Talk on Trial

Job interviews, language and ethnicity

Celia Roberts and Sarah Campbell

A report of research carried out by King’s College London on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions
## Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ x

The Authors ................................................................................................................. xii

Summary ....................................................................................................................... 1

1 Brief literature review and key concepts .................................................................. 11

1.1 Summary literature review .................................................................................. 11

1.2 Key concepts ........................................................................................................ 13

   1.2.1 Subjective judgements and joint productions ........................................... 13

   1.2.2 Institutional, personal and occupational discourses and the ‘interview game’ .. 13

   1.2.3 Sharedness, co-membership and ‘special help’ ...................................... 14

   1.2.4 Linguistic capital ....................................................................................... 14

   1.2.5 Linguistic penalty and communicative style ...................................... 15

   1.2.6 Positive and negative dynamics ......................................................... 16

1.3 Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 16

2 Methodology ............................................................................................................. 17

2.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................... 17

2.2 Methodology ........................................................................................................ 17

2.3 Methods ................................................................................................................ 20

2.4 Data collection and transcription ......................................................................... 21

2.5 Analysis ................................................................................................................ 21

2.6 Note on the data: research sites, ethnicity of candidates, and job level .......... 22

3 Overview of candidates and interviewers .................................................................. 23

3.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................... 23

3.2 Profile of candidates ........................................................................................... 23

3.3 Levels of success .................................................................................................. 24
3.4 Composition of interview panel ..................................................... 26
3.5 Note on ethnicity........................................................................... 26
3.6 Work status ................................................................................... 29
3.7 Equal opportunities policies ........................................................... 29
3.8 Conclusion .................................................................................... 29

4 The interviewer’s decision making criteria ............................................... 31
4.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 31
4.2 The main questions asked ............................................................. 33
4.3 The interviewers’ explicit criteria .................................................... 34
  4.3.1 Willing to take on responsibility ....................................... 34
  4.3.2 Flexible and adaptable ..................................................... 35
  4.3.3 Resilient in the face of difficulties ..................................... 35
  4.3.4 Personable and friendly.................................................... 36
  4.3.5 Managerial/able to make innovations ............................... 36
  4.3.6 Self-aware ....................................................................... 36
  4.3.7 Able to give valid evidence............................................... 37
4.4 The interviewer’s implicit criteria .................................................... 37
  4.4.1 Obedient ......................................................................... 37
  4.4.2 Honest ............................................................................ 38
  4.4.3 Strong personality ............................................................ 38
  4.4.4 Bland............................................................................... 38
  4.4.5 Shared perspective on work experience............................ 39
  4.4.6 Certain (unspecified) level of ability in English................... 40
4.5 Conclusion .................................................................................... 40

5 The candidate’s contributions ................................................................. 43
5.1 Introduction .................................................................................. 43
  5.1.1 Alignment to different discourses..................................... 43
  5.1.2 Authorial voice ................................................................ 44
  5.1.3 Alignment, authorial voice and linguistic capital ............... 44
5.2 Alignment to institutional discourses ............................................. 46
  5.2.1 Style: Listing in an analytic response ......................... 47
  5.2.2 Aligning to institutional workplace assumptions .......... 47
  5.2.3 Aligning to the institutional relationship between candidate and interviewer .... 49
5.3 Alignment to occupational discourses ............................................ 52
  5.3.1 Occupational narrative structures ........................................... 53
  5.3.2 Occupational discourses: context and transferability .............. 54
5.4 Alignment to personal discourses .................................................. 56
  5.4.1 Integration of personal discourse with occupational and institutional discourse ........................................................ 56
  5.4.2 Amount of personal discourse .............................................. 57
5.5 Authorial voice and credibility ...................................................... 59
  5.5.1 Blending of institutional, occupational and personal discourses ............................................................ 59
  5.5.2 Blending of institutional and personal discourses ...................... 60
  5.5.3 Blending occupational and personal discourses ....................... 61
  5.5.4 Blending institutional and occupational discourses ................. 62
5.6 Persuasive reporting ....................................................................... 62
  5.6.1 Detailed and vivid experiences .............................................. 63
  5.6.2 Rhetorical devices ............................................................... 64
  5.6.3 Self-awareness and ‘outsideness’ .......................................... 65
5.7 Organising and linking themes ...................................................... 67
  5.7.1 Organising themes ............................................................... 67
  5.7.2 Linking themes: Dealing with lack of continuity in one’s life story ............................................................ 68
5.8 Incoherent authorial voices and lack of credibility .......................... 69
  5.8.1 Lack of blending .................................................................. 69
  5.8.2 Inconsistent claims about life and work ................................. 71
  5.8.3 Disparity between content and delivery of candidate talk ........... 73
  5.8.4 ‘Trained responses’ ................................................................ 73
  5.8.5 Failure to align to the interview phase .................................... 74
5.9 Conclusion .................................................................................... 76

6 Interviewer-candidate interaction ...................................................... 77
  6.1 Introduction .............................................................................. 77
    6.1.1 ‘Joint production’ and ‘improvising order’ .............................. 77
    6.1.2 Emotional tone, sharedness and co-membership .................... 78
    6.1.3 Indirectness – the hidden rules of the game ......................... 79
    6.1.4 ‘Presentation’ equal opportunities interviews ....................... 79
    6.1.5 Semi-structured interviews ................................................. 81
    6.1.6 Amount of talk elicited by questions ................................. 81
6.2 Overview of the data ................................................................. 82
  6.2.1 Misalignments, misunderstandings and reformulations .... 82
  6.2.2 Numbers of misalignments, misunderstandings and 
  reformulation sequences for different groups ............... 83
  6.2.3 Unrepaired misalignments and misunderstandings ........ 84
  6.2.4 Length of reformulation sequences for different groups ... 84
6.3 Causes of misalignments ...................................................... 85
  6.3.1 Discourse misalignments ................................................ 85
  6.3.2 Topic misalignments ....................................................... 86
  6.3.3 Interactional: misalignments to stages of interview ....... 88
  6.3.4 Interactional: misalignments over lengths of turns .......... 88
  6.3.5 Interactional: misalignments over interpreting 
  interviewer response ..................................................... 89
6.4 The positive dynamic .......................................................... 90
  6.4.1 Candidate awareness of the positive dynamic ................ 91
  6.4.2 Relaxing the interview structure ..................................... 91
  6.4.3 ‘Easy’ repair and prevention of 
  misunderstandings or misalignment ................................ 92
  6.4.4 More topic control, topic negotiation and topic gliding .... 94
  6.4.5 More follow-ons and fewer negative reformulations ...... 94
  6.4.6 More shared context and embedded questions .......... 96
  6.4.7 Making inferences from prompts and cues ................. 97
  6.4.8 Confirmatory statements ............................................. 99
  6.4.9 Tolerance of extended narrative ................................... 100
  6.4.10 Other indicators of the positive dynamic ................. 100
  6.4.11 ‘Rescued’ interviews ............................................... 101
6.5 The negative dynamic ......................................................... 102
  6.5.1 Candidate awareness of the negative dynamic ............. 104
  6.5.2 Tightening of the institutional structure ...................... 104
  6.5.3 Negative reformulations and ‘talking down’ ............... 105
  6.5.4 Self-perpetuation of problems of understanding ......... 106
  6.5.5 More sudden shifts of topic, less topic initiation 
  allowed to candidates and more struggle over topics .... 108
  6.5.6 Negative confirmatory statements/questions 
  and conclusions ......................................................... 108
  6.5.7 Disallowing alternative narrative structures .............. 109
  6.5.8 Problems with hidden cues and less context ............. 110
  6.5.9 Situational questions ................................................ 110
  6.5.10 Other indicators of a negative dynamic ............... 111
7.8 Different interview experience ................................................. 135
  7.8.1 Differences between British interviews and interviews in the country of origin .................................. 136
  7.8.2 Experience of other interview types ......................... 137
7.9 The ‘immigrant story’ ................................................................. 137
  7.9.1 Being positive ................................................................. 137
  7.9.2 Difficulties with negative questions ......................... 138
  7.9.3 Lack of awareness of stereotypes .............................. 139
7.10 Non-expert language use and the linguistic penalty
  7.10.1 Taken for granted assumptions about English language ability ............................................... 141
  7.10.2 The demands of the job interview for non-expert users of English ........................................... 143
  7.10.3 Temporal ordering .......................................................... 144
  7.10.4 Making connections ......................................................... 146
7.11 Conclusions ................................................................................ 147

8 Conclusions .......................................................................................... 149
  8.1 Key findings ................................................................................ 149
  8.2 Competence frameworks ............................................................ 150
  8.3 Legislative requirements .............................................................. 151
  8.4 The ‘interview game’ ................................................................. 151
  8.5 The candidate’s contribution ....................................................... 152
    8.5.1 Alignment to different discourses ................................. 153
    8.5.2 Authorial voice .............................................................. 153
  8.6 Interviewer-candidate interaction ................................................. 154
    8.6.1 The interview as a joint production ............................. 154
    8.6.2 Misalignments and misunderstandings ........................ 155
    8.6.3 A positive dynamic ......................................................... 156
    8.6.4 A negative dynamic ....................................................... 156
    8.6.5 Hard work for both sides ............................................... 157
  8.7 The ‘interview game’: Language and diversity .............................. 158
    8.7.1 Linguistic penalty 1: Different communicative styles ....... 158
    8.7.2 Misunderstanding, misalignment and communicative style .......................................................... 159
    8.7.3 Authorial voice .............................................................. 159
    8.7.4 Positive and negative dynamics ................................. 160
    8.7.5 Specific difficulties because of working abroad and experience of other interview types ................. 161
    8.7.6 Linguistic penalty 2: Non-expert language use ............. 162
9 Recommendations ................................................................................ 165
  9.1 Recommendations for policy ....................................................... 165
  9.2 General recommendations for interviewers ............................... 166
    9.2.1 Build a good interactional environment .......................... 167
    9.2.2 Make questions informative ........................................... 167
    9.2.3 Accurately identify the causes of problems of understanding ........................................................... 168
    9.2.4 Discourses and narrative structure ................................. 168
    9.2.5 Particular issues with candidates born abroad ............. 168
  9.3 General recommendations for training job seekers ...................... 169
    9.3.1 How to structure responses ........................................... 169
    9.3.2 Appearing honest and convincing .................................. 169
    9.3.3 How to speak about the self .......................................... 170
    9.3.4 Interpreting the question and reading interviewer cues ............................................................. 170
    9.3.5 Managing and preventing problems of understanding ... 171
  9.4 Particular issues for training candidates who were born abroad ... 171
    9.4.1 Influence of previous interview types.............................. 171
    9.4.2 The ‘immigrant story’..................................................... 171
    9.4.3 Talking about foreign work experience ....................... 172
    9.4.4 Mitigating against stereotypes ....................................... 172
    9.4.5 Making inferences ......................................................... 172
    9.4.6 Issues of communicative style in self presentation .......... 172

