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Maria Rosa Garrido*

Multilingualism, nationality and flexibility: mobile communicators' careers in a humanitarian agency

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Abstract: This article explores the management of multilingual mobile communicators at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) according to institutional requirements and the consequences on Arabic-speaking communicators' careers. Based on interviews complemented by institutional documents, I analyse the impact of "multiple languages", "'easy' nationality" and "flexibility for non-family posts" as key requirements for mobile communicators. The institutional shortage of Arabic speakers largely limited their experience to Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) while other communicators allegedly had a broader variety of field experience for career advancement. Linguistic repertoires and nationality shaped mission allocation since acceptance of one's nationality in the host country largely outweighed linguistic competences in Arabic in MENA, with a preference for European or dual nationals and the Lebanese over other Arab nationals. Flexibility for non-family posts, numerous in MENA, seems to reinforce an unequal distribution of reproductive work and structural gender inequalities. Many interviewed women felt that they had to choose between the agency and family. Although desirable, family posts outside MENA were not considered as exciting communications work. Besides hiring L2 speakers with an acceptable nationality, interviewed communicators suggested a new rotation system, advising roles for Arabic-speaking professionals and special quota for women.

Keywords: Arabic; flexibility; humanitarian work; mobility; multilingualism

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***Corresponding author: Maria Rosa Garrido**, University of Lausanne, Section d'anglais, Bâtiment Anthropole, Lausanne, 1015, Switzerland, E-mail: mariarosa.garrido.sarda@gmail.com

1 Introduction: career management of mobile humanitarians

> It's a jigsaw puzzle I always say because when I was a kid I loved to do jigsaw puzzles, as a small boy you know? The classical Ravensburg pic jigsaw puzzle? But this one here is a puzzle where you have pieces that are double? Some pieces that, don't fit anywhere? Some missing pieces? And some pieces who actually transform over time. Who change colour or shape, you know. [Interview with Xavier, pool manager, 18-03-2016]

Career management is likened to a puzzle with missing pieces, double pieces, pieces that can't seem to fit and others that transform over time. This metaphor captures Xavier's career management tasks, which include assigning mobile humanitarian communicators, the "pieces", to successive temporary missions (usually lasting 1–2 years) in the over 90 country office delegations of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC henceforth). The ICRC provides humanitarian protection and assistance activities to victims of armed violence and emergencies and it also engages in the dissemination of International Humanitarian Law (IHL henceforth). This article explores the management of mobile humanitarian communicators according to institutional requirements and the consequences on their careers. These "pieces" have different profiles and needs based on their language repertoires, nationalities, field experiences, professional competences and family situation. Xavier's allocation depends on the vacant posts at a given time, with institutional requirements (e.g. request for a given working language) weighed against the available communicators' profiles and wants.

At the time of research (2016–2018), Arabic was a sought-after competence for key operations in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA henceforth), often unaccompanied posts with strict security measures and nationality restrictions. This research project emerged out of concerns voiced in interviews over the shortage of qualified Arabic speakers at the ICRC in general and the high turnover in the specialist pool of communicators in particular. Mobile communicators are in charge of public communication with the media and on the ICRC's webpage and social networks in addition to operational communication with war victims in the field. This pool had an average of 59 workers in 2016 and communicators only stayed an average of 2–3 years (manager, personal communication, 2017). This project also inscribes itself in the ICRC's goal to retain and promote more women. I was also intrigued by the other side of the "puzzle", the careers of Arabic-speaking communicators, mostly women, who periodically took up missions in armed conflicts. Contrary to the institutional preference for surveys and quantitative results, I decided to interview active and former "Arabic-speaking mobile communicators" in order to understand the affordances and constraints in their careers, the reasons for high turnover, and their suggestions for career management.

At the ICRC, mission allocation is primarily mediated by three central institutional categories: (tested) language competences, nationality and flexibility for unaccompanied posts. These axes of differentiation not only allocate but also hierarchise staff in a pool of mobile and multilingual specialists in ways that have an impact on their personal and professional trajectories. The differing career trajectories within this pool created frustration and even perceptions of unfairness among staff in "hardship posts" with strict security measures, such as unaccompanied posts in MENA. In her study (2009) of a UN agency, Fresia points out that "for the same level of competences some obtain promotions quickly – because they have the right nationality, right networks or the right gender – while others stay in the same grade for years" (Fresia 2009: 183, my translation). These processes of differentiation and stratification among ICRC communicators illuminate the flexibilisation and the commodification of segments of the self in the new language-intensive economy in general (Urciuoli 2008) and in the humanitarian labour market in particular.

Following this introduction, I will present my research site, the ICRC, in more detail. The third section will briefly discuss my qualitative research methods and data. The fourth section will outline the conceptual framework. The analysis will be divided into four sub-sections. The first one will examine the institutional construction of the "field communicator of tomorrow". In the three ensuing subsections, I will analyse three key requirements: multiple languages, 'easy' nationality and flexible for non-family posts. The final section will discuss institutional regimes of language and mobility at the ICRC.

