



Migrant networks, language learning and tourism employment

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between migrants' social networks, the processes of language acquisition and tourism employment. Data collected using netnography and interviews are used to identify the strategies that Polish workers in the UK use to develop their language skills. The paper highlights the roles played by co-workers, co-nationals and customers in migrants' language learning, both in the physical spaces of work and the virtual spaces of internet forums. It also shows how migrant workers exchange knowledge about the use of English during different stages of their migration careers: prior to leaving their country of origin and getting a job, during their employment and after leaving their job. Implications for academic inquiry and human resource management practice are outlined.

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1. Introduction

Existing work has highlighted that tourism employment provides opportunities for migrants to develop their language skills (Anderson, Ruhs, Rogaly, & Spencer, 2007; Eade, Drinkwater, & Garapich, 2006; Janta & Ladkin, 2009; Janta, Ladkin, Brown, & Lugosi, 2011). Previous research has also highlighted the importance of language in the migrant experience and in the management of a diverse workforce. Linguistic competence helps migrants to adjust better to life in receiving destinations (Brown, 2008), while its absence can limit access to information or support, leading to social exclusion (Spencer, Ruhs, Anderson, & Rogaly, 2007). Moreover, language skills can be utilised further by mobile individuals when returning to their country of origin or when moving to new areas (Williams & Baláz, 2008). There is also a relationship between host linguistic competence and migrant employment experiences (Dustmann & Fabbri, 2003). Many migrants are able to enter jobs within the tourism and hospitality sector, mainly in back-of-house positions, with hardly any knowledge of the local language. However, poor linguistic skills often force migrant workers to occupy the lowest grade jobs, endure poor

working conditions and limit promotional opportunities (Wright & Pollert, 2006). The problem is exacerbated as migrants working in enclaves speak their own language, which reinforces ghettoisation (Adler & Adler, 1999). Finally, from a management perspective, previous research has suggested that deficiencies in language capabilities can lead to tensions in the workplace and a decrease in service quality (Devine, Baum, Hearn, & Divine, 2007a,b; Lucas & Mansfield, 2008; Lyon & Sulcova, 2009).

This body of work stresses the importance of linguistic competence for numerous stakeholders, but previous research has not examined in any detail the *processes* and *agencies* involved in language development among migrant workers in tourism; nor has it considered the relationship between the processes of migrants' language learning and tourism employment. In response to this gap in knowledge, this paper examines how networks of people interact, both in physical and virtual environments; and, how flows of information, often between loosely connected individuals (Granovetter, 1983), at various stages in travel and movement, are involved in the process of language development. Moreover, we argue that tourism employment is at the core of these networks and flows of information in several ways. Firstly, tourism employment creates contexts for learning and facilitates the development of interactions and relationships that lead to specific learning repertoires. Secondly, among migrants interacting in virtual environments (i.e. internet chat rooms and social networking sites), tourism employment often stimulates debates between users. For example, tourism employment emerges frequently in discussions

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about developing language skills. Within these virtual environments, migrants also reflect upon their learning and their experiences of tourism employment. Furthermore, they assist other migrants in developing their language skills to help them gain employment in tourism and related sectors. In this paper, data are used to demonstrate how migrant workers exchange knowledge about the use of English during different stages of their migration career: prior to leaving their country of origin and getting a job, during their employment and after leaving their job.

The emerging themes from this study thus inform contemporary research on migration and tourism (e.g. Janta, Brown, Lugosi, & Ladkin, *in press*; Janta, Ladkin, Brown, & Lugosi, 2011) by helping to understand the complex relationships that migrants are engaged in as they develop their language skills. Moreover, the data help us to appreciate how migrants' experiences of learning are mediated and influenced by tourism employment. Examining migrants' language development is also important for tourism and hospitality practitioners for two reasons: firstly, understanding the *modus operandi* of international employees can help in the recruitment process to identify expectations from engaging in tourism employment. Secondly, understanding why migrants work and the processes of language learning can inform both staff development investment and the management of a diverse workforce.

This paper's findings are drawn from a wider study on the experiences of Polish migrant workers employed in the UK tourism sector; however, the emerging themes of the study, particularly around the forms and processes of interaction, and the central role of tourism employment, can be used in the analysis of other migrant groups and international contexts.

