross-border mobility. From the perspective of the employer, other skills and virtues, such as reliability, aptitude to learn the tasks, and work capacity, may be valued higher than skills in the national language/s (Hess 2020). The theoretical concept *language investment*, as developed by Norton Peirce (1995) and later Darvin & Norton (2021), draws attention to the social nature of language learning and the relevance of personal life trajectories in language learning processes. Drawing on Bourdieu, Darvin & Norton (2017) argue that learners invest in an L2 because they hope that it will provide a wider range of material and symbolic resources that will increase their social power. However, if learners are marginalised, or feel marginalised, at a workplace because of, for instance, their race, gender, ethnicity, or social class, they may not be invested in practising the language in these contexts, even though they are otherwise highly motivated to learn the language (Darvin & Norton 2021).

Earlier studies focusing on language use and investment in blue-collar settings suggest that in order to understand language learning at work, social and contextual aspects need to be considered. In an ethnography of a restaurant kitchen in Austria,

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Gonçalves (2020) demonstrates that migrating workers at the lower end of the socio-economic scale are in a position to resist investment in the local languages, especially when there is shortage of workers. The kitchen is a multilingual workspace and shared material and semiotic resources, in combination with collective social practices, such as an atomised work scheme during busy hours, were considered more important than skills in the local languages. In contrast, other studies of blue-collar work have documented the need for specific linguistic repertoires and, accordingly, language learning at workplaces—for example, McLaughlin's (2020) study of an oil sands company in Canada. The workers consider linguistic skills not at all relevant for their tasks, yet McLaughlin observes that skills in English are necessary for team meetings and safety reports, and the French-speaking workers acquire these at work.

In the analyses below we report on the migrating, manual workers' language use at work and discuss their need—and interest—to learn Swedish. Maintenance and cleaning are generally considered language-marginal jobs, since they involve manual, individual, and low-skilled physical work that does not require much interaction (Strömmer 2016, 2020; Gonçalves & Schluter 2017). The working days in our study are lonely and the tasks require little interaction. Still, several different tasks need to be carried out in the public arena, albeit preferably without attracting attention and without interfering with other activities there. As far as we know, language use at work has not yet been studied in this kind of a setting.

Language brokering and ethnic resources

Several studies that focus on language diversity in blue-collar work environments show that employees with similar ethnolinguistic backgrounds tend to collaborate (Goldstein 1997; Piller & Lising 2014). Supervisors and managers can form culturally homogeneous teams by recruiting through the company's bank of CVs or within their own networks (McLaughlin 2020). Recruitment of employees with a similar ethnolinguistic background is a recurrent, if not universal, characteristic of immigrant economies (Pécoud 2010). *Ethnic resources* are social group features which co-ethnic business owners utilise or from which their businesses passively benefit (Light & Bonacich 1988 in Pécoud 2010). Ethnic resources include values, knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In particular, solidarity is a key business advantage. In addition, as Pécoud (2010) argues, recruiting from a family network leads to other social values, such as shaping a job situation that reconciles family and professional life, or enables children to acquire work experience in the family business. Meinhof (2009) labels the combination and mutual interdependence of social contacts, culturally specific knowledge (from upbringing, education, etc.), and its economic return, *transcultural capital*.

In these kinds of work teams people often speak a different language than the country's official or majority language/s. The workers may rely on a bilingual team leader who mediates information and instructions from superiors, and

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functions as a 'scaffolder' (McLaughlin 2020) or a *language broker* (Handford & Matous 2015), which is the term we use in this article. An early definition of adult language brokering is provided by Tse (1996:485), who states that 'language brokers facilitate communication between two linguistically and/or culturally different parties. Unlike formal interpreters and translators, brokers mediate, rather than merely transmit, information'. Today, there are a number of studies available on language brokering practices at multilingual construction sites (Handford & Matous 2015; Kraft 2017, 2020), where workers are organised in teams with a bilingual team leader who transmits information from the managers to the manual workers. The role of the broker varies according to workplace needs, as also argued by Kraft (2017, 2020). In her study of a multilingual construction site in Norway, brokering practices involved obtaining knowledge, information transfer, and decision-making, but little brokering in the sense of direct interpretation between individuals. Marschan, Welch, & Welch (1997) demonstrate that individuals acting as brokers in organisations become 'informal gatekeepers', who can facilitate communication flows, such as ensuring that critical information reaches the appropriate person, but can also use their position in counter-productive ways, such as filtering, distorting, and even blocking information transmission (c.f. gatekeeping practices at work reported by Holmes 2007). Likewise, Gonçalves & Schluter (2017:255) demonstrate how the manager's language brokering activities at a cleaning company in the US are tied to authority and 'legitimate domination over employees', building on access to linguistic and material resources. Altogether, the broker's language skills are an empowering resource, giving him or her a type of power that goes beyond what their formal position would normally indicate (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch, & Welch 1999).

