

‘That’s quite all right’. Cultural shibboleths in job interviews with second language users of Danish

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This paper analyzes data from two job interviews with job applicants who speak Danish as a second language. The data stem from an integration initiative designed to support migrants and refugees in finding employment in Denmark. Using interaction analysis as my method, I focus on institutional gatekeeping as a process of inclusion and exclusion that involves language and cultural assessments. I draw on linguistic ideology as a theoretical framework and introduce the notion of the shibboleth, which I use as an index for cultural belonging to a particular group. I contextualize shibboleths in relation to two areas: conventional expressions as shibboleths and common spaces of interest as shibboleths. The analysis shows that both the use of conventional expressions and the negotiation of common spaces of interest facilitate a momentary common ground between applicants and employers in the interaction. If the applicants are able to navigate successfully within the established common ground, they are more likely to be considered suitable for the job they apply for. I also discuss the relation between language and culture, suggesting that the use of conventional expressions might serve as an effective strategy in situations where second language users communicate with more advanced language users.

KEYWORDS: shibboleths, gate-keeping, job interview, Danish as L2, cultural membership