Appendix A Extended literature review .................................................... 175
Appendix B Transcription conventions ..................................................... 195
Appendix C Key to candidates ................................................................. 197
References ................................................................................................. 199

List of figures
  Figure 3.1 Ethnic breakdown of candidates ............................................. 23
  Figure 3.2 Relative levels of success of white British, British ethnic minorities and ‘born abroad’ candidates .......... 24
  Figure 3.3 Ethnic breakdown of interviewers ......................................... 26
  Figure 3.4 Misalignments, misunderstandings and reformulation sequences for different groups ....................... 83
  Figure 6.1 Length of reformulation sequences for different groups .... 85
The authors would like to thank the Department for Work and Pensions, who provided the funding for the research, and the project steering group, in particular Anthony Johnson, who provided support and guidance throughout the project. We would also like to thank Lauren Small, Annia Hussain and Priti Chopra, who worked as researchers on the project; John Twitchin, Jennifer Bright and Ann Janssen, practitioners in the field of interview training who formed our consultative group; and Roxy Harris, Ben Rampton and Constant Leung, members of the Languages and Literacies group at King’s College who assisted us in the process of data analysis.
The Authors

**Celia Roberts** is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Education and Professional Studies at King’s College London. Her publications in the fields of urban discourse, medical discourse, second language socialisation and intercultural communication include: *Language and Discrimination* (Longman 1992 with Davies and Jupp), *Achieving Understanding* (Longman 1996 with Bremer et al.), *Talk, Work and Institutional Order* (Mouton 1999 with Sarangi) and *Language Learners as Ethnographers* (Multilingual Matters 2000 with Byram et al.).

**Sarah Campbell** is a Research Associate in the Department of Education and Professional Studies at King’s College London. Her research interests include intercultural communication, migration studies, narrative theory, institutional discourse and ethnography.
Summary

The research

The aim of the research was to understand the discourse practices of interviewers and candidates and to determine whether ethnic minority candidates are systematically disadvantaged in interviews because of culturally-specific practices.

Sixty-one real job interviews were video-recorded and analysed, using a discourse analysis approach, by a team of researchers from King's College London. Brief pre- and post-interviews were undertaken with the candidates, and interviewers gave feedback on the recorded interviews. The majority of the job interviews analysed were for manual and junior administrative jobs requiring relatively little experience and few, if any, qualifications.

Key findings

The research did not uncover any overt discrimination by interviewers against candidates on the basis of ethnicity. However, first generation ethnic minority candidates fared less well in the interviews. These interviews were marked by greater difficulties for candidates in presenting themselves in expected ways and more interactional problems between interviewers and candidates. Proportionately, fewer of these candidates were successful in being selected for employment. The job interview creates a linguistic penalty for this group.

The linguistic penalty arises not from a lack of fluency in English amongst this group, but from the largely hidden demands on candidates to talk in institutionally credible ways and from a mismatch of implicit cultural expectations, evidenced by mutual misunderstandings, protracted attempts to resolve them and negative judgements by interviewers.

These problems are not exclusive to first generation ethnic minority candidates. All candidates may suffer some difficulties because of the complex communicative demands of the job interview which often exceed the stated requirements of the job. This study focused on interviews for low-paid, mainly manual work where
second generation ethnic minority candidates fared as well as white British candidates. Further research is needed to establish whether, in interviews for higher paid and managerial level jobs, ethnicity is a factor in determining success.

The fact that there is a gap between the communicative demands of the job interview and the communicative requirements of the job, raises questions about the value of job interviews as a selection process for manual and similar low-paid work. Candidates judged not suitable for the job interview may be suitable for the job.

The evidence points to two main factors which are shaping interviewer practices and which work especially against the interests of ethnic minorities: competence frameworks and equal opportunities legislation. In addition, the nature of the job interview ‘game’ means that its rules are hidden and this compounds the linguistic penalty.

**Competence frameworks**

Organisations that employ a ‘competence framework’ (nearly all in the sample) require interviewers to frame questions that need a high degree of candidate knowledge about institutional cultures, and require a high level of analytical ability and communicative competence – even if the job itself is manual work and demands only basic functional communication. For example, candidates are asked about the advantages of teamwork, or what strategies they use to deal with repetitive work. Those candidates who are unfamiliar with these demands to speak analytically about routine work are at an immediate disadvantage, even though their experience and skills may match, or often exceed, the job requirements.

Interviewers working within this framework appear to recruit primarily on the basis of candidate ‘attitudes’ – assuming that candidates with the right attitudes can be trained into the job when hired. Candidates’ talk, therefore, must be persuasive so that they come across as credible, trustworthy and adaptable. This means picking up on the hidden assumptions in interviewers’ questions and managing their talk in accordance with the unstated expectations of the interviewers. This research shows that this framework puts unreasonable demands on first generation ethnic minority candidates. Interviewers are not convinced by their responses and so consider them unsuitable for the job.

**Legislative requirements**

Interviewers are aware of anti-discrimination legislation and adhere to equal opportunities interview frameworks. However, this emphasis on equality means that interviewers are constrained from helping candidates whose style of communicating and expectations are different from theirs. Thus interviews tend to be ‘equal’ but not ‘fair’ for first generation ethnic minority candidates, especially relative newcomers.
The ‘interview game’

The metaphor of the ‘interview game’ is used to describe a competitive encounter in which the rules are only known to some. The job interview is a paradoxical interaction governed by unwritten, implicit and culturally specific rules. The procedures, including equal opportunities requirements, are in place to make it an objective, institutional encounter. Answers must be bureaucratically processable, i.e. people have to be fitted into boxes. But it is also a social encounter in which both sides mutually take account of the other. Personality, motivation and credibility are judged on the basis of how well interviewers and candidates understand each other and get on together. So there is an ongoing tension between making the interview ‘human’ and making it institutionally defensible.

Managing this tension leads to a high level of indirectness in the interview. For interviewers, the rules and features of the ‘interview game’ are routine and self-evident. But for those with least experience of the British job interview this game is hard to play. These hidden rules are an interpretive minefield and a major contribution to the linguistic penalty. It is impossible to determine, even in the frankest encounter between close friends, exactly what a speaker’s intention is. In the job interview it is much harder. Even an apparently straightforward question like ‘What does your job involve?’ requires a high level of shared knowledge to be answered appropriately.

Interviews are hard interactional work for interviewers as well as candidates, especially when there is a mismatch of linguistic or cultural expectations. The institutional and personal demands on interviewers can outstrip their skills and since interviews are joint productions candidates can be blamed for interviewers’ poor performance.

Equal opportunity requirements entail a written record of the candidates’ responses. The large amount of writing has to be often overtly managed by interviewers. How both sides manage the problem of interacting and writing affects the overall tone of the interview and contributes to its outcome.

The task for the candidate

To present oneself successfully as a suitably ‘coherent’ personality, and therefore a successful applicant, in the interview, the candidate must have linguistic capital, i.e. the language resources that are deemed appropriate for formal, institutional encounters in certain settings, as opposed to general ability in English.

Two forms of linguistic capital were identified. The ability to interpret and produce responses which contained an appropriate mix of personal, work-based and analytical talk; and the ability to produce consistent, credible and coherent talk which in turn is used to make judgements of honesty, motivation and reliability.

For those in low-paid, often ‘backstage’, jobs, work is unlikely to be used to form their identity nor is there much opportunity to develop a discourse which links
personal motivation to the organisation they work for or are applying to. Although many candidates have developed some fluency in this discourse, this is by no means universal and relative newcomers, often working in ethnic work units, are least likely to have access to it or the assumptions underpinning it.

Unsuccessful candidates often come across as ‘having been told what to say’, as if their responses were trained and grafted on to their own style. Trained responses, combined with sudden shifts in discourse give an overall impression of a hybrid style (a mix of unintegrated styles) and, since ‘You are what you say’ in the interview, of an incoherent, less convincing and less trustworthy person. Those who most need help with the job interview and are given training are often newcomers who are already grappling with different communicative styles brought from abroad and recently acquired in the UK. The ‘scripted’ responses learnt in training add to this mixed style which is interpreted by interviewers as inconsistent and can lead to judgements of untrustworthiness.

The successful use of these two forms of linguistic capital are complex and, for some candidates, contradictory communicative tasks: they have to be consistent and yet flexible in how they tune into the different stages of the interview; be both self-aware but not too self-orientated, be impersonal and personal; to show their involvement in their work experiences but be able to stand back from them so that they are bureaucratically processable; and to manage these tensions while still appearing authentic.

However, candidates whose work experience closely matches the expectations of the interviewers, so there is sufficient shared context, can be successful even if they do not have a strategic command of all the resources identified in this research. This is particularly true of candidates whose answers are grounded in the concrete, physical world of jobs familiar to interviewers. This means that candidates who can give vivid and detailed accounts about experiences of jobs in the UK are at an advantage, and relative newcomers are disadvantaged. This finding may only be relevant to low-paid and largely manual work.

Candidates who cannot manage these complex communicative demands are not suitable for the job interview. However, there is little in the job descriptions for shop floor factory work, delivery work or receptionist jobs which indicates that these are the communication skills required for the job. They are judged not suitable for the job interview but may be suitable for the job.

The possession (or not) of linguistic capital for the job interview has consequences for the interview interaction. Judgements about the candidates’ contribution are based not only on what the candidates produce but are a joint production between interviewer and candidate.
Interactional difficulties and interactional help

The interview is a joint production so interviewers’ performance plays a large role in their judgement of candidates. There is plenty of scope for interviewers to, unwittingly, disadvantage candidates who may be blamed for interviewers’ own poor performance. Conversely, interviewers may give special help by relaxing the interview structure, or helping to ‘rescue’ candidates even after extended misunderstandings. However, rigid equal opportunities do not provide a solution to unequal interviewer practice.