In the upcoming analyses, we demonstrate how the system with a language broker places the Estonian workers at the company, socially and professionally, in a vulnerable position, due to power asymmetries based on language skills, the type of work, and minimal contact with the receiving society. In addition, we discuss the logic of capitalising on personal trust and close family ties, which are at the same time prioritised in this kind of work migration.

DATA AND METHOD

The studied maintenance company, Green Leaves, is located in a medium-sized city in Sweden. It has contracts with, among others, the local municipality and a regional housing company (which owns 18,000 flats in the city) to take care of the daily maintenance of public spaces. The company also performs related seasonal work tasks, such as clearing leaves or snow from the pavements, cutting grass, planting, watering, and weeding flower beds. The company has about 150 employees spread across five different branches in the country, and we studied the largest one with around 100 employees. In addition, seasonal workers are employed during April–September. Seven Estonians (including Jaan) are permanently employed,

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others are hired for the busy summer months, and still others travel to Sweden for short-term work, based on available tasks and hours.

To understand the daily work and its language practices, we combined various qualitative methods: interviews, video-recordings of working days, and ethnographic observations. We carried out observations over seven days (twenty hours in total), involving meetings at the main office, manual work in the city streets, and two days of Jaan's work at his office desk and in his car. All of the observations were documented with fieldnotes and complemented by 9.5 hours of video recordings.

The fieldwork encompassed all Estonians involved with the company. Most information was obtained from a selection of willing collaborators, and we were able to target persons with different terms of employment: the manager Jaan, three permanent employees from Estonia (Merit, Teivo, and Mait), one seasonal worker commuting between Estonia and Sweden (Vaido), and a team of pavers, hired short-term from Estonia for a specific work task. All Estonians at Green Leaves work in Jaan's team, and they are recruited via his personal network. The family members are: Merit (wife) and Teivo (Merit's brother). Merit's sister and her partner also work at Green Leaves, while Teivo's partner was previously employed there. The latter three individuals are not included in the study. The third permanent employee in the study, Mait, was likewise employed by Jaan. He is not a relative but an acquaintance.

The fieldwork and interviews were documented with GoPro cameras that were easy to carry around in the complex work settings, in and outside vehicles, and during mobile work tasks across longer distances. GoPro cameras are very small, which is a benefit as they attract little attention and can be carried in one hand during filming. The sound quality is satisfactory for documenting ethnographic observations. Besides enabling intermittent interviewing, the continuous recording guaranteed the documentation of any fleeting encounters in the streets, the sense of spatiality, and the embodied nature of the tasks. Rather than being interviewed in their spare time, the workers could carry on with their regular work, which furthermore engendered questions that would not have occurred other than in real work situations. More demanding or noisy work tasks occasionally interrupted our interviews. The interviewer was also able to help out with minor matters, such as providing a hand to hold a rubbish bag. This presumably helped to build rapport for a more relaxed interview. Several interviewees expressed that it was "weird" being shadowed during work but that they ended up having "an interesting day". Recording ceased whenever requested and no information was passed on to managers or authorities. All participants agreed to the collected data being used for research purposes. A semi-structured interview was also carried out with Jaan in his house (with his wife Merit attending parts of the interview), and we asked him additional questions while he was driving between work locations in the city. Last, we had the opportunity to carry out a short interview with the CEO of Green Leaves, in which he told us about, among other things, the company's official requirements

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regarding employees' language skills. The interviews and observations involving Jaan and the senior manager were done in Swedish, while Estonian was used on all other occasions.

In the interviews we aimed to discover participants' professional (and personal) life trajectories, with a special focus on their linguistic repertoires and language use at work. We asked about their motivations behind and experiences of migration, living and working in Sweden, including earlier jobs and work tasks, as well as about what family and professional networks they were part of. They also described their work arrangements at Green Leaves.

Linguistic studies that include ethnography have an interest in what individuals say and do in specific real-life contexts. Language use, in the form of interaction and texts, is considered within the larger social and cultural context (Creese 2010). We therefore analysed the fieldnotes, recordings, and interviews, looking for details on how different languages are managed at the company as well as within the Estonian enclave. The study uses inductive methods, as we started with the observations and interviews, and only later identified theories in the sociolinguistic framework that would illuminate the data. In particular, we discovered Jaan's intricate language brokering activities, their inherent basis in mutual trust, and the power asymmetries in the group arising due to access to different linguistic resources.

