

INSTITUTIONS AND LINGUISTIC PENALTIES

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This paper argues that job interviews are key site in the production of linguistic and social inequality. They present a linguistic penalty which is rendered invisible by the processes and rhetoric of institutional selection. Applicants from overseas, including migrants and international medical graduates, fare much less well than both white British and black and minority ethnic British. This linguistic penalty is produced by the competency-based framework of these interviews and the hybrid discourses entailed in them. Candidates from overseas struggle to 'read' and produce these hybrid discourses. While the examples below show that these candidates are fluent English speakers, the indirectness inscribed in the job interview penalises them, despite them being highly qualified, or indeed, over-qualified, for the posts on offer.

Keywords: linguistic penalty, job interviews, inequality, UK institutions

When differences in ethnicity, religion or language come to be seen
as markers of low social status and attract various downward prejudices,
social divisions and discrimination may increase

Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (2010: 185)

1. Introduction

This paper is about the role of language in contributing to inequality in institutional settings. It looks at an area of life that has been somewhat neglected by socio and applied linguistics: the workplace. I shall argue that there is a *linguistic penalty* in the labour market that particularly affects migrant and mobile workers and job-seekers. This penalty is at its harshest and most visible in the job interview and associated selection processes. While different countries in the western world, and in the global labour markets influenced by western ideologies, have somewhat differing selection processes, in the English speaking world, the job interview reigns supreme. Outside of the informal economy, 90% of organisations use telephone and face to face interviews to select acceptable people for the post(s) on offer. And while occupational psychologists and human resource managers invest considerable money and time in designing and carrying out these interviews, the fact that such encounters are made of talk is never routinely addressed. So language and its power to produce inequality remains hidden except when candidates are from linguistic minorities when language is used as an explanation for failure.

2. The role of institutions in contributing to inequality

While the institutions of the state have a role in contributing to a fair society, institutionalised workplaces require a knowledge of how they operate from those who seek access to them. In a quirky book, the anthropologist, Mary Douglas, talks about institutions as

living organisms busily creating and defending themselves: “This is how ... we build institutions, squeezing each other’s ideas into a common shape” (1986: 91). She discusses the classifications and categories that institutions create that come to shape and define us. Our complex and dynamic lives are fitted into boxes. And the knowledge institutions produce is seen as natural and reasonable. However, as many critical theorists have asserted, institutional knowledge requires special reasoning and inferencing and institutional activities constrain what it is allowable to say. So, for example, while the job interview seems a reasonable activity, its institutional design and consequent interactional demands are not transparent or subject to common knowledge. On the contrary, knowing how to succeed at selection is knowledge that is unequally distributed in society.

Let us look at three questions to illustrate this point:

- How does an organisation manage change?
- How does illness make you feel?
- How do you know what you don’t know?

The first of these questions comes from an interview for a what is called entry level work. This is work that is low-paid and requires no formal qualifications. However the question is wide-ranging, requires analytic skills, imagination and either academic or experiential knowledge about organisational change. The second two questions are from selection interviews for young doctors hoping to go on to specialised training. In the case of the second question, it is difficult to establish whether this is a personal question about the candidate’s feelings or an attempt to elicit their professional stance on health and illness. The third question appears to be a philosophical question but was actually asked to elicit what sources of information the candidate would use to develop and maintain their professional knowledge. In all cases, there is a gap between the question, what was expected of the candidate and the actual job/training applied for. In other words, considerable inferences have to be made about the organisation, its codes of behaviour and the wider circulating discourses of skills and selection processes. How do institutions come to ask such questions?

It is worth stepping back for a moment, to look at how bureaucratic institutions which aimed to be fair could produce interactions which seem to discriminate against certain groups. The sociologist Max Weber was a strong advocate of bureaucracy. He saw it as aiming to release institutions from the personal and introduce rationality, accountability and depersonalisation –to turn things into categories and cases against which individuals could be fairly judged (Weber 1947, du Gay 2000). Weber’s arguments for objective and rational forms of work were in part designed to cater for globalised, diverse societies and the goal of fair and objective procedures in the institutional allocation of scarce resources. The principles seem fair but in order for them to operate fairly those who bump up against them need the knowledge of how they work, as I have suggested. The irony is that many aspects of the selection interview designed to be fair act against those groups least familiar with the taken for granted knowledge institutions have built. And it is this irony which I will explore in the rest of this paper.

