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Employee discourse: tensions between the use of English and multilingual exchanges in daily work activities.

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Employee discourse: tensions between the use of English and multilingual exchanges in daily work activities.

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Abstract

A number of European projects – ELAN (2006), Dylan (2006-2011), CELAN (2011-2013) – have confirmed the importance of multilingualism in the workplace. They provide evidence that a multilingual environment increases the diversity and the quality of projects, while monolingualism can mean a loss of markets. Since the '80s, English as a lingua franca (ELF) has been accepted as the international business language. Although English is not considered a threat to multilingualism (House, 2002, 2003), tensions exist between these two forms of communication: ELF and multilingualism. In this paper, I present an analysis of Airbus employee interviews using argument formulas (Anscombe, Ducrot, 1983). The initial analysis of what is said before and after the connector “but/pero/aber/mais” within interviews in four languages indicates tensions between the use of English and multilingual exchanges in daily work activities. The combination of “enunciation frames” (Charolles, 1997) and the role of personal pronouns (Benveniste, 1974) shows that the employees adapt their communication according to workplace structures: they tend to use English at an executive or a departmental level, while at team and face-to-face levels their communication benefits from multilingual skills.

Keywords: Language policy, Workplace, Multilingualism, Discourse analysis, Argumentation

1 Introduction

Throughout Europe, organisations and businesses are being confronted with the effects of an extreme work rationalisation, a trivialisation of their strategies and discourse as well as a loss of specific cultures, resulting in the current situation, which fluctuates between “all English” and more diversified language practices.

A number of European projects – ELAN (2006), Dylan (2006-2011), CELAN (2011-2013) – have confirmed the importance of multilingualism in the workplace. They provide evidence that a multilingual environment increases the diversity and the quality of projects, while monolingualism can mean a loss of markets. Economics professors François Grin and François Vaillancourt (1997) have also demonstrated that managers earn higher salaries when they are multilingual. At the same time, 80% of the communication in English in European workplaces is between non-native speakers (Kankaanranta, 2008). Indeed, English as a lingua franca (ELF) has been accepted as the international business language since the '80s. Although English is not considered a threat to multilingualism (House, 2002, 2003), tensions exist between these two forms of communication: ELF and multilingualism.

In this paper, I present an analysis of Airbus employee interviews using argument formulas (Anscombe, Ducrot, 1983). This institution has multilingual characteristics, including the use of English as a lingua franca, regular communication with sites in Spanish-speaking areas as well as

courses for employees in English, French, German and Spanish. My aim is to identify the factors involved when employees switch languages during professional tasks in the workplace.

After a brief presentation of our research field and the methodology of the interviews conducted with Airbus employees, I shall proceed to an analysis of discourse in the workplace focusing on the discourse before and after the connector “but/pero/aber/mais”. Finally I will consider the factors that trigger the switch from one language into another.

2 An officially monolingual language policy

The aeronautical corporation employs approximately 55,000 people throughout several European countries, its two most important sites being located in Germany and France and home to 12,000 employees each (Barberi, 2008)¹. The sole working language is English, as indicated in the company’s internal document “Reference Language”²:

“The Airbus language is English using the aeronautical terminology in common use, i.e. the American aeronautical terminology.” (Reference Language, 2003:5)

In 1998, the aeronautical corporation commissioned a document to standardise the terminology, syntax and acronyms for computer programmes on a project. It was entitled “Controlled language”. Its objective was to achieve an optimal level of quality of the work carried out:

“Throughout this innovative linguistic project, [the company] proves to be aware of the constant need to enhance safety.” (Spaggiari, Beaujard & Cannesson, 2005:1)

Uniformity is a fundamental strategy to ensure the smooth functioning of processes between sites. Within the multinational company, certain internal regulations specify that employees “shall speak English”. The company issues all its official reports and documents in English. Taking this factor into consideration, “shall” here appears to indicate a formal command for a group that bypasses the direct order from one person to another. The modal “shall” allows for a strict instruction to be given while showing respect for the receivers of the message. It acts as a buffer between cultures to avoid an absolute sense of obligation when faced with a language. This formulation commits to respecting an instruction that applies to a community.