ORGANISATION OF WORK AT GREEN LEAVES AND THE RELATED LINGUISTIC PRACTICES

We now begin to describe and analyse the work arrangements of all of the Estonians, the related language use, and the workers' linguistic repertoires. After a summary of Jaan's work as a manager and language broker at Green Leaves, we first report from the permanently employed workers Merit, Teivo, and Mait, and then from the temporarily employed workers: the seasonal worker, Vaido, and the short-term team of Estonian pavers.

The manager and language broker Jaan

At the time of our fieldwork, Jaan was in his mid-thirties and had been living in Sweden for ten to twelve years. He was born in Estonia and first came to Sweden as a teenager for seasonal work on a farm. A friend from the farm later founded Green Leaves and invited Jaan to work for him. Jaan speaks Estonian and Swedish at work, varying the language depending on the interlocutor. He had already acquired Swedish at the farm, without participating in formal language classes. He reports that his linguistic repertoire also includes Russian and English, although he claims his English knowledge to be poor.

Jaan's work. Being in charge of a team of workers, Jaan plans what needs to be done, assigns work tasks within the team, and checks the results. He single-

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handedly mediates the tasks from the clients (mostly the municipality and the housing company) to his team, makes decisions about smaller assignments himself, and negotiates larger projects with higher-level managers. He can take up to 100 phone calls a day concerning upcoming tasks and matters to be fixed immediately (such as fallen trees or broken traffic signs). He can hire subcontractors when necessary, and occasionally obtains extra work orders from the clients. These extra tasks are lucrative for the company, and his quick responsiveness to the variety of needs that constantly surface in public spaces is an asset, as it brings new tasks and profit to the company while it also allows him to hire more workers from his network (see the section *Temporary workers commuting from Estonia* for a detailed account).

All Estonians at Green Leaves are recruited via Jaan. Regarding recruitment procedures, he claims to value Estonian workers specially for their work ethic, arguing that they would "not put down their tools at four o'clock to pick up kids from daycare like the Swedes do". Thus, he positions Estonians as a group of flexible workers, whom he is happy to hire. Flexibility is generally considered a key quality of migrating workers in the manual work sector (Gonçalves & Schluter 2017; Rolfe 2017). Heller & Duchêne (2012:9) even consider *flexibilisation* as one of five processes characterising late capitalism. The growing and increasingly integrated markets place distinct requirements on the workers, who need to quickly shift sites, work hours, or modes of work. Jaan's categorisation of the workers as "Estonians" could also indicate ties of solidarity often discussed within the framework of *ethnic economies* (see Pécour 2010). Interestingly, nationality and work ethic are what he focuses on when talking about his employees with us, rather than the family ties or friendships that also exist. The family ties are mentioned when we first meet Jaan for an interview (see extract (1)), but always in relation to the relatives' type of employment.

(1) Interview with Jaan (translated from Swedish)

Jaan: The permanent Estonians working here, most of them are actually relatives. I came first, then Merit, and then her brother. Then came her sister's husband who is an excavator operator and then her sister.

Jaan regularly makes a distinction between the permanent employees and short-term workers. The permanent employees, who are all family or friends, are usually referred to by their first names. Similarly, the employee, and also brother-in-law, Teivo, uses Jaan's first name in the interview, but replaces this with "the boss" (extract (2)) when telling us how the work tasks are assigned. Commenting on the information flow through Jaan, his wife Merit states that she is "just a worker" (extract (3)).

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(2) Interview with Teivo (translated from Estonian), on how he gets hold of materials

Teivo: Certain things I simply tell Jaan, I mean the boss. It is his job to order the stuff from somewhere.

(3) Interview with Merit (translated from Estonian), on her professional status

Merit: I am just a worker. (In response to the interviewer describing the information flow at the company as always moving via Jaan.)

In this way, professional ties are fronted by the participants themselves, while family ties are backgrounded. Also, the quotes underline the separation of manual tasks from ones that necessitate interaction with the local community, handled by Jaan.

Jaan as the language broker. Green Leaves has no official language policy, but one of the clients demands that all employees working at their properties should be able to "read, understand, and speak Swedish", arguing that interaction in Swedish between residents and cleaners must be possible. The CEO at Green Leaves informs us that they cannot employ people who do not speak Swedish, with no exceptions. However, in practice, Jaan does hire Estonians with low or no skills in Swedish from his transnational network, even though he is aware of the requirements (extract (4)).

(4) Interview with Jaan (translated from Swedish)

Jaan: When we meet at work, we speak Estonian. Some people have jokingly pointed out that we should talk Swedish more often, so that everybody would understand. This is not to be mean to us, but actually, there is a requirement that if you work in Sweden you should know Swedish. It will be easier if you know the language so I've said that those who come here must learn to speak Swedish as quickly as possible.