The interviewer is looking for a candidate who fits the organisational mould. There is a taken for granted assumption that the interview is a proxy for the job so that how candidates relate to interviewers stands for how they will talk and relate to work colleagues and superiors. This cultural assumption is not made clear to candidates or indeed acknowledged by interviewers.

When things go wrong

Things can go wrong early on, usually because of unresolved mismatches and misunderstandings, which are a major contributor to judgements of mistrust. Since no distinction is made between simple clarifications and deeper issues of mismatches in cultural expectations and styles of talking, candidates are failed because of general, unsubstantiated doubts about their attitude, communication skills or ability in English. When things go wrong, interviewers tighten the interview structure, ‘talk down’ to candidates more, give candidates fewer opportunities to talk in a style that suits them and repair misunderstandings less frequently.

Special help

When the interview starts off well, the formality of the interview is relaxed and candidates are given more control: they negotiate questions, introduce new topics, work out responses together with the interviewer, and structure their responses as they wish. For the interviewer, their answers become more predictable and more processable and any problems are easier to repair.

When things have gone wrong, the situation can be rescued by interviewers who offer helpful ways of resolving misunderstandings. This means that candidates can tune into interviewer expectations which in turn relaxes the tight institutional structure of the interview.

How the ‘interview game’ may unwittingly discriminate:
Language and diversity

First generation ethnic minority candidates are failed by the cultural and linguistic demands of the job interview. They face a linguistic penalty which means they are more likely than white or ethnic minority British candidates to be rejected.
As well as differences in self-presentation and interactional difficulties, they also face specific difficulties because they have worked abroad; and they are likely to be labelled by a catch-all judgement of ‘poor English’ which is used to account for the other two difficulties.

**Linguistic penalty: Self-presentation and interactional difficulties**

Interviewers judge a candidate on the basis of their own communicative style. Since ‘You are what you talk’ in the job interview, candidates with a different communicative style are judged negatively both in terms of their communicative ability and their personality. Differences lead to misunderstandings which are more frequent, protracted and less likely to be resolved with this group of candidates. Attempts to repair problems, by both sides, put extra demands on the least strong resources of this group – their communication skills in English in formal settings. This is particularly the case in the context-reduced environment of the job interview where work contexts have to be conjured from talk. Misunderstandings occurred most frequently when candidates were expected to infer the hidden purpose of questions and to present their experience according to British interview norms and styles. The very resources (based on different communicative styles) which contributed to problems of understanding in the first place have to be used to repair them.

There is no simple relationship between ethnicity and communicative style, so it is not helpful to attempt to establish a systematic style for ‘South Asians’, ‘Nigerians’ ‘Italians’, etc. and then train interviewers to recognise these. However, stereotypical assumptions about how different ethnic groups communicate, circulate widely in society and were used, albeit rarely, to justify rejection.

Questions are designed on the assumption that a candidate can interpret their hidden purpose. They are often general or ambiguous or assume an analytic competence that the candidates are often unprepared for: for example, what seem like personal questions about their feelings are often used to elicit a more abstract and analytic response. Candidates from any background might find these difficult, but first generation ethnic minority candidates, particularly newcomers, are especially disadvantaged by this reliance on inferences.

Interviewers also assume that candidates will adhere to the norms of the interview in terms of: using a western narrative structure; finding the right balance between being personal and impersonal, being formal or informal with the interviewers, and knowing how to back up claims with evidence. These taken for granted institutional norms are a barrier for those with a different style of communication and different expectations.

Interviewers who are flexible, use an improvisatory and adaptive style and take joint responsibility for resolving misunderstandings, prevent the job interview from discriminating against ethnic minority candidates. Four interviewer strategies, in particular, were effective: reserving judgement for longer and persisting in facilitative repair throughout; identifying causes of problems early on and having awareness
that their own questions were ambiguous or vague; providing more context in questions to foster chances of participation; and showing appreciation of a candidate’s point before moving on to elicit more relevant answers.

**Specific difficulties because of working abroad and experience of other interview types**

Foreign work experience: This is often dismissed as not immediately relevant. When candidates are given the opportunity to talk about work abroad, this is more challenging than the talk of those with British work experience because so much unfamiliar context has to be given to make the experience relevant. So foreign work experience may itself be seen as a disadvantage, to which is added the linguistic penalty. Candidates with professional backgrounds abroad tended to focus on this experience although it was taken as less relevant by interviewers. Equivalences between professional categories and experiences are particularly difficult to make.

Experience of other interviews: this group lack information about the hidden assumptions of the British job interview and bring experience of other job interviews that can distract them from the requirements of the British one. In both the interviews and in comments afterwards, members of this group orientated to their training and job needs, focused on qualifications and formality or conversely expected more informality and candidate control, and used different styles of self-presentation. They were often surprised by the formality and length of interviews for low-paid jobs.

Experience of other interview types: Since relative newcomers are less likely to be citizens or have permanent residency, interviews routinely began with questions about visas. This calls up an ‘immigration interview’ frame which requires somewhat different self-presentation from the job interview and may contribute to fears of discrimination. The increasingly complex laws on migration may mean that checks on those who are identified as ‘immigrants’ take up more time in job interviews and disrupt or distract from the interview purpose. This is a potential cause of discrimination against this group.

This group of candidates may also bring a bundle of anxieties about fears of discrimination and exclusion (these are not articulated in the interviews or comments but underpin aspects of self-presentation). Members of this group frequently presented themselves as always hard working, willing to do anything and seeing no disadvantages in any aspects of the job. These claims tend to be met with scepticism by interviewers. This group may also be less aware of how to mitigate against negative ethnic stereotypes.

**Linguistic penalty: Non-expert language use**

The third area of particular difficulty lies in non-expert language use. Catch-all judgements such as ‘wouldn’t fit in’ are no longer acceptable in the selection process. But ‘poor English’, a similarly unverified generalisation goes unchallenged.
‘Poor English’ is a catch-all term that sweeps together different communicative styles, interactional difficulties and perceived linguistic oddities and disfluencies. Candidates who used English in their countries of origin may have been ‘expert’ users there but are failed by the job interview process in Britain. Expertise is relative. This may account for some of the discrepancies between how candidates thought they had done and the actual outcome. It is in such discrepancies that perceived discrimination may lie.

Poor English also assumes that there is a fixed level of English that can be assigned to an individual. Beyond the basics such as a knowledge of words and sentence grammar, the ability to handle talk shifts according to setting and even within a single encounter. Like the rest of the interview, judgements of English language competence are jointly produced. Linguistic ability is highly subjective and dependent on the interviewer’s own communicative style. The taken for granted assumption that a candidate has language problems is, therefore, the result of the linguistic demands of the job interview.

The linguistic demands of the interview are part of the wider communicative demands described above. The pressure to produce extended responses in a context reduced environment puts great demands on two aspects of language: how time (the temporal order) is conveyed and how connections between parts of the narrative (or other long answer) are made. This pressure often leads to a high level of false starts which adds to the difficulty of processing connections.

There was no clear evidence that candidates’ accents caused any basic processing problems. This was not remarked on by interviewers or orientated to in the candidates’ contributions. The linguistic penalty is the result of much more complex processes created by the contradictions of the interview and the different experiences and styles brought along by candidates and misapprehended by interviewers.

Recommendations

Since interview talk is more demanding than the communication skills required in low-paid, largely manual jobs, consideration should be given to alternative means of selecting staff for these types of jobs. Changes in interview frameworks or training courses for interviewers and candidates will not tackle this fundamental discrepancy. A trial period or simulation would match the demands of the job to the demands of the assessment. However, for jobs where more demanding communication skills are required, job interviews may be necessary. In this case, training for interviewers and candidates is recommended.

Organisations should assess the impact that competence frameworks have on the communicative demands of the interview, if the job interview can be justified as a necessary element of the selection process.

The linguistic penalty means that first generation ethnic minority job-seekers, particularly relative newcomers, should be given training focused on their needs,
including an understanding of the hidden rules of the interview ‘game’, detailed
guidance in self-presentation and how to manage their foreign work experience. An
extended training programme led by English for Speakers of Other Languages
(ESOL) specialists, based on research in this area, is required for this group.

All job-seekers would benefit from training based on the findings of this report to
develop their skills in self-presentation.

Interviewers should be given training which focuses on the difficulties candidates
face as well as on developing their own interaction skills. There should be awareness
raising on how to take account of linguistic and cultural differences so ‘poor English’
is not used as a general reason for rejecting a candidate. They would also benefit
from further training on the full implications of the law on indirect discrimination for
their interviewing practices, in relation to foreign work experience and equivalences
between foreign and British work experience. Guidelines should be circulated to
employers which make clear what might constitute discriminatory interviewing, and
how to tackle this in training and practice.

There should be a move away from rigid equal opportunities interviewing, where
questions are read out and interaction is reduced to an absolute minimum, as this is
equal but not fair interview practice. The lack of flexibility in such interviews can be
particularly disadvantaging for relative newcomers.

Candidates from the category described as ‘other’ in ethnic monitoring, particularly
white linguistic minority candidates born abroad, often suffer as much disadvantage
at interview as their first generation Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian counterparts.
This will become an increasingly pertinent issue as Britain looks to accept more
workers from the EU. It is, therefore, important that ethnic categorisations and
equal opportunities practices should reflect the changes in immigration patterns of
ethnic groups, rather than their visibility in terms of colour.

Interview panels: An ethnically mixed interview panel, while desirable, is far from
being a sufficient guarantee of a fair interview. Ethnic minority interviewers may
have no more understanding of the issues of intercultural communication than their
white counterparts, given that shared linguistic and ethnic background is not very
common in situations of ‘hyper-diversity’. Training is also necessary. Our data
showed a tendency for private sector interviews to consist of only one interviewer.
While this may help make interviews more informal, questions need to be asked
about whether this is a fair system.

The new legislation on immigration, asylum and nationality may lead to more
checking up on status and documentation of candidates. This should not be carried
out as part of the job interview.

