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'There's Nothing Strange': Language Policy and Racialisation at Warehouse Workplaces

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ABSTRACT

Sweden is a country where racial/ethnic power relations reflect and reinforce the marginalisation of groups of people. Research has shown that language makes part of such racialised processes through makings of the Swedish language into the norm and a consequent stigmatisation of the 'non-Swedish' others. This article explores the role of language in racialisation at the workplace level of online retail warehousing. The empirical material comprises interviews (n = 24) and focus groups (n = 15 groups, tot. of 49 participants) with managers, team leaders, and workers at three online retail warehouses in Sweden, with an emphasis on the perceptions of a Swedish language policy that had been implemented in one of the warehouses. The policy had been implemented to promote inclusion and to create opportunities for workers whose primary language was not Swedish. The article shows that the language policy can be understood as racialising, even though that was not its purpose.

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Introduction

Sweden has long rested on a self-image of being a country of equality that contrasts the significant role played by Sweden in the historical production of racial/ethnic categories to classify people based on (imaginaries of) differences (see Gardell 2020). The formation of racial/ethnic structures and power relations in Sweden can be exemplified by the case of the Sámi people, who are indigenous to the Arctic area. Sámi people have been colonised, marginalised and minoritised in relation to the imagination of a homogenous Swedish nation-state, for example through the banning of Sámi languages in schools in the late nineteenth century (Pietikäinen et al. 2010; Jonsson and Rosenfors 2017). Tornedalian people, another official national minority group in Sweden, bear a similar reality of marginalisation – not least through the stigmatisation of the Meänkieli language (Elenius 2002; Kokkola et al. 2019; Poromaa Isling 2020; Knobblock and Stubberud 2021). The relevance of taking language into account when exploring racialisation – the processes through which race, as a discursive-material phenomenon, comes about

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and makes categorisation and hierarchisation of people appear as 'natural' (Barot and Bird 2001) – is furthered by current political discussions in Sweden. At present, adult migrants to Sweden who are Swedish residents have access to language education, free of charge, through the programme 'Swedish for immigrants' (SFI). There are three different course tracks, depending on the individual's educational background, and four courses, with course D representing the most advanced level (Skolverket n.d.). Further educational possibilities are available for those who have completed SFI, including the programme 'Swedish as a second language' and language programmes focused on work in specific occupations and industries (Länsstyrelserna n.d.). Recently there has been a political suggestion to make proficiency in Swedish into a requirement for Swedish citizenship; this knowledge would be examined through a test paid by them who take the test (see SOU 2021: 2). While language management such as this can be motivated by ideas of inclusion, it also risks categorising people at the same time (Flubacher and Yeuong 2016), for example, Swedes versus Sámis, Tornedalians and migrant groups.

This article explores racialisation and language in the context of work. Previous work studies in Sweden have made visible structural discrimination in the labour market, expressed in unequal access to employment and possibilities for vertical career progression for people born in Sweden and in another country, or having parents who are born outside of Sweden (see, for example, Wolgast et al. 2018; Wolgast and Wolgast 2021). These issues go further beyond the question of the birthplace, as seen in a report focused on white privileges in the Swedish labour market (Wolgast and Wolgast 2021) where career prospects are demonstrated to differ between those racialised as white and those racialised as non-white. Similar to research findings from other countries (see, for example, Strömmer 2017; Lønsmann 2020) the same report shows that the (lack of) knowledge in the Swedish language functions as a demarcation between desired and undesired workers in the labour market, that is when applying for jobs, and as a hindrance to career progression within an organisation (Wolgast and Wolgast 2021). Other studies have demonstrated a relationship between fluency in Swedish and working conditions. In Sohl's (2021) study of a commercial laundry service, where many workers were born outside of Sweden and had limited skills in the Swedish language, 'exploiting racism' expressed itself in the form of stress among the workers in performing work tasks and surveillance of their work. Similar findings are made in Gavanas (2013) study among domestic service workers performing cleaning. Not only did the lack of Swedish language knowledge contribute to worker exploitation, but also the type of job performed – physically demanding, socially isolating – did not allow the workers to improve their Swedish (Gavanas 2013; see also Strömmer 2016).