2 Context: The International Committee of the Red Cross

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a Swiss private association with an international mandate based on the Geneva Conventions (ICRC 2017, art 2). It engages in humanitarian protection, assistance and IHL dissemination in armed conflicts and emergencies. Its headquarters are located in Geneva and it has over 90 country delegations (as of early 2020). It has a workforce of 17,000 field staff and 1,000 headquarters staff representing over 150 nationalities (as of 2020). Field staff are divided into mobile staff with a Swiss contract managed from the headquarters and resident staff hired on local contracts. Until 1992, this Swiss association relied exclusively on Swiss "delegates" (expatriate representatives) owing to their perceived neutrality during the Cold War (Palmieri 2012: 1286). The exponential growth of the ICRC in terms of personnel and budget opened these positions to an international pool. This "internationalisation" gradually decoupled humanitarian neutrality[1] from Swiss political neutrality (Troyon and Palmieri 2007). In 2006, 47% of expats and 80% of managers held Swiss citizenship (Kim and Schneider 2006). During fieldwork, the two main institutional preoccupations were recruiting and retaining Arabic speakers and gender equality in a multinational enterprise model. The mobile communication pool articulates and illuminates these processes.

This expansion morphed this Swiss association into a "humanitarian enterprise" (Palmieri 2012: 1294) adopting the vocabulary of the private enterprise at the turn of the century.

> It is striking to note the recurring use in recent years, in the general vocabulary of the institution, of terms that come directly from marketing (target populations), from the economy (efficiency, result-based management) or from trade (strategic anchor). In the public communications of the institution one can see the particular importance attached to quantifiable results, often to the nearest unit. (Palmieri 2012: 1294)

The ICRC competes in a humanitarian market and corresponds to the definition of a multinational with a different fundamental objective (Palmieri 2012: 1295). Some practices that have been interpreted, and criticised, as market-oriented include delocalisation of certain services such as IT or finance and enhanced accountability to state donors, which contribute 80% of its budget.

After the "internationalisation" of personnel, English increased its dominance as a lingua franca to the detriment of French, the historical headquarters language, in Geneva (Mercier 2004). Today, the ICRC has English and French as administrative languages. It also designates less widely used "working languages" for operations, which can be "regional languages with an international dimension (Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese) and national languages with a regional or subregional dimension (Russian, Chinese)" (Krimitsas 2012: 2–3). The requirements for ICRC delegates include English as a must and at least a second ICRC working language. Concerning the latter, there are tensions between the desired and sometimes required language regime at headquarters, privileging French as the "parent" language, and the current needs in key operations, with a shortage of Arabic speakers.

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[1] The ICRC adheres to the fundamental principle of "neutrality", defined as follows: "In order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature" (International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 1986).

The feminisation of the delegate started in earnest in the late 1970s, as there were "few women delegates" in 1975 (Troyon and Palmieri 2007: 105). Kim and Schneider (2008) describe ICRC operations as a "male bastion" linked to the prestige of field operations in the humanitarian sector. In 2002, the Gender and Diversity Advisor position was created. In 2006, the ICRC adopted a "Gender Equity Policy" (2006–2016) that aimed to have 30% of women by 2011 and 40% by 2016 in all functions (Norlin 2016: 25). According to an ICRC report, only 31% of the field workforce was categorised as female in contrast to 54% at headquarters in 2015. Women only represented 31% of top management and 37% of middle managers. However, line staff and experts – like the mobile communicators– counted 56% of women. In 2017, the ICRC launched the "Global Framework on Diversity and Inclusion at the ICRC" based on bottom-up, organisation-wide consultation of staff to formulate a global approach in which gender is one more dimension of "diversity" (interview with Gender Equality and Diversity Officer, 27-04-2018). Employment status (resident vs. mobile) is actually a more central diversity issue than gender (Norlin 2016: 46). The new framework targets groups that experience barriers to inclusion, namely, resident staff, women, LGBTIQ and people with disabilities. The two global priorities to be implemented locally are resident staff inclusion and gender in the workplace.

While field operations are male-dominated, communications is a domain that has attracted more women since the International Prisoners-of-War agency was created in 1914. Today, the mobile communications pool is a "feminised" pool of specialists, according to its manager in Geneva, in which 43% of communicators were women until 2016 according to internal records. Since 2012, it has specifically recruited Arabic-speaking communicators for the on-going operations in MENA. In 2016, this group made up around 30% of the pool and most Arabic-speaking staff were women. The main institutional problem was the 20% turnover in the pool, which was seemingly even higher among Arabic speakers. From a gendered perspective, "women who belong to an ethnic minority are the ones who feel most excluded at work" which stands in contrast with White men's experiences (Norlin 2016: 14).

3 Methods and data: interviewing humanitarians

This article is based on interviews and institutional documents collected between 2015 and 2018. I interviewed different generations of mobile staff, namely nine Swiss delegates who experienced internationalisation in the 1990s and 12 Arabic-speaking mobile communicators who had more recently joined the ICRC. I also organised three focus groups with mobile communicators, two with Arabic speakers and an additional focus group with non-Arabic speakers, all working in MENA. Individual interviews were divided into different topics, namely their career trajectory, the use of languages in communications work, gender equality and career management issues. By contrast, my focus groups were less structured. In order to understand institutional policies and processes, I interviewed the pool manager, Xavier, and the gender and diversity advisor, Erica, at headquarters. I also collected relevant institutional documents that were publicly available and that my informants gave me access to, such as job advertisements and informants' CVs. I was not granted access to internal documents such as language policies, Gender Equality and Diversity plans and internal surveys because they are deemed to be confidential documents.