According to the interview, then, some people at the company have objected to the use of Estonian at work. Jaan frames the objections as a friendly joke, but also positions himself as a responsible manager, acknowledging that competence in Swedish actually is required and useful, although not with reference to Green Leaves' requirements in particular.

In practice, our observations show that most of the Estonians are exclusively in contact with Jaan, and Estonian is the language on all of these occasions: in face-to-face interaction, over the phone, and in text messaging. One-to-one interaction seems to be most common, as the manual workers are spread out across the city during working days. Jaan explains (extract (5)) that many work tasks are performed in isolated spaces, often during the early hours, and therefore the individuals in his team do not speak to other people during work hours.

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Further, he arranges the tasks of the seasonal workers in such a way that no one else needs to come into contact with them. The individuals are thus isolated due to the type of work, but also due to Jaan's work arrangements.

(5) Interview with Jaan (translated from Swedish)

Jaan: And the permanent employees, like Mait, his task is to drive a small machine. He starts earlier than everybody else, around six o'clock, and ensures that the city is clean. So he doesn't come into contact with the Swedes … doesn't talk to many at all and if he needs something he just asks me.

Jaan: During the summer months I assign people who work for a month or so and then go back to Estonia. … I myself distribute all the tasks to them so no one else comes into contact with them. I show them places and where to buy materials … everything they need for completing the task.

Accordingly, we observe Jaan transferring (and adjusting) instructions from clients to the workers, receiving them in Swedish and passing them on in Estonian. Thus, in daily professional routines, Jaan functions as a language broker for the Estonian enclave, a person who facilitates communication between two linguistically and/or culturally different parties (cf. Tse 1996). He is also the Estonians' primary contact at the company, as he organises their work and provides the necessary tools and materials. In order to further scrutinise his brokering activities, we now turn to the different categories of workers involved.

Permanent employees from Estonia

We first report on the professional trajectories, work tasks, and language use from the perspective of three permanently employed Estonians: Merit (Jaan's wife), Teivo (Jaan's brother-in-law), and Mait (acquainted with Jaan).

Professional trajectories and linguistic skills. Merit came to Sweden a few years after her husband Jaan and started to do different cleaning jobs for Green Leaves. According to her brother Teivo, Jaan was the one who convinced him to also come to work at the company, and he accepted since he "didn't have much else going on at that time in his life" in Estonia. Mait, in turn, got the information about the job from his aunt who lives close to the Swedish city, and also knows Jaan. He took the job just for money, as it pays three times more than his previous one in Estonia. He doesn't particularly like it, but "a job is for money, right? Not for a hobby", as he tells us in the interview. Merit is in her mid-thirties, while Teivo and Mait are in their mid-twenties, thus all with the potential of still establishing longer careers in the receiving country.

Regarding linguistic repertoires, Merit, Teivo, and Mait all self-report skills in Estonian, English, Russian and, to a varying degree, Swedish. They all speak Estonian as their first language and learned English and Russian as foreign languages at

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school. Merit says that her English skills are poor, which made the acquisition of Swedish a more urgent concern for her. As Jaan was working full time, she was able to focus entirely on learning the language. Teivo estimates that he speaks English quite well after a lot of computer gaming, and Mait reports that he worked at a petrol station in Estonia where English was used. Mait also understands some Finnish and claims, just like Teivo, to have insufficient knowledge of Swedish. All three of them have been enrolled in language classes, and Teivo still takes two-hour evening lessons twice a week, although he doesn't find them very effective, after his working days that begin before 5 o'clock in the morning. Mait, by contrast, has quit the courses, claiming to be too tired after full working days. When talking about language classes, Teivo also refers to his partner, who was previously employed at Green Leaves but has now changed professions in Sweden. Like Merit, she had the opportunity to take intensive all-day Swedish classes while Teivo was working, which he considers the key for language learning. It thus seems that the females in particular have profited from family employment at Green Leaves in terms of opportunities for language learning, as they did not have to combine long working days with formal language training.

Merit reports that she had no difficulties signing the contract in Swedish (although she is unable to tell us whether she is permanently employed) and Mait reports that he signed a contract in Swedish with Jaan's assistance. Teivo, in turn, says that the contract was so straightforward that he understood it well: name, dates, salary, and so on. None of them had a job interview and Jaan helped them to register with the Swedish Tax Agency.

