

Department of English

Online Research Seminar

Migrant domestic workers' multicompetence, English-language proficiency and power at the workplace: The view from a migrant-owned, multilingual cleaning company in the United States



ILP : 1 UNIT (SEW)



12 February 2025 (Wednesday)



4:30pm–5:30pm

Speaker: Dr. Anne Ambler Schluter

Anne Ambler Schluter is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and Communication at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. In collaboration with Kellie Gonçalves, she is the co-author of *Domestic workers talk: Language use and social practices in a multilingual workplace* (Multilingual Matters, 2024), excerpts of which she will present in the talk. This work builds on previous studies about language, inequality, and global care work featured in the special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (Issue 262, guest edited by Gonçalves and Schluter, 2020). An engagement with this strand informs Schluter's current project about agency and linguistic entrepreneurship among Filipina domestic workers of Hong Kong, which is grounded in her broader research interests in the sociolinguistics of migration.

Zoom link:

<https://lingnan.zoom.us/j/93177947736?pwd=hPluInUb37NRjRCQ3CiSl6gBWOpYiy.1>

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Abstract

Set in a multilingual cleaning company that serves Anglophone customers in the affluent suburbs of New York City, this presentation focuses on an ethnographic study into power, language policy, and communication among the company's Hispanophone and Lusophone employees. Against the backdrop of the vast literature that acknowledges both the global prestige of English (Cf. Crystal 2000; Holborow 2007; Mufwene 2013) in addition to its nationally and regionally prestigious statuses in this study's setting (Cf. De Swaan 2001), the results' emphasis on the linguistic capital of the dominant company-internal language (Portuguese) – rather than English – is noteworthy. Customer-employee interactions, which build on the mutually negotiated deployment of multimodal communicative resources, further diminish the importance of English-language competence. Moreover, the adeptness of workers at co-constructing a shared situational meaning with customers by tapping into these resources determines the extent to which they can act autonomously from their employer, highlighting a connection between a type of multicompetence (Cook, 2016) and individual power. These findings provide a U.S.-based, blue-collar contribution, which, in line with a growing number of blue-collar-focused studies (Cf. Sherman and Homoláč, 2020), contrast with the tendency to converge toward English as a lingua franca at white-collar workplaces (Kleifgen, 2013).