The stakes of this study are manifold. My informants often quoted Arabic as the reason why they are repeatedly or even exclusively assigned to hardship posts in MENA. In this paper, I have tried to decentre language and articulate it with other key requirements, namely nationality and flexibility, shaping humanitarian careers. For HR managers, it was important to have "data" to understand the reasons behind the turnover among this population that they consider to be critical to their functioning. Interviews have yielded qualitative analyses of individual pathways, with trends and discourses, instead of quantitative, generalisable results preferred by the "humanitarian enterprise" according to Palmieri (2012). Arabic-speaking communicators are the main stakeholders whose live(lihoods) depend on the management system analysed. I have tried to adequately represent their career pathways while guaranteeing their anonymity to the greatest extent possible. This research ultimately aims to have a positive impact on their job security and conditions.

4 Conceptual framework: political economy, mobility and intersectionality

The conceptual framework combines the political economy of language, the politics of mobility and intersectionality as approaches calling for situated analysis of socio-historical conditions that shape the (de)valorisation of language, the uneven access to (linguistic) resources and their distribution in ways that create socially salient distinctions among multilingual actors.

The political economy of language defines "language as a resource that, under certain political-economic conditions, can be exchanged for other symbolic or material resources" (Del Percio, Flubacher, and Duchêne 2017: 5). It looks into the dynamic and situated processes that (de)value linguistic resources under specific material and historical conditions in larger social systems of difference and inequality (Del Percio, Flubacher, and Duchêne 2017). In the tertiarised economy, employees are increasingly stratified according to their communicative and linguistic “skills” in a given transnational market. According to Heller and McElhinny (2017), “a more political economic approach allows us to ask when and how representing the self as performed in socio-linguistic accounts contributed to the formation of an ideology of a flexible subject in a flexible workforce more adequate to a globally dispersed, multinational corporate culture (Hennesey 1993)” (p. 244).

“Flexibility” as a corporate keyword suggests flatter hierarchies and capacity to adapt and downsize to a fluid workforce, whose “skills” anticipate company needs, are readily adaptable and are subject to evaluation (Urciuoli 2008: 219). Communicative and linguistic “skills” are imagined as aspects of personhood with exchange value on the market in ways that construct flexible workers as “bundles of skills” (Urciuoli 2008). Language can be either a “hard skill” that can be certified or as “soft skills” (e.g. listening skills, leadership, intercultural awareness) that adopt to the dominant institutional practices and beliefs. Soft skills trump hard skills in the new economy and they are increasingly imagined as a teachable and learnable “technology of the self” (Urciuoli 2008: 215), as shown by Allan (2013) and Flubacher (2020) among others. Martín-Rojo (2018: 548) claims that neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurship are “a new mode of governing linguistic conduct” that shapes speakers’ desires, practices and trajectories through processes of self-capitalisation. We should examine how, and to what extent, neoliberal logics, values and subjectivities with regard to language are taken up (or not) and how they are expressed through “the lexicon of neoliberalism”, with empty signifiers like “skills” or “flexibility” in new contexts with unanticipated outcomes (Urla 2019: 214).

The politics of mobility focuses on the social inequalities and uneven distribution of mobility capital. The changing political conditions create social categories that regulate mobility and securitise borders through state bureaucracies, e.g. through language tests or interviews for labour migration. As a consequence, some people have greater capabilities to move more, differently and faster. It is key to explore how this categorisation occurs, its consequences and what resources are mobilised by those affected, as well as how social actors experience and contribute to these processes. The distribution of “mobility capital” results in particular embodied racial, classed and gendered mobilities (Merriam et al. 2013). It is also relevant to ask under which conditions the categories legitimising the nation-state system (especially language and nationality) are destabilised. Documenting “regimes of mobility” (Guittet 2017: 213) foregrounds the visible and the invisible forms of mobility, immobility and pathways that these technologies of mobility engender.

In order to account for the diverse socio-historical conditions that give rise to the constitution of differences, an intersectional approach asserts that aspects of identity are intertwined and influence each other instead of a multiplication and fragmentation of discrete social identities (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016). As not all those who are assigned to a given category used in policy (e.g. “women” in gender equality plans) have the same traits or needs, the homogenisation of categories results in the exclusion of certain people from resources. We cannot assume the same constellations of inequalities in every context and hence the need for “the investigation of the specific social, political and economic processes involved in each historical instance” (Yuval Davis 2006: 200). Some social divisions will be more important to individual people in constructing certain specific positionings in a given situation (Yuval Davis 2006: 203). Therefore, we need to unveil social “axes of differentiation” and the role of language in their constitution and expression. Capital always intersects with the bodies producing the labour and is thus embedded in gendered and racialised structures (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016: 52).

5 Analysis

In this section, I will analyse the main axes of differentiation among ICRC mobile communicators shaping their geographical and career pathways. The first subsection will briefly analyse the institutional construction of the “field communicators of tomorrow” as a bundle of traits and skills. The three ensuing sections correspond to three key requirements: multiple languages, “easy” nationality, and flexibility for non-family posts. They will focus on the workers’ negotiation of institutional discourse and strategies to navigate the opportunities and constraints, resulting in differing pathways.