Work tasks and languages. The manual work at Green Leaves varies over the seasons, and we report from the autumn. Merit gets all her assignments from Jaan, either on the very same morning or with a few days' notice. We observe her when cleaning a city playground, defining its boundaries with the help of a paper map from the municipality. She is the only one who is coupled with a person who does not speak Estonian, but Polish. They discuss work tasks in Swedish and even chat in Swedish over breakfast. Teivo's task, in turn, is to sweep the city centre every morning. He would prefer starting work earlier than 5.30 to avoid people but is not allowed to do so because of the excessive noise from the machine. After three years at the company, he knows which parts of the city need most cleaning and where people are most likely to first appear, and he can plan his work trajectory accordingly. During our observation of Teivo on a Friday morning he only interacts verbally with Jaan who calls him about an accident that needs to be cleaned up, while he just waves to greet fellow cleaners in a passing street sweeper. Most assignments come from Jaan, usually via his mobile phone in the form of an address together with pictures illustrating what needs to be fixed. The practice of texting (and not posting the observations on the company's shared platform for work tasks) establishes Jaan's control over

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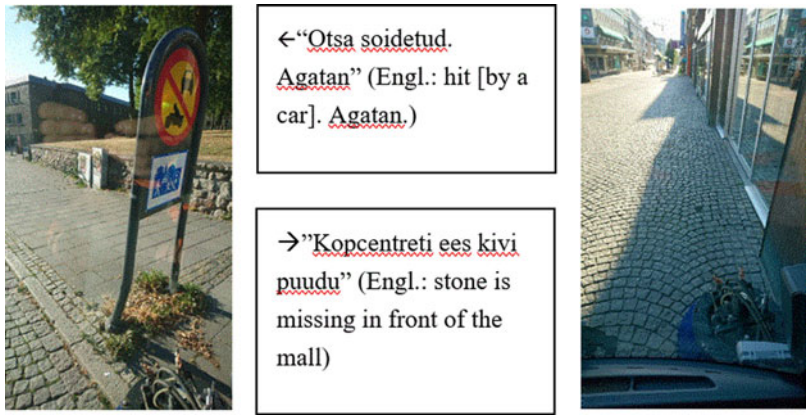

FIGURE 1. Pictures and additional text messages from Teivo to Jaan in Estonian. Our translations added in English.

the work flow and his team, and makes it possible to exclusively conduct their business in Estonian. Addresses and maps need to be handled in Swedish, though.

Teivo may report occasional early morning issues that he spots in the city, such as shattered windows, directly to the police—in English. We observe that he speaks Swedish when a colleague calls for help, and he reports that the Swedish supervisors initially sent information (text messages) to him in English, but switched to Swedish after he began replying with some standard Swedish phrases. If Teivo sees something less urgent that needs to be fixed (a broken street sign, damaged pavements) he takes a picture with his mobile phone and sends it to Jaan, often with an address attached, and sometimes with a short explanation, as illustrated in Figure 1. They always use Estonian with each other in the text messages too. The address and location are written in Swedish, albeit slightly misspelled (Ågatan is written as Agatan and Köpcentret as Kopcentret).

Mait's work tasks are complementary to Teivo's. He needs to empty rubbish bins in the city centre, blow garbage to the middle of the pavement so that the sweeper can reach it, and collect litter around bus stops and from rubbish bins (see Figure 2). He works somewhat later hours (06.00–14.30) and reports them on the human resources platform, as do Merit and Teivo. Since the platform mostly uses hours and dates, language is never an issue. Mait too faces very little actual interaction during his work hours, apart from contacts with Jaan, in Estonian. He might call Teivo for coordination issues or Jaan for spotted problems or necessary purchases (see also extract (2)). For smaller purchases, however, the workers can go to specialty retail stores and use the company code without more demanding verbal exchanges. Mait says that most of the days he does not talk to anyone. He waves to Teivo in his vehicle, to colleagues driving by, and to people from other companies working with similar tasks.

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FIGURE 2. Pictures of daily work tasks at Green Leaves.

There are workplace meetings which the workers are obliged to attend, and we observe one of them. Teivo admits difficulties in comprehending the CEO who presents financial results but claims to have understood another Swedish manager who talks about work procedures. Mait says that he "did not get much" of the meeting, but that Jaan will inform him afterwards (in Estonian), which we also observed in the corridor. Mait thus demonstrates a 'no-problem attitude' towards his lacking language skills, but from an observer's perspective the meeting is a disempowering situation, as he cannot be an active participant. Other potential meeting spots between colleagues at the company are the lunchroom at the main office (with free coffee and breakfast) and additional lunchrooms in the city. Merit, Teivo, and Mait seldom go there. They claim not to take any breaks that involve a long ride to the head office on the outskirts of the city, and instead prefer to get the job done quickly. Teivo and Mait avoid social gatherings, including informal barbecue parties, partly due to an experienced linguistic gap between themselves and the rest of the employees. The following exchange with Mait (extract (6)) underlines this point.