Nevertheless the multinational corporation engages in isolated linguistic actions. Its website is in English only, whereas in-house newsletters are published in four languages, as shown in this excerpt:

- “How to get in touch with HR Direct through the [Head Office] Shared Service Desk? [...] provide support to you in 4 languages.
- Comment joindre HR Direct via [Head Office] Shared Service Desk ? [...] vous fournir une assistance dans 4 langues.
- Wie kann man Kontakt zu HR Direct über den [Head Office] Shared Service Desk bekommen? [...] Support in 4 Sprachen anzubieten.
- ¿Cómo ponerse en contacto con HR Direct a través de [Head Office] Shared Service Desk? [...] para darle soporte en 4 idiomas.” (Newsletter 2011)³

¹ Article from magazine *L’Expansion* “Toulouse contre Hambourg - Les cités rivales de Airbus” by Jean-Luc Barberi, published on 22 December 2008

² AP2080 Reference Language : http://www.cockpitseeker.com/wp-content/uploads/goodies/ac/a320/pdf/data/AP2080_Main_Module.pdf

³ Confidential internal document

The analysis aims to identify specific situations linked to certain multilingual practices in a professional environment according to the chosen vector of communication. I now avail myself of an instrumentation, i.e. interviews regarding work activity conducted with Airbus employees, in order to assemble the spoken corpus to embark on an analysis of discourse.

3 Interviews with employees on their professional activity

The spoken corpus comprising 12 interviews⁴ originates from a study that was carried out between 2009 and 2012 on statements regarding individual language practices as perceived by the actors of the multinational corporation. We chose the technique of the semi-directive interview, which complements the theoretical contributions from explicitation interviews (Vermersch, 2006), comprehensive interviews (Kaufmann, 2008) or else what are known as semi-directed interviews (Becker, 2002; Flick, 1995).

In contrast to a standardised interview featuring a set of questions used in an identical fashion for a series of interviews, the comprehensive interview allows for adaptation to the statements of the person being interviewed. Taking into account that the individuals interviewed for our study had in some cases filled out a previous questionnaire or had been prepared for the subject matter through prior informal conversations, a typical interview averaging 45 minutes was able to meet our expectations. Whenever possible, we chose to conduct the interviews in the mother tongue of our successive interlocutors: German, Spanish, French or English. For this purpose we prepared our questionnaire in four languages.

Starting from the issue of framework considered at both a linguistic and a sociological level, we endeavoured to establish a link between professional position and language practices. The discourse analysis is used in this case to conduct an analysis of the construction of the representations of language practices in the workplace from a selection of the statements made by the interviewees.

4 Argument formula

By compiling the occurrences in the four languages, the breakdown reveals that the main connector employed is “mais/but/aber/pero”.

Figure 1: Comparative breakdown of the use of “but” in German, Spanish, French and English⁵

German		Spanish		French		English	
41	und	41	o	78	et	140	and
24	so	36	pero	35	donc	39	but
23	aber	20	porque	31	mais	28	or

The analysis entry of “mais” allows us to explore the structures in which the connector plays an opposition role (Ducrot, 1980) between two subordinate propositions. The studies on this

⁴ Twelve transcribed interviews of the aeronautical corporation: four in English, five in French, two in German and one in Spanish

⁵ This breakdown was performed with the programme Lexico 3 for a total of 18 interviews, of which 12 were conducted with employees from the aeronautical company and 6 with employees from an international organisation also located in Hamburg.

connector (Anscombe & Ducrot, 1983; Simon & Grobet, 2002; Fischer, 2006; Petit & Nemo, 2011) reveal its entire semantic complexity. We endeavoured to select excerpts in the four languages in which the connector “mais” has a strict meaning of opposition. We also looked at studies on its counterparts “pero” in Spanish (Ferrer Mora, 2000), “aber” in German (Weydt, 1983) and “but” in English (Lang & Umbach, 2002).

