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Words that work: multilingual repertoires and survival-oriented linguistic capital among interstate migrant construction workers in an informal labour economy

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ABSTRACT

Labour migration has transformed many workplaces into multilingual environments; however, research has largely focused on formal organisational settings and language barriers rather than on how workers actively navigate linguistic diversity in informal labour economies. This study explores how interstate migrant construction workers in Kerala develop and mobilise multilingual repertoires in Malayalam-dominant workplaces. Data were generated through in-depth interviews with 18 migrant construction workers and were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes were identified: linguistic bricolage as daily survival, language as workplace capital, language brokerage and unequal access, gendered linguistic experiences, and language, belonging, and shifting insider/outsider positions. The findings show that workers rely on flexible combinations of language fragments, gestures, observation, visual resources, and peer support to navigate workplace communication and everyday life. Language has emerged as both a communicative resource and a form of workplace capital, shaping access to information, employment continuity, and participation. The findings suggest that multilingual repertoires operate as survival-oriented linguistic capital under conditions of precarity and limited institutional language support. The study contributes to multilingualism scholarship by advancing the understanding of language, labour, and belonging in informal migrant labour economies of the Global South.

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Introduction

Contemporary labour migration has transformed workplaces into increasingly multilingual environments in which communication routinely occurs across diverse linguistic backgrounds. This is especially true for labour-intensive industries such as construction, manufacturing, transport and logistics, agriculture, and domestic work, where workers do not share a common first language (Fellows, Phua, and Tutt 2022; Lønsmann 2023). With increasing flexibility in the labour market, language has become a central part of workplace communication, access to information,

integration into the workplace, and social inclusion (Canagarajah 2020; Lønsmann and Kraft 2018). The multilingual workplace has thus become a key space for understanding the relationship among language, labour mobility, and social inequalities.

Studies on multilingualism in the workplace have grown dramatically during the last decade. However, most of this research has focused on formal organisational contexts or has taken the deficit perspective of studying communication challenges, workplace safety issues, loss of productivity, and integration challenges (Alsamadani et al. 2013; Kraft 2019). These studies have revealed significant issues, but they have not sufficiently focused on the migrant worker's active role in everyday communication practices in multilingual work environments. It is crucial to understand these communicative strategies, as language influences not only how people communicate in the workplace but also access to employment opportunities, safety information, recognition, and participation in labour markets.

Internal labour migration in India is one of the largest labour mobility systems in the world, with millions of workers migrating across state borders to find jobs (Bowers 2021; Parihar and Singh 2025). Kerala has a unique place in this context, as the state has always faced out-migration, demographic shifts, and labour shortages, which have led to increasing reliance on interstate migrant labour, especially in the construction industry (Ali 2023; Aswani and Bhat 2022). While state-level initiatives such as the Changathi programme and the recognition of migrants as 'athithi thozhilali' ('guest workers') show the general focus of migrant welfare support (Kumar 2025; Rajan and Sumeetha 2020), multilingualism in the informal construction sector is largely dependent on the individual practices of the migrants themselves and a lack of language support in workplaces (Ali 2023; Peter, Sanghvi, and Narendran 2020).

Although there is an increasing amount of research on migration in Kerala, the linguistic aspects of migrant workers' everyday experiences at the workplace have not been adequately explored. While studies on workplace multilingualism have been carried out mainly in Europe, North America, and a few Gulf countries, multilingual labour environments in the Global South have been under-researched (Bylund, Khafif, and Berghoff 2023; Theodoropoulou 2019). Likewise, the study of interstate migration in Kerala has mainly been conducted in the domains of labour markets, welfare, and social integration, and little research has been done on the negotiation of multilingualism by migrant workers in the informal sector. An analysis of these experiences can be used to gain an understanding of the functionality of the language as a communicative tool, as a resource for the workplace, and as a way of determining participation and belonging in multilingual labour settings.

In this context, the present study aims to understand the strategies employed by interstate migrant construction workers to form and mobilise multilingual repertoires in Malayalam-dominant workplaces. The study is based on in-depth interviews that were analysed using thematic analysis to explore workers' experiences of negotiating communication in everyday practice, as well as the ways language facilitates or hinders access to workplace opportunities, and how communicative mediation is negotiated; similarly, to understand how multilingual experiences impact on social participation and belonging. The study expands the scope of the research into the multilingualism of workplaces into an informal labour economy in which multilingualism is also linked to internal migration and a lack of institutional provision of languages, and proposes the concept of survival-oriented linguistic capital as a way of understanding how multilingual repertoires can become functional resources for participation, livelihood, and recognition in precarious conditions. This helps to advance the wider debate on language, labour, and inequality and provides insights for workplace language support, migrant welfare, and occupational inclusion.

Literature review

Today, workplaces are increasingly multilingual, with communication regularly taking place across diverse linguistic backgrounds, especially within labour-intensive industries such as construction,

manufacturing, logistics, and agriculture (Fellows, Phua, and Tutt 2022; Lønsmann 2023). Initial studies on multilingualism at work mostly relied on a deficit approach that saw multilingualism as an issue of communication failures, accidents at work, loss of productivity, and problems of integration in the organisation (Kraft 2019; Kaushik, Walsh, and Haefele 2016; Roberts 2010). While these studies pinpointed the salient dangers in the workplace, they tended to focus on the migrant worker's lack of something rather than how that migrant worker negotiated communication in a multilingual setting. Recent research has focused on the multilingual worker as an active communicator who will skilfully use the linguistic and semiotic resources at their disposal to complete workplace tasks even if their language skills are unequal (Canagarajah 2020; 2021; Kahlin et al. 2021; Wilmot 2024).

