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Modernist Entry Tickets for Post-Modern Sociolinguistic Realities: the testing of immigrants for admission to the Netherlands

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A new form of diversity

The blending of ‘new’ and ‘old’ migration brought to western Europe by the aftermath of the political events that have taken place in 1991 has given way to a post-modern form of diversity, one for which the term ‘super-diversity’ has been coined (Vertovec 2006). This form of diversity raises critical questions about the rationale and future of nation-states, about the dynamics of their fast moving urban spaces as well as about the embedded but yet omnipresent supremacy of the majority’s perspective within those institutions that regulate the entrance of migrants (Stead-Sellers 2003). Opposed to the state support given to the free movement of goods and information, the movement of people has pushed politicians across Europe to enforce modernist measures that regulate people’s access to the nation-state territory and preserve the national order. Such measures often imply knowledge of mainstream cultural norms and values as well as learning of the (official) national language (see Extra, Spotti & Van Avermaet 2009 *forthcoming*; Leung & Lewkowicz 2006; Mar-Molinero, Stevenson & Hogan-Brun 2009 *forthcoming*; Milani 2007). In the current gamut of modernist responses to super-diversity, the Netherlands is no exception. Rather, it has tackled this new immigration wave by setting up an admission test that assesses immigrants’ knowledge of mainstream cultural norms and values as well as of Dutch language in the immigrant’s country of origin. It is against this background that the present paper sets out to investigate the structure, content and rationale of the admission test that immigrants who wish to enter the Netherlands have to pass. In so doing, the paper takes the perspective of the nation-state’s testing machinery and tries to unravel both the (explicit and implicit) ideologies contained in the test and their workings toward the maintenance of the national order. The article concludes with a reflection on the implications that the ascertaining citizenship on the basis of testing hold for applied linguistics. On the one hand, applied linguistics is made paying lip

service to modernist governmental measures. On the other hand, those complex post-modern realities that characterise the mobile life paths and sociolinguistic biographies of immigrants call for a sociolinguistics of globalisation (Blommaert, 2003; Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck 2005; Jaspers 2005; Spotti 2008) to be applied in the making and evaluation of these tests.

Gaining an entry ticket to the Netherlands

The regulations of the admission test are spelled out in the *Wet Inburgering in het Buitenland* (2006) where it is stated that the admission test is meant to prepare people abroad, who do not fall under the refugee or asylum seeker category, for their coming settlement in the Netherlands. In other words, it is the first step that should allow the migrant to move his identity ascription from ‘foreign’ guest toward that of ‘civically integrated’ temporary resident. The admission test is available at 140 Dutch embassies / consulates and it is fully computerised. The first part examines the applicant’s knowledge of Dutch society. It consists of a series of photos based on a video film about the Netherlands accompanied by 30 questions. The video film entitled *Coming to the Netherlands*, is available in 14 different (official) languages as a preparation tool and it deals with Dutch everyday way of living, Dutch politics, work, education, health care and history. Preparation for this first part is possible by buying and studying a photo album and an audio CD. The photo album contains 100 photos, the audio CD 100 questions. All questions are in Dutch and all answers have to be given in Dutch. During the test, taken in a phone booth at the local Dutch embassy in the examinee’s country of origin, 30 questions taken from the photo album have to be answered through a headset. The second part consists of five sections that deal with 1) repeating sentences, 2) answering short questions, 3) indicating opposites and 4 & 5) repeating two short stories. Each section includes four exercises. All 20 exercises are taken on the phone and the answers are assessed by a speech recognition programme, also with respect to the quality of the candidate’s pronunciation in Dutch. Out of the 1580 applicants who have taken this test since its first implementation in January 2006, approximately 90% of them have succeeded at their first attempt. Most of the applicants fell in the age category 25-36 years old and were Turkish (21%), Moroccan (19%) or Chinese (10%) nationals. No exact information was made available on their socio-economic backgrounds.

Modernist measures for post-modern sociolinguistic realities

Admission on the basis of a computerised phone test has far-reaching consequences for those who aspire to enter the Netherlands. From the very beginning of their migration trajectory, the admission test confronts the potential immigrant with economic, travelling, technological and literacy challenges. The first part of the test is a computer mediated language test disguised as a test dealing with knowledge of Dutch society. It is evident therefore that Dutch language and the mastering of basic ICT skills are immediate, vital prerequisites for the applicant to take and pass the test and although these skills may seem minimal, we should not forget that the applicants in question may well be people who might have differential access to literacy skills, ICT skills and who may encounter travelling constraints due to their economic situation. The admission test makes an implicit yet drastic selection from the very beginning. While the test opens the door to the deterritorialised manager who wishes to come to the Netherlands for a high fly career or to the foreign PhD student who embarks on an academic post, it also closes a door for the masses of applicants who do possess neither the money nor the necessary skills, or both, to prepare and tackle the test. The admission test therefore covertly constructs a hierarchisation of the immigrant population that may be made eligible to enter the Netherlands and it supports a representation of immigration as a positive, willed and affordable move. This hierarchic stratification is not a matter of letting new people in. Rather, it is a matter of hindering some from coming in through an ideology of language testing that supports a *doxa* (Bourdieu 1991) of elitist immigration.

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