(6) Interview with Mait (translated from Estonian)

Interviewer:	You don't have breakfast at the head office?
Mait:	No.
	(– – –) I went there a couple of times at the beginning.
Interviewer:	But you didn't like it?
Mait:	I wouldn't say that. It is just strange to be there without being able to talk to anybody about anything.

Merit, who is married to Jaan, however, says that she quite likes the parties, and they seem to be popular among the Swedish-speaking staff. None of the three permanent employees report any contact with the seasonal workers.

In summary, the Estonian workers, even though more or less permanently settled in Sweden, effectively lead their work lives separately from other parts of the company, with crucial information flowing in Estonian or mediated through charts, pictures, maps, and addresses that require very little Swedish skills. Due

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to the early work hours, attending evening language classes is problematic for the workers. The members of the same extended family form a group of mutual social support that functions in Estonian, and the foundation of their work arrangements is trust in the manager Jaan who provided them permanent access to the Swedish job market and continually scaffolds their activities at the company.

Temporary workers commuting from Estonia

The seasonal workers at Green Leaves commute between countries and workplaces. They experience either entirely transient or semistable work communities (see Mortensen 2017) and, as noted above, language brokering is common in this type of context (Handford & Matous 2015; Kraft 2017). This is also what we can observe regarding the temporary workers, for whom Jaan combines the roles of recruiter, manager, facilitator, and language broker.

Seasonal worker Vaido. We interviewed a seasonal worker, Vaido, and recorded half a day of his work and a conversation with Jaan. Self-employed Vaido came to Sweden in April and will work for the company until the end of September. He normally stays three weeks at a time, and then spends one week at home in Estonia with his wife and children. He works up to ten hours a day, every day of the week, and says that he prefers such long days to earn more money. This is his first summer at Green Leaves, but he has held temporary jobs in the construction sector in Finland for many years and worked at a Swedish construction site the year before. The Estonian manager at that site is a friend of Jaan's, and he was therefore recruited to Green Leaves without a job interview, apparently through an informal recommendation procedure. He explains (extract (7)) that Jaan can pick the people he wants, confirming our impression of Jaan as the door-opener and gatekeeper for all Estonians at Green Leaves.

(7) Interview with Vaido (translated from Estonian)

Vaido: This is Jaan's job, he is like the boss of the place, where all the Estonians work. This is his team, you see. He can choose from where to pick his men.

Vaido gets all of his assignments from Jaan in Estonian and works independently, cutting lawns, trimming grass, occasionally picking litter and leaf blowing. He works alone and says that the job is lonely, as he never socialises with other workers at Green Leaves, although he sometimes speaks to the Polish person at the company in Russian, which is a language that he learned at school in Estonia. He claims to speak Finnish well, and English reasonably well, but no Swedish. He has not been enrolled on language courses, which he, similar to Teivo and Mait, explains by citing the difficulties in taking courses after long and tiring working days (extract (8)).

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(8) Interview with Vaido (translated from Estonian)

Vaido: I was offered a language class. It was last year [when working for another company in Sweden], paid for by the company. At that time I said no. I was at work basically the whole day, every day, then at night you are supposed to attend the course. Actually, you cannot take it in, you see, when you are tired.

He is not invited to meetings at Green Leaves and says he would not understand the language anyway. Jaan regularly visits him at the workspaces, giving him instructions and checking finished work.

Pavers recruited on an hourly basis. During our observations at Green Leaves Jaan hires additional workers from Estonia, as a new task suddenly appears. The matter begins with a phone call from another maintenance service company mentioning that a street needs to be re-paved following sewer pipe repairs. The representative apparently already knew that Jaan was planning to bring in pavers for other work tasks. He tells Jaan to go directly to the spot and see if the job is still available, which appears to be the case. In the car back to the office, not wasting any time, Jaan makes a call to his Estonian friend, who also recommended Vaido, and asks if the pavers he knew could come from Estonia to pave the street and carry out some other work tasks. We are not allowed to record the call (which takes place in Estonian, a language the observing researcher does not understand), but afterwards Jaan explains: "They will be on the boat [from Estonia] tomorrow". Back at the office he sends a quotation to the municipality, specifying the costs for re-setting the paving stones, and confirms to his friend that the Estonian pavers can start preparing for their journey.

The four pavers work in the city for a couple of weeks, staying at a nearby hostel, and flexibly decide the extension of their stay as tasks emerge. According to Jaan they are in Sweden only for the work and "don't care what country they are in". They are employed by an Estonian company, run by Jaan's friend, who handles their contracts and at least one of them has worked in Sweden before. Jaan meets them at every location to show them what needs to be done. They brought the machinery along from Estonia but also use some equipment owned by Green Leaves, possibly because one of their own machines broke down. When returning the equipment to Green Leaves, apparently their only contact with the rest of the company, we observe them exclusively speaking Estonian. We get a chance for a brief chat with them while they take a break from the pavement job. As might be guessed, they report no use of Swedish. Their contact with locals is limited to passers-by asking questions or commenting on the obstacles to free movement. They may also receive official complaints via Jaan.