Our data also shows that candidates with substantial foreign (often professional)
work experience struggle to explain equivalences which are relevant to the job
applied for. The tiered system for classifying migrant workers proposed in the recent
Home Office Five Year Plan (February 2005, 13) is problematic in this respect. More
guidance on possible equivalences should be widely available to organisations.
1 Brief literature review and key concepts

1.1 Summary literature review

Government figures show that the gap in employment levels between ethnic minorities and their white counterparts stands at 16 per cent (DWP 2004). While some of this disparity can be accounted for by direct discrimination and lower human capital amongst ethnic minorities (EMs), several studies suggest that a third factor is significant in explaining the extra ‘penalty’ suffered by ethnic minorities (Heath and McMahon 1997) – that of indirect discrimination. This occurs at the level of apparently neutral workplace cultures and relations which work to exclude ethnic minority candidates (Noon 2005, Sanglin-Grant 2005). One such apparently neutral practice is the job interview, which in fact relies upon subjective, culturally informed judgements of candidates’ ways of presenting themselves (Jenkins 1986). These, in turn, are dependent on the culturally relative assumptions and communication styles of the candidate and interviewer.

The psychological literature on discrimination in the job interview has focused on how the structure, types of question, and panel composition of the interview impact on the selection of EMs. A number of studies have argued that structured interviews tend to reduce bias and increase validity (Palmer and Campion 1997). However, these findings have been disputed by research which suggests that the unstructured format produced more accurate perceptions of the candidates’ job-related personality traits (Blackman 2002). Research on interview questions has focused on the relative benefits of the situational (hypothetical) and behavioural (experience-based) question. Some research has found the situational question produces less racial bias (Latham et al. 1980). However, Huffcutt & Roth (1998) found that Black and Hispanic candidates perform better on behavioural questions. Several recent studies found that having an ethnically mixed panel reduces the impact on interview outcomes of shared ethnicity among interviewers and interviewees (McFarland et al. 2004), although this was disputed by some studies (Huffcutt and Roth 1998).
The findings of occupational psychology literature indicate some of the complexity of job interview interaction, and suggest that the social dynamics of the interview need to be researched in detail (Posthuma, Morgeson and Campion, 2002, 13). This is where the literature on the job interview from discourse analysis, conversational analysis and interactional sociolinguistics can make a useful contribution. This literature has tended to focus not on the statistical effect of fixed variables, such as question types on interview outcomes. Instead, it looks at the varied processes which make up the social dynamics of a job interview, and how these produce particular outcomes. In other words, sociolinguists treat the discourse processes which constitute the job interview as a topic to be studied in its own right and not merely an unproblematic resource through which decisions are made.

Discourse analysis studies of the interview have, in some cases, highlighted the impact of western cultural discourses concerning the institution and the individual on the relationship between the job interviewer and candidate (Auer and Kern 2000, Adelsward 1988, Gee et al. 1996). They argue that in the interview, certain salient features, such as social status, ethnicity and the institutional hierarchy between candidate and interviewer become ‘unmentionable’ according to the unwritten rules of the interaction (Komter 1991). The successful negotiation of the interview, therefore, depends on the interviewer and candidate already sharing a definition of the interview situation, which is implicitly referred to and marked by indirect linguistic cues (Linell and Thunquist 2003). This shared definition guides the participants as to how formal or informal to be, when and how to take turns, how to move between phases of the interview, and how to repair misunderstandings. Where such a shared definition is lacking, often as a result of cultural or social divisions between candidate and interviewer, the management of all these aspects of the interview becomes more problematic (Erickson and Schultz 1982).

The fact that candidates who have cultural communicative styles which are at variance to that of their interviewer are more likely to encounter interactional problems demonstrates how the apparently neutral process of the job interview might disadvantage certain groups. As well as racial prejudice, there is a communicative element to discrimination (Gumperz 1982a). By analogy to the ethnic penalty, this might be termed the linguistic penalty. Different ethnic groups, whether they use English as their heritage language or not, may use culturally specific styles of communication which are different from local or standard English, as a result of belonging to a particular communicative culture, and being unfamiliar with British institutional norms that relate to selection interviewing. Differences include a range of rhetorical and self-presentational features: how personal or impersonal to be, what to stress and what to play down, how direct to be in self-presentation, how to structure and sequence responses, choice of words and idioms and a range of paralinguistic features, such as intonation and rhythm (Longmire 1992, Akinnaso & Ajiriotu 1982, Michaels 1981). Furthermore, a number of studies of the ways in which narratological and rhetorical practices are used by different cultures to construct the teller’s identity have drawn attention to the culturally specific nature of narrative techniques (Chafe 1980, Tannen 1989,
Zimmerman 1998, Holland et al. 1998, Linde 1993). Since both sides interpret and judge the other according to their own conventions, wrong judgements about a speaker’s intention, personality, ability and attitude can routinely be made (Gumperz 1982a, 1992, 1996, Birkner 2004). Many of these misunderstandings and misevaluations arise from the fact that differences in communicative style are processed unconsciously and so uncomfortable moments and apparently irrelevant or incoherent responses are treated as failures in competence or attitude. However, while some correlation has clearly been found between certain ethnic groups and the employment of particular communicative styles, many researchers considered in this study have been at pains to avoid the kind of essentialist categorisation which would equate one ethnic group with one style of speaking (Auer and Kern 2000).

See Appendix A for an extended version of this literature review.

1.2 Key concepts

The current literature on job interviewing has led us to adopt conceptual frameworks from discourse analysis, including organizational discourse analysis and conversation analysis, which have not been widely applied to the study of job interviews, and from sociolinguistics, where there has been more focus on what are generally called ‘gatekeeping interviews’, of which the job interview is an important example. The key concepts to be drawn on in the report are listed below.

1.2.1 Subjective judgements and joint productions

Although indirect discrimination often occurs through subtle processes, organisations assume that the job interview is a neutral process which can be made fairer by tightening procedures. However, discourse analysis studies have shown that interviewers rely on subjective judgements which are dependent upon culturally relative ideologies and criteria.

Interviews are ‘social events’ made of talk-in-interaction. As intersubjective encounters they are inherently variable as each side mutually adapts to the other. Since they are social events, they are also joint productions. So, candidates’ contributions are the product of the interaction between interviewer and candidate (see Chapter 6).

1.2.2 Institutional, personal and occupational discourses and the ‘interview game’

Interviews are also ‘institutional events’. They must conform to institutional priorities and procedures. Directives from equal opportunity legislation and large, centralised organisations require increasing accountability and recording of the interview. This means that candidates’ contributions must be bureaucratically processable (Iedema 1999). We call the kind of talk which is analytical and accountable ‘institutional discourse’. However, interviews are also interactions between individuals working in similar areas, who bring along identities and ways of speaking from their personal and work lives to the interview – which we will term ‘personal’ and ‘occupational’
discourses respectively (Roberts and Sarangi 1999). The ability to successfully mobilise and seamlessly blend institutional, personal and occupational discourses is key to success in the interview (see Chapter 5 for more on this).

The tension between the social (personal) and institutional aspects of the interview is reflected in the inconclusive findings in the job interview literature on whether structured (more rigidly institutional) interviews or unstructured (more interactive) interviews are less discriminatory. This tension is one of the inherent contradictions in the job interview. The requirement to interactionally manage such contradictions makes the interview a highly complex encounter characterised by indirectness. It is useful to think of the interview as a ‘game’ with hidden rules and assumptions which are taken for granted as normal and natural.

The metaphor of the ‘interview game’ draws on Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘language-games’ and on Bourdieu’s work on institutional power and individuals’ dispositions which determine the extent to which they have ‘a feel for the game’ (Bourdieu 1991). The interview is a game in so far as it is a highly competitive encounter in which there are (largely implicit) rules which candidates may not be familiar with.

1.2.3 Sharedness, co-membership and ‘special help’

The job interview assumes a tacit ‘membership’ of a community of shared knowledge and understanding. Assumptions brought along to the interview, styles of self-presentation and the means of interpretation of indirect messages and cues are all culturally relative and so may not be shared between the interviewer and candidate. These are not matters of ethnicity per se but depend upon exposure to similar communicative experiences. Where there is a degree of sharedness, there is more likely to be ‘special help’ given (Erickson and Shultz 1982, see Chapter 6). One unofficial basis for the provision of ‘special help’ in certain cases is that interviewers and candidates share past experiences in common. This ‘co-membership’ helps to produce a ‘positive dynamic’ (see Section 1.2.6).

1.2.4 Linguistic capital

Since the fabric of the job interview is talk, judgements about candidates are based primarily on their talk. To successfully talk their way into a job, interviewees need what this study will term ‘linguistic capital’. This ability differs from general fluency in English in that it requires knowledge of how to use particular vocabularies, social positions and modes of behaviour appropriate to the interview setting. For example, if someone who was fluent in English but unfamiliar with medical language was placed in a medical setting with a group of healthcare professionals, they would lack the linguistic capital to converse on an equal footing and manage the interaction as skilfully as their interlocutors in this environment.

Social capital is defined by Bourdieu (1986) as the resources which are linked to an individual’s network of social relationships and which can lend that individual potential for advancement independently of their total economic capital, or monetary wealth. Linguistic capital, by analogy, is not only the knowledge of how
one ought to speak, but also the fluency in ways of speaking which is acquired through practice in certain social situations – which some candidates will have had more experience of than others (Bourdieu 1986, 1991, Gee et al. 1996). These conceptions of capital are quite different to economic notions of ‘human capital’, which refer to the skills or knowledge possessed by a workforce, viewed in terms of their monetary cost or value to an organisation or country. By contrast, linguistic, social and symbolic capital are more fluid, individual and subjective, and less easily quantifiable.

Candidates who do possess a high degree of the kind of **linguistic capital** valued by the interview have knowledge of and fluency in the particular institutional discourses, bureaucratic languages and power structures of the organisation to which they are applying, which determine the ‘proper rules of behaviour’ in the interview (Bourdieu, 1991). Knowledge of these discourses, and of certain rhetorical strategies, enables them to construct a coherent authorial voice, which is convincing to the interviewer (see Chapter 5).

### 1.2.5 Linguistic penalty and communicative style

Candidates who do not possess the ability to fluently blend institutional, occupational and personal discourses, who do not share co-membership with the interviewer, and who lack the kinds of linguistic capital demanded by the interview are often unsuccessful. Candidates born abroad are much more likely to suffer this ‘linguistic penalty’ than British born candidates.