In exploring racialisation, language and work, the article contributes to the research on online retail warehousing. That is, goods handling work performed by warehouse workers to fulfil orders for customers shopping online. Findings from work studies in geographical contexts other than Sweden imply that there is a relationship between the often poor conditions on the warehouse floor and the workforce comprising people of colour, (undocumented) migrants and other groups of people who might not get access to 'better' jobs (see, for example, Alimahomed-Wilson 2019, 2021; De Lara et al. 2016; Dörflinger et al. 2021; Kaminer 2018; Lindemann and Boyer 2019; Reese 2020). A study of work in Swedish online retail warehousing, where Swedish national employment statistics has been summarised, shows that Swedish-born and foreign-born managers and workers are segregated

in online retailing and that Swedish-born men are overrepresented at the managerial level[1] (Johansson et al. 2024). If and how language matters for racialisation processes in Swedish online retail warehousing has not been investigated to date, to the best of my knowledge (compare with Lønsmann and Kraft 2018).

Based on interviews and focus groups with managers, team leaders, and workers at three online retail warehouses in Sweden, this article aims to explore the role of language in racialisation processes at the workplace. More specifically, the article makes empirical use of a language policy that had been implemented in one of the warehouses through which Swedish was rendered the official work language. The article makes theoretical use of Ahmed's phenomenological body of theory on racialisation, in particular her theory on strangers (Ahmed 2000), as is further explained in the next part of the article. The theory on racialisation and strangers is followed by a theory section on language policies, exemplifying how they have been used in workplaces. Then, the methods and materials used in this article are considered, and the results are presented and discussed.

Racialisation and Strangers

'Racialisation' as a concept emerged in academia through the works of Fanon (1986/1952), with his phenomenological approach to studying colonialism, and Miles (1993) with his Marxist study of racialised class relations. These authors, and others after them, make clear that racialisation inherently involves Othering (see Mulinari and Neergard 2017). As a relational process, racialisation involves both 'racialisers' who perform racialising practices and those who are 'racialised' as Others with reference to their (constructed) differences. Speech, behaviour and phenotypic characteristics (such as skin colour or hair) are some examples of categorisations through which racialisation operates, resulting in stigmatisation, discrimination, and segregation, and acts of resistance (Gans 2017).

In this article, I make use of Ahmed's (2000) phenomenological theory on strangers. In the book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality,* Ahmed (2000) investigates how 'racism operates as a way of deciding who belongs and who does not' (Ahmed 2021: 8) through encounters where some people will be approached as 'strangers'. The stranger is not a stranger because they are unfamiliar to us; rather, we approach people as strangers because we recognise them as strangers (Ahmed 2000; see also Marotta 2021: 2). The process whereby someone is recognised as a stranger thus involves a 'temporal movement' (Ahmed 2000: 145) in that it is affected by what we know from before. Proximity matters in these encounters, as the stranger is (re)produced as someone close but never fully assimilated in the space. Strangers 'fit, not by being the standard, but by being defined in terms of their difference' (Ahmed 2000: 96); approaching someone as a stranger hence contributes to defining the existing standard.

Ahmed (2000) uses the example of a neighbourhood watch to illustrate the relational process through which strangers come into being, thereby making it clear that the stranger is someone *made* alien by how they are approached as not belonging in a certain space. That strange encounters are about perceived differences, has also been illustrated by other studies. For example, Chávez and Hill (2021), in their study of neighbourhoods during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrate that readings of how neighbours looked and sounded contributed to the making of racialised strangers during this time (see also Bilge 2021). The importance of bodily markers in strange encounters is further shown

by Nilsson (2016) in a study of the inclusion of newly arrived migrants in Swedish schools. Teachers perceived it as a problem when newly arrived students spoke another language than Swedish, and the students were assigned the main responsibility for the 'the success of the inclusion' in how they had to be 'downplaying certain aspects of their alleged difference (such as [their] mother tongue)' to be acknowledged as part of the group (Nilsson 2016: 835).

Language Policies at Work

According to Spolsky (2004), language policy involves the components of (a) *language practices* – the language(s) people choose to speak, (b) *language beliefs* – the beliefs about the language(s), and (c) *language management* – activities to manage and influence the language practice (Spolsky 2004: 5). The direction of the relationship between the language practice, language belief and language management is not given, but the three of them can relate in different ways to one another (Spolsky 2004). A language policy in the form of a document, as the one explored in this article, can be understood as an effort to manage language practice that both influences and is influenced by language beliefs.