The case illustrates how Jaan's quick responsiveness to assignments in the city together with his personal extended network in Estonia is an asset to the company,

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as he can push hours up and down in relation to business needs. It brings new tasks and profit to Green Leaves, but he also explains that he is looking for more assignments in order to offer longer hours to the temporary workers during their time in Sweden. Jaan is thus not only capitalising on his network ties, but also supporting those by opening doors to the Swedish job market and facilitating the temporary workers' tasks in the country. The temporary workforce is completely separated from the larger company, relying entirely on Jaan's association with it.

DISCUSSION

The role of the manager at Green Leaves should be considered within the macro-social system of work migration within the EU. The situation is characterised by considerable wage differentials between Sweden and Estonia, the steady demand for short-term labour at the company, and the isolated and language-marginal work tasks of the migrating workers. The last circumstance implies that the migrating Estonians can work without any Swedish (or English) skills, as long as the broker is within reach. In this section, we discuss the role of language, power relations, and linguistic capital that emerge in the above work arrangements.

Power asymmetries and a social support network

The local context of Green Leaves is characterised by the socially and professionally complex relationship between the manager and the employees from Estonia: Jaan is both a manager (and, for example, responsible to superiors for recruitment in his team) and a husband, brother-in-law, friend, and so on of the recruited workers. These social relations have similarities to those in immigrant entrepreneurship, as for example, discussed by Pécoud (2010): Jaan recruits individuals he can depend on and rely on from his transnational network of family and friends. The arrangement helps him push hours up and down in relation to business needs at the company, while his professional and social network in Sweden is growing. Likewise, the arrangement is economically beneficial for the migrating individuals, due to considerable wage differences between the two countries. The recruitment and its attendant brokering practices could thus be considered a form of social support of family and friends on the European labour market, as Jaan provides them access to the Swedish job market and continually scaffolds their activities at the company. He is both capitalising on social relationships and creating a social support network in the receiving country for everybody involved.

Earlier studies of language brokering demonstrate that certain power relations are created and re-created in the daily work activities, based on unequal distribution of linguistic resources (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999; Gonçalves & Schluter 2017; Kraft 2017). This is also the case at Green Leaves: the brokering activities maintain asymmetrical relations of power and grant Jaan a certain level of control. The relevant language skills empower him as a manager, more so than his formal

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organisational position would indicate. The power differences are arguably most visible in the contract signing procedures, as the Estonian workers do not fully understand the content and must therefore place immense trust in Jaan and the company, particularly regarding their rights, working hours, and salaries. Jaan is thus not only a door-opener for his extended family and friends, but also a gatekeeper (Holmes 2007); he facilitates their hiring process and daily work arrangements, but is also in charge of their future work opportunities. From the perspective of the company this creates a person-bound shadow structure of the type discussed by Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999), in which the formal organisation is treated as less important by the individuals involved.

Apart from providing communicative advantages when fulfilling work tasks, language regularly mediates access to important sites of social inclusion. Networks of interaction at work rely on language skills and the sense of belonging is negotiated through language (Holm, O'Rourke, & Danson 2020). We can see how some channels are closed for the Estonians without skills in Swedish. For instance, Mait reports that he avoids social gatherings due to linguistic barriers. Furthermore, learning Swedish could improve the workers' opportunities for upward mobility in the company, as is evident in Jaan's career path. This would also enable mobility on the wider labour market of the host country, which generally requires some degree of proficiency in the state's official or majority language(s), possibly in addition to English (Duchêne 2011; Piller & Lising 2014; Holm et al. 2020). Language learning is therefore a relevant theme for understanding power relations at the studied company. As Gonçalves (2020) has demonstrated, though, self-improvement through acquiring language skills is not necessarily relevant in blue-collar settings. In our study, this is true for the seasonal worker Vaido and the pavers. They are isolated from the rest of the company and can resist participating in language courses, as they do not know which country they will be working in next. This attitude is, however, problematic for the permanently employed Estonians at Green Leaves as they are actually required to learn Swedish. Mait and Teivo have both been enrolled in language courses, but they report difficulties attending them due to lack of energy after the physically demanding working days. Also, investing in language learning at work is difficult for them, partly due to isolated and language-marginal work tasks, but also due to the continual brokering activities of Jaan, which lessen the workers' opportunities to practice Swedish at work. The power relations due to language that we see in this type of blue-collar workplace thus seem to be difficult to reconcile with language courses or language investment at work, and the issue of access to language learning opportunities is highly relevant for understanding power relations in mobile blue-collar settings in general.