3. Ethnic and linguistic penalties in gatekeeping interviews

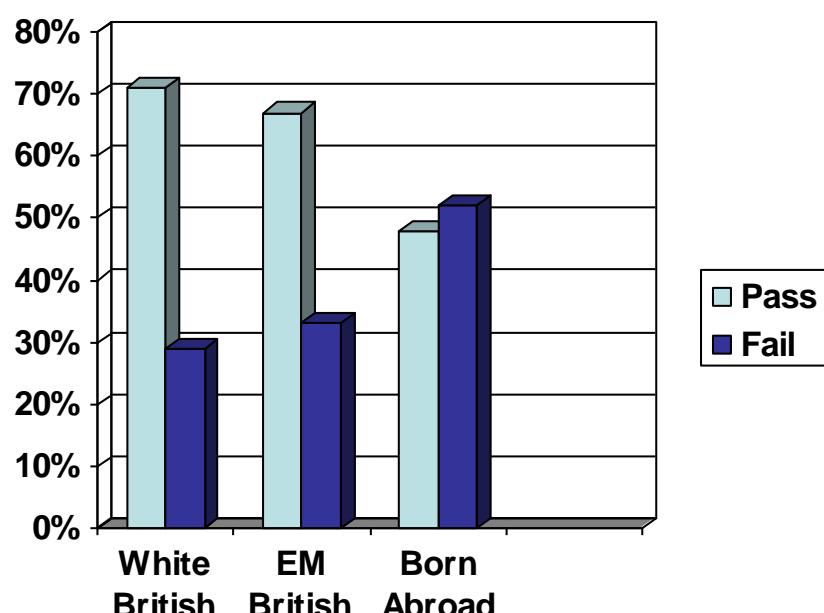
The notion of a linguistic penalty draws on the work of British sociologists who have documented some of the disadvantage and discrimination in employment that minority groups face (GLA 2005, Heath and Cheung 2006) and have summed it up in the notion of an *ethnic penalty*. This penalty means that minority ethnic groups are less likely than the majority to obtain work and get promotion (Heath and Cheung 2006) even when matched in terms of social and educational background. A more dramatic way of expressing the effects of this

penalty is to talk of the ‘snowy peaks’ that are still at the top of an organisation with few of those who are not white in these upper ranks. If the penalty does not relate broadly to social background, is it the selection interview that is one technology that is producing it?

This type of encounter is one of the key types of ‘gatekeeping’ interviews where scarce resources are offered to applicants who are judged on how well the face to face encounter goes (Erickson and Shultz 1982). The image of candidates at the gate waiting to see if it will be opened for them also calls up the role of Janus, the god of doors, gates and thresholds in Roman mythology. Janus looks both ways, out to the world beyond the gates and inwards to what lies within, once the gates are opened. In several ways the interview is Janus-like. Interviewers look out to the candidate but also back to their own organisations. While candidates may believe that the interview is all about the interviewers’ interest in them, this is only part of the story. Institutions and their representatives who sit on the interview panels also have to defend themselves if they are to survive. So much of the interview is about squeezing people into the institution’s shape while ensuring that the conduct of the interview stands up to scrutiny in terms of equal opportunities and other legislation. Candidates also have to look both ways. They have to present their past but in ways that are aligned to the organisation where there future may lie. Facing two ways simultaneously creates an interactional dilemma and sums up the tensions and contradictions of the selection interview: the talk becomes more indirect and more abstract.

