

Language work in the internet café

A locutorio shop front in Barcelona (Source: El Periodico)

There is now a well-established body of work exploring the language work provided by service workers in call centres and tourist businesses. By contrast, the multilingual language work provided by migrants for migrants in multiethnic service enterprises has rarely been the focus of sociolinguistic attention. A recent book by [Maria Sabaté i Dalmau](#), *Migrant Communication Enterprises published by Multilingual Matters*, fills this gap with an ethnographic inquiry into the language practices in a *locutorio*, a call shop, in Barcelona. A *locutorio* offers all kinds of telecommunication services such as billed calls in booths, the sale of top-ups for mobiles, fax services, internet access and international money transfers.

The *locutorio* the research is based on also served as meeting point for working class Spaniards and migrants, both documented and undocumented, from a variety of countries of origin. Beyond the sale of telecommunication services, the *locutorio* thus provided access to information, a place to hang out and it even served as the 'public' toilet for homeless people in the neighbourhood, mostly undocumented men from West Africa.

The *locutorio* was part of a chain of similar call shops owned by a Pakistani venture capitalist whose aim was to make a profit rather than provide social services for Barcelona's marginalized. It was his employee Naeem, who was in charge of running the *locutorio*, who ended up caught between more than one rock and more than one hard place. Naeem was a fellow Pakistani hired by the owner in Pakistan two years before the fieldwork began. Naeem's position was legal as a temporary resident but in order to achieve permanent residency in Spain he needed another two years of proven work, which left him vulnerable to exploitation by the owner. He worked twelve hours per day, seven days a week, for a meagre salary of less than Euro 800 per month. Naeem's job consisted of opening the *locutorio* in the morning and closing it at night. He would start with booting up the computers and getting all the equipment to run. During the day, his duties consisted of assisting and charging customers, and making various phone calls (to his boss; to call card distributors; to the money transfer agency etc.). Additionally, he was in charge of maintaining the premises, including sweeping the floors, removing garbage and cleaning the toilets.

Much of this work is obviously language work and Naeem had to operate in a complex sociolinguistic environment. In addition to a range of varieties of Spanish – from Standard Peninsular Spanish via various Latin American varieties to a range of second language varieties – this included Catalan, English, Urdu, Punjabi, and Moroccan Arabic in various spoken and written constellations and used by clients with variable levels of proficiencies, including proficiencies in the use of telecommunication services. In this highly diverse environment, communication was rigidly regimented by the meters on the machine where communication was paid for by the minute.

Unsurprisingly, misunderstandings and communication break-downs were common. On top of all that, Naeem had to deal with customers who tried to cheat him (the balance of each financial irregularity was deducted from his meagre salary) and who abused and insulted him. Working in a highly constrained yet super-diverse environment left little room for personal autonomy and, only in his late twenties, Naeem was suffering from eating disorders, compulsive smoking, chronic fatigue and anxiety attacks.

The researcher concludes that *locutorio* language workers constitute “a voiceless army of multilingual mediators” (p. 170) whose multilingualism is not only a site of language work but also a site of linguistic exploitation.

[Migrant Communication Enterprises](#) offers a rich migrant-centred ethnographic account of a prototypical enterprise of the 21st century. If this blog post has piqued your interest and this is your area of research expertise, you might want to review the book for [Multilingua](#). If so, [please get in touch with a short description of your expertise](#).



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Maria Sabaté i Dalmau (2014). Migrant Communication Enterprises: Regimentation and Resistance
Multilingual Matters