In workplaces, language policies are often implemented to manage language diversity among employees (compare with Spolsky 2021: 51). Like any document, workplace language policies 'are not simply objects; they are means of doing or not doing something […]' (Ahmed 2012: 85) and a workplace language policy can, but do not necessarily, result in changes in the language practices (Spolsky 2004: 8, see also Sherman and Strubell 2013; Sanden 2020). Lønsmann and Kraft's (2018) study of a warehouse in Denmark demonstrates that the implementation of an English-only language policy did not necessarily result in all warehouse workers increasing their use of English, as it was not needed to perform most of the tasks. The workers who spoke languages other than Danish daily were working in the incoming/outgoing goods section, where the drivers who came to drop off or pick up goods tended to lack knowledge of Danish and English. The warehouse workers communicated with the drivers by using nonverbal cues, Google Translate, or a mix of spoken languages. While English was considered irrelevant to the content of warehouse work, Lønsmann and Kraft (2018) conclude that many workers still enjoyed participating in the English courses offered by the employer as part of the language policy. In another study of an English-only language policy, Lønsmann and Mortensen (2018) argue that such policies can reinforce power relations in the workplace, namely, in terms of how language skills are turned into a commodity for employees: English 'becomes a commodity that employees are expected to either simply HAVE or be prepared to acquire' (Lønsmann and Mortensen 2018: 450, capital letters in original, see also Muth and Del Percio 2018). This situation can pose an issue for migrant workers who are new to the dominant language (Lønsmann and Kraft 2018; Holm et al. 2020). Although migrant workers who do not speak the dominant language 'properly' may not necessarily be excluded from the workplace, they might be excluded from certain tasks and responsibilities (Kraft 2019).

Materials and Methods

The article is based on an interdisciplinary study of working conditions and (in)equality in online retail warehousing (Jackson et al. 2024), focusing on the three warehouses

Recreational, *Pharmacy,* and *Grocery*. In this article, I focus mainly on one of them, which had implemented the language policy. I will keep the online retail warehouses unnamed in the article to ensure the anonymity of the research participants. The research participants have given their consent to participate, after having been informed about the research study and their option to terminate their participation at any time without having to provide any explanation as to why.

The materials used in the article comprise transcripts from *individual interviews* with managers (n = 12), team leaders (n = 8), and health and safety and workplace union representatives (n = 4); transcripts from *focus groups* (n = 15 groups, with 49 participants in total) with warehouse workers (and pharmacists at *Pharmacy*); and notes from *observations* (one week at each online retail warehouse) containing *informal interviews* with employees. These methods have made it possible to create broad knowledge taking into consideration perspectives of different groups of employees, including their descriptions, opinions and feelings about phenomena. The interviews, focus groups, and observations were performed by the author together with Dr. Sardiello. The author conducted the interviews with the managers, and Dr. Sardiello conducted the team leader interview on page 12. The interviews lasted 20-60 min, the focus groups lasted 35-60 min, and they were recorded upon participants' agreement. Most interviews and focus groups were conducted in Swedish, except for a couple of focus groups where workers felt more comfortable speaking English and a mix of languages was used. All quotes in the article have been translated from Swedish to English. While I have strived to keep the participant's voice visible in the translation, I have had to generalise some parts to avoid risking their anonymity. For example, the original, Swedish version of the quote 'I've been working here for quite a long time' (see page 14) includes references to the exact time that the worker had been employed, which has been deleted to ensure the worker's anonymity.

Both the interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, and we used a list of questions focused on the organisation of work and workers, the work environment, and digital technology. More specifically, questions concerned the work environment, scheduling and work hours, formal/informal assignment of work tasks, qualities, and competencies needed to perform the work tasks, recruitment and career paths, and the relationship between employees. The semi-structured format allowed questions about the language policy to be included at the warehouse where it had been implemented, as we had been informed about it early on and it had piqued our interest. The participants were asked to reflect on the workforce demographics (gender, country of birth, and other aspects they considered relevant) at the beginning of the interviews and focus groups. We then followed up on these aspects when relevant to the other questions.