The increased levels of abstraction and indirectness, exemplified in the three questions above, help to produce what I have called a *linguistic penalty*. On the analogy of the *ethnic penalty*, this constitutes all sources of disadvantage which might lead a linguistic minority group to fare less well in the selection process. Three research studies that I have been involved with show this linguistic penalty in the outcomes of selection processes. While the numbers are quite small in these studies, they are backed up by more statistical data (for example Heath and Chung 2006). The first of these studies (Roberts and Campbell 2006) related to job interviews for low-paid work such as mail delivery, supermarket work, packing jobs in factories and simple receptionist work. In most cases, the organisation would be recruiting in quite large numbers and would accept up to about 60-70% of the candidates:

Data Example 1: Success levels of white, British minority ethnic and born abroad candidates.



While minority ethnic British candidates did almost as well as white British, migrant candidates were more likely to fail than pass, even though these were entry level jobs.

The second example relates to membership of Royal Medical Colleges which required candidates, who were already experienced doctors, to undertake an oral exam:

Data Example 2: Success levels of British versus overseas trained candidates for the Royal Medical College examination:

Graduate fails:

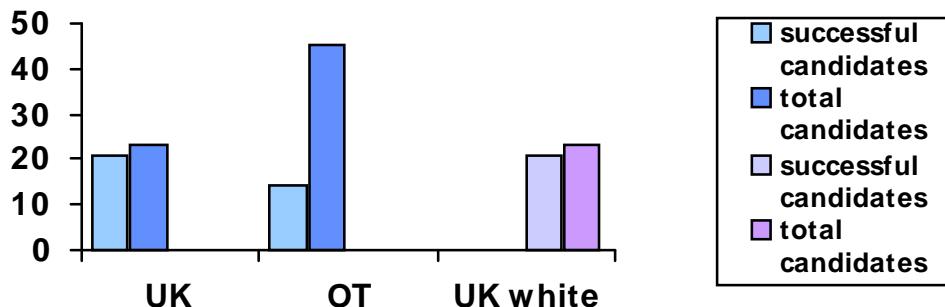
- UK trained = 7.7%
- Overseas trained = 35.9%

The persistent gap between local white British candidates, minority ethnic British candidates and those born overseas has been shown across a range of medical settings (Woolf, Potts and McMannus 2011; Roberts et al 2000).

The third example, also of a medical setting, relates to newly trained doctors applying for medical vocational training:

Data Example 3: Success levels of British white candidates, British minority ethnic candidates and overseas trained graduates:

GP trainee candidates - training & placement



Overseas trained (OT) candidates were less successful than BME UK trained and much less successful than white, UK trained, British candidates:

- 31% of OT trained BME candidates were successful (14/45)
- 77% of UK trained BME candidates were successful (33/43)
- 91% of white British UK trained candidates were successful (21/23)

In both these examples, there is a distinct hierarchy in which white British candidates do extremely well, British minority ethnic candidates rather less well and overseas trained candidates not well at all.

While these broad statistics paint a telling picture of all minority ethnic groups doing less well than their white counterparts, migrants do startlingly less well. Also these statistics while useful in conveying what is happening, do little to explain why. How can we account for the small tragedies of individuals’ lives when they experience failure? These figures gloss over the design and interactional details of what Goffman called “this quiet sorting process” (Goffman 1983).

4. The British job interview 1960s to the present

When migrants came to the UK after the second World War, job interviews for low-paid work barely existed and for skilled and professional jobs they lacked structure and consistency. For entry level jobs, a pair of hands was often sufficient and much low paid work was offered using the chain recruitment method. This entailed friends or family of a potential applicant vouching for him or her as a good worker. Often new migrant workers knew no English and worked on what were called ‘ethnic work units’ overseen by a bi-lingual supervisor from the same ethnic-linguistic backgrounds as the new workers. Job interviews for professional jobs were usually unstructured, often depended on mutual contacts and were certainly not politically correct. For example, women were often asked about childcare and I was asked in the early 1970s if I was ‘courting’ –or what we now call ‘in a relationship’!

