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The dark side of multilingualism at work: Language "factories" and the Taylorization of linguistic resources

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The aim of this paper is to question the emergence of multilingualism as a central working tool within the new globalized economy and to highlight the consequences of increased multilingual language-based work activities on language ideologies and the hierarchization of speakers of different languages. Drawing on an ethnographic study of workplaces and enterprises of the new economy in Switzerland, I'll focus on two specific issues that correlate with the transformation of the very nature of work itself and of the correlated economicization of linguistic diversity. First, I will draw attention to how multilingualism becomes a central instrument for the economic rationalization and management of work, especially in the growing service sector, and a key criterion in recruitment processes. Second, I will illustrate how enterprises capitalize on the linguistic resources of their workers as a means of productivity. Both analyses lead us to the argument that, instead of being vilified, quite on the contrary, multilingualism becomes commodified, under certain conditions, for the sake of the enterprise rather than its workers. In fact, the economic exploitation of multilingualism and the taylorization of work processes reify existing social inequalities and language ideologies. Language competencies are thus constructed as a natural instrument of work, hence, purely utilitarian and banalized. This rationalization tends to exclude the producers of language resources of any added value (e.g. salary increases). At the same time, language competencies become a central qualification for such employment, often lowly paid, and as such a clear instrument of selection. Concluding, I argue that contemporary studies on multilingualism should take more critically into account the emerging investment in language from certain (dominant) economic sectors, in order to contribute to the understanding of the ways in which monolingualism AND multilingualism are terrains on which social inequalities are produced and reproduced nowadays.

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