Transcripts were analysed in a three-step process performed by the author together with Dr. Sardiello and Dr. Johansson using NVivo (see NVivo n.d.). First, we conducted inductive coding by looking for codes in the transcripts. Second, we linked these first-cycle codes to second-cycle codes with reference to Acker's (2006) inequality regime theory, which understands work organisations as comprising class relations that (re)produces different types of inequalities via various organisational practices and processes. Third, we identified whether such practices and processes exhibited gendered and/or racialised class relations and other types of inequality.

According to Acker (2006), employers' control over employees partly explains how inequality regimes are (re)produced and how they remain intact. It is from here that my interest in the language policy emerged. The present article provides an analysis of how managers, team leaders and workers talked about and perceived language policy and not a text analysis of the document per se. The results are divided into four sections: first, the perspectives of managers; second, the perspectives of team leaders; third, the perspectives of workers; and fourth, approaches to language from the perspectives of other online retail warehouses.

Managers' Perceptions of the Language Policy

The language policy, which had been implemented in one of the three studied online retail warehouses, was a written document stating that Swedish was the official language during work hours. Therefore, employees were required to speak Swedish on the warehouse floor and in the offices. They were allowed to use other languages in the lunchroom and other common areas, given that the break time there did not represent working hours in formal terms. A manager stated that '[…] there is a point in being able to have it cover the breaks. To include the Swedes, maybe, rather than anything else,' yet this was not the case at the time of the study.

The main reason why the language policy first came into existence was that the managers wanted everyone to feel included. Managers recognised a problem in that workers had felt excluded from the group when standing next to other workers who spoke a language that they did not understand. 'It's unlikely that these people [talking another language] say something stupid, but you will be excluded, so that's an issue we have', said one manager. A manager with many years of experience from similar jobs in similar work fields stressed that this problem was not unique to this warehouse:

> There's nothing strange. I have worked in businesses, [at the time of the war in] former Yugoslavia; it was like mass immigration from there, and we took in huge groups. We had the same problem. After all, they still speak their language, and then it becomes like, well, if someone doesn't step in and steer and release this, then we won't get the Swedes included. Or [get] Swedish speakers included. Here, it can also be, like, Bosnians who have problems because there are Arabic speakers, too. It doesn't have to be the Swedish language that is not included.
>
> Interview, manager, 2022

In line with how this manager suggested that, for everyone to feel included, someone must 'steer' the language practice at the workplace, another manager explained that having Swedish as the official language on the warehouse floor provided them with a 'common ground' to stand on. Of note here is the straight line drawn by these managers between the 'inclusion' issue and language. I am not claiming that there were no social divisions at the workplace, nor that language practice would have nothing to do with it. However, could the experiences of workers who felt excluded from a group possibly have been related to other aspects of the social work environment as well? Given how these managers talked about the 'inclusion' issue as an issue of language practice and the language policy as a way to manage it, language came across as the root problem. Although one of the managers stressed that the 'exclusion' experience could apply to anyone, irrespective of language, Swedish was still ascribed normalcy through how the

policy made Swedish the common workplace language. Workers with comparatively less knowledge of Swedish appeared to be responsible for 'the success of the inclusion' (Nilsson 2016: 835) by adapting to the Swedish language norm.