Research in the 1980s showed that interviews for low-paid work were much more common and more structured (Jenkins 1986). Jenkins makes a distinction between “suitability” and “acceptability” which suggested that inter-personal elements and manner were increasingly important even for low-paid work. This was also the period when ‘equal opportunities’ were introduced in the public sector. These were, and still are, highly standardised interviews where all aspects of the interaction, it is assumed, can be regulated. Questions are written down and read out by interviewers, candidates have no opportunity for clarification, interviewers give no feedback and answers are written down verbatim by interviewers. The notion that standardisation produces equality and fairness is challenged by our own research which included some equal opportunity interviews in the 80s style. Many migrant candidates found these intimidating and there was no evidence that they helped these candidates to be successful.

Since the 1990s, selection interviews in the Anglo world have been dominated by the notion of competencies and the competency framework (Wood and Payne 1998). Designed out of the “new managerialism” or “fast capitalism” (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996), competencies are the predominately soft skills that are widely accepted in business are necessary for organisations to adapt and grow (Urcioli). The new or fast capitalism requires flexibility; new responsibilities are pushed down to workers who are expected to develop an “entrepreneurial self” (du Gay 2000); and relatively low status staff are expected to be engaged in the organisation’s vision/mission. A typical list of competencies for both low-paid work and management level posts will include the soft skills of team working, communications, customer focus, adaptability and flexibility and self-management. Rhetoric outstrips the reality in many workplaces where routine, repetitive work in hierarchical structures are the norm. But while the actual tasks of the low-paid worker may not require these competencies, the selection interview is designed to display them, as the example below shows. The competency framework which our research shows is now the norm in most British selection interviews, is also designed to meet equal opportunities legislation since the interview is structured around these competencies with similar questions asked of these candidates.

In both the private and public sectors, competency-based interviews are seen as a silver bullet, meeting legislative requirements and also responding to globalised markets and the flexibility and soft skills required to operate in them. While they are a better option than earlier types of interviews between 1960s-1990s, the figures, as I have shown above, suggest that there is something going on in the face-to-face talk of the interview that penalises migrant and mobile candidates. I will now turn to the analysis of this talk, using data from low-paid work settings and medical settings.

5. Competencies played out in the interview

In this extract from an interview for a low-paid job in a delivery company, one of the competencies is ‘self-management/resilience’: the ability to perform well under various pressures and be reflective about your performance. One key area for this company is managing yourself while doing repetitive work. The candidate, who we have called Ire, is from Nigeria:

Data Example 4: Repetitive work

I= interviewer C= candidate (Ire, Nigerian-born, borderline in terms of success)

- 1 I: right what would you tell me is the advantage of a repetitive job (1)
2 C: advantage of a-
3 I: repetitive job (1)
4 C: er I mean the advantage of a repetitive job is that er:m it makes you it- i-it
5 keeps you going, er it doesn't make you bored, you don't feel bored you keep on
6 going and I mean and er also it puts a smile on your face , you come in you put a
7 smile on your face(.) you feel happy to come to the job the job will interest you
8 I: you don't get to know it better
9 C: yeah we get to know the job better we I mean we learn new ideas lots of new
10 ideas as well
11 I: right what is the disadvantage of a repetitive job
12 C: well, disadvantage er:m- er disadvantages (1) you may you may f- offend
13 customers you may f- offend our customers in there that's a disadvantage of it
14 I: you don't find it boring
15 C: yeah it could also be boring, to be boring and you- and you .. yet by
16 being bored you may offend the customers
17 I: how how would you offend them by being bored
18 C: by not putting a smile on your face

This candidate was a borderline candidate. His answer, transcribed here, was the main reason why he was not rated as successful. What is notable here is the difficulty he has in inferring a preferred response from the interviewer and the interactional turbulence that results from this. The contradictions and tensions of the job interview are apparent in the opening question and the interviewers' subsequent follow-up. While self-management is one of the competencies of the ‘enterprising self’, the design of the questions and their follow-ups are predicated on standardisation and conformity. Ire’s story must fit the box on the interviewer’s form (Roberts and Campbell 2005) but the self that is presented must be of a go-getter, managing work and himself in entrepreneurial ways. An appropriate response also assumes a shared definition of the interview (Auer) and a shared understanding of the assumptions about such questions. The competency question at turns 1 and 10 is based on a set of conventionalised expectations/ inferences that repetitive jobs are boring but easy to learn, but that enterprising, self-managing candidates will recognise this and find ways of dealing with the boredom which will maintain their identity as motivated workers. (Indeed, the successful candidates made these inferences and produced good answers).