5.1 “Field communicator of tomorrow” as a bundle of skills

The “field communicator of tomorrow” was discussed in a training session for communication coordinators in Geneva in early 2017. This was a discussion on which forms of knowledge are productive for humanitarian labour and amenable to a repackaging/entextualisation as skills. In the slide reproduced below (see Excerpt 1), an ICRC trainer identified “lots of requirements” as central to the definition. The desired profile is a “bundle of skills” with exchange value on the humanitarian market, including competences in language and qualities such as flexibility, “soft skills”, and management and leadership. These are all keywords on the neoliberal labour market according to Urciuoli (2008) and they lend further evidence that the language of the private enterprise has permeated this agency as claimed by Palmieri (2012). Linguistic competences are tested in-house both orally and in writing. The ICRC imagines languages as separate, standardised tools needed to do their jobs (e.g. writing reports, being interviewed by the media, explaining IHL to interlocutors in the field) and as hard skills that are measured on a scale from 1 to 5. These communicators are "elite knowledge producers" with relative authority over their unscripted language productions by virtue of their maximum linguistic capital and specialised knowledge (Urciuoli and LaDousa 2012: 181).

Excerpt 1. Transcription of slide used at a training session for communication coordinators, 2017. Shared by informant.

Recruitment: Lots of requirements
"Easy" nationality
Operational experience
Multiple languages
Expert COM skills
Manager & leader
IHL/PREV knowledge
Flexible for non-family
Soft skills
Generalist vs Specialist: What skills & experience do we expect from the field communicator of tomorrow?

Among the requirements above, I have identified three central ones that have repeatedly emerged from my interviews and focus groups with communicators in MENA for analysis. These are "multiple languages", "'easy' nationality" and "flexible for non-family". The multiplication and fluctuation of "multiple languages" for delegate posts explain the new demand for multilingual communicators with Arabic as a strategic language in MENA and the continued prestige of French as the headquarters language. "'Easy' nationality" is a new category that emerged after the opening of delegate posts to international candidates in 1992 and that hierarchises nationalities in connection with perceived neutrality (see Hassemer and Garrido 2020). "Flexible for non-family" uses a neoliberal keyword to refer to decades-old (re)production of gendered pathways in male-dominated unaccompanied missions. In the case of "Arabic-speaking communication delegates", these requirements correspond to the job advertisement that some informants shared with me. First of all, they must speak multiple languages which are strategic to the ICRC operations, which include "excellent command of Arabic and English" while "a good command of French is a distinct asset for career development” because French is an institutional language (job advertisement, 2012). Second, the requirement for “easy nationality” refers to the institution’s principle of neutrality that prevents mobile staff from working in their countries of origin. This requirement often goes beyond this general condition to include incompatible nationalities for certain missions (see Section 2 above). Third, communicators must be “flexible for non-family” posts. The job advertisement requires new recruits to be “prepared to accept unaccompanied postings for the first two missions (minimum 12 months each)”. Family missions make up around 35% of all posts in this pool.

5.2 “Multiple languages”: discourses of burden and skilling

“Multiple languages” mainly refers to the sub-set of working languages at the ICRC. Communicators who speak Arabic as a working language for key operations form a differentiated group in the communications pool with dedicated recruitment campaigns. These communicators’ language use is often reduced to English as an internal lingua franca in delegations and to Arabic as language used with interlocutors and in public communication. The shortage of Arabic speakers in this agency has resulted in the repeated deployment of multilingual professionals with at least oral competences in Arabic in MENA, counting many unaccompanied posts. These Arabic-speaking professionals frequently expressed that they feel they are carrying a “burden” because of this restricted mobility in my interviews and focus groups (see Hassemer and Garrido 2020). As a typical trajectory, Adam’s ICRC career started with two years in a hardship post in MENA, in which he had to cover for colleagues suffering from burnout, continued to South Sudan for one year and then moved to another hardship post in MENA in which he had been for two years, prolonged for two more, in 2017.

In our first focus group (see Excerpt 2), Arabic-speaking communicators spontaneously brought up the issue of “being doomed to stay in the Arabic-speaking countries” (lines 9–10) because of their Arabic competences. For example, one of the participants, Masun, had been working in MENA for 11 years. The participants felt that the rotation system was unfair to them because they were repeatedly deployed in Arabic-speaking countries whereas colleagues who do not speak this regional language were allegedly allocated to a broader variety of missions, both geographically and in terms of family posts. They co-constructed this limited mobility as constraining their desire for family postings, which are less common in this region, and their professional ambitions in this organisation, because they see themselves as “foot soldiers” (line 24 in Excerpt 2) assigned to hardship posts. In fact, fatigue (line 5 in Excerpt 2) and burnout account for the high turnover among Arabic-speaking communicators. According to Masun, “then they will burn out, they will leave and they will start the whole process again” (Focus group 1).

Excerpt 2. Focus Group 1 with Arabic-speaking communicators, 22-03-2017. Participants: RES (researcher), ZAA (Zaara), SAL (Salif), ADE (Adel) and MAS (Masun).