This is captured in the notion of multilingual repertoires, a perspective that views communication as the flexible mobilisation of all kinds of linguistic and semiotic resources instead of complete mastery of distinct and discrete languages (Blommaert and Backus 2013). From this point of view, multilingual competence arises from engaging in everyday social and workplace interactions and includes partial language knowledge, gestures, observation, demonstration, material artifacts, and digital technologies (Theodoropoulou 2019; Cenoz and Gorter 2021; Heltai and Tarsoly 2023). Communication is therefore identified as a situated social practice in which workers integrate the resources they have to attain mutual understanding in specific contexts. This approach is especially relevant for the construction industry, where much communication can rely on embodied action, demonstration, tools, and visual cues, as well as on the spoken language (Canagarajah 2021). However, repertoire-based approaches do not consider the use of improvised communication as a sign of linguistic lack, but rather as a valid expression of the multilingual competence that is built up in the course of daily work and social life.

Multilingual repertoire theory can be used to understand how communication is achieved, but it is less concerned with how and why specific linguistic resources become valued in the labour markets. The concept of linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991; Xie and Peltokorpi 2022) attempts to answer this question, as language is viewed as a symbolic and social capital whose value is contingent upon its legitimisation in specific social fields (Barakos and Selleck 2019; Susen 2013). In the workplace, the level of competence in the majority language may influence access to jobs, power, and access to information and decision-making of workers (Lauring, Vulchanov, and Stoermer 2023). However, besides language proficiency, migration histories, social networks, and labour market structures play a role in the value of linguistic capital (Kahlin et al. 2021; Nimer and Rottmann 2021). The current use of linguistic capital has largely been in formal organisational contexts in which the competence of a language is acknowledged in institutions via institutional policies or professional qualifications. However, less research has focused on informal labour economies, such as precarious work and verbal negotiation without a strong institutional language support, where language can be used to help workers find employment, negotiate wages, access safety information, and live their daily lives (Grünhage-Monetti and Braddell 2019).

Language brokerage also plays a role in communication in multilingual workplaces, where bilingual or multilingual employees serve as intermediaries between people who do not speak a shared language (Kraft 2019; Orellana 2009; Reyes 2019). Brokerage goes beyond word translation, to the way expectations, technical instructions, safety procedures, and employment conditions are communicated in the workplace (Fellows and Phua 2025; Silla et al. 2020). While brokerage enables participation, it can also entail the reproduction of communicative inequalities, as access to information in the workplace, wages, or decision-making processes relies on brokerage and not on communication itself (Long, Cunningham, and Braithwaite 2013; Söderlundh and Keevallik 2022). These dynamic interactions are especially relevant in informal labour contexts where interpersonal relations play a key role in communication, rather than written organisational language supports (Kraft 2019; Ciuk, Śliwa, and Harzing 2022). Linguistic resources access is also influenced by the wider social circumstances. It has become evident in recent research that opportunities to acquire and use workplace languages can vary depending on migration history, social position,

and gender (Bar-Haim and Birgier 2024; Söderlundh and Keevallik 2022; Zhao, Zhao, and Liu 2022). For example, migrant women tend to have more limited mobility and fewer chances to engage in the informal, public settings where dominant workplace languages are picked up (Mavisakalyan and Weber 2017). Thus, multilingual competence is not only a result of an individual learning process but also a result of unequal access to communicative opportunities that are part of a larger social structure.

Nevertheless, there are significant gaps in these theoretical advances. Research on workplace multilingualism has mostly taken place in Europe, North America, and some Gulf states, with multilingual workplaces in the Global South relatively under-researched (Bylund, Khafif, and Berghoff 2023; Theodoropoulou 2019; Léglise 2022). Similarly, while interstate migration is now at the heart of Kerala's working class, there is little research that considers how migrant construction workers build and mobilise multilingual resources in the Malayalam-dominated workplace (Ali 2023; Rajan and Sumeetha 2020). Existing research has also tended to focus on multilingual repertoires, linguistic capital, language brokerage, and gender separately, and there is little research on the interplay of these processes in informal labour economies with precarious employment and limited institutional language support and access to workplace opportunities. This study brings together these complementary views to study language as a communicative resource, a component of workplace capital, a medium of mediated access, and a way of accessing participation and belonging among interstate migrant construction workers in Kerala.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do interstate migrant construction workers navigate multilingual communication in Malayalam-dominant workplaces?

RQ2. How does language shape workers' access to workplace opportunities, information, and participation?

RQ3. How do multilingual experiences shape workers' sense of belonging and integration in the host environment?

Methodology

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative design within an interpretivist paradigm to examine the experiences of interstate migrant construction workers navigating language diversity in informal labour settings. Given the focus on participants' lived experiences, meaning-making, and everyday communicative practices, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was adopted (Braun and Clarke 2019). RTA enables the exploration of shared patterns of meaning without imposing predetermined categories.