In addition to explaining that the language policy had emerged to enhance inclusion, managers, when talking about the policy, mentioned the relevance and importance of workers' language skills in Swedish. 'It has nothing to do with [us] not wanting you not to speak your mother tongue, but it's more about us wanting, well, both *better conditions for you* but also that, well, everyone should feel that they are included' (emphasis added). What these 'better conditions' referred to appeared twofold to me: First, they appeared to relate to workers' ability to perform warehouse work tasks. The 'routines and all of that' were formulated in Swedish, which meant that workers needed to be able to understand the Swedish written language accordingly. The Swedish governmental educational programme '*Swedish for Immigrants* has its scales, but it's not until the fourth step that it's about reading comprehension. And we employ [workers] after already having finished the third step, so here we've failed a bit, I guess' said one of the managers. *Swedish for Immigrants* is a language programme offered free of charge to migrants to Sweden, and it comprises four courses – or steps, as the manager described it – with increasing difficulty (Skolverket n.d.). Different from what this manager said, all four courses do grade reading comprehension, although reading comprehension related to working life in specific is only graded in the two more advanced courses (see SKOLFS 2017: 91). Second, the 'better conditions' also appeared to relate to opportunities for career development. One of the managers expressed that some employees had been interested in another job position in the warehouse but that they could not qualify for it because they lacked Swedish language skills. He explained that Swedish 'becomes so incredibly important' in those tasks where you have contact with 'external actors'. The manager continued: 'There is also the aspect, somewhere, that we take responsibility for, well, that it is an issue of inclusion in the Swedish society, as well. If you don't know the language, then it will become extremely difficult'. In my understanding, the most interesting point is not the statement that Swedish proficiency would be helpful for migrants to Sweden in getting access to qualified jobs and decent work (see, for example, Strömmer 2017; Wolgast and Wolgast 2021). What I find most interesting is how managers seemed to believe that a change of language practice would *automatically* follow from the language policy – and ultimately that workers would improve their Swedish skills because of this – although no language education was provided (compare with Lønsmann and Kraft 2018).

While the language policy appeared, from the perspectives of managers, as a sound solution to the two-fold issue of inclusion and foreign-born workers' limited opportunities for career development, this had seemingly not been a straightforward process. One of the managers told me 'I know that we, as managers, were a little worried in the beginning so that we wouldn't be like … labelled as being a certain type of person if we chose to bring it up [the focus on the Swedish language]'. I interpreted this as a fear of how workers would look upon the managers; that introducing the language policy entailed a risk for managers of being perceived as racist. In response, I asked the manager if it had been difficult to talk about the 'language issue' at the workplace. He replied:

> I don't think one should make it into a too-sensitive issue either. In your free time, you can of course speak whatever language you want, but in the workplace, we must agree on how we communicate with each other. Yeah, I believe it's a fairly natural part of today's working life; we come from so many different places, so there's nothing strange to talk about it, either.
>
> Interview, manager, 2022

While the manager told me about the fear of being perceived as a 'certain type of person' when they the language policy, he also seemed to feel like 'there's nothing strange' with language management given that 'we come from so many different places'. In theory, how the manager expressed that diversity means that 'we must agree on how we communicate with each other' at the workplace could likewise have been used as a supportive argument for encouraging a multilinguistic workplace. In practice, the opposite seemed to occur. It appeared to me as if diversity was used as an argument for a monolingual workplace, whereby Swedish was treated as the only viable option.

Team Leaders' Perceptions of the Language Policy

In practical terms, workers mentioned that those who spoke a language other than Swedish during work hours were supposed to receive warnings. Initially, they would receive a verbal warning, and then, they would receive a written warning if they repeatedly spoke a language other than Swedish. Team leaders, who were in between managers and workers in the organisational hierarchy and who spent most of their time on the warehouse floor, explained that they had been assigned the responsibility of providing warnings. One of the team leaders was critical of the fact that issuing warnings had been assigned to them: 'The managers should do that, I think. They must do that, not put it on us'. This team leader linked her critique to broader criticism concerning managers, who she found spent too much time in their offices and too little time 'out in the business' (see also Johansson et al. 2024). Another team leader described what she thought about the task of issuing warnings:

> *Team leader:*
>
> […] If someone would explain something to me in English, [for example] explain how a whole system on a phone like this works, then I would have quite a hard time understanding. So, then it would work perfectly if someone else explained in a language that I understand. That's where I'm a little torn. Because I let them do it [speak another language than Swedish], of course.
>
> *Researcher:*
>
> So, you don't report them, do you?
>
> *Team leader:*
>
> No, no. I've done it once, and it was when a whole group just talked, and then we had a Swedish girl who felt quite left out. And then I said that we should talk so that everyone understands each other. I know they didn't talk about her, but she wasn't part of the group. So, you might take on those fights.
>
> Interview, team leader, 2022

The citation above illustrates a clash between the team leader's job content and the team leader's knowledge that it might be best to allow workers to speak languages other than

Swedish. The team leader had issued a warning at a time when the language practice in a group had resulted in a worker feeling excluded, yet often she tended to let the use of languages other than Swedish go unnoticed as she realised the struggle for some workers to comprehend instructions in Swedish. What underpins this team leader's choice of actions seems to rest on a different logic than the language policy. The language policy had been introduced to create sameness, based on perceptions of diversity as a problem. The team leader, instead, seemed to already experience sameness despite the diversity. She did not find it strange that workers spoke another language than Swedish – it could as well have been her who had 'a hard time understanding' and who would ask a coworker to explain it in a language that she understood. What the team leader does when choosing not to report the workers, in my understanding, is that she positions herself as similar to the workers.