2. Literature review

In order to understand the complex relationship between migrants' networks, language learning and tourism employment it is necessary to consider several areas of literature: firstly, migrant mobilities and networks; secondly, learning theories and language learning among migrants; and thirdly, the nature of tourism employment, with particular reference to migrant workers. We begin by considering the relationship between migrant mobilities and networks.

2.1. Migrant mobilities and networks

Current research within the broader mobilities paradigm has stressed that contemporary society is characterised by the continuous movement of people, objects, capital and information (Duncan, Scott, & Baum, 2009; Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006). An emerging challenge, therefore, is to understand the complex networks, interactions and relationships that emerge within mobile societies. There is a well-established and expanding body of work that has considered the relationship between migration and networks (see e.g. Faist & Ozveren, 2004; White & Ryan, 2008). Such research has grown as global flows of people have intensified, and as interaction between migrants is increasingly facilitated by developments in technology. However, as Ryan, Sales, Tilki, and Siara (2008) argue, insufficient attention has been given to examining the different types of networks that exist, or how migrants access existing networks and establish new ties.

In response to these gaps in knowledge, Ryan et al. (2008) examined how migrants used different networks, involving strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1983), to socialise, access employment opportunities and emotional support as well as to learn English. Their work shows how certain networks, particularly those involving others from the same national and ethnic groups can help in specific ways, for example, in settling into an area.

However, their work also suggests that close ties and dense networks, particularly among migrants from the same national or ethnic background, may lead to social closure, thus constricting flows of information and limiting opportunities to learn other languages. This is partly as migrants have fewer incentives to develop linguistic competencies, but also because they have fewer opportunities for interaction (Kim, 2001). As several studies have demonstrated, limited language skills force migrant workers into roles that reinforce immobility and offer fewer opportunities to interact with customers or other nationals, which might help to develop their language skills (see Adler & Adler, 1999; McDowell, 2009; Ryan et al., 2008). In the tourism sector, research on migrants' involvement in networks has largely concentrated on accessing employment (Devine et al., 2007a,b; McDowell, Batnitzky, & Dyer, 2007; Matthews & Ruhs, 2007). However, as we argue, networks within tourism employment are also a significant learning resource.

Ryan et al. (2008) stress that social networks should be seen to operate across different time scales and spaces, both physical and virtual. Recent research has demonstrated the importance of the internet in the maintenance of networks and in information transactions (Garapich & Osipovic, 2007; Hiller & Franz, 2004; White & Ryan, 2008). Since the 2004 EU Enlargement, a significant number of internet sites aimed at Poles living in the UK has been launched. Apart from sites providing general information about life in the UK (e.g. britaintown.com, mojawyspa.co.uk, goniec.com), there are sites related to a particular county, district or town. The widening use of the internet by Polish migrants in the UK is reflected in the nine-fold increase (805%) in traffic on Polish language and community websites between January 2006 and January 2008 (Hitwise UK, 2008).

Existing work on networks operating across virtual and physical spaces (e.g. Ryan et al., 2008; White & Ryan, 2008) helps to emphasise the usefulness of adopting a mobilities approach when examining the relationship between migrants' language learning and tourism employment. The data presented in this paper are used to consider how learning operates across multiple environments and influences migration experiences at numerous temporal stages. We illustrate the way information flows from virtual to physical spaces and back again, while considering how interactions between individuals are facilitated and mediated by tourism employment.

2.2. Learning theories and language development among migrants

There are numerous competing theories that have been developed to explain the processes of learning, which focus on cognitive, behavioural and social aspects, but lack of space prevents a lengthy review (see Jarvis, Holford, & Griffin, 2003 or Schunk, 2008 for a more detailed review of key theories). Some theories have attempted to bridge the divide between the three approaches to learning. For example, within social learning theory and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), environment, behaviour, and other such personal factors as cognition have been shown to interact in learning. These theories propose that people learn through observation and the modelling of others' behaviour. Learning can thus be thought of as an ongoing process, operating through relationships and interactions. The learning and adoption of specific norms or behaviours are dependent upon the reinforcement of particular behaviours, which are deemed to be positive among reference groups. Other norms and behaviours that are viewed as inappropriate are abandoned or restricted (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Social learning and social cognitive theory offer an understanding of learning that appreciates its networked nature; however, the psychological aspects of learning are privileged in understanding the adoption of particular behaviours.

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