The lack of a shared definition about the competency-based interview is evident in the interactional turbulence that the interviewer’s questions produce. There are several markers of discomfort, and then two less than acceptable responses at lines 4-6 and 11-12. These, in turn, further constrain his contributions as she works to get the conventional answer from him. His contributions are down-graded by her negative questioning at lines 7 and 13, thus showing how his borderline status is interactionally accomplished by her questions (Heritage and Clayman 2010: 8-50). Finally, the competency question is couched in what we have called

"institutional discourse" (Roberts and Sarangi 1999). The two parts of the question ask for a balanced answer, listing and weighing up relative advantages and disadvantages in an impersonal, analytic mode, abstracted from the experience of doing repetitive work. Ire does his best to answer a question which, in its communicative demands, seems so far removed from the job itself where mail has to be stuffed into bags. He is on the receiving end of a linguistic penalty.

6. Hybrid discourses

The competency-base interview, although designed around a small number of competencies, each one usually introduced and then followed up in relatively standard ways, produces what Srikant Sarangi and I have come to call "hybrid discourses" (Roberts and Sarangi 1999). We have already seen 'institutional discourse' in the preceding example and I will now unpack this notion a little more. Institutional discourse is framed by the work institutions do in creating classes, categories and cases and in their 'structuring' work as they are planted in the interactional here and now but look out to the structures and systems of which they are a part. Their bureaucratic function is to produce rational and accountable language which is incorporated into the institutional life of the workplace. In doing so, this discourse is made more abstract and distant from the immediate and local so that it can fit institutional criteria and standards and make the candidates' contribution more gradable.

Bourdieu describes institutional discourse as at the top of the hierarchy in the linguistic marketplace. He sees it as characterised by "impartiality, symmetry, balance, propriety, decency and discretion" and the creation of a certain professional distance between those using it (1991: 130). As such, institutional discourse does euphemising work, detaching the speaker from the rough and tumble of the everyday working world so that they can be cautious, discreet and impersonal. For example in our study of the exams for membership of a royal college, the following candidate was highly rated when asked what she would do in a particularly stressful situation. She opted to say: "*That's where my personal stress management plan comes in*" as opposed to choosing a more personal and narrative mode such as "*Well I try to think of ways of dealing with ...*". So although using the word 'personal' in her actual reply, it is embedded in the more semiotically abstract notion of a 'stress management plan'.

However, despite the over-arching institutional frame of the selection interview, in our data successful candidates were ones who managed a blend of hybrid discourses. And this hybridity matches the informal but over-riding criteria used by interviewers and which we saw at work in the post interview decision –making activities and in conversations with interviewers. The stress on personality and on other personal characteristics such as trust, together with the interactional requirements from many of the competency questions to provide narrative accounts, suggests that job interviewers wanted to know what people were like beneath the veneer of the institutional discourse. So, while institutional discourse produces power for legitimate speakers (Bourdieu 1991), its over-use can work against candidates who are in a powerless position.

Candidates are, therefore, expected to use personal discourse to construct a coherent story of the self that displays individuals' experiences and feelings. This 'personal discourse' allows glimpses of the character and emotions of the candidate, how they react to difficulties or stress and shows something of their values. For example, a successful candidate applying to the same organisation as Ire (above) was asked how he managed to work very different shift patterns: "... *you can see your friends any time of the week, you know, so it don't really matter to them, you just adjust yourself*".

There is a third mode of discourse which we have called 'professional discourse'. In this mode speakers give accounts of working life and shared ways of knowing and seeing

which make an individual sound like a member of a particular profession or job community. In low-paid jobs this is routinely brief descriptions of what the job involved and individual's particular task. However, in junior management interviews (Roberts, Campbell and Robinson 2008) and in professional interviews, such as health settings, professional discourse is more prominent.