Study context and participants

This study was conducted in Kerala, India, a major destination for internal labour migration. The construction industry is linguistically diverse, with workers from various Indian states working across multiple language boundaries. Malayalam is the predominant language of Kerala, while the term *Malayali* refers to the people of Kerala and their associated linguistic and cultural identity. Within construction workplaces, Malayalam holds particular communicative value in interactions with local contractors, supervisors, workers, and clients. Migrant workers, however, bring diverse linguistic repertoires, including Hindi, Bengali, Bhojpuri, Odia, Assamese, and Sadri. Their interaction creates an asymmetrical multilingual environment in which Malayalam facilitates engagement with local workplace networks, while Hindi and other migrant languages support peer communication, mediation, and language brokerage. In the absence of formal workplace language support, construction sites provide a valuable context for examining multilingual communication

and linguistic adaptation. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling and supplemented by snowball sampling. Eligibility criteria included interstate migrant workers employed in construction, aged 18 years or older, and willing to participate in the study. Eighteen migrant workers participated in the study. The participants came from Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Assam, with mother tongues including Bhojpuri, Hindi, Bengali, Odia, Assamese, and Sadri. There were 15 male and 3 female participants, aged 21–48 years. The duration of stay in Kerala that the respondents had experienced varied from 1 to 12 years, allowing for analysis of recent and long-term migration experiences. Table 1 presents the detailed characteristics of the participants.

Data collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted from February to March 2026 to gather data. The interview protocol was developed to elicit migration histories, language repertoire, communication strategies, language learning histories, perceived inclusion/exclusion, and the role of language in accessing workplace opportunities. The interviews were conducted as usual and lasted between 30 and 45 min, with participants consenting to audio recording. In addition, field notes were kept that recorded contextual observations, nonverbal communication, and researcher reflections.

Interviews were conducted flexibly in various combinations of Malayalam, Hindi, English, and/or local languages, as feasible given the study population's multilingualism. Participants were able to express their experiences in a language and culture that was comfortable for them. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim; non-English portions were translated into English, while the meaning of culturally specific expressions and other contextual meanings was preserved.

Data analysis

The six-phase Braun and Clarke (2019) approach to reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts and familiarisation with the participants' narratives. Initial codes were then generated inductively across the data with the

Table 1. Participant characteristics and linguistic backgrounds (N = 18).

ID	Age	Gender	State of origin	Mother tongue	Other languages	Years in Kerala	Occupation
P01	24	Male	Bihar	Bhojpuri	Hindi, Malayalam	2	Construction Helper
P02	31	Male	Bihar	Hindi	Bhojpuri, Malayalam	6	Mason Helper
P03	27	Male	West Bengal	Bengali	Hindi, Malayalam	4	Painter
P04	38	Male	Odisha	Odia	Hindi, Malayalam	8	Steel Fixer
P05	29	Female	West Bengal	Bengali	Hindi	5	Construction Helper
P06	22	Male	Assam	Assamese	Hindi	1	Construction Labourer
P07	45	Male	Bihar	Bhojpuri	Hindi, Malayalam	10	Tile Worker
P08	35	Female	Odisha	Odia	Hindi	7	Construction Helper
P09	33	Male	Jharkhand	Sadri	Hindi, Malayalam	5	Electrician Helper
P10	28	Male	Uttar Pradesh	Hindi	Malayalam	3	Scaffolding Worker
P11	41	Male	Bihar	Bhojpuri	Hindi, Malayalam	9	Carpenter Helper
P12	24	Female	Assam	Assamese	Hindi	2	Construction Helper
P13	30	Male	West Bengal	Bengali	Hindi, Malayalam	4	Construction Labourer
P14	36	Male	Odisha	Odia	Hindi, Malayalam	7	Mason
P15	21	Male	Bihar	Bhojpuri	Hindi	1	Daily Wage Labourer
P16	39	Female	West Bengal	Bengali	Hindi, Malayalam	8	Construction Helper
P17	26	Male	Uttar Pradesh	Hindi	Malayalam	3	Welder Helper
P18	48	Male	Odisha	Odia	Hindi, Malayalam	12	Senior Construction Worker

Note: Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. State of origin, mother tongue, years in Kerala, and occupation were based on self-reported interview data. 'Other languages' refers to languages participants reported using or understanding in the workplace and everyday communication. The table is intended to contextualise participants' multilingual backgrounds rather than to indicate formal language proficiency.

following emphases: communication practices, language learning, workplace participation, access to opportunities, and experiences of inclusion/exclusion.

Data management, coding, and organisation of analytic materials were supported by NVivo 14 software. As set out in the principles of Reflexive Thematic Analysis, NVivo was used as an aid to data organisation rather than as an analytical process. After initial coding, similar codes were grouped into thematic categories, which were then iteratively checked against coded extracts and the full dataset. Themes were defined and named to reflect broader patterns of shared meanings through ongoing refinement. This process yielded five themes that shed light on the function of multilingual repertoires as 'survival-oriented linguistic capital' in informal labour contexts: (1) Linguistic Bricolage as Daily Survival; (2) Language as Workplace Capital; (3) Language Brokerage and Unequal Access; (4) Gendered Linguistic Experiences; and (5) From Outsider to Insider: Language, Belonging, and Integration.