1 2 3 4 5 6	ADE:	[…] being alwa:ys eu::h categorised or cornered, as you said before, because you have, those eu::hm , eu::hm means to understand the culture, to:: answer the culture, to always be actually targeted as the one to sta:y a:nd to remain in the Arabic world, and- and I think that’s the main issue we’re all facing, and that’s actually what the ICRC eu::h how the ICRC might lose, tho:se talents, because eventually, we get tired we got tired, I mean […]
7 8 9 10 11	MAS:	eu:h, just maybe to complement to that, eu::hm, I don’t understand the logic, why, all the different nationalities, can come and work in the Arab countries and they make rotations they go to Africa and to Asia, to Latin America and for the Arabic speaking delegates (1) they are doomed to stay in the Arabic speaking countries this is not fair, right? is all, all different, all equal, but not for ours.
12	ZAA:	yeah.
13 14 15 16	MAS:	right? so, so all different nationalities they are all equal when it comes to these rotations, but not for Arabic speaking count- eu:h delegates, and this is, e:hm main shortcomings is goes wrong as my colleagues, mentioned early long years back, many discussions about this one, [>] <right?>
17	ZAA:	<oh yeah> [<]
18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25	MAS:	many discussions, and no changes, right? I:: can give you some rhetorics, like okay why:: why we’ll send you to:: to:: eu::hm, non-speaking eu::h, Arabic country, if we send you there we’ll lose an Arabic speaking delegate, right? and you’ll take at the place of someone who speaks like English so we have missing two, posts, if we send you to other countries, right? this is the way of thinking and this is not correct, we- they should look at us as: assets, not as a num- number, or- or seeds, right? and it was one of the discussions today that I have to see how to put and they put more people from one place to another you know? okay, we are not at the end of the day foot soldiers (1) we have caree:rs, we have [>] <ambitions>
26	ADE:	<families> [<]
27	MAS:	we have families, [>] <we have>, responsibilitie:s.
28	ZAA:	<yeah, responsibilitie:s> [<]

The “rhetoric” (line 18) of why they are kept in the region harks back to the puzzle pieces in the opening quote of this article. If an Arabic speaker is deployed outside Arabic-speaking missions, the organisation will “lose” (line 20) them as Arabic speakers (i.e. a missing piece) and they will take the place of “someone who speaks

English” (line 21), which I interpret as a colleague that cannot be deployed to French-speaking contexts and thus a piece that does not fit the puzzle. The institutional categorisation as “Arabic-speaking mobile communicator” and the limited mobility within MENA seems to have an impact on their “ambitions” and career progression (see line 25, Excerpt 1). In this focus group, the participants compared their multilingualism with that of colleagues who “just speak French and English, and maybe a bit of Spanish, which is for Europe standard” but who nonetheless might earn higher salaries, have higher ranks because they had “the chance to be in several contexts, meaning more experience” (Adel, focus group 1).

For some participants, the lack of diversity in their missions is problematic for career advancement. Roula, for example, did not get a high management post because she did not allegedly have “the wider variety of experience”, which was restricted to MENA. She linked this to being an Arabic speaker and not having the “skillset” to be sent to missions outside the region (interview, 22-06-2017). After this rejection, she eventually became a communications manager in MENA, for which Arabic was an asset but not a requirement, as she was replacing a European man with limited competences in this language. According to Roula, Arabic is not an element that facilitates promotion to managerial posts given that “you would need more people also on the ground than you would need them as Arabic-speaking managers” (interview, 22-06-2017) echoing the concept of “foot soldiers” above. In a focus group with communicators who worked in MENA but did not speak Arabic, there was agreement that Arabic “boosts” your work but does not secure a promotion in the way that French does owing to its sustained symbolic role in this organisation, as foregrounded in the job advertisement (see Section 5.1.). However, Roula spoke fluent French but her Arabic competences tethered her experience to MENA. In political economic terms, multilingualism is reduced to a main resource, Arabic, highly valued for a wide range of temporary missions in MENA. It shadows other linguistic resources in their repertoires, including English as a must and other working languages.

This restricted mobility in their humanitarian pathways, which might impact the Arabic-speaking multilingual professional’s career advancement, gave rise to two different discourses to gain broader experience. Arabic-speaking professionals in both focus groups vested in the “burden” discourse (see Excerpt 2) suggested an institutional “fair rotation for everyone”, namely alternating hardship posts with family ones in other regions in which they can contribute their expertise and skills gained in MENA operational delegations. These multilingual professionals appropriated the institutional skilling discourse to propose an alternative structural solution that does not place the burden on individuals. Aida questions the “strategy” of having many (native) Arabic speakers “because of the added value of the language, the culture” as “the need for the language” can be fulfilled by an increasing number of L2 Arabic speakers (Focus group 2, 08-05-2018). The first focus group of Arabic speakers insisted on their potential role as "advisors" for new colleagues in MENA who lack any specific training on the historical context and cultural know-how, like not showing your shoe soles to your interlocutor.

In three interviews with Arabic communicators in MENA, the discourse of Arabic as a burden was rejected in favour of a counter-discourse focusing on self-development and skilling through training. In Roula's words, "if anyone uh uh is absolutely, euh convinced that they need to move on or do something else and so forth so my question is what have you done, as a person as a delegate [...] to learn a new skill or you know uh a new language" (interview, 22-06-2027). Adam, whose trajectory includes consecutive hardship posts in MENA, compared his own specialised "diversified portfolio" including French to that of a generalist profile without French who is labelled as an Arabic speaker and becomes geographically "stuck" in MENA (interview, 08-03-2017). Like Roula, he moves beyond "multiple languages" to include other skills in communication. This neoliberal discourse of skilling responsibilises the employee for lifelong learning to be eligible for better opportunities. Fareda also concurred with Roula and Adam that "more trainings, more opportunities to develop your eh, skills," will help "to develop myself and not just to- to blame the institution, you know the institution will offer, you know whatever you have, but there is a personal responsibility" (interview, 19-05-2017).