In the context of the “theory of argumentation in language” (Ducrot, 1980:15), the admitted and excluded discursive sequences lean more towards the conclusion introduced by B, namely the formula: “A but B = -r”.

In this formula, utterance A leads to the conclusion r while utterance B leads to the conclusion not-r. Consequently, based on A but B, the conclusion is not-r, “*mais* is thus the bearer of a specific argumentative instruction. It is of course the situation of communication that allows a value to be assigned to the variables r and not-r” (Ducrot, 2006:169).

The conclusion of the sequence of two utterances linked by a connector is obtained by “determin[ing] the argumentative orientation” (Ducrot, 2006:167). The interpretation of the utterances occurs in two successive stages that employ a linguistic component and a rhetoric or pragmatic component, respectively. O. Ducrot defends this process by the complementarity of the concept of the “presupposed” and the concept of the “implied” (Ducrot, 2006:167-168).

Let us consider an example taken from an interview of our corpus:

“sometimes they had difficulties\ (.) but they are also given the opportunity to express themselves in German”
(Interview with a German employee, L342-343)

We will now explain the argument we will be following (Ducrot, 1980) to interpret each of these excerpts, before illustrating it in schematic form. In a first instance, the linguistic analysis assigns a signification to the sentence that is independent of all context. The signification is deduced from the rules of syntax and semantics.

“Sometimes they had difficulties”

“they are given the opportunity to express themselves in German”

The linguistic component indicates the presupposed: “they do not speak English”, “the interlocutors understand German” or “they speak German”.

In a second instance, the rhetoric or pragmatic analysis is performed on the sentence obtained via the linguistic analysis. This new stage takes into account the “signification and circumstances of the utterance” and attributes “a value to the variables contained in the sentence: the meaning of the utterance in the given context is found at the end of the rhetoric component”. This second phase of interpretation provides access to the literal meaning of the utterance by assigning it a referential and argumentative value.

“Sometimes they had difficulties” = “the concierges had difficulties in English”

“they are given the opportunity to express themselves in German” = “my colleagues and I give the concierges the opportunity to speak German”

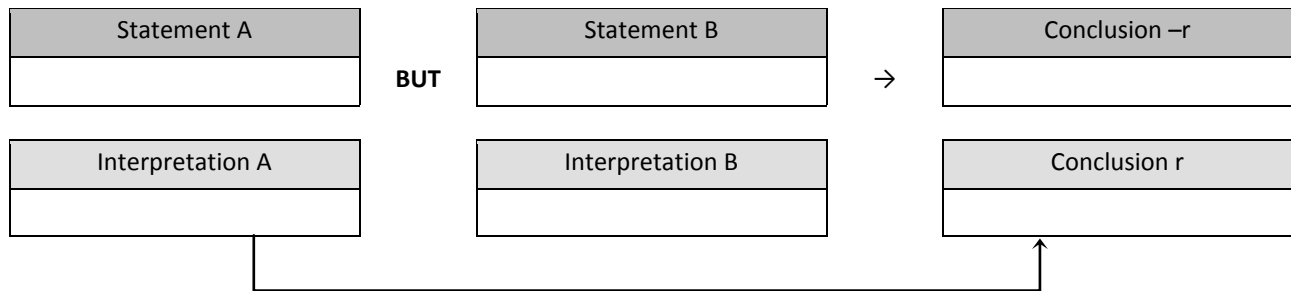
The results of this second phase of interpretation correspond to what we will qualify as interpretation A (for the first part of the utterance) and interpretation B (for the second). As we have explained previously, the use of the connector “but” assigns an argumentative value to the

two utterances. According to O. Ducrot (1980), the connectors “but, yet, however”⁶ introduce a strong argument of counter-argumentation. From utterance A (“sometimes they had difficulties”), the interlocutor draws the conclusion r. From utterance B (“they are given the opportunity to express themselves in German”) introduced by “but”, the interlocutor draws the conclusion not-r.

Based on A *but* B, the conclusion is thus not-r, “*but* is thus the bearer of a specific argumentative instruction. It is of course the situation of communication that allows a value to be assigned to the variables r and not-r” (Ducrot, 2006:169), in this case r = “the concierges do not have the capacity to express themselves as they would like in English” and not-r = “the concierges are allowed to express themselves in German”.