Reflexivity and research quality

In line with Braun and Clarke (2019), the researchers recognised their role in constructing knowledge and themes. The second and fifth authors are from Kerala and are fluent in Malayalam, while the fifth author, who conducted the interviews, is also fluent in Hindi. This linguistic and cultural familiarity facilitated communication and contextual understanding but also positioned the researchers closer to the locally dominant linguistic context than many migrant participants. This linguistic asymmetry was considered reflexively during data collection and interpretation, with particular attention to participants' preferred linguistic expressions and contextual meanings. Reflexive notes documented analytic choices, tentative interpretations, and researcher assumptions. Rather than relying on inter-coder reliability, the study prioritised analytical rigour through prolonged engagement with the data, an iterative process of theme development, reflexive transparency, and rich contextual interpretation, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Ethical considerations

This study followed the ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Ethical approval was obtained from the Marian College Kuttikkanam Autonomous Institutional Ethics Review Board (MCKA/IERB/2601-07). The participants were provided with information regarding the study's aims, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any stage without consequences, and the measures in place to ensure confidentiality and data protection. All participants provided written informed consent before the data were collected. All participants were allocated pseudonymous codes (P01-P18), and all personally identifiable information was de-identified from the transcripts and reports. Given the precarious employment conditions of migrant workers, particular care was taken to ensure that participation posed no personal or occupational risk. Audio recordings, transcripts, and research materials were kept secure and used only by the research team.

Results

The reflexive thematic analysis yielded five interrelated themes that provide a deeper understanding of how interstate migrant construction workers in Kerala experience multilingual workplaces and negotiate linguistic differences in their day-to-day working lives. Participants reported that they arrived at the construction site with low or no proficiency in Malayalam and encountered a multilingual communication environment with unequal access to information in the workplace. However, language was not just a barrier, but a dynamic social resource that influenced participation in the workplace, access to opportunities, interpersonal relations, and wider experiences of belonging. In narratives, workers talked about learning pragmatic communication strategies such as using

bits of various languages, observing, imitating, and using gestures. Meanwhile, language skills were linked to higher levels of recognition, job responsibility, and access to information in the workplace. However, these opportunities were not always equal and involved workers using informal language brokers to facilitate communication with the contractor and/or supervisor. The women's narratives also indicated the role of gender in opportunities for language learning and participation in the workplace. Language learning was not perceived as a formal learning activity in itself, but rather as a social trajectory that eventually leads workers to a better sense of confidence, participation, and integration, as seen in their stories.

Theme 1: linguistic bricolage as daily survival

The participants' narratives highlighted that communication in multilingual construction sites was not only related to shared language proficiency but rather to the flexible mobilisation of multilingual and multimodal resources. Most of the workers did not know Malayalam or knew very little, while supervisors, contractors, engineers, and local workers mostly talked in Malayalam. Workers were not excluded, but used bits of language, gestures, observation, visual cues, and repeated contact situations on the job to carry out tasks and reduce misunderstandings.

Observation was the first means of communication for many of the new workers. Rather than passive imitation, observing experienced workers became an active process of learning. P15 explained:

It's just looking at what they do and if I don't know, asking another worker, sometimes I have to have the supervisor show me the job and I get it.

Many people were confident in their participation before they were confident in their language. Workers suffered from not learning the Malayalam language before they became productive and instead interpreted the meaning from body language, work sequences, demonstration, and the practices of experienced workers. P06 and P12 also referred to learning by watching, imitating, and clarifying from trusted co-workers, suggesting that language learning is not an outcome of formal learning but of everyday work.

Multimodal communication was also used extensively by the participants. Everyday communication in the workplace involved gestures, pointing, drawing, pictures, and demonstrations. P17 explained:

I use hand signs, photos, drawings on the floor or wall; drawing a line or marking the place helps a lot for welding work.

Similarly, P11 noted:

If you don't know the words of the instructions, the drawing tells you what to do in the carpentry field.

In these accounts, workers found that they needed to use a mix of verbal, demonstrative, photographic, and visual validation to minimise uncertainties, especially in skilled construction tasks.

Over time, workers developed functional Malayalam repertoires centred on workplace tasks and everyday interactions. As P14 explained:

I knew what the words sand, cement, water, brick, wall, and floor meant; I learned how to talk to the shopkeepers and bus conductors, and the words fast, wait, and finish.

Likewise, P02, P04, and P13 reported that they learned Malayalam by exposure to construction sites, tea shops, buses, and local markets. Language learning was thus restricted, instrumental, and related to daily life in the workplace and community.

Overall, communication relied on flexible multilingual repertoires combining language fragments, gestures, visual resources, and workplace experience, enabling workers to participate despite minimal institutional language support.

Theme 2: language as workplace capital

Participants described language as more than a means of communication; it shaped access to responsibility, recognition, wage negotiation, and workplace participation. Workers with functional Malayalam communicated directly with contractors, coordinated work more effectively, and participated more actively in workplace decision-making. Therefore, language functioned as a form of workplace capital within the informal labour hierarchy.

This was especially true for workers who had been in Kerala for a longer time and had slowly acquired the Malayalam language through their interactions at workplaces. P14 explained:

Contractors call you back for work if you know Malayalam because they feel it is easy to communicate. Sometimes they give more responsibility because you can guide other workers also.

This account shows that language enhances employability beyond technical skills by improving coordination and reducing workplace misunderstandings. Informal authority was also a factor related to language ability. P18 reflected:

Sometimes I am asked to teach new people since I can communicate with them both and language gives responsibility.

Experienced multilingual workers frequently acted as informal intermediaries between supervisors and newly arrived migrants, becoming valued communication resources despite lacking formal authority.

The participants also linked the skill of Malayalam with increased economic empowerment. Workers who had learned functional Malayalam reported that they were able to interact directly with the contractors on employment conditions and wages, and not through an intermediary. As P18 explained:

Earlier I was dependent on others and now talk to people, regarding wage rates and working conditions.