5.3 "Easy nationality": categories of acceptability in the field

The ICRC regime of mobility rests on not only "multiple languages", but also on nationality as a central regimentation technology on the part of nation-states involved in armed conflicts. Despite the pervasive discourse of Arabic as a "burden", language alone does not determine my informants' pathways: different constraints and possibilities are linked to one's passport(s). The ideal Arabic-speaking humanitarian has, then, an "easy" nationality to make them "acceptable" for a visa issued by the national authorities in the territory where they are deployed. Sophie, who is an Arabic speaker with dual nationality, claims that "you're more precious, like, when you speak a language that is really wanted and you have a good nationality to go with it" (interview, 24-04-2017). Generally, different nationalities have particular affordances for mobility as an ICRC employee who speaks, at least, English and Arabic as working languages. Nationality is an axis of social differentiation that categorises mobile employees and shapes their experiences as well as their ambitions. The main categories linked to nationality in the informants' discourse are: dual nationals like Sophie, the

Lebanese, a single "Arab nationality", "arabisant·e·s" (L2 Arabic speakers) and "difficult" nationalities.

At the time of fieldwork, roughly a third of all Arabic-speaking communicators had dual nationality, often a MENA nationality and a European or American one (50% corresponding to Switzerland). The vast majority of dual nationals work on their non-MENA passports for security reasons. Some believed that dual citizenship allows them "more opportunity" than "not being [an] Arab national" because, according to Pat, "we can be Arabs, uh suddenly I can be [American nationality] then Arab again" (focus group 2, 08-05-2018). Salif added that "if I didn't have the-the Swiss passport I wouldn't be where I am now" given the historical weight of Swiss nationals at the ICRC. The first focus group of Arabic speakers expressed a preference for Arabic speakers who are double nationals to those who have non-Arab passports because "you have people actually, French, Swiss, who speaks Arabic but they don't understand actually what- how to behave in those contexts". These L2 Arabic speakers, known as "arabisant·e·s" (in French), are often European university graduates. It is more important to have an "easy" nationality for working in operational delegations, i.e. passports that allow holders to work in a diversity of ICRC delegations and key operations in MENA, than to have full competence in written Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). This was Adam's case, who acted as a communications coordinator in a key MENA delegation even though he claimed that he could not write MSA in a professional capacity.

Mono-nationality from an Arab country can be less advantageous in terms of geographical mobility than any of the options above. For example, Egyptians cannot work in Israel, Yemen, Libya, Sudan and Iran, but they can work in Syria. Iraqis cannot go to Kuwait and Israel, but can work in all other countries. (Pool manager, personal communication, 2018). Recognisable geographical accents can create relations of trust with interlocutors but they can also mark them as less neutral in humanitarian diplomacy (see Hassemer and Garrido 2020). For a Palestinian expatriate employee, "I knew that I cannot make it to Syria because again we have this problem now in the Middle East, it's about the nationality". In a non-MENA context in her subsequent mission, she wanted to go back to MENA because she claimed that "I am more confident, I am more uh independent in the Middle East thanks to the language" (interview, 19-05-2017). In terms of career development, Yaasmin felt that as an Arabic-speaking communicator who is not a native French speaker, her career development was limited in terms of future postings, with Sudan or Iraq as likely possibilities owing to her MENA passport and Arabic competences (interview, 30-03-2017).

Lebanese nationals are numerous in all ICRC departments and made up around 20% of the Arabic speakers in the pool in late 2016. In MENA, they could be deployed anywhere except Syria and Israel. During a focus group in Beirut

(Lebanon), Salif constructed the Lebanese as "different from other Arabs" because, in my informants' opinion, they understand European culture better by virtue of their sectarian organisation and often speak both French and English thanks to their education (08-05-2018). Salif further claimed that that the Lebanese played "the bridge between the Occidentals and the Orientals very well". This connects with the long history of the ICRC in Lebanon since 1967 and the fact that Beirut has become a humanitarian hub. According to Aida, the high percentage of Lebanese at the ICRC and in communications is also linked to their nationality rather than their language skills: "the whole because you're Arabic speaker you have a guaranteed position for me I think it's less and also linked to the question of the nationalities, at some point the only people who can move around in the region who are not on any restricted list are again the Lebanese" (focus group 2, 08-05-2018).

Holding a "difficult" nationality (such as USA, French and British) limits one's geographical range for missions, especially in MENA, owing to existing visa restrictions and interlocutors' negative perceptions. The restrictions on nationality are, however, intertwined with language repertoires in ways that shape potential humanitarian mobility. Henry, a British national, was exceptionally working in a key MENA mission despite lacking Arabic competences. In fact, the British are excluded from several contexts, such as Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Nonetheless, Henry explained that "being British and francophone, there're actually quite a few contexts that you can, you can work in" (Focus group 3, 09-05-2018). Having competences in French and holding a European (but not French) nationality allows the ICRC to allocate him to missions in former French colonies in Africa. Another exceptional case is that of David, a North American communicator who was temporarily covering Israel and the Occupied territories. Although he was both American and Jewish, and did not speak Arabic as a "fundamental language", the HR rationale for his assignment was, in his words, "extensive familiarity with the sensitivities of the complex, uh, the context from previous assignments" (Focus group 3). Field experience and speaking other working languages, notably French, can extraordinarily trump the nationality restrictions and perceptions in place.