This heuristic of hybrid discourses provided a way in to understanding how some candidates were so much more successful than others and why it was that migrant and mobile groups fared much less well than others. While questions might be in any one of the three discourse modes, candidates who did well routinely blended all three discourses either within an individual response or across the whole interview. In the next example, a white female candidate is asked about the different jobs she has had as part of the competence of 'flexibility':

Data example 5

- 1 C: erm well it is I think t-m-majority of the jobs that I have worked in I
- 2 have been erm customer focussed and deadlines and under pressure (.)
- 3 hhh erm catering I've m-you know
- 4 I: mmm
- 5 C: my family own a business and I've worked in that since the age of nine (.)
- 6 you know helping them out

The candidate opens her response in institutional discourse mode, generalising in an analytic way and using competency discourse, 'customer focused'. She then moves on to describing some of her work experience in professional mode and also gives a personal glimpse of herself as a nine year old, helping out. This shows a coherent narrative and resilience as well as fitting well with the institutional boxes on the interviewers' forms.

Another successful strategy is to be able to infer from the question what its purpose is – that questions are not always what they seem. Candidates are expected to recognise that a question in a personal/ professional mode may need a relatively more institutional answer or vice versa. This interpretation may depend upon subtle aspects of interaction which are interpreted below the level of consciousness. For example, as we shall see below, there is a subtle difference in Why do you do visits? and Why do you do visits? The perceived stress on 'why' implies a more institutional response while the stress on 'you' suggests a more professional or personal one. The evaluation of candidates and the decision to accept them or not depends crucially on the extent to which they can infer which discourse mode is being elicited and on their ability to synthesise these different discourses in their responses.

The final set of examples looks at the challenges faced by a young doctor who is taking the membership examination for a royal college of medicine. This type of exam has now been replaced by one that relates more closely to the professional practice of medicine. Nevertheless, similar exams still occur in other contexts and the general points from this exam, as our job interview research indicates, are just as telling to-day. In these two data examples the candidate is asked to discuss some of her recent cases from her work in a family practice. She had received her medical education in Spain but has been in Scotland for two years for her post-graduate training. At this point in the interview, she is asked about a post-natal visit she has made:

Data example 6:

C= candidate (unsuccessful) E= examiner

- 1 E: let's go on to something (.) clinical one of your visits was a postnatal visit

2 C: [(.)] there's no need [to going in to great detail about it] (.) why ==
 3 E: [uhuh] [no right okay]
 4 C: = do you do a postnatal visit
 5 C: um (.) I think one of the (.) reasons ((slightly laughing)) is because you get paid for it (.) um [(.) its an item uh (.) it's one of your uh (.) =
 6 E: [right]
 7 C: = commitments and (.) only if you finish (the whole care of the patient) do you get the full pay
 8 E: o you have to do the visit yourself to get paid
 9 C: er no you can delegate like (.) to the (.) registrar [(.)] or um (.) the =
 10 E: [mhmm]
 11 C: = health visitor has a al obligation as well to visit [(.)] but I don't =
 12 E: [mhmm]
 13 C: = think you can delegate on her the actual postnatal (.) visits (.) [the]
 14 E: [okay] so let's move on for other reasons for doing (.) the postnatal visit (.) why do you go (.) why do you do it (.) what's your plan when you're going there C: um (.) I think one would be the clinical aspect to (.) you know (.) make sure that they have no (.) post partum haemorrhage or any other (.) actual you know clinical (.) complication[s] uh infection of the breasts or anything (.) uh for the more social aspects

The opening question sets up the special line of inferencing which the candidate is expected to follow. While the wording of the question appears to be in the professional mode, asking for a professional description of the doctor's duties in post-natal care, there are two indicators that this may be an institutional question. Firstly, the question is asking 'why' which may well index a request for an institutionally defensive position. The examiners may expect an abstract, analytical answer along the lines of how medical personnel construe the division of labour. For a doctor to make regular postnatal visits has to be justified in terms of scarce resources. The candidate deals with the questions in the professional mode, talking from her practical experience of being a GP. However, at line 7 the institutional line of reasoning becomes clearer when the examiner asks "do you have to do the visit yourself ...?". The opening question now becomes understandable as an institutional discourse mode question but the candidate does not read it in this way. At line 13, the examiner gives up on the institutional question and asks about her plan in professional mode. She then responds appropriately also in professional mode.