Direct communication enabled workers to clarify employment conditions, negotiate wages, and participate more confidently in workplace discussions. Workplace recognition was also found to be related to language proficiency. P07 explained:

Language, many times, creates opportunities – you can communicate with the migrant workers and the local clients.

Equally, P11 said that the ability to communicate was vital for carpentry as there were always things to be discussed and measurements to take, including design changes and client preferences. These accounts report that language was not a substitute for technical knowledge but rather helped workers show and coordinate their expertise.

However, the availability of these benefits was not uniform. Those who had longer migration experiences were more likely to have opportunities to learn Malayalam through ongoing workplace and community engagement and to translate language proficiency into job security, job responsibility, and recognition. Newer migrants, on the other hand, continued to be more reliant on others until they had comparable communicative resources.

The participants' accounts indicate that Malayalam language skills played a significant role as a resource in the workplace and influenced access to employment, responsibility, recognition, and greater participation in multilingual construction sites.

Theme 3: language brokerage and unequal access

Participants' narratives showed that multilingual construction sites functioned largely through informal language brokerage. When there was no formal language support, communication relied on workers who knew more Malayalam to act as arbitrators between the contractors, supervisors, and newly arrived migrant workers. These brokers helped newcomers navigate the workplace by

translating work instructions, pay details, and safety information. However, brokerage extended beyond communication; it also shaped unequal access to information, authority, and workplace participation.

Language brokers were often the main source of communication for new workers at work. P01 explained:

If I still do not understand I ask another worker who knows Malayalam.

Likewise, P06 used his uncle and older employees to understand workplace instructions and expectations. Brokerage was therefore part of the daily communication at the workplace, and many new entrants communicated with supervisors mainly via experienced coworkers. Those who had learnt functional Malayalam slowly took over brokerage jobs. P18 explained:

Sometimes they ask me to explain instructions to new workers because I can speak with both groups.

Language gives responsibility.

P14 shared similar experiences of helping new Odia workers. Brokerage went beyond translation to explicate technical tasks, workplace norms, and safety procedures. The movement of workers between Malayalam and migrant languages led to the emergence of informal communication links within the workplace, who gained extra authority, albeit without formal managerial ranks.

There was a special role for brokerage in the negotiation of wages, overtime, and working conditions. Team leaders or more senior workers were often used as a vehicle to convey messages to contractors. P10 explained:

Usually, our team leader talks with the contractor. He understands Malayalam better than us. Most workers depend on him.

Similarly, P09 reflected:

Well, I don't talk directly much about wages, I feel I cannot argue directly as my Malayalam is weak.

There is a significant contradiction in these accounts. Brokers mediated access to economically important information, but they also helped to communicate. Employment opportunities, overtime rates, deductions, etc. were mediated by these intermediaries who were less fluent in Malayalam, resulting in a communicative hierarchy based on language proficiency instead of information access.

Language brokerage was also a major factor in conveying safety information, especially in very dangerous jobs such as scaffolding, welding, electrical work, and steel fixing. Routine checking of experienced workers before technical tasks. This minimised misunderstandings and potential work-site hazards but also revealed a systemic issue with multilingual construction sites: the responsibility for ensuring effective safety communication was placed on the employees. Thus, brokerage served as a protective measure and a sign of low institutional language support.

However, the participants considered brokerage as more than dependency. Some of the more experienced workers spoke about assisting the newcomers as a show of solidarity and shared migration experiences. As P07 reflected:

Before I was helped, I was helping others; now I am helping others.

These informal support networks helped experienced migrants lessen newcomers' uncertainty, smooth their transition into the workplace, and, in some cases, highlight the lack of formal multilingual communication systems.

Overall, language brokerage played a key role in the operation of multilingual construction sites. It facilitated communication and engagement in the workplace and reinforced inequities in access to information, authority, and decision-making. Thus, brokerage became a vital means of survival in the workplace and an important means by which communicative inequality was structured in multilingual informal workplaces.

Theme 4: gendered linguistic experiences

Participants described multilingual experiences as strongly shaped by gender. Men commonly learned Malayalam through everyday interactions in workplaces and public spaces, whereas women reported fewer opportunities because of restricted mobility and greater reliance on family members or coworkers. Language learning therefore reflected gendered access to social interaction rather than individual effort.

The language-learning experiences of women revolved around their own limited mobility. P05 explained:

For us, it's difficult, because for a girl there is not much space to go outside from the room to work and back, so we have less chance to learn Malayalam; for the boys, they go outside, they learn more.

Similarly, P08 observed:

For me, as a female, it is hard to learn the language because I do not go out much. Men learn faster because they talk to many people.

These inequalities have not only been seen in language learning but also in participation in the workplace and economic voice. Women often relied on husbands, group leaders, or senior workers to ensure that the contractors knew about wages and working conditions. As P05 explained:

Usually, my husband or the group leader talks to the contractor. I only know how much I will get per day after they tell me.

Women often received wage information indirectly, limiting their opportunities to negotiate or participate directly in workplace decisions. Language was also associated with autonomy and self-representation. P16 reflected:

Women who know the Malayalam language are able to solve their problems themselves, talk to the supervisor, ask for leave, explain their family situation, and explain the matter of the payment. Language is independence.

Language was not just a communication device but helped women assert themselves, speak directly to supervisors, and interact with them with greater confidence.

Despite limited learning opportunities, women actively developed multilingual repertoires through observation, trusted relationships, and digital resources. P12 explained:

When I see other workers, I take a close look at them. I also quietly ask questions to trusted workers, sometimes I store Malayalam words in my phone and practice them later.