The language penalty, by analogy to the ethnic penalty, has been used by some economists to refer to fluency in English as another fixed variable which might impact on EM candidates’ success in accessing employment (D Leslie, J Lindley 2001). However, ‘linguistic penalty’ is used in a slightly different sense in this report to the ‘language penalty’ described above. This report argues that linguistic ability is not fixed, but shifting and interactionally produced (Section 7.10 and see Gumperz 1982a). So, the concept of ‘linguistic penalty’ has greater complexity than a fixed ‘language’ variable which employment prospects can be measured against.

The communicative styles which all candidates employ are a combination of their personal ways of speaking, and styles which associate them with particular social and cultural groups. Communicative style consists of assumptions about how to present oneself, rhetorical strategies, choices of grammar and vocabulary, intonation, tone of voice, rhythm and tempo.

The culturally specific communicative styles of born abroad interview candidates might, in some cases, mean that they do not, for example, use personalisation in the way expected by the interviewer (and see Gumperz 1982). Such misalignments can lead to exacerbations of interactional problems (see Chapter 6) and judgements of candidate’s as ‘having poor English’. Linguistic ability is not a fixed fact or ‘level’, but is interactionally produced (see Chapter 7). In some cases, the interviewer’s interactional behaviour contributes to a candidate’s disfluency.
1.2.6 Positive and negative dynamics

When an interview begins positively, this generally feeds into a pattern which continues throughout the interview, and which contributes to a candidate’s success. We have termed this pattern the ‘positive dynamic’. The positive dynamic includes features such as low levels of misunderstandings, more helpful or informative questions, fewer interruptions by the interviewer, more successful introductions of new topics by the candidate, and a more conversational style overall.

Conversely, interviews dominated by a negative dynamic often contain clusters of self-perpetuating features such as misunderstandings, which contribute to a shifting down to low-level topics, breakdowns of communication, and the eventual failure of the candidate. Features of the negative dynamic include a greater enforcement of institutional requirements, frequent interruptions by interviewers, sudden topic shifts, negative assessments of answers by interviewers and more indirect questions. See Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion of these concepts.

1.3 Conclusion

It is only in the discourse and conversation analytic literature that a magnifying glass is put on talk-in-interaction. The lack of research outside this literature on the interactional dynamics of the interview reflects a general assumption that there is a direct correspondence between candidates’ words and their personality: ‘You are what you talk’. So judgements about candidates depend on how they communicate, even though the complexity of the communicative demands of the interview goes unrecognised.

In sum, the complex communicative demands of the job interview and its potential to discriminate indirectly against those who lack the necessary linguistic capital have been underestimated. Tighter procedures and more record keeping are no substitute for a painstaking reassessment of the interview’s processes. The issues mentioned here will be examined in more detail in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this report.
2 Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This study involved collecting hard to obtain data – sixty-one real video-recorded job interviews. These data are highly sensitive for interviewers and organisations, because of the potential for their use as evidence of discrimination and bad interviewing practice. Candidates are also often apprehensive about their job interview being recorded when they are already nervous and self-conscious. For these reasons, the data used in this study constituted, to our knowledge, the first large data set of real video-recorded interviews in the UK. It is also one of the largest data sets which been used to employ interactional sociolinguistic methodologies to ask questions about language and ethnicity in the job interview, comprising 416,145 words. The difficulty of obtaining data also meant that an opportunistic approach was used. This has implications for the potential for generalising from our sample about the levels of disadvantage suffered by ethnic minorities in job interviews (see Section 2.6 below).

2.2 Methodology

The analytic approach used is discourse analysis. Discourse is defined as language in use, and spoken discourse as talk and non-verbal communication. This approach connects societal level knowledge, values and assumptions to the detailed ways in which we talk and interact. At a macro level, discourses are the means of circulating knowledge and sustaining and challenging power relations and structures: for example, stereotypical assumptions about specific ethnic groups or ideologies about correct and standard English and its association with ability (Irvine and Gal 1998). These wider resources on which we draw when we talk and make meaning together have been called ‘big D’ discourses (Gee 1990). At the mid and micro levels, ‘little d’ discourses draw on the ‘big D’ ones to produce talk, writing and interaction. At a mid-level, discourse analysis looks at the ways in which speakers design the content of each turn at talk, how interactions are sequenced and managed and speakers’ choices in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric. At the most micro
level, discourse is concerned with the largely hidden ways in which we convey meaning and attitude through intonation, rhythm and other linguistic features.

Discourse analysis is particularly appropriate for the study of interaction in job interviews because these encounters are made up of talk and non-verbal communication. Also, decision-making is based on relating evidence (actual talk and perception of this talk) to wider assumptions and ideologies. These ideologies tend to be normative and based on ‘gut feelings’ about competence, ‘fitting in’ and personal qualities as displayed through talk (Jenkins 1986). Even for unskilled and manual jobs, how the candidate comes across in job interviews is crucial.

A branch of discourse analysis called Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) is the main analytic tool. The focus of IS is on cultural and linguistic diversity in stratified multilingual societies. The key question is: how does diversity affect interpretation of meaning in interactions and how do differing interpretations lead to (potentially) discriminatory outcomes? This approach has made a special, but not exclusive, study of ‘gatekeeping encounters’ (Roberts 2000). These are encounters of intense communication where the stakes are high in attempting to gain access to scarce resources such as state housing, jobs and promotion.

Developed by the American anthropologist, John Gumperz, IS has informed all the qualitative research on discourse in intercultural selection interviews in the UK (Gumperz 1982a, 1982b). Gumperz argues that as well as racial prejudice, there is a communicative element to discrimination. Different ethnic groups, whether they use English as their heritage language or not, may use culturally specific styles of communication which are different from local or ‘standard’ English. The content and style of candidates’ talk is also determined by assumptions and values based on shared experience.

IS draws on ethnography, particularly the study of social events across cultures, narrative theory, and linguistic and philosophical approaches to discourse and sociology. The aspects of narrative and literary theory drawn on in our analysis were those which focus on the way in which narratological and rhetorical practices are used by different cultures to construct the teller’s identity (Tannen 1989, Zimmerman 1998, Holland et al. 1998, Linde 1993). From the linguistic and sociological approaches to discourse, IS draws in particular on Goffman’s notion that interaction constitutes a separate order of analysis to be studied (Goffman 1983). This ‘interaction order’ focuses on how interactants display shared perceptions and identity – how they maintain involvement with each other.

IS also draws on the tools of conversation analysis which looks at the fine-grained mechanisms through which a particular activity is accomplished. By analysing patterns in large data sets, conversation analysis shows how and when people take turns to talk, how questions, comments and other utterances set up expectations as to how to respond, and how conversations are negotiated through co-ordinated effort. The co-ordination of speech and non-verbal communication, through video analysis, has been a particular contribution of conversation analysis (Heath 1986).
Conversation analysis has shown how an activity like a job interview is jointly constructed: both interviewers and candidates together produce the outcome.

Conversation analysis methods are an important part of IS but are not sufficient. Conversation analysis deals with general procedures and strategies whereas IS is concerned with how interpretations are made and how far they are shared. Also, conversation analysis rarely addresses diversity and culturally specific communicative style. Whereas conversation analysis takes interpretive processes for granted, IS asks how far participants handle the problem of making sense of each other. IS, therefore, includes as part of its methods the ethnographic study of key participants and their expectations, presuppositions and interpretations, as well as their social identities. The combination of detailed conversation analysis with the focus on diversity provided by the more ethnographic sociolinguistic perspective of IS offers social and linguistic perspectives particularly relevant for this research project. In addition, ethnographic insights and detail are useful methods for practitioner orientated research since the data and analysis produced are close to the experiences and understandings of practitioners (Bloor 1997).

IS uses highly detailed analysis to uncover tacitly applied and largely unnoticed culturally influenced interpretative practices. However, there is no assumption that because people are identified or identify themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority (EM) group, that the interview is necessarily intercultural. ‘Culture’ can only be understood as part of action and interaction rather than standing outside it, and people do not automatically represent a ‘culture’ which they are perceived as belonging to when they speak. People talk themselves into an intercultural encounter (Auer and Kern 2000). Differences, difficulties and misunderstandings cannot only be accounted for because people come from different backgrounds. This may be one explanation but there are other reasons to do with ‘professional culture’ and variances in individual experiences which may account for differences.

The misunderstandings and uncomfortable moments which arise when participants cannot negotiate the rules of the ‘interview game’ (Roberts 1985) lead to the ‘clinical labelling’ of candidates (Erickson 1985). Since these moments rely on fleeting and largely unnoticed interpretive processes, candidates tend to be judged in terms of personality and competence. Their performed social identity, based on the interaction, easily becomes a more fixed identity, evident in interviewer comments such as ‘He seemed a bit shifty’ and ‘She wasn’t very motivated’. Indeed, it is the interviewer’s task to make such huge inferences on the limited data available to them in the interview. However, through recordings of decision making and further feedback from job interviewers, the progression from interaction to judgements can be traced.

Interactional sociolinguistics’ concern with interactional detail is consistent with the practices of the interview itself, where ‘the devil is in the detail’. This methodology allows us to ask how the interviewers’ claims about candidates – such as poor English, untrustworthiness, self-awareness or a responsible attitude – are evidenced (or not) in the data. It also reveals the inherent variety in interviewer questions and
their responses to candidates. The task of focusing in this level of detail on the interview encounter meant that our data collection and analysis concentrated primarily on the job interview, and did not include related selection procedures such as the process of short-listing candidates or computerised testing of candidates. Indeed in discourse analysis terms the amount of data (40 hours) represents a large data base (discourse analysis is routinely undertaken with small samples of a few hours of transcribed data). Furthermore, because our methodological focus is on a qualitative account – the detail, variety and contingency of interactional processes, we did not analyse the data using fixed sets of variables, as might be typical in other branches of the social sciences (see Appendix 1: Extended literature review 2.4, Section 3.4 and Chapter 7).

The 61 job interviews consist of 416,145 words and it is at the level of word, information unit (phrases which hang together) and speaker turn that interactants process each other’s meaning and discourse analysis is undertaken. While the outcome for interviewers and candidates depends upon the interview as a whole, discourse analysis examines the patterns at mid and micro levels which account for this outcome. For example, we identified and analysed 102 reformulations in the data (see Section 6.2.2), and found that these and other interactional features played a major part in the interview outcome. So, although our data are a small sample from which to conclude that certain groups are disadvantaged by the process, it is a large sample in terms of looking at the routinised practices in interview processes which account for disadvantage more generally.