Workers' Perceptions of the Language Policy

Echoing managers and team leaders, many workers described that the language policy had been implemented to create inclusion. In one of the focus groups, workers agreed with why the language policy had been first introduced but their experiences of what it meant in practice varied:

> *Worker 1:*
>
> I think that it's really good. Because I've worked at places where it's been … it's going to be social divisions otherwise.
>
> *Researcher:*
>
> Do you have experience with it?
>
> *Worker 1:*
>
> Yes, yes, and the thing is that … I don't care if they sit in the coffee room, but otherwise, when you're in the work environment, I think that it's great.
>
> *Worker 2:*
>
> I also think it works. I usually talk to Katarina [who also works here] in our language about practical stuff in our private life, but not about work.
>
> *Worker 1:*
>
> Yeah, but then you end up standing around and talking, and that is the kind of stuff you should avoid. I have no idea that you are talking about your private stuff, so I think this is great to prevent someone from feeling badly treated.
>
> Focus group, workers, 2022

Here, the second worker explained that their partner also worked at the online retail warehouse. The two of them were born outside of Sweden and had learned Swedish as adults when they moved here. The worker expressed a distinction in language practice in that they and their partner usually talked in 'their language' when discussing private things and in Swedish when discussing work-related things. Workers in another focus group similarly explained that they used to mix the Swedish language

with Dari. They said that 'it is nice to speak with him in my mother tongue' and that 'I try to speak Swedish but sometimes there are words I don't understand in Swedish, or that he doesn't understand […] So, then we explain it in our mother tongue'. At the same time, they emphasised that they never spoke Dari when there was a third person around who did not know the language. These examples of people speaking other languages than Swedish at the workplace illustrate that a workplace language policy does not necessarily bring the intended change in language practice among employees (see Spolsky 2004). Another worker talked in similar terms about mixing languages:

> Ok, I know Arabic, and I want to sit next to a person who knows Arabic. No one sits next to us […] I want to speak Arabic, why should I speak Swedish if the person next to me knows Arabic?
>
> Focus group, workers, 2022

The situation this worker talked about was the lunch break and how he felt pressure to speak Swedish. He continued by saying that he was 'a little annoyed when it comes to the language policy.' I interpret what this worker said as exemplifying the normative position given to the Swedish language by the workplace language policy. Even though the policy formally refers to the language spoken during work hours, that is, mostly on the warehouse floor, this rule can be interpreted as a form of internalised control that goes beyond the spatial context of the warehouse floor to also cover time spent at the lunch table. Although there were no formal hindrances for this worker to speak Arabic at his lunch break, he still felt like he should not – as if it would be wrong to speak any other language than Swedish. It was implied by workers that languages had not always been managed in this way:

> *Worker 1:*
>
> I've been working here for quite a long time. And this is something I feel has been … You have worked here almost as many years as I [have]? [turning to worker 2]. It wasn't like this before […] This has only been around 3–4 months.
>
> *Researcher:*
>
> Aha, is that [right]?
>
> *Worker 2:*
>
> Yes, not before.
>
> *Worker 1:*
>
> Yeah, this has not been the case all the time. And then, I don't even experience that we've had any differences in where people are from, during these years, if you get what I mean? It's not been that it's previously been mostly Swedes or Swedish-speaking people. It's not that an Arabic-speaking group arrived 3–4 months ago. It's always been a mix; the [various] languages have always been spoken. […] So, I don't know, if it's that people have just started to feel excluded, if it's new employees, maybe. I don't know, but it has not always been like this.
>
> Focus group, workers, 2022

These workers did agree with the arguments behind the introduction of the language policy – that it would be a problem if a group of workers spoke a language that others around them did not understand and that Swedish language skills were important for

parts of the job. Yet they concluded that to have the workplace language policy 'does not feel good' and 'it's weird'. Thus, from their perspective, the Swedish language did not seem to be the main issue but what created feelings of unease among them seemed to be the focus that has been directed towards other languages than Swedish in recent times. Rather than encouraging Swedish language practice, it appears as it the language policy brought strangeness to non-Swedish languages.