P05 also spoke of learning from seeing and playing with children in the neighbourhood. These accounts illustrate how women constructed language using cautious, relational, and self-directed strategies in the context of everyday social life.

Children were also identified as significant language resources in migrant families. P16 explained:

My children also help me, they go to school in Aluva and can speak Malayalam much better than I can, sometimes they teach me new words at home.

Children learned Malayalam in school and from their peers and became informal language brokers in the families, helping to spread multilingual learning beyond the workplace into family life.

Overall, women's multilingual experiences were shaped by restricted mobility and fewer opportunities for informal language learning. Nevertheless, participants actively developed multilingual repertoires through observation, family networks, and digital resources, demonstrating that access to linguistic capital was structured by gendered social opportunities rather than individual motivation.

Theme 5: language, belonging, and shifting insider/outsider positions

Participants' narratives described language learning as a gradual transition from silence, uncertainty, and dependence towards confidence, participation, and, for some, mentorship. Proficiency in Malayalam or giving up native languages was not related to integration. Instead, the workers spoke of developing functional multilingual repertoires, which helped them to become more confident in their workplace, public space, and daily life contexts. Language learning thus constituted not only a communicative process but also a social change from outsider to more active involvement in the multilingual communities of Kerala.

Uncertainty and low participation in the early stages of migration were common. P15 explained:

Sometimes people know and begin to work, and I am still struggling with what they said. If you ask me, I don't want to be perceived as slow.

The following story demonstrates that language barriers went beyond understanding and into workers' feelings of abilities and confidence. Most new arrivals were silent, afraid of embarrassment, and language was a barrier to full participation in the workplace. P12 also reported feeling left out of 'informal chats' as follows:

At times, everyone is talking and laughing, and I don't know what they're saying, I hear it, but I can't participate in the conversation, it makes me feel like I am not part of the group.

This indicates that language not only influenced work-related communication but also workers' emotional relationships with each other and their sense of belonging within everyday social communication, as described in these narratives.

Language and accent were also reported as signs of migrants' identity. P13 said that migrant workers were often called 'Bengali' even if they were not from Bengal, and P09 explained why he was not happy about being referred to as such because of his Hindi language. Linguistic distinctions thus became social markers that reproduced the differences between local and migrant workers.

However, participants reported a progressive decrease in this sense of distance over time. Functional Malayalam allowed workers to communicate without the need for an interpreter, travel, seek medical help at local hospitals and public services, and interact confidently with local people. As P16 reflected:

Before, I felt left out. Now I understand much more than before, so the feeling is less.

Similarly, P13 shared that he was able to go to hospitals and government institutions on his own after learning the Malayalam language. Thus, language learning helped to diminish both the barriers to communication and anxiety and dependence in daily mobility.

Language for longer-settled workers became strongly linked to confidence and a sense of belonging. P02 explained:

Learning Malayalam has really helped me; initially I didn't know anything about Kerala but now I can speak to the shopkeepers, locals, even my colleagues at work. It's made me more comfortable in my stay here.

Likewise, P07 reflected:

Language change my life in Kerala, it helped me to make friends, helped me to get a better job, and feel comfortable in society. When we learn the local language we can be independent.

As these accounts demonstrate, belonging was not only a result of the complete assimilation of the language but also repeated communicative interactions. Migrants persisted in using the languages of their communities (Bengali, Odia, Hindi, Bhojpuri, Assamese, and Sadri) and also adopted Malayalam as a second language to engage with local communities. Thus, it was essentially a multilingual process of moving from outsider to insider. Some veteran workers also shared their experiences of transitioning from language learners to language resources for others. P18 explained:

Sometimes when I see new workers with the same problem, I feel their problem, I often give work instructions in Hindi and Odia so that they get it well.

Workers developed multilingual experience and took on the roles of interpreter, guide, and informal mentor for newcomers. Language skills thus not only created personal mobility but also new types of responsibilities and support within migrant networks.

However, this transition was not equal. Newer migrants still relied on more experienced migrants, and women reported slower language acquisition due to fewer opportunities for public interaction. Longing insecurity over accent or non-standard Malayalam was occasionally noted even among experienced workers. Belonging was thus a negotiated (and partial) process, dependent on a series of participations, communicative competence, and social recognition.

The participants' narratives reveal that language learning served as a temporal trajectory whose aim was to renegotiate the migrant workers' position in the multilingual labour landscape in Kerala. Over time, functional multilingual repertoires shifted silence to participation, dependence to confidence, and for a few, newcomers to mentors. This shift from outsider to insider thus highlighted not only the acquisition of the language but also identity, agency, and belonging in multilingual informal contexts of work.

Discussion

Beyond language barriers: multilingual repertoires and survival-oriented linguistic capital

Much of the existing literature has understood language as a blockage that prevents migrant workers from engaging in multilingual workplaces and has highlighted communication failures, safety concerns, and migrants' lack of ability to communicate in the dominant language of the workplace (Fellows, Phua, and Tutt 2022; Roberts 2010). Although these issues were apparent in the current study, the results show that these issues offer a limited understanding of multilingual experiences in the workplace. Instead of being restricted by the limitations of language, migrant construction workers actively constructed communicative repertoires that included bits of Malayalam, Hindi, Bengali, Odia, gestures, observation, demonstration, visual resources, mobile technologies, and peer support. Communication thus came to be regarded as a multimodal and situated process that allowed workers to participate despite a lack of a common language.