Overall, acceptance of one's nationality in the host country largely outweighs linguistic competences in Arabic in MENA. Mission allocation and career pathways depend on the fluctuating value accorded to linguistic repertoires and passport(s) for on-going humanitarian operations, linked to changing political conditions and the incessant rotation of staff. In addition to hierarchising passport holders in a politics of mobility, linguistic repertoires and nationality are intertwined in ways that complexify relevant categories such as "arabisant·e" or "British" and their expected pathways.

5.4 "Flexible for non-family": gendered pathways

"Flexibility" as a keyword is closely linked to mobility, defined as "pressure on people to also accept wherever we need them" in Xavier's words (interview, 18-03-2016). The institutional value placed on "hardship posts" takes a toll on these humanitarians' career progression, owing to variety of postings, and on their personal lives, given that the narrow legal definition of "family". As mentioned above, the repeated assignment to "hardship posts" in conflict zones have an impact on fatigue, mental health and eventual turnover in this pool, notably among Arabic speakers whose missions are mainly limited to MENA. Some humanitarians have been involved in or witnessed security incidents (e.g. bombing, shelling, kidnapping or killing people) and had to leave the field on a medical evacuation due to Post-traumatic stress. The desired "flexibility" for non-family postings dissociates reproductive labour from productive (communicative) labour. It is an expectation that is placed on not only new recruits for their first two missions (24 months), as indicated in job advertisements (see Section 5.1.), but also more senior professionals whose expertise is needed in hardship posts according to Xavier. In fact, Adam had accepted to extend his hardship post in a key MENA operation for 4 years at the time of our interview. As observed by Norlin (2016), this requirement impacts women's careers more than men's among my informants and this partly explains why operations are still "male dominated".

Operational and thus risky posts are key for career advancement at the ICRC, as operations is considered the breeding ground for Geneva-based ICRC managers (Kim and Schneider 2008:11). Jansson's work on UN mobile employees (2016) confirms the value of field postings for career advancement: "what counts is the type of stationings the agent takes up during his or her professional trajectory. In such contexts, field experience becomes even more important, and as one informant put it, 'the tougher stationings one can get, the better'" (p.7). Mobility is central to the construction of "the aristocracy of risk" (Kouchner 1992) embodied in expatriate employees deployed in armed conflicts. Henri Dunant (founder of the ICRC) and the Médecins sans Frontières pioneers contribute to the founding myth of the bourgeois (White, male) adventurer who risks his own life to save suffering others in far-away lands (Fassin 2012). Many informants in "risky" operations such as Syria or Yemen regard them as exciting, rewarding communications work in contrast to non-hardship posts outside MENA. Yaasmin, a young Arab communicator, was very surprised and felt lucky to be sent to Syria on her first ICRC mission as communicator. This mission was the reason why she applied to this agency (interview, 30-03-2017). Sophie, in turn, had recently given birth and could no longer work in hardship posts. She distinguished "boring" from "interesting" delegations for communications work. She claimed to be "on the boring side of the delegates" and missed going to the field, which she contrasted with "the operational places that are not nice, but they're interesting work-wise" (interview, 24-04-2017). Sophie and Fareda, both working outside MENA, told a similar story of how they miss the buzz of communications work in a conflict zone.

Starting a family is deemed to be incompatible with mobile humanitarian work for the majority of Arab women I spoke with. It is often presented as a black and white choice between their present post and motherhood. In Fareda's words, "it's either you choose the ICRC or you choose family as a woman" (interview, 19-05-2017). She claims that expatriate work for women is "a luxury that not many women can afford in the Middle East, Arab women", especially if they are married. This is in spite of the existing measures in place which include paid tickets for a break every six weeks and in some places, family housing in the closest "family post" according to my informants. "Additional roadblocks for women on international assignments can also be the lack of mobility of spouses and concerns about care for family members accompanying or staying behind" at the ICRC (Norlin 2016: 5). In our interview, Sophie claimed that "the humanitarian field is not a family friendly one" and further explained that it is difficult to obtain a family post as an Arabic-speaking communicator: "the problem when you're, you get at my age and my situation for instance? you're an Arabic speaker, and then you have a family is that there- there aren't many places where you can go" (interview, 24-04-2017). In interviews, women's career expectations and choices are often contraposed to men's, who often leave their children behind with their partners (children's mothers). Sophie highlighted the difference between her mobility vis-à-vis that of male colleagues, as "being a woman I cannot just leave him [her son] and go". In Sophie's narrative and that of other informants, there is clearly an unequal distribution of reproductive labour, which is more expected from women and frowns upon their unaccompanied professional mobility. This reinforces the lone, male humanitarian figure in the field and the societal negative judgement of mothers who are away from their offspring. By the end of 2015, only 28% of mobile humanitarians assigned to family missions were women. Most interviewed women in my study were childless and expected to quit the ICRC if/when they found a family. Fareda proposed reserving a special quote for family missions in MENA for Arabic-speaking women to improve the conditions for, and retain, women in this pool.

