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## Shuttling between scales in the workplace: Reexamining policies and pedagogies for migrant professionals



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### ABSTRACT

Scalar analysis enables us to develop a more dynamic, relational, and negotiated orientation to language norms. However, in many policy and pedagogical circles, privileged varieties of “native speaker” English are treated as belonging to the translocal or higher scale, facilitating mobility across different times and spaces. Local English varieties are treated as low mobility resources belonging to situated spaces and limited time scales. This article reports on a study of African migrant professionals in English-dominant countries. It elicits their opinions and narratives on workplace communication. The findings reveal that the subjects consider the workplace as a layered space with different scales of interaction; they interpret the translocal scale as containing more inclusive language norms; and they adopt negotiation strategies to invoke diverse scales of consideration and make spaces for local Englishes and other languages. The article concludes by articulating how shuttling between scales requires a more complex and creative language competence for migrant professionals and other learners. Rather than treating specific language norms as universally privileged or scales as pre-given, language pedagogies and policies should develop the dispositions, language awareness, and strategies required to negotiate diverse scales with a repertoire of language norms.

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Scalar analysis has significant conceptual implications for language competence and pedagogy in the context of mobility. From the perspective of scales, current theorizations of language competence appear to adopt a normative and generic scale that is not sensitive to the layered and mediated nature of communication in situated spaces. In this article, I present research findings from the way migrant professionals negotiate scales in their workplace communication, and then consider the implications from the study for language learning/teaching purposes. This is in keeping with a recent move in educational linguistics to address the disconnect between classroom learning and out-of-class needs (see [Kramsch, 2014](#)). Scholars are also realizing that the modes of interaction outside classrooms can teach us about learning styles and acquisition practices that can be cultivated pedagogically.

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## Scales, skilled migration, and language policy

Skilled migration<sup>2</sup> has occupied an important place in the development of the global economy and, for this reason, posed important new challenges for language education and policy. Though it is not easy to define skilled professionals, it is widely interpreted as those with credentialized skills beyond tertiary level education, constituting professions in the sciences, technology, business, and health (D'Costa, 2008). While skilled migration was perceived as leading to the brain drain of intellectual resources from developing communities (Bhagwati, 1976), the discourse has now shifted to a win/win situation of brain gain (Kuznetsov, 2006). According to currently dominant neoliberal ideologies, the opening of national borders and loosening of state regulations to facilitate the mobility of people, resources, and knowledge would lead to development for all. While migrant professionals from less advanced communities develop their skills and knowledge in the developed West and contribute to its technological and economic innovations there, they are also known to share their knowledge, skills, and capital with their own communities to facilitate their development. For such reasons, both sending and receiving countries are formulating policies that would facilitate this form of mobility. There are also serious implications for education in general, and language education in particular. Sending countries are enhancing instruction on the language resources that would enable their citizens to market their knowledge abroad. Receiving countries are attracting international students and increasing their offering of remedial language classes to address the communicative needs of these students.

What is the language competence required to harness the benefits of skilled migration? Empirical research and theoretical discourses lead to slightly different answers to this question. However, they both lead to policies that favor English as the language for skilled migration, with native speaker varieties of English considered the most desirable.

Demographic and quantitative research by social scientists finds that those migrants who are proficient in the dominant language of the host community earn more salary, are better employed, and enjoy professional success (Adsera & Pytlíkova, 2010; Chiswick & Miller, 1995; Chiswick & Miller, 2002; Chiswick & Miller, 2007; Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003; Dustmann & van Soest, 2002). Summarizing the implications of this genre of studies, Williams and Balaz (2008) state: "The classic human-capital perspective suggests that immigrants tend to adapt to their host countries via accumulating human capital. A critical element of human capital is fluency in the host country's language, which mediates their integration into that country's labor market" (p.29). As English-dominant countries such as UK, USA, Australia, and Canada are important destinations for skilled migrants around the world, such findings would lead to treating English as the required linguistic capital. The limitation of this research is that a correlation of language test scores and salary amounts misses a lot of other considerations. Though those with English certificates might earn more, we have to ask whether it is the language used actively in workplaces. We have to explore the attitudes of the subjects to the role of English versus other languages in their work. These studies are also not sensitive to the fact that migrants bring their own varieties of English, not to mention the many varieties spoken in host communities.

From another perspective, neoliberal policy discourses assume a shared code to facilitate cross-border production and marketing efforts (Duchene & Heller, 2012; Piller & Cho, 2013). The ability of knowledge workers to cross borders and enhance production requires flexibility in communication, values, and resources. The way to achieve this flexibility, according to neoliberal perspectives, is through standardized skills and resources which are easily adaptable everywhere. Heller and Duchene (2012) explain the rationale for this orientation thus: "Global management, in its search for taylorist modes of regularization carried through from modern economic activities, often also looks for ways to technicize and standardize linguistic regulation techniques. These techniques construct language as a technical skill, decoupled from authenticity" (p. 10). When communication is technicized, as in the scripted communication workers are expected to adopt in some workplaces, their local identities, values, and languages are considered irrelevant, perhaps even distracting. Hence communication in these policy discourses is "decoupled from authenticity." An obvious means to achieving this standardized communication is through a uniform language such as English. If people from diverse countries learnt English, they can move with flexibility to other countries for education, work, and development, it is assumed.

These two strands of postulating the language needs of skilled migrants adopt different scales. Demographic research treats language norms in terms of places of work and life for skilled migrants. They prioritize the needs in terms of localized communication in the countries of habitation, adopting a national scale. Policy discourses treat norms in relation to the transnational needs of communication, adopting a translocal scale. However, both converge in promoting English as the linguistic capital for skilled migration. The implications of such findings and discourses have led to the promotion of English, especially native speaker varieties, in testing instruments and pedagogical approaches around the world.

In testing, the corpus that migrants need is defined in terms of the privileged and formal varieties of English. Consider, for example, IELTS (International English Language Testing System) which claims that about 8000 organizations worldwide use its test to make hiring decisions and four countries (UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) officially use its scores for immigration purposes ([www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org)). Though IELTS claims that it is democratic in accommodating all the "native speaker varieties" in its construction of tests, leaving out the "nativized" varieties skilled migrants bring with them fails to make it sufficiently inclusive or relevant. Also, though IELTS is somewhat communicative in focusing on language functions in all four skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing), it is largely form-focused and does not address the discourses and interactional

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms "skilled migrants" and "migrant professionals" synonymously. Though "skilled migration" is the accepted term in fields like geography and migration studies, I prefer the broader term "migrant professionals" as it reduces the emphasis on the ambiguous binary of skilled/unskilled.

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