Estonian as capital in work migration

Interestingly, it is not English (a well-spread lingua franca) that constitutes the main linguistic capital in our case study. Jaan's competence in the language of the local

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society (Swedish) on the one hand, and the language of the workforce (Estonian) on the other is a local form of symbolic capital that generates economic benefits for himself as well as the company. The value of Estonian can be explained by a combination of local circumstances and the macro-social context of work migration within the EU. From one perspective, there is Jaan's position as a manager at Green Leaves and his specific linguistic repertoire in combination with seasonal and language-marginal work. From another perspective, there is the Free Movement Principle and the salary differentials between the two countries. Accordingly, skills in other geographically close Eastern European languages, such as Lithuanian or Polish, would not provide the same value for migrating individuals in the local context of Green Leaves, while they might well do so in other similar situations. More generally, this implies that a particular linguistic repertoire can be used to gain value due to combinations of local circumstances and the macro-social structures that make work migration advantageous. Obviously, the values are in flux depending on the context and the historical point in time. Still, this finding problematises literature that advocates English as the constant dominant global language for economic and social mobility. Similarly, Gonçalves & Schluter (2017) show that Portuguese carries most symbolic and material value in a US-based cleaning company, despite its unofficial status in the country. We are hereby accumulating proof that these situations are far from unique in the globalised world and demand attention to be paid to both economic and sociolinguistic causes. Our case illustrates that the sociolinguistic value of a code is always locally negotiated (Canagarajah 2013). At Green Leaves, this value builds on the linguistic brokering work by one person and high levels of mutual trust between him, the various categories of workers and individuals, and crucially also, the employer.

CONCLUSION

In this article we studied the role of language in the broader context of workforce mobility between two economically unequal and linguistically different EU countries. We presented a case study of a Swedish company that hires Estonian workers and demonstrated that the system plays to the economic interests of all the involved parties: the workers, the manager Jaan, and the company. By addressing the role of language and social relations as well as potential power-asymmetries related to language skills, we demonstrated how brokering activities are central for this type of work migration within the EU, and how an individual such as Jaan, with competence in the languages involved, becomes a crucial and powerful node in the system.

The study highlights the importance of research into different kinds of workplaces, if we want to understand the relationship between language and mobility in contemporary work life, not least in the settings of manual and low-skilled work that tends to be excluded from academic scrutiny. The study demonstrates how a language with relatively few speakers, Estonian, can enjoy symbolic power in a foreign job market due to a combination of macro-social factors and local

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circumstances, centrally maintained by the manager Jaan. This is a nice example of what Gonçalves & Kelly-Holmes (2020b) call the *currency of language* and the positions, practices, and values (or lack thereof) a particular language has for particular speakers in a given society. Notably, it is Estonian and not English, as the constant dominant global language for economic and social mobility, that is used to gain value in this very context.

The inherent power asymmetries of language brokering are salient in the studied case, as the brokering system renders individuals different social and professional positions in the particular company as well as within the EU single labour market more generally. Language functions as both a barrier and a facilitator to social interaction, and we observe how the manager, who possesses the relevant language competences, is in a more powerful position than would normally be the case for middle managers, as he is, for instance, involved in contract signing by the Estonians. The manager is a gatekeeper, with power to filter and even block information, should he want to. At the same time, the value of a network of familial support in a foreign country cannot be underestimated. We demonstrated how the recruitment patterns and attendant brokering activities facilitate the individuals' entrance to the Swedish job market and help them manage working life in a new country. Language brokering in the context of the studied company is therefore Janus-faced. The brokering practices maintain power relations between Jaan, the recruited Estonians, and other employees at the company, creating the type of 'shadow structures' discussed by Marschan-Piekkari et al. (1999). Yet, they also constitute a key for the transnational recruitment of family and friends, facilitating their working life abroad and enabling a continual scaffolding of individuals with low skills in the language/s of the receiving country.

NOTES

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[1]However, workers temporarily sent abroad by their employers (posted workers) need to acquire a specific permit.

[2]Invented name to guarantee anonymity.

[3]See www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se; accessed May 21, 2020.

[4]When it comes to cross-border work for Estonians, however, Finland is the largest country of destination (Krusell 2013).

[5]The Estonian national curriculum prescribes the teaching of at least one foreign language: English, Russian, French, or German. A second foreign language is generally selected, plus Finnish. The middle-aged workforce has had compulsory Russian at school, while the younger workers have more experience with English.

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