For all the interview excerpts analysed, we will identify A as the opening utterance, B as the utterance introduced by “but” and r as the conclusion of A, and finally not-r (noted -r in our diagrams as per its first designation by J.-C. Anscombe and O. Ducrot in 1983) according to the orientation that “mais” gives to the meaning of the sentence. An equation according to the formula of J.-C. Anscombe and O. Ducrot (1983) will be modelled as follows:

Figure 2: Equation model “A but B → -r” (Anscombe & Ducrot, 1983)



Once the utterances with the connector “but/pero/aber/mais” are identified, two analysis entries emerge. The first is that of enunciation frames (Charolles, 1997) and the second is that of the “shifters” (Benveniste, 1974). The discourse analysis entails a delinearisation of the verbal chain, as also practiced by P. Stalder (2010) for the analysis of her interviews carried out within companies after meetings. The process of delinearisation of the verbal chain is sequential in nature, allowing the various topics used in the interviewee discourses to be classified.

5 An indexed analysis of discourse on language practices

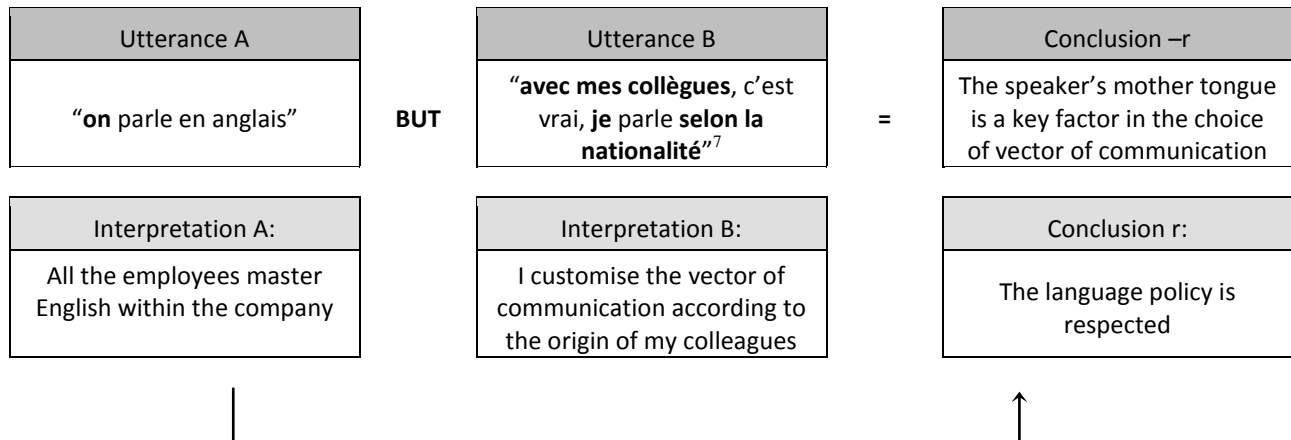
Here we report the three formulas that arose around the use of the connector “mais”. We considered the utterances according to a communicative situation presented as either monolingual or multilingual. We will show how these situations contrast based on the formula A MAIS B = -r from three formulas that we will illustrate individually using examples from the fields of research.

5.1 Monolingualism BUT multilingualism = multilingual compromise

The interviewed individuals explain that they adapt to particular cases and at times specify that they customise their work approach according to whom they are speaking to:

⁶ “mais, pourtant, cependant” in French

Figure 3: Interview with French-German employee, L397



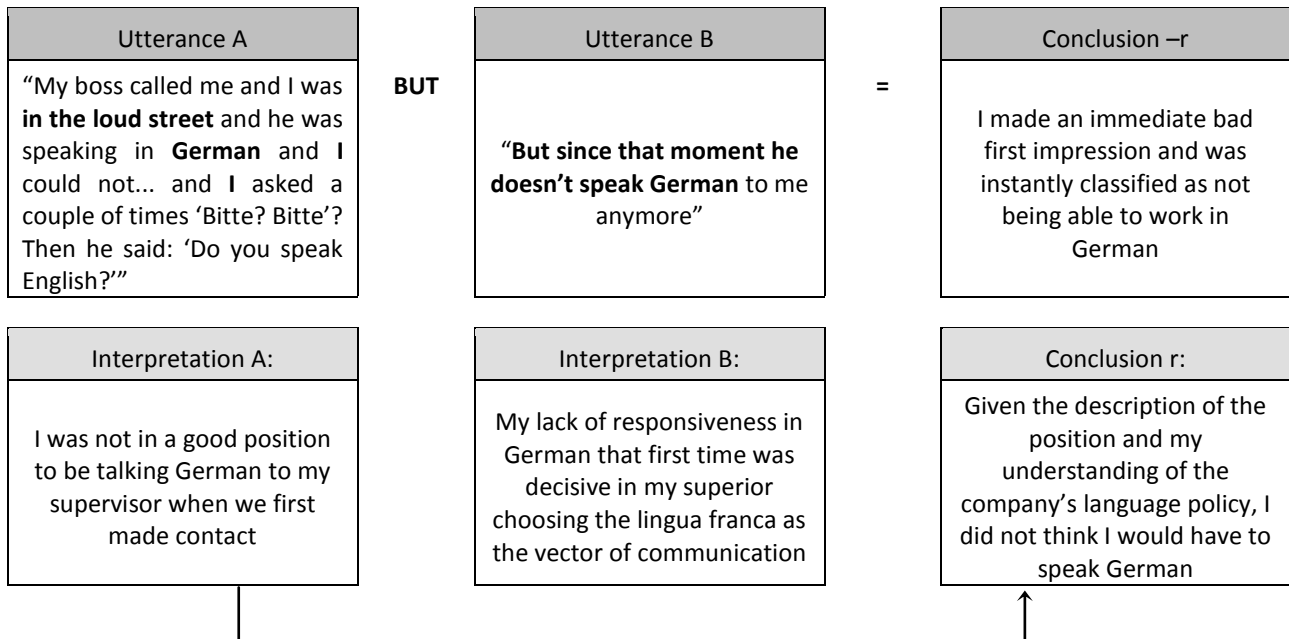
In this example, the pronoun “one” represents the employees of the multinational company in general. No location is thus specified but rather the fact that one is working. The pronoun “one” is associated with the use of English in an established monolingual situation, thus dictated by the language policy; it is in contrast to the pronoun “I” and the possessive adjective “my”, which customise the multilingual situation and present it as the result of a personal decision. The nominal syntagma “my colleagues” reduces the scale of this practice. The “one” has an effect of detachment from day-to-day reality, opposite an “I” implied in the situation. The opposition established by the use of “but” is accentuated by the syntagma “according to nationality”. The factor explaining the transition from a single language to multilingual situations is thus the national origin of the individuals present. This linguistic flexibility improves relationships among colleagues. It provides an opportunity to create links other than strictly professional ones.

5.2 Multilingualism BUT monolingualism = monolingual compromise

If multilingualism has its limits, it is not due to a lack of goodwill or the strict adherence to company rule, but rather the result of limited competencies. The following example is an anecdote by a Russian employee of her first telephone conversation with her future manager:

⁷ Our translation: one talks in English. But, with my colleagues, it’s true, I speak according to nationality