The high turnover among Arabic speakers in this pool is partially connected with the incompatibility with a family life in different forms. Single humanitarians in their thirties complained that they do not get the same family package as married people, e.g. they get fewer flights back home, and that they are the main candidates for hardship posts, for which they claim not to obtain any incentives. In hardship posts with strict measures, like curfews and reduced mobility, it is difficult to meet a potential partner and it becomes a problem if you have consecutive hardship missions (fieldnotes, 22-02-2017). In Roula’s perspective, “because you’re single, uh uh ICRC feels that ah but you don’t have a family so we can put you anywhere, hardship missions one after the other” and she also pointed out that there was some discussion about single people also having the right to “less stressful missions” (interview, 22-06-2017). Some women have taken unpaid leave or breaks between fixed-term contracts to take care of parents or to deal with asylum procedures, with financial consequences. In addition, LBGTIQ couples and families face difficulties in obtaining joint mission assignments, as all couples at the ICRC, or family missions with a spouse because of restrictive visa conditions imposed by the host countries. They even had problems being accepted in their delegations according to a 2016 ICRC report.

6 Discussion: institutional regimes of language and mobility

The goal of this article was to provide a nuanced account of the institutional axes of differentiation among a pool of humanitarian language professionals and their impact on their career pathways. The intersection of multilingual repertoires, nationality for acceptance by authorities and interlocutors, and flexibility for non-family postings gives rise to complex constraints for mobile Arabic-speaking communicators’ pathways. Arabic speakers are needed in MENA and many communicators feel frustrated that they are “stuck” in the region unlike other multilingual colleagues who cannot speak Arabic. This might have a double-edged impact on their possibilities for career advancement because “hardship” posts are highly valued in the humanitarian market but these professionals, like Roula, might not have a diverse enough experience for managerial posts. The ICRC favours “easy nationality” for acceptance (and indirectly, security) over Arabic language competences, which are scarce in their recruitment pools. Arab nationalities (e.g. Iraqi, Egyptian) are generally at a disadvantage compared to Lebanese nationals, dual nationals or most European nationals. Hiring L2 speakers of Arabic, often with a European nationality, is a strategy to reduce the linguistic burden on the existing Arabic-speaking communicators and allow a (future) rotation system. The demand for flexibility for unaccompanied posts, which are numerous in MENA, reinforces an unequal distribution of reproductive work and structural inequalities in terms of gender and sexuality.

In contrast with the “field communicator of tomorrow” as a bundle of traits, the profiles of these Arabic-speaking mobile communicators are much more complex as a result of the intersection of individual linguistic skills, nationality and caregiving responsibilities. In fact, the ICRC shapes the communicators through language and discourse to fit in specific operations and the mission rotation system (or the “puzzle”). This entails institutional categorisation and economic consequences for the interviewed communicators, who might experience exclusion from desirable postings, promotions and even humanitarian work. The ICRC, according to my informants, inadvertently builds an unequal mobility regime and ultimately careers for mobile staff based on the immediate needs to be covered in the field, exacerbated by the lack of Arabic speakers in MENA. An intersectional lens allows me not to overgeneralise institutional categories such as “women”, “Arabic speaker” or “American” since the informants’ careers show that no single category can determine one’s geographical and institutional mobility. For example, most women deemed the ICRC to be incompatible with a family, but I met a new mother who occupied a coveted position, albeit doing what she considered to be less exciting communications work. Additionally, the institutional discourse of “easy nationality” hierarchises communicators but does not fully determine their mission allocation, as some “difficult” nationalities might still be deployed thanks to competence in other working languages and valuable field experiences. These unequal and unexpected pathways among mobile communicators can sometimes cause frustration among those who are (mainly) limited to MENA.

The ICRC management considers each communicator’s profile, which might not fit the desired profile for the vacant posts (e.g. French-speaking mission, list of banned nationalities or non-family post) and will probably evolve throughout their careers. Despite the shared sense of restricted geographical and career mobility among my informants, they appropriate the “lexicon of neoliberalism” to perform some agency over their careers. The discourses of flexibility and (self-) skilling are used, I argue, to navigate and circumvent the linguistic, legal and personal requirements for deployment in ways that are advantageous to one’s situation, e.g. to obtain a managerial position or to be deployed in family posts. “Flexibility” for (consecutive) unaccompanied posts can have exchange value for interesting work in conflicts and later institutional recognition. A multilingual repertoire including not only English and Arabic but also (self-skilling in) French can be a card to communications missions outside MENA and eventual managerial posts at headquarters. Some informants, however, mobilise discourses of skilling or flexibility to resist neoliberal self-responsibilisation and request more balanced rotation systems that valorise Arabic speakers for skills other than the working language in their job title. The discourse of incompatibility between productive and reproductive labour, specifically family life and motherhood, seems to resist the situated meaning of "flexibility" as non-family and being deployed wherever the ICRC needs them even in later stages of their humanitarian careers.

This article illustrates the need for sociolinguists to look for jigsaw pieces that contain not only elements of language but also, crucially, other social axes of differentiation such as nationality or family that are articulated to "language pieces" to fully grasp the puzzle of the political economy of language.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions for Excerpt 2

(1)	pause in seconds
-	self-interruption, fragment
:	lengthened segment
[>]	overlap follows
[<]	overlap precedes
<>	scope symbols

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