Alternative Approaches to Language

Different from the online retail warehouse where the language policy had been implemented, language appeared to be perceived as less of an issue in the other two warehouses which have also been studied within the broader research project on which this article is based. The first online retail warehouse employed workers who, taken together, spoke a broad range of various languages. A team leader explained that they had been talking about languages at an evening shift when they had very little to do. She recalled, 'I think we were around 90–100 people on that shift, and I counted up to 35 languages'. At this online retail warehouse, there was a worker who neither spoke Swedish nor English. We were told that the language differences could make conversations between this worker and his managers slightly challenging, but a coworker who spoke the same language as the worker helped with interpretation when needed. In general, not knowing Swedish was described as a non-problem in the goods-handling process, given how easy the work tasks were.

At the second online retail warehouse, knowing a language other than Swedish was described as a 'bonus' among workers at the outgoing goods station, as it meant they could more easily communicate with the non-Swedish speaking drivers, whom the workers met at the gate to hand over the ready-packed wagons and wood pallets (Lønsmann and Kraft 2018 report similar findings). For the picking and packing tasks, limited skills in Swedish were described as a challenge, but organisational practices similarly seemed to 'cushion' the problems:

> We've had problems with some who speak Arabic and read in the wrong direction; it will be wrong then. That you read, yeah like this, it is on the shelf AB and then you read BA, then you'll take the wrong product […] But on the other hand, especially when we were working together with [another online retail warehouse] that has more foreign-born people, then we also had some [employees] who held job introductions in Arabic. So that those [Arab-speaking people] who were good at Swedish themselves could teach someone who spoke almost only Arabic. So, that has worked out well. We do not have those resources today, really […] it is about that too, of course, that you have someone who tells you in your language.
>
> Interview, manager, 2022

Here, the manager explains that the shelving system and picking routes are based on a reading of Latin letters from left to right, which meant that they had 'had problems' with workers who were accustomed to reading from right to left. I further observed that they had put A4 paper with the Latin alphabet on some of the picking wagons, which was explained to me as a form of support for those workers who are more familiar with the Arabic letters. How the manager expressed it in terms of these workers reading in the 'wrong direction' reflects the normativity of the Swedish language (implicitly reading in the 'right direction') and how it renders strangeness to non-Swedish languages (compare

with Ahmed 2000). However, what made this warehouse different from the warehouse where the language policy had been implemented was how language was dealt with. By offering job instructions in Arabic and using the Latin alphabet support, it seems that the organisation assigned itself the responsibility to meet the workers' varying skills in Swedish rather than placing the responsibility on the individual workers. This stands in contrast to how the Swedish language policy placed the responsibility on the individual workers to change their language practice (see also Nilsson 2016: 835).

Discussion

The title of this article – 'There's nothing strange' – is a quote from two of the interviews with managers when discussing the implementation of the Swedish-only language policy. My interest is not primarily in these individual managers, yet their statement is illustrative of the results of my study in two (related) ways, which I use to structure the discussion below.