2.3 Methods

This study uses discourse analysis of real video recorded job interviews. This approach examines sequences of interaction, speakers’ rhetorical styles, intonation, grammar and vocabulary. The core data is sixty one real video-recorded job interviews (40 hours or 416,145 words) mainly for low-paid jobs in reception, supermarket, factory and delivery work. In addition, candidates were interviewed briefly before and after the interview. Where possible, post-interview decision-making was recorded and interviewers provided feedback on the video recordings.

Our analysis combines detailed linguistic studies of particular interviews, with the tracing of certain discursive or thematic features such as misunderstandings, misalignments and reformulations across the entire data set, looking at how they function in each interview. This analysis focuses on both the interactional data and the judgements made by interviewers, to attempt to explain how the processes of the job interview lead to specific outcomes for individual candidates (see Appendix A1 for more detail on the rationale for the methodology).
2.4 Data collection and transcription

Our methodology involved audio and video recording 61 authentic job interviews. It also involved familiarising ourselves with the current local interviewing practices, languages and communicative styles of job seekers, within the time constraints of field work. We interviewed candidates before and after the job interviews, to obtain self-identified data on ethnicity, perceptions of job interviews, aspirations and other relevant ethnographic details such as age and educational background. Detailed field notes were taken from these interviews. Where possible, we recorded post-interview decision making, and used the recorded job interviews to elicit further feedback from interviewers, both on particular candidates and the interview process more generally. However, obtaining recordings of the interviewers’ post-interview discussions was difficult, partly because many of the interviews were carried out by one interviewer and because some interview teams did not give consent. Therefore, only nine of the sixty one interviews include a post-interview recording. In addition to collecting audio recordings and ethnographic interviews in our research sites, we also obtained copies of associated documentation including job descriptions, assessment forms and interviewer training materials. IS methods were used to transcribe and analyse the data (Roberts, 2003). The complete set of interviews was transcribed.

2.5 Analysis

Initially, all recordings were reviewed, annotated and indexed to identify uncomfortable moments, misunderstandings and different types of interviewer contribution. At this stage, we identified matches and mismatches between evidence from the interview talk and evidence used by interviewers to make decisions. The complete data set was transcribed and reviewed prior to the selection of a core set of 29 interviews, selected on the basis of the ethnic background of candidates and comparability and relevance to the project.

We carried out thematic case studies on the core set of 29 interviews. These case studies focused on interviews for low-paid jobs. Although we have some data for junior management and employment agency interviews, they represented only a small proportion of the data and were difficult to compare with the majority of our interviews. The structure and range of questions asked in these interviews differed from those of the low-paid job interviews. The analysis was triangulated with ethnographic data from candidates, feedback sessions with interviewers, field notes and studies of the relevant literature.

We coded 25 of the interviews from a range of ethnic groups for features such as misunderstandings, reformulations and candidate negotiation using the qualitative package Atlas.ti. We did some quantitative work, comparing the numbers of reformulations and misunderstandings in different interviews, which raised issues for qualitative analysis. The number of transcripts coded was limited by time constraints. The patterns identified by coding were traced across all ethnic groups.
and between different ethnic groups, and were verified using the complete data set. Our research findings are based on the detailed analysis of the case study interviews and coded data, and specific examples drawn from the full data set.

Feedback was given on our initial findings and plans for the report in consultations with members of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Jobcentre Plus and the Advice, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) at steering group meetings; members of the Language and Literacies group at King’s College London and a team of practitioners who are engaged with the training of candidates and interviewers.

2.6 Note on the data: research sites, ethnicity of candidates, and job level

Most of the interviews were recorded in Greater London, although recordings were also made in Birmingham and a Scottish border town. Interviews were recorded in four private sector companies (a factory, a supermarket, a delivery service and an employment agency), and three public sector organisations (a National Health Service (NHS) trust hospital, a sixth form college, and an adult education centre). The sample for this study was opportunistic. We collected data where we could, primarily in areas of high linguistic and ethnic diversity to ensure that candidates would be from both the white majority group and ethnic minority groups, including South Asian, African, Afro-Caribbean and others, including white linguistic minorities. We collected data in public sector organisations that used tightly structured ‘equal opportunities’ interviews and in recruitment agencies and a factory, where interviews were less structured.

In the four private sector organisations, where the majority of the data was collected, there were large numbers of vacancies. Interview days were organised and everyone who passed any initial tests was interviewed. In many instances, the majority of candidates interviewed were successful. Failure, therefore, can be interpreted as a clear judgement of unsuitability and not simply an indication that a particular candidate was relatively less good than the short-listed candidate offered the position, as was the case in the public sector interviews (see Section 3.2).

Although the data sample is large in terms of detailed discourse analysis, it is a small sample for generalising about whether ethnic minorities are disadvantaged by the job interview process. Rigorous comparisons could not be made as there were a wide range of job levels in the interviews recorded. Opportunistic sampling meant that the organisations that let us in were, by definition, relatively positive about their processes and outcomes. They may represent some of the best practice around. In addition, in all but one case we collected data in large cities, where high levels of EM populations mean that a diverse set of job candidates is the norm. Areas with less dense EM populations might produce different results.
3 Overview of candidates and interviewers

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the ethnic breakdown of the candidates in our data, showing the hyper diversity contained in our sample. It gives figures for the success rates enjoyed by the various ethnic groups, and shows that candidates who were born abroad were by far the most disadvantaged group in terms of interview success. It details the ethnicity of the interviewers, and shows that over 60 per cent of the encounters we recorded were interethnic. Section 3.5 below explains the way ethnicity is categorised and treated in this report, and the reasons this report focuses on the ‘born abroad’ category, rather than other ethnic categorisations. The work status of the candidates and the equal opportunities policies of our research sites are also covered.

3.2 Profile of candidates

Figure 3.1  Ethnic breakdown of candidates
As this table demonstrates, the Afro-Caribbean, South Asian or ‘other’ groups each account for roughly a quarter of our data sample of sixty-one interviews, while one-third are white British. Of those candidates in our study who were ethnic minorities, around half of each group were born abroad. These ethnic categorisations are based on the candidate’s country of origin and self-identification, and are informed by classifications used by the Office of National Statistics (see Section 3.5).

It is also worth noting that of the EM candidates, about one-quarter belonged to the ‘other’ category. These candidates have emigrated from areas such as Eastern Europe, South America, and South East Asia, and are often white or of mixed heritage. This data sample reflects wider changes in immigration patterns. A recent study by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) found that due to a recent growth in communities from non-traditional immigration countries, Britain, particularly London, is now ‘hyper-diverse’ (Kyambi, 2005). Groups who fall outside traditional EM categorisations may be faced by issues of cultural difference and discrimination which there is little policy in place to tackle (Noon 2005, 3 and Dustmann et al. 2003). For example, 31.7 per cent of Iranians in Britain are unemployed (Kyambi 2005).

3.3 Levels of success

The following figure illustrates the relative levels of success of white British, British EMs, and ‘born abroad’ candidates (all of whom are from EM groups) in our data.

![Figure 3.2](image)

As this figure illustrates, in our data, white British candidates achieved very similar success rates to their EM British counterparts. The main distinction evident here is between candidates who were born abroad (who enjoyed considerably less
success), and the other two groups. However, the sample size does not allow us to make any firm conclusions on this point.

The pass rates for our data overall were high, with thirty six out of sixty one candidates being offered jobs (see Section 2.6 for an explanation of the reasons for this). Of this number, fifteen (or 71 per cent) of white British candidates were successful, and six (29 per cent) failed. Of the EM British candidates, fourteen (66 per cent) were successful and seven (34 per cent) failed. Of the candidates who were born abroad, nine (48 per cent) were successful and ten (52 per cent) failed. However, not all ‘successful’ interviews are equally felicitous – some are borderline cases, in which the interaction does not flow easily, or there are difficult moments. Therefore, in this report we will also distinguish between interactive moments which are ‘comfortable’ and ‘difficult’, notwithstanding the overall outcome of the interview.

Although our data do not show high degrees of disadvantage to EM British job candidates, this does not mean that this group as a whole do not suffer discrimination. Moreover, the ‘ethnic penalty’ and greater levels of unemployment experienced by certain groups of British born EMs, notably those of Pakistani and Bangladeshi parentage, has been well documented (Madood 2005, Platt 2005, DWP 2005). Our data sample is too small to give statistical information, or to disaggregate success rates for different groups. The fact that our data were collected in organisations who agreed to take part in our research because of their strong commitment to best practice in the area of equal opportunities may mean we did not collect data in the organisations in which discrimination against British EMs is prevalent. Furthermore, it may be that disadvantage to this group is occurring with greater magnitude at stages other than that of interviews for low-paid jobs. Research has shown that EMs are heavily disadvantaged at the stages of initial submission of written applications, and of internal progression through companies (Hubbuck and Carter 1980). Also, our data on interviews for low-paid jobs were not, except in two cases, recordings of recruitment procedures where one person is selected from a short list. As with many other low-paid jobs in large organisations, the norm was for recruitment days where if candidates passed other tests and assessments and were considered acceptable in the job interview, they were offered the job – they were not competing against others in a short list. In these circumstances, where large numbers of applicants are EMs, there is more probability that EM candidates will be accepted. For all these reasons, our findings are likely to underestimate the likelihood of failure rates among EM candidates overall and of those born abroad in particular.

Interviews for higher paid, junior management and technical and professional jobs, where one candidate is selected from a short list, and more institutional and analytic communication is required, may present greater disadvantage both for EMs and for white British candidates from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This may in part explain the lack of progression of EMs within organisations, termed the ‘snowy peaks’ syndrome by Trevor Philips (2003).
3.4 Composition of interview panel

**Figure 3.3 Ethnic breakdown of interviewers**

![Pie chart showing the ethnic makeup of interviewers](image)

Only one of the interviewers in our study was born abroad. She interviewed three born abroad candidates – of these, the two who she had more closely shared ethnicity with (West African) were successful, while one who she did not share ethnicity with (Filipino) failed.