Figure 4: Interview with Russian employee, L23-25



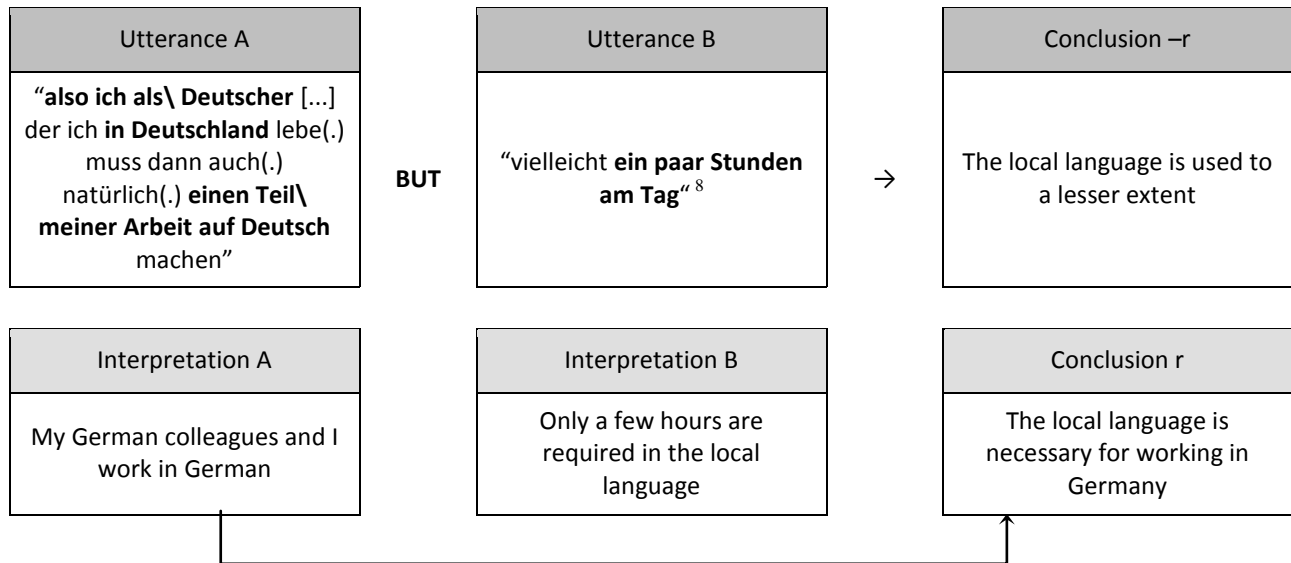
German appears to have been introduced here as a standard practice for a position in Germany. This young Russian engineer missed an opportunity to belong to the German-speaking group at work. Utterance A focuses on her own action in which she has the opportunity to establish the communication agreement, but she seizes up (“I was in a loud street”, “I could not”, “I asked”). She increases the descriptions of the context in order to justify herself. However, as a result of this mental block, her manager cements the communication agreement in English. English is presented as an alternative by default, characterised here by a temporal universe that, on the face of it, is henceforth unchangeable (“But since that moment he doesn’t speak German”). Nevertheless Rosa was offered the position. This shows that this “deficiency” does not represent a problem for the department even if the tacit work logic of her superior would have been that she be able to reply in German. The inability of Rosa to deal with German defined the conditions of their relationship. The monolingual compromise in English was not prohibitive to her taking up the position since she masters the standard language.

English generally remains the rule as the professional vector of communication and, in all logic, it is the predominant language practiced in exolingual communication, which is why the results –r obtained in our uttered formula: A but utterance B → -r often refer to an established monolingual use, i.e. to the lingua franca status.

5.3 Monolingualism BUT multilingualism = monolingual compromise

This new formula presents a monolingual situation to which is added a multilingual situation, resulting in a monolingual compromise. This combination shows an effect of resistance of the English-speaking monolinguals. The manager identifies as a German in Germany working in German. He confronts this spatial universe with a temporal universe (“ein paar Stunden am Tag”), which reduces the importance of the use of German and specifies a spatial universe (“in Deutschland”). By specifying the country, he shows that this cannot be considered for the company as a whole.

Figure 5: Interview with German employee, L. 56-62



In another part of the interview, the manager reduces the importance of the use of French to a fractional period within a time schedule (“einen gewissen Teil seiner Arbeit”) and he opposes it to the temporal universe “of business”, implied as the strong and serious part of work (“Aber in dem Moment, wo er in das Business einsteigt”⁹). He once again reduces the importance of this use by opposing the individual situation of the Frenchman in France working in French in utterance A to a situation that concerns everyone (“alle”) in utterance B. Nevertheless, he lends further strength to the argument of utterance B in favour of the use of English by reinforcing it through the “multinational” spatial universe, which implicitly conveys the notion of English as the official language of the company.