First, the wording that 'there's nothing strange' illustrates, in my interpretation, a general perception among managers that the language policy is a non-issue – that is, that the language policy has little (or nothing) to do with racialisation. Racialisation does not concern language alone, but it often takes shape through a combination of aspects (see Barot and Bird 2001; Gans 2017). However, language has long mattered for how racialisation operates in Sweden. Sámi and Tornedalian people in Sweden bear a history of stigmatisation through language management (see, for example, Elenius 2002; Pietikäinen et al. 2010; Kokkola et al. 2019; Poromaa Isling 2020; Knobblock and Stubberud 2021). Recent political suggestions for proficiency in Swedish to be a requirement for Swedish citizenship (see SOU 2021: 2) illustrate that racialising through language also concerns people who have migrated here recently. At the studied warehouse, the language policy had been introduced to create linguistic sameness, yet it rather seemed to (re)produce differences through the making of non-Swedish languages appear as strange. Managers said the language policy communicated that 'our common language is Swedish' but what many seemed to hear was 'we must not speak non-Swedish languages'–a possible effect of how workers were supposed to be stopped by team leaders when talking, for example Dari or Arabic, rather than being encouraged when speaking Swedish. However, it was not the case that everyone had changed their language practice due to the language management (Spolsky 2004) and workers did still speak other languages than Swedish. On the one hand, workers who spoke non-Swedish languages were reminded that they do not 'belong' by the (threat of) warnings – or by being perceived by their managers as 'reading in the wrong direction'. On the other hand, they simultaneously did 'belong' just because they were (made) different than the normative Swedish-speaking worker (see Ahmed 2000; 2021). Findings from previous online retail warehouse studies imply that migrants make a desirable workforce, given the need for workers who (have little choice but to) accept the often-poor working conditions (see, for example, Alimahomed-Wilson 2019; Alimahomed-Wilson 2021; De Lara et al. 2016; Dörflinger et al. 2021; Kaminer 2018; Lindemann and Boyer 2019; Reese 2020). Strangers 'fit, not by being the standard, but by being defined in terms of their difference' (Ahmed 2000: 96) and the fit of strangers in online retail warehousing must be understood within a hierarchal framework where class and race/ethnicity serve to distinguish employers from employees.

Second, one of the managers followed their 'there's nothing strange' statement by a description of his familiarity with the 'inclusion' issue from his previous experiences in another work organisation, where there was also a variety of languages spoken among the workers and social divisions. This manager's comment brings us to the issues of spatio-temporality as implied by Ahmed (2000) when she explains that 'the figure of the "stranger" is produced not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as "a stranger"' (Ahmed 2000: 3; see also Marotta 2021). While this study focuses on warehouse workplaces, the racialisation of workers through language is not unique to online retail warehousing but it also applies to other industries. It is seen in how workers with limited skills in Swedish are working under poor working conditions (see, for example, Sohl 2021) and in how language proficiency can be required to obtain access to more privileged job positions (Strömmer 2017; Lønsmann and Mortensen 2018; Kraft 2019; Lønsmann 2020; Wolgast and Wolgast 2021). Furthermore, the political debate in Sweden on language and citizenship (see SOU 2021: 2) makes it seem plausible that the making of strangers through language norms in online retail warehouses not only reflects working life and the labour market but possibly also Sweden in broader terms. This possibility can also be read in light of the workers who experienced that the organisational focus on language has increased lately. 'I don't know, but it has not always been like this', as one worker concluded after noting that there had been a mix of languages spoken among workers for many years already, without such a strong, organisational focus on language disparities. Although a possible future of a strengthened making of strangers is made visible in the manager's statement that '[…] there is a point in being able to have [the language policy] cover the breaks', another future is possible by offering language education to workers when Swedish proficiency is needed for the job (see Lønsmann and Kraft 2018).

Conclusion

Based on a study of three online retail warehouses in Sweden, this article has explored the role of language in racialisation processes at the workplace. In particular, the article has studied managers, team leaders and workers perceptions and experiences of a Swedish language policy, which had been implemented to foster inclusion among workers speaking different languages. However, what the policy did was to create racialised divisions by assigning normalcy to Swedish language and strangeness to non-Swedish languages (see Ahmed 2000). Although it appears as if the language management did not necessarily affect the language practice at the workplace (see Spolsky 2004), it can still be understood as reflecting and reinforcing employers' control over the workforce. These issues do not appear in a vacuum but research findings from online retail warehouses elsewhere (see, for example, Alimahomed-Wilson 2019; Alimahomed-Wilson 2021; De Lara et al. 2016; Dörflinger et al. 2021; Kaminer 2018; Lindemann and Boyer 2019; Reese 2020) have demonstrated (undocumented) migrants, people of colour and other racialised groups of people make a desired workforce for companies. As shown in this article, language management can (re)produce such power relations.

Note

1. Swedish-born men represent 54per cent of managers in online retailing but only 37per cent of all employees in online retailing (Johansson, Rydström and Sardiello 2024).

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