In the majority (61 per cent) of our interviews, candidates did not share ethnicity (in the sense of broad ethnic divisions – white, black African, Asian, other etc.) with their interviewer(s). This reflects an increasingly diverse society, where more encounters are ethnically mixed.

Interethnic encounters frequently resulted in successful interviews (we recorded 22 successful interviews where interviewer and candidate did not share ethnicity). However, a slightly greater proportion of candidates who did share ethnicity with the interviewer were successful (60 per cent as opposed to 56 per cent). But again, it has to be stressed that our sample was too small for any meaningful statistical conclusions to be drawn from it.

These very small differences between interethnic and intraethnic interview outcomes suggest that ethnicity per se was not the key factor in determining success. Our research shows that shared assumptions about self-presentation and interactional styles are the most important determinants of success (see Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

3.5 Note on ethnicity

Ethnicity is a highly problematic, contested, and historically variable concept. It is constructed out of overlapping categories based on colour, nationality, religion, culture and language. These categories do not always correspond to the way in which people identify themselves, and people often move between ethnicities by using bilingualism, dual nationality, multiple identities and repertoires of cultural
knowledge (see also White 2002, 4). It is therefore problematic for the researcher to impose categories such as ‘Afro-Caribbean’ on their informants.

In ‘tick box’ ethnic monitoring, ethnicity is routinely associated with biological identity, although nationality is used where particular groups within a larger racial category are perceived to have a different profile – for example, the division of South Asian into Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi. However, research in anthropology, linguistics and sociology has commonly understood ethnicity in terms of distinctive cultural and linguistic resources. Early research associated these resources with distinctive patterns of communication which individuals used to assert their ethnic identity (Hymes 1972, Gumperz 1982a). More recently, as society has become increasingly ethnically diverse, rather than seeing ethnicity as inherited, it is seen as a ‘strategic’ resource (Gilroy 1987, Hall 1990, Hewitt 1986, Rampton 1995) which can be emphasised or not. Language can be used to invoke one or a number of ethnicities and is attended to or not by others depending on its use and the particular situation in which it occurs.

So, culture and ethnicity are an integral part of talk. EM groups who have grown up in the UK, are likely to have a range of language resources (both bilingual and stylistic) which they can use strategically in different situations. In the job interview, the amount of linguistic capital they have acquired to perform in institutionally acceptable ways will vary, as with the white majority groups. With candidates who were born abroad, and specifically relative newcomers, how they talk in the job interview is much more likely to invoke an ethnic background whether they wish to stress this or not, since their style is more prone to be influenced by their expert language and associated cultural knowledge. As ethnicity is defined by degrees of belonging to social groups with common cultural or national traditions, born abroad candidates will often orient to ethnic identities which are in key ways different to the orientations of EMs who were born in the UK. Different styles of self-presentation are then linked to generalisations about ethnic groups. In this way, the ‘ethnic penalty’ has a ‘linguistic penalty’ attached to it (see Chapter 7). Ethnicity is, therefore, more than simply a question of race – two people who are classified by normative categories as ‘Bangladeshi’ could have somewhat different ethnic identities related, in part, to the length of their residence in the UK.

While recognising the difficulties inherent in attempting to classify ethnic identities, for the purposes of consistency in informing the reader, we have chosen to use the following labels:

- ‘White British’, for candidates who identified themselves as such.
- For EMs born in this country, we use Office for National Statistics (ONS) categories as cited in White (2002). For example, we state that a candidate was ‘Afro-Caribbean’, and identify them as ‘British’ if they were born in the UK. Some EM British candidates declined to self-identify in terms of DWP categories, so they are referred to more broadly as, for example, ‘South Asian’.
- For candidates who were born abroad, we identify them by their country of origin, as, for example, ‘Ghanaian’. This is so that the discussion on communicative
style and expert language can be more accurately informed by details of country of origin and language, rather than generalisations such as African or ‘other’.

- While we consistently give information on ethnicity for every candidate quoted, this does not mean that the candidate’s ethnic origin is necessarily relevant to every point which is made. Indeed, an encounter can only be defined as ‘intercultural’ if cultural differences are in some way made relevant in the encounter (Auer 1998).

It is problematic to draw a clear distinction along these lines between somebody who was born in the UK and somebody born abroad who may have had at least some of their education in the UK or may have had English as the medium of instruction at school or in higher education. All those in the born abroad category were bilingual with at least a functional command of English. Different studies draw the line between the majority of EMs and those who in some way are less representative of the majority (Kyambi 2005). Length of stay in the UK is significant in the born abroad category and we refer to ‘relative newcomers’ who are particularly disadvantaged by the interview process. But there is no absolute time limit that can be put on what constitutes a ‘newcomer’ and factors such as education and professional networks may account for relative familiarity (or not) with the discourses of the British interview. So, we heuristically draw a distinction between those born in Britain and those born abroad, since we anticipate a notable difference between ‘first generation’ and ‘second generation’ EM candidates.

This report does not attempt to make generalisations about the communicative style of any particular ethnic group, but rather to focus on issues which are common to all intercultural communication, and how these manifest in particular cases. Like several researchers in this area, we have found that it is not useful to generalise that, for example ‘Africans speak like this’ (Auer and Kern 2000, Erickson and Schultz 1982, see Appendix 1: Extended literature review 2.5). This is for several reasons:

- This encourages stereotypes about ethnic groups.
- The advent of hyper-diversity (see Section 3.2) means that it is more useful to increase self-awareness, communicative flexibility and aptitudes in interviewers to counter prejudice and improve communication, than to offer advice on the communicative styles of particular ethnic groups.
- Even within groups of newcomers from one country, linguistic and communicative styles can vary greatly depending on social class, education, area of origin, how long the candidate has been in UK and the current communicative situation they are in.
- Although cultural and linguistic styles are influenced by the environments which people grow up in, we do not have sufficient data to comment on this, and often only have one candidate from a very large area. We have therefore chosen to focus on what we do have data on – the interview interaction.
3.6 Work status

The majority of the candidates (61 per cent) were unemployed, but 39 per cent were already employed, many of these in temporary positions. All of the candidates whose interviews we recorded had been previously employed, even if they were unemployed at the time of interview. Many of the born abroad candidates were working in ethnic work units – for example as Polish builders and Indian waiters – in jobs which offered them less security and benefits than those in the large companies which they were applying for. Research has found that EMs, particularly those born abroad, often occupy ‘backstage’ roles in kitchens, back offices or night work, or in ethnic work units (Madood 2005, Evans et al. 2005, Vallas 2003, Adkins 1995).

3.7 Equal opportunities policies

All the organisations that data were collected in had an equal opportunities policy, some form of structured interview, and a fairly high degree of written recording and numerical marking of answers. These developments (which have been introduced in many organisations since the 1980s) gave the interview process a veneer of objectivity, but often engendered a fairly high degree of rigidity in the interview interaction, which was not always conducive to effective communication (see Chapter 6). However, many of the interviews we recorded in these organisations only had one interviewer. The exceptions to this were the public sector organisations – the Hospital, Sixth Form College and Adult Education Centre – which had ethnically diverse interview panels.

3.8 Conclusion

The data which we have collected reflects the hyper-diversity of ethnic groups in the urban centres of contemporary Britain. The majority (61 per cent) of the interview encounters which we recorded were interethnic, as either the interviewer or candidate belonged to an ethnic minority group. However, ethnicity itself was not the major indicator of success. Candidates who were born abroad were much less likely to be successful than British candidates, whether they were white British or EM British. Furthermore, the differences in success rates between interethnic and intraethnic encounters were negligible. For these reasons, this report will focus particularly on the problems encountered by candidates born abroad (see Chapter 7), and will consider the complex and interrelated issues of communication, co-membership and self-presentation, which cut across ethnic divisions, rather than focusing on the communicative styles of any particular ethnic group.
4 The interviewer’s decision making criteria

4.1 Introduction

There has been a shift in recent years from the CV based interview, with general questions about motivation and suitability, to the competence framework. This means that rather than being structured around a chronological account of the candidate’s past work experience, the interview moves from talking about one ‘competence’ or aptitude to another. All of the interviews which we recorded, except for some of those done in recruitment agencies, had a competence based structure. This development marks a change in practice from interviews of candidates for low-paid jobs in the 1970s (Roberts 1985). These days, there is little space in large organisations for ‘head-downers’ who merely provide physical strength or technical knowledge. In our data, candidates for low-paid jobs were asked questions about teamwork, self-organisation and flexibility and were assessed on their ability to give descriptive examples and answer analytic questions such as ‘what improvements would you make to the business?’ or ‘why do you think a business needs to go through change?’.

The competence based structure reflects the fact that personality, ‘values’ and ‘behavioural traits’ have become the main focus of the job interview – and are often valued over technical skill or relevant experience (Halford and Leonard 1999, Gee et al. 1996, 17). To quote one of the interviewers we recorded, current received wisdom in Human Resources (HR) circles is that one ‘recruits for attitude and trains for skill’. This is evident in the preponderance of personality questionnaires which measure, in the words of one leading occupational psychology company, ‘how an individual approaches a job rather than the ability to perform that job’ (www.shl.com). Interviewers in the public sector were often more reticent about the interview’s requirements of candidates in terms of personality, perhaps because of their consciousness of the problems in terms of equal opportunities of requiring a candidate to fit into a particular organisational culture. However, in both the questions asked by interviewers, and reasons given for the decisions made, a strong focus on personality was evident in both the public and private sector interviews (see Section 4.3 below).
The focus on personality, and the ability to ‘fit in’, is linked to notions evident in corporate literature and the practices of organisational culture, which argue that the ideal candidate’s personal priorities are the same as those of the organisation applied to. Candidates are expected to ‘come to identify and conceive of their interests in terms of [the organisation’s] words and images’ (Halford and Leonard 1999). As one management journal puts it ‘Employees are constantly on view, and the line between work and play, the line between private and public becomes fuzzy’ (Boyett & Corn, quoted in Gee et al. 1996, 34). The fact that candidates for low-paid jobs are expected to ‘buy into’ the organisation’s values and culture to a high degree is evident in the similarities between the qualities demanded of low-paid, junior management and senior management job candidates in large companies – as all these employees are expected to share the same ‘core values’. These ‘core values’ are expressed, (see Section 4.3 below), in terms of interviewers’ requirements for candidates to show in specific ways certain kinds of responsibility, adaptability, resilience, friendliness, self-awareness and honesty. The requirement for candidates to conform to certain core values also encourages the interviewer to look for a degree of blandness and homogeneity in low-paid candidates.