These findings align with repertoire and translanguaging approaches that view multilingual communication as the flexible use of linguistic and semiotic resources, not necessarily mastery of a language (Blommaert and Backus 2013; Canagarajah 2020; 2021). The current study builds on this literature by demonstrating how multilingual repertoires serve as pragmatic tools for employment, error avoidance, managing daily interactions, and maintaining workplace engagement in informal work contexts where institutional language support is limited. The findings indicate that, in informal labour markets, these repertoires are a key part of how the labour market operates rather than merely being used to communicate, although other studies have reported similar communicative practices in multilingual construction settings (Fellows, Phua, and Tutt 2022; Theodoropoulou 2019).

Drawing on these results, we suggest the notion of survival-oriented linguistic capital to account for the context-specific nature of multilingual repertoires in informal labour economies. The present findings reveal that linguistic capital was not exercised for symbolic and material gains, as theorised by Bourdieu (1991), but rather through everyday practice. Functional Malayalam, along with other communicative materials, helped workers comprehend instructions at work, negotiate for a better rate of pay, mitigate the need for go-betweens, utilise public services, and better engage in workplace and community life. Linguistic capital therefore becomes survival-oriented when it is that of multilingual and multimodal repertoires that allow workers to ensure participation, safety, and livelihood in moments of labour precarity.

This concept builds on repertoire-based and translanguaging approaches and shows that multilingual creativity emerges in unequal labour relations and is sometimes a critical component of participation, safety, and livelihood. In contrast to the deficit perspective, it focuses on the communicative resources that migrant workers actively build and engage with, and on the structures that require them to be resourceful.

Language, power, communicative inequality, and gendered agency

Results show that multilingual repertoires were not equally distributed among workers but were used as forms of workplace power. Workers with functional Malayalam were able to communicate directly with contractors, negotiate wages, coordinate work, and access information and knowledge, whereas limited Malayalam resulted in a dependency of more experienced workers. Language thus not only served as a resource for communication but also as a form of capital in the workplace, determining access to responsibility, recognition, and decision-making. This helps confirm previous studies that demonstrated that language skills affect the extent of participation in the labour market and the position in social life in multilingual workplaces (Lønsmann and Kraft 2018; Xie and Peltokorpi 2022). The findings of the present study, however, reveal that in informal labour economies, language capital is created in daily interactions and not through formal organisational language policies.

One of the main findings is the contribution of informal language brokers to the maintenance of multi-lingual workplaces. Skilled employees regularly translated instructions, acted as a liaison for communications with contractors, interpreted safety information, and assisted new migrants. While workplace brokerage is found in multilingual organisations (Kahlin et al. 2021; Söderlundh and Keevallik 2022), the present findings indicate that in informal construction environments, brokerage turns into an integral organisational resource instead of a secondary practice. Informal brokers, on the other hand, reinforced communicative disparities by focusing access to workplace information, authority, and economic opportunities among those who were more linguistically competent. Thus, brokerage served as a mechanism of inclusion as well as a source of communicative dependency, revealing the consequences of limited institutional language support.

The results also show that access to multilingual repertoires is affected by broader social inequalities. Another factor was the women's limited mobility, which limited their ability to learn informally and rely on family members or intermediaries for communication at work. In addition to individual motivation, gendered mobility, migration histories, and social networks acted as factors affecting language learning. However, participants reported actively learning communicative tools through watching, trusting relationships, and communicating with family, with children frequently being brokers of language within migrant families. The results confirm the social nature of multilingual adaptation over individual adaptation (Birgier and Bar-Haim 2023; Cheung and Phillimore 2017; Zhao, Zhao, and Liu 2022). They also argue that communicative inequality is a manifestation of larger structural inequalities in informal labour economies with respect to access to education, access to work, and social inclusion.

Reframing workplace multilingualism in the Global South

The results, when considered as a whole, help to reshape the conceptual framework of workplace multilingualism in informal labour economies of the Global South. Existing frameworks developed in Europe, North America, and the Gulf have generated valuable insights into multilingual construction sites (Fellows, Phua, and Tutt 2022; Kraft 2019; Theodoropoulou 2019). However, these frameworks do not fully account for contexts in which systematic workplace language support is limited, and workers themselves bear primary responsibility for managing multilingual communication.

The Kerala case shows that multilingualism in informal labour settings operates simultaneously as a communicative practice, workplace capital, mediated access, inequality, and partial belonging. Workers mobilise multilingual repertoires to survive and participate; language competence contributes to responsibility and recognition; brokerage orchestrates access to information; gendered mobility relates to who acquires language resources; and language learning slowly changes workers' sense of confidence and belonging (Lønsmann 2023; Kahlin et al. 2021; Söderlundh and Keevallik 2022). These dimensions should not be minimised to 'language barriers' or to celebrations of multilingual resourcefulness.

Finally, the experience of migrant construction workers in Kerala demonstrates that language is embedded in the everyday organisation of work, risk, livelihood, authority, and social life in the state. Multilingual repertoires are not merely tools for communication; they are practical resources through which workers negotiate participation under conditions of mobility, informality, and precarity. Recognising these repertoires as forms of survival-oriented linguistic capital shifts attention from what migrant workers lack to the communicative resources they actively construct and mobilise, while keeping visible the unequal conditions under which such resourcefulness becomes necessary for survival.