The argument calling upon the authority of the multinational corporation at a national level or at head office is also invoked by a Spanish engineer to justify the systematic recourse to the English language when there are multilingual brackets:

“solamente algunas palabras de cortesía cuando hablo con una persona francesa o algunas palabras de cortesía cuando hablo con una persona española **pero** eh: en EADS el idioma oficial es el inglés/”¹⁰ (Interview with a Spanish employee, L69-72)

The temporal universes of utterance A (“solamente”, “cuando [yo] hablo con una persona francesa o algunas palabras de cortesía cuando hablo con una persona española”) once again minimise the importance and the duration of the multilingual situation. Nevertheless, the Spanish engineer evokes this opposition with a turn of phrase devoid of an active subject (“el idioma oficial es el Inglés”) in contrast to the personalisation of utterance A with “yo”. Utterance B sounds like an official communication statement regarding the company. This argument protects him in some way, given that he works in Germany with a relatively low level of German (A2).

⁸ Our translation: Well, as a German living in Germany, I of course have to do some of my work in German. But this involves maybe a few hours a day, which ultimately is not a lot.

⁹ Our translation: from the moment it is about business

¹⁰ Our translation: just a few words of courtesy when I speak to a French person or a few words of courtesy when I speak to a Spanish person, **but** eh, at [head office] the official language is English.

Conclusion

In the analysis of all 12 interviews, the use of English is presented either by impersonal turns of phrases or by an all-encompassing subject (“on/man/you”, “nous/wir/we/nosotros”), while the practice of the other languages calls for a more personal construction introduced by the singular first person pronoun (“je/ich/I/yo”). These situations correspond to an own initiative that has been taken and accentuated. When the practice of English is the subject of the utterance, it is characterised by a constant spatial universe (“toujours”, “tout le temps”). The vector of communication is the stable element that defines the whole. The justification for its use is reinforced in the utterances by the reminder of the spatial universe (“within the company”, “at Airbus”); these references confer a non-revocable institutional dimension to the statement. English remains in the background as a pact linked to the (linguistic) security of everyone. Other language practices are intermittent and are triggered by the coming together of elements that are out of the ordinary, e.g. “sometimes”, “quand je me suis retrouvée en Espagne”, “parfois”, “dans cette conversation”. In the latter example, the demonstrative adjective “cette” underlines the specificity of a situation that is out of the ordinary.

The result r is the result expected given the angle of the situation reported by utterance A. Utterance B, however, incorporates a different use. The result r should therefore be the opposite of r , which is the first conclusion that would be drawn. The use of the connector “but” does not yield a categorical result. It is very nuanced. It is indeed not a “but” of objection, it is a “but” of compromise because it has to ensure that things work and come up with on-the-spot adjustments to the various levels of command of the languages. This “but” of compromise could be compared to expressions featuring different angles of a situation such as: “On one hand... on the other hand”. The connectors “mais”, “but”, “aber” and “pero” that we singled out in the discourses position themselves as an argumentative “but” in the sense of distributing parts of reality. We view the breakdown of the contexts in our field of study as follows:

- head office: adherence to English as the vector of communication and thus working language;
- company premises in Germany, specifically in Hamburg: adherence to English as the working language at a high hierarchical level and intermittent recourse to the local language;
- work departments: adherence to the rule imposed by the department manager (predominance of German, English, authorisation of code switching, etc.) and in accordance with the partners of the projects being developed (contacts with local suppliers, internal clients, etc.);
- direct contacts with colleagues on a daily basis: implementation of interpersonal rules on a case-by-case basis;

The initial analysis of what is said before and after the connector “but/pero/aber/mais” within discourse in four languages indicates tensions between the use of English and multilingual exchanges in daily work activities. Employees report exclusively using English to perform their professional tasks, using the connector “but” in order to explain why, when and with whom they switch from one language to another. Three contextual factors were found to influence the choice of language: the location, the time of day and the individual multilingual skills. These skills impact on collecting information, networking in the workplace and increasing work opportunities.

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