The view that the successful candidate should embody the organisation’s values is evident in the move within organisations towards an ‘accountancy’ (Miller 1994) or ‘enterprise’ (Du Gay 2000) culture, whereby individuals are required to become ‘autonomous, productive and self-regulating’. In the interview, this trend can be seen in the focus of questions about team working, which are often linked to the idea of self-managing teams, where team members learn from one another, devise strategies to improve processes, increase productivity, help each other to stay motivated, and manage one another (Gee et al. 1996). Candidates who do not understand this rationale behind team working questions can be disadvantaged at interview. For example, one Filipino candidate in our study, Luis, perceives team working as being about kindness and sociability, and speaks about doing team mates’ work for them. However, he is criticised by the interviewer for failing to report his ‘irresponsible’ team mates to their manager.

There are two main problems with the ideology of organisational culture, and the focus on personality in the interview, in terms of equal opportunities. First, the requirement for candidates to understand and orient to a certain organisational culture, which may be specific to corporate and/or British contexts, disadvantages candidates who do not share an understanding of it. This applies most obviously to candidates born abroad, but may also impact on, for example, young British working class candidates who have limited knowledge of middle class work cultures. Furthermore, an understanding of this organisational ideology or culture is often far from necessary for effective performance in a job, particularly a low-paid one.

Secondly, the kind of features which interviewers look for in candidates are linked to notions of the self which dominate western culture and particularly occupational psychology (Linde 1993, 100), a discipline which has had a formative influence on
the job interview. This tradition, as it has been applied in the recruitment industry, tends to view the self as a continuous, coherent whole, containing certain (desirable or undesirable) personality features and not others, which one can objectively define, measure, and reveal in the interview. However, as has now been long established in social science theories of identity, these attributes of the self are in fact constructs of the situation or culture which they manifest within (in this case that of the interview) and may be claimed to be possessed in varying degrees by people at different moments. People are constantly changing and in flux, and have contradictory and overlapping aspects (Holland et al. 1998). The assumption that judgements of a candidate’s personality can be extracted from the interactional environment in which they take place, and the objectivity of the interviewer in making such judgements, will be brought into question in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this report. The ideology briefly described above informs the main questions asked in job interviews.

4.2 The main questions asked

This section considers the main topics which are dealt with across the complete dataset of interviews, and are introduced with a main question – as opposed to optional sub-topics which emerge in follow-up questions. The questions tend to focus, directly or indirectly, on communication skills and how candidates talk about their relationships to others. Most of these questions are about the candidate’s relationship to their co-workers, customers, or themselves. They therefore focus on the candidate’s interpersonal relationships, and personal self-awareness. But, as with all topics, it is the candidate’s ability to communicate about themselves and others which is being assessed, even if communication skills are not the most important aspect of the job.

The following topics occur in some form in all our data:

- Team working.
- Organising one’s self/one’s time.

These occur frequently in our data:

- Customer service questions - often about dealing with a difficult customer.
- Learning from failure/dislikes of features of work and strategies to deal with them.
- Describe yourself/how would your boss/friend describe you in three words.
- Making improvements.
- General questions about motivation and suitability such as ‘Why are you applying for this job?’ or ‘What makes you the ideal candidate?’ (These used to be staples of the job interview but are now less frequent).
- Outline of previous job – working day, skills used.
These topics are specific to particular jobs:

- **Equal opportunities** – This question occurs in all public sector data.
- **Physical work** – doing shifts, lifting, fitness.
- **More technical questions** such as ‘What computer packages have you used?’ and ‘What experience do you have of cash-handling?’

### 4.3 The interviewers’ explicit criteria

The features which are listed below as the main personality features and dispositions which interviewers look for in candidates were the criteria most frequently cited in decision-making sessions between interviewers, and in the feedback which interviewers gave us on the reasons for their decisions. Often, this feedback was given in the context of re-watching the interview on video. The ‘explicit requirements’ are also taken from the main questions which were asked to candidates in the interviews (see above), as the rationale behind these questions was often repeated by interviewers in the justifications of their decisions.

#### 4.3.1 Willing to take on responsibility

Interviewers frequently gave their perception that a candidate was willing (or unwilling) to take on responsibility as a reason for the success or failure of the candidate. This feature is becoming increasingly important in the context of the ‘entrepreneurising of every job’ (Gee et al. 1996), whereby low-paid employees become more accountable as they are organised into ‘self-managing’ teams.

Often, this capability was commented on by interviewers in the context of candidate’s responses to team working questions, the subtext of which may be that candidates are required to demonstrate willingness and ability to manage their co-workers – for example by giving training, monitoring their own and others output, and dealing with problematic employees (either themselves or by communicating the issue to the management).

The failure of candidates to take on responsibility is often linked to their relation to team members – for example, Tahir and Vijay (both of whom were unsuccessful) were criticised for asking for help from a colleague or superior to deal with a problematic customer rather than suggesting how they would manage the situation themselves.

In some cases, the demonstration of ability to take on responsibility was decisive to the candidate’s success. For example, Sukinder’s interview was going quite poorly when, in reply to a question about dealing with change, Sukinder spoke enthusiastically about how he was given greater responsibilities in his work, and how these both gave him better prospects, and made him accountable for collecting money for the business. The interviewer commented that this answer was one of the main reasons for the candidate’s success, and that he showed that ‘he was keen to take on responsibility for change by changing roles’.
4.3.2 Flexible and adaptable

Interviewers often spoke of the need for candidate’s to be willing to adapt to different roles and to be able to ‘think on their feet’ in an emergency. This capability is particularly tested in questions about how candidates would deal with change in the workplace, and how they would cope with contingencies (such as colleagues being off sick). This ability to switch between roles is often demonstrated by candidates in subtle ways, such as moving between and blending different ways of speaking or discourses, and not being fixed in one position (see Section 5.5.1).

One candidate, when asked how she planned out her work, emphasised how ‘picky’ she was about things: ‘I’m very oooh and if it doesn’t work right I’m kind of like ooh god’. The interviewer cited this comment as the turning point in the interview, and the reason why she failed this candidate – she saw this as evidence that the candidate was fixed, unable to adapt to contingency and liable to panic if things went wrong.

By contrast, Jim, a successful candidate who was viewed as flexible, emphasised his ability to try out different work strategies, and his ability to shift around his social life in response to work demands. He also demonstrated his adaptability by adjusting his talk to the different demands of the interview. For example, when asked about the advantages of teamwork, he gave a work-based answer about learning other’s skills; but when prompted for more he gave a more ‘personal’ response about building trust with others.

4.3.3 Resilient in the face of difficulties

Interviewers, particularly in interviews for the more physically demanding jobs, often mentioned in their reasons for accepting a candidate that they felt that they were hardworking and motivated to do repetitive tasks, and would not mind doing lots of lifting and carrying.

Jim also successfully portrayed himself as resilient and hardworking. His interviewer mentioned that he was ‘very convinced’ by Jim’s brief asides that attested to his hardworking nature. For example, Jim mentioned that in a previous job, he was offered one day off in the week but ‘me being me I worked’. Similarly, another candidate, Tom, impressed the interviewer in his account of a previous job in which he had to work all night outside, in the rain, and at times for weeks ‘solid’ without a break.

Yohannes was one of a group of candidates who were perceived by their interviewer as potentially unsteady, or not hardworking enough. This candidate asked the interviewer if it would be possible to transfer to doing a different, less physically demanding job after being accepted. This enquiry was given as one of the reasons that he failed the interview. Another candidate, Alex, asked the interviewer if it would be possible to listen to music while doing driving work. The interviewer took this as an indication that he would be easily distracted and not focused on his work.
4.3.4 Personable and friendly

In customer service questions, in particular, interviewers focus on the candidates’ ability to strike up a rapport with, for example, difficult customers. However, this aptitude is often tested not so much in specific questions as by the overall impression which the interviewer gets of the candidate – were they able to strike up a rapport with the interviewer(s)?

With successful candidates, such as Pippa, whose interviewers commented that she was positive and easy to get on with, these judgments are made tacitly from impressions created by the interaction – Pippa was laughing and joking with the interviewers. In the case of unsuccessful candidates, interviewers are usually less aware of the effect which the interaction might have on the impressions formed, and tend to limit the reasons why the candidate seemed like an unfriendly person to specific candidate comments. For example, one interviewer, when speaking about an unsuccessful candidate with whom his interaction was strained, Sara, commented that she ‘self-declared’ herself as ‘aggressive’ by saying that she ‘didn’t suffer fools gladly’, and brusquely asking people ‘are you going to do it or not’ when she needed to get something done.

4.3.5 Managerial/able to make innovations

Another aspect of the ideal ‘entrepreneurial’ employee is that, even as a low-paid worker, they are empowered to make changes, to go outside their work remit, and to structure their own workload. They are therefore asked questions about how they organise themselves, what changes they would make to improve things and how they respond to change. The candidate is expected to demonstrate agency and independence (rather than emotionality or dependence on others) and the ability to deal with situations on their own, without others help.

This quality was more often remarked on by interviewers when it was not present in candidates. For example, Renard was criticised for not talking enough about his personal input in making changes. Tahir was criticised for an answer to a question about what innovations he would bring in to implement equal opportunities, to which he answered that he would look for feedback from customers by carrying out surveys about what they wanted to change. The interviewers felt that this reply was rehearsed, and did not show creativity or a sufficient grounding in the situation. Another candidate, Sara was criticised for an example she gave which involved going to others for help when she was upset by a colleague’s remarks. The interviewer felt that she should have dealt with this herself, and not reacted so emotionally to the situation.

4.3.6 Self-aware

Interviewers often saw candidates who were able to effectively identify their own strengths and weaknesses as people who would adapt well to a new role and respond better to training and development (see also Adelsward 1988). Some questions, such as those concerned with the strategies candidates employ to deal with their own weaknesses, specifically sought to elicit candidates’ self-reports of
their own weak points, or what they found difficult, to see how they dealt with such problems.

Candidates who were reluctant to admit to such problems were therefore judged negatively – for example, one unsuccessful candidate’