Theoretical, practical, and policy implications

This study extends workplace multilingualism research by demonstrating that multilingual communication in informal labour economies differs fundamentally from multilingualism in formal organisational settings. The current scholarship has largely been shaped in environments in which language is supported through policy, formal training, and/or institutional language infrastructures (Fellows, Phua, and Tutt 2022; Lønsmann and Kraft 2018; Theodoropoulou 2019). The current findings reveal that, in informal labour contexts, the organisation of multilingual communication largely depends on workers' own adaptive practices, thus indicating the need to extend current notions of workplace multilingualism beyond formal organisational settings.

This study also contributes to the development of the notion of survival-oriented linguistic capital, which is an extension of linguistic capital based on context. Multilingual repertoires, far from being valued because of institutional recognition or formal language qualifications (Bourdieu 1991; Susen 2013), gained value because of their ability to support employment, workplace safety, wage negotiation, access to public services, and everyday participation in conditions of labour precarity. In this way, the study contributes to the translanguaging scholarship by illustrating how multilingual creativity is influenced by structural inequalities and pragmatic needs in informal migrant labour markets (Canagarajah 2020; 2021; Xie and Peltokorpi 2022). The results also reveal that access to linguistic resources is not only individual language learning but also related to migration history, gendered mobility, and social networks (Bar-Haim and Birgier 2024; Söderlundh and Keevallik 2022).

The results also have significant implications for practice and policy. Multilingual communication is not an individual responsibility of migrant workers but an integral part of workplace organisation that employers and labour contractors should recognise. Structured workplace orientation, visual communication tools, translated procedural guidance, and multilingual safety materials could help mitigate communicative inequalities and enhance workplace safety and coordination, especially in high-risk construction settings (Caffaro et al. 2017; Cappella, Clarke, and Lucas 2025). Language orientation programmes could be further strengthened in the early stages of migration in the community to support workplace participation and social integration more (Cunningham et al. 2018; Matlin et al. 2018). Lastly, language support programmes should be gender-sensitive, because women have less mobility and are therefore less able to engage in informal language learning. Community- and digital-based flexible language programmes have the potential to boost women's communicative power, participation in the workplace, and access to

employment opportunities (Cheung and Phillimore 2017; Mouboua, Atobatele, and Akintayo 2024).

Limitations and future research

The findings should be interpreted in the light of a number of limitations. First, the study was carried out in one geographical and occupational context – interstate migrant construction workers in Kerala. While this context offered valuable experiences of multilingual communication in informal labour economies, the results are context-specific. Further research could focus on exploring the same dynamics in other states in India, industries, or informal economies of the Global South.

Second, the study was semi-structured, and interviews were conducted at one point in time. This method provoked detailed descriptions of workers' experiences and communicative practices, but it failed to record the multi-lingual interaction as it unfolded in 'real-time' workplace contexts. Future research with ethnographic observation, interactional analysis, or linguistic landscape approach is needed to develop a more nuanced understanding of the enactment of multilingual communication. Comparative studies between different policy and language-support contexts might also shed light on the impact of broader institutional and labour market conditions on access to linguistic resources.

Third, there were only three female respondents, indicating that the construction sector in Kerala is male-dominated. The gendered theme produced important data, but the small female subsample prevented the possibility of in-depth analysis of gendered data. Further research on the gendered multilingual experiences of female migrant workers or on the gendered multilingual experiences of sectors with a larger proportion of female migrant workers (e.g. domestic work, hospitality, manufacturing) would deepen the understanding of gendered multilingual experiences in informal work.

Future studies could also aim at comparative studies across regions and sectors, longitudinal research on how migrants' multilingual repertoire changes over their migration careers, as well as in-depth studies on digital technologies in migrants' informal language learning.

Conclusion

This study explored the strategies and processes of multilingual repertoire formation and mobilisation used by interstate migrant construction workers in Kerala when they need to communicate in a formal language setting with limited formal language assistance. It was a reflexive thematic analysis of 18 worker interviews exploring how language is used in the workplace and how it influences communication, opportunities, and experiences of participation and belonging in Malayalam-dominant construction workplaces.

The results show that migrant workers are not just limited by language barriers, but rather create a communicative resource that involves the use of multiple languages, parts, gestures, observation, visual materials, and peer support. These multi-lingual repertoires facilitate the workers if they need to deal with everyday demands that come from the workplace, but are also a factor in access to employment opportunities, information, recognition, and social participation. Meanwhile, language resources are imbalanced. Workers' involvement and differential access to workplace communication are influenced by language brokerage and gendered opportunities to learn languages, which in turn perpetuate existing inequalities in informal labour situations.

This study adds to the scholarship on multilingualism by bringing the field of workplace multilingualism to an under-researched context in the Global South: internal migration and labour informality. It also shows that multilingual repertoires are linguistically useful survival tools that are developed and given value within the workers' daily attempts to manage work, relationships, and belonging in precarious circumstances, rather than via institutional recognition. Multilingualism is not a characteristic of, but a means for, negotiating participation, power, and inclusion: The

experiences of migrant construction workers in Kerala illustrate this. These communicative practices shift the focus from deficit understandings of migrant workers to the resourcefulness they develop, while also pointing to the structural inequalities in which this resourcefulness is enacted.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Declaration of AI usage

AI-assisted tools (Grammarly and Paperpal) were used solely for language editing to improve the clarity and readability of the manuscript. All conceptualisation, research design, data analysis, and interpretation were conducted entirely by the authors, who take full responsibility for the content of this work.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and/or analysed in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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