On the negotiation of desirability: Foreign workers in the Swiss labour market.

Mi-Cha Flubacher

University of Fribourg, Institute of Multilingualism, Switzerland

Competences in the local language are often discursively constructed as the decisive factor to access the Swiss labour market – especially for foreign workers with no/low qualifications. In line with this reasoning, language courses are a principal measure provided by the state in order to increase the employability of unemployed migrants. Yet, it appears that competences in the local language are sometimes of only secondary importance for securing employment. Following questions thus arise: When and how do workers become desirable for employers? Under which conditions do which languages and/or professional qualifications become a factor for employment – and for which jobs? How is the desirability of migrants on the labour market negotiated by diverse actors (e.g. migrant workers, unemployment consultants HR personnel)? And, finally, what are the desires of the workers to enter the Swiss labour market and what does role do language competences play in this?

In order to approach these questions and to understand how the desirability of language competences is negotiated and how it relates to employability, I will draw on data collected in an on-going research project on the access to the labour market, unemployment and language competences. The project consists of an ethnography carried out in three unemployment offices, which includes interviews with unemployed migrants and their consultants as well as participant observation of consultations. While language is repeatedly invoked as the prime component of desirability by consultants and unemployed alike, it appears that, in the end, economic considerations rather than linguistic profiles determine over employability. Thus, I argue that the effect of language competences on the desirability of the migrants as workforce becomes highly variable in that it is primarily determined by the needs of the labour market.

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