

Linguistic penalty in the job interview

Success levels of different candidate groups in job interviews for low-skilled jobs (Source: Roberts 2013, p. 89)

A common explanation for the un- and underemployment of migrants is that their English is not good enough. Despite the overuse of this explanation, we do, in fact, not have a particularly clear idea what “good English” for a particular job might mean. In some cases, the proficiency expectations placed on job candidates are clearly out of step with the language requirements of a particular job, [as I have shown before](#). So, when it comes to migrants’ access to the job market, English language proficiency is both over-used as explanation and under-specified as to what the actual requirements might be.

New research by Celia Roberts (2013) goes some way to fill this gap. The researcher and her associates recorded job interviews in Britain for low-skilled (and low-paid) work such as stacking shelves, packing factory products or delivering parcels. For this kind of work employers hold “assessment days” and interview large numbers of people with a view to taking on most of those who have applied. Around 70% of white and non-white British-born applicants are hired for these jobs (see Figure; ‘EM’ stands for ‘ethnic minority’). However, for applicants born abroad, the picture looks radically different: despite the fact that they are more qualified, less than half are hired.

What is going on here? Surely, language proficiency is almost completely irrelevant to being able to stack shelves, package products or deliver parcels?

I have previously argued that [discrimination on the basis of language proficiency can serve as a proxy for racial discrimination](#) but, in the present context, this explanation doesn’t make sense, either: if racist structures were to blame, they would presumably funnel migrants into low-skilled low-paid work rather than exclude them from that particular segment of the labour market. So, what is going on?

To begin with, Roberts (2013) explains that interviewers are guided by principles of equal opportunities and diversity management, and are perfectly aware that a good command of English is irrelevant to stacking shelves and similar monotonous and repetitive jobs.

What they are looking for is evidence that applicants will be able to cope with repetition, monotony and boredom, and evidence that they are reflexive flexible individuals who will be capable of managing their own boredom. How can you demonstrate that? By telling a good story! Candidates were expected to tell a vivid story of how they had worked in a boring job before and, ideally, inject a bit of humour. For instance, one candidate, who the interviewers really liked, told the panel about how he had once painted the “giant walls” of a warehouse in one colour for three weeks. He closed by joking that painting the ceiling in a different colour was “a bit of pleasure” because it broke the routine.

In another example a successful candidate reflected on how he had coped previously when working a job consisting of “complete mind numbingly same repetitive stuff” by reflecting on how he would not “turn your brain on” and chat with co-workers while drilling and gluing a little piece of equipment onto another piece of equipment.

Both these (white British-born) successful candidates drew on the well-known Labovian structure for Anglo narratives (abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation, coda). As it so happens, this structure coincides with the structure of the evaluation form the interviewers have to fill in. That form is organized in a “STAR structure” where they are asked to record the candidate’s responses to **S**ituation, **T**ask, **A**ction, and **R**esult. Thus, “the normative Anglo narrative and the institution’s bureaucratic assessment form map on to each other precisely” (Roberts, 2013, p. 87).

Candidates who produced stories about coping with monotonous work and who were able to reflect on the experience in order to project a credible, competent and flexible personality did well during the interview, and interviews could become quite informal and friendly. This opened further spaces for the candidate to present themselves as having “the right kind of personality.”

By contrast, migrants often didn’t know what to make of questions such as “what would you tell me is the advantage of a repetitive job?” When they failed to produce an extended response, the interview usually became much more difficult: the interviewers became more controlling of the candidate’s talk and turns; there was more negativity and interviewers became less helpful and sympathetic; and the interviewers aligned more with formal participation roles and the interview became more formal and more institutionalized. Such conduct was a response to the candidate’s failure to produce the expected kind of discourse, but, crucially, it also served to make the interview much more difficult for them.

In sum, migrant candidates did fail because of language. However, it was not their accent, or their grammar, or their ability to produce “Standard English.” What mattered was the ability to “play a language game:” to tell a story that would project the candidate as the kind of person who was not only willing to do monotonous work but who was also sufficiently self-organized and self-aware to reflect on how they would manage the boredom inherent in such jobs.

The selection interview requires both bureaucratically processible talk and a vivid social performance, subtly blended together to produce a credible and persuasive self which aligns with the ideal worker in the new capitalist workplace. Small interactional differences and difficulties feed into larger scale judgements and institutional orders which, in turn, press down on individual decision making. (Roberts, 2013, p. 91f.)

The production of such a hybrid discourse is not easily practiced, particularly for those who are unemployed or employed in an ethnic job market. While the applicant’s competence and personality is assessed on the basis of how they talk, the linguistic and cultural nature of the assessment remains, in fact, unacknowledged and invisible.



Roberts, Celia (2013). The Gatekeeping of Babel: Job Interviews and the Linguistic Penalty A. Duchêne, M. Moyer & C. Roberts (Eds.), *Language, Migration and Social Inequalities: A Critical Sociolinguistic Perspective on Institutions and Work*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 81-94