However, a few minutes later on the examiner return to the institutional question about time and scarce resources:

Data Example 6 (continued):

30 E: [that's right] okay (.) if I said to you (.) we really don't (.) haven't got time to be doing all these things (.) we're going to stop doing the postnatal visits (.) how would you feel about that
 31 C: (2.0) um (.) I think (.) I quite enjoy doing the postnatal visits um
 32 E: is it good use of your time though

While the question at line 30 is dealing with the institutional discourse of accountability and rationality, the question is asked in a personal mode: "How would you feel about that?" Here the examiner returns to the opening question, which has still not been answered to his satisfaction, to try to elicit her opinion on the use of her time and the division of labour between doctors and other primary care professionals. This question is posed as personal experience question in an apparently unambiguous way since he asks her about her feelings. But the examiner expects an institutional response since he is still probing about the

question of use of time. She responds in the personal mode, answering the question literally by talking about her enjoyment. The examiner’s response at line 32 clearly shows that this is a dispreferred answer, just as the interviewer does in the Ire example above.

The indirectness which is so common in gatekeeping interviews disadvantages the candidate. She shows from other answers that she is an experienced doctor, but she is not familiar with the hybrid gatekeeping discourses which are, eventually, to bring her down. In the post-examination decision –making she is rated as less than satisfactory and fails. The post-natal visit question was specifically mentioned as an area of weakness. What is most telling is the explanation for her failure. She is categorised as having language problems because she comes from overseas. Her Spanish name and her very rare and minor grammatical slips are enough to fuel this categorisation. Ironically, the interviewers’ own hybrid discourses are never brought to the surface so there is no realisation that it is these that cause the negative judgement to be made.

7. Conclusion

Selection interviews are one of the ways in which institutions build and defend themselves, producing knowledge which they take for granted. The institutional habitus that is realised, at a local level, in every job interview encounter, produces routine bureaucratic knowledge which regiments what can be said and how candidate contributions are evaluated. The Janus-faced contradictions of the interview produce the linguistic contortions/mysteries that I have illustrated and which then require special reasoning and inferencing in an applicant’s performance. The institutional knowledge and performative abilities required to be successful at selection are unequally distributed and those from migrant backgrounds or who are mobile citizens are least likely to share with interviewers a definition of the interview as it is played out in the particular cultural context of the nation state.

The competency-based interview and the hybrid discourses that it produces put demands on all candidates which routinely exceed the demands of the job. The gap between the communicative demands of the selection interview and the communicative demands of the job/profession is particularly evident in selecting for low-paid work. While all candidates are potentially disadvantaged by this gap, migrants and linguistic minorities suffer a ‘linguistic penalty’. Their qualifications and experience count for less than their ability to manage the paradoxes of the interview.

Many migrants are over-qualified for the jobs they apply for. They cannot enter the labour market at a level commensurate with their experience and qualifications and may not even get low-paid work because of the linguistic penalty imposed on them by the job interview. So the labour market is, in part, stratified by the linguistic competences required of the selection interview. And while institutions are deaf to their own language use, they are quick to invoke ‘language’ to exclude others, as the medical interview setting shows. Here language is a proxy for the misunderstandings and misalignments that are produced by interviewers’ own hybrid discourses.

Outside of education, many big issues such as migration, health and inequality in the labour market have tended to side-line ‘language’ as a relatively uninteresting set of skills that need acquiring. I hope this paper has shown that the small tragedies of every day life which cumulatively lead to much larger issues of social inequality need to be understood using just those same resources as the ones that are used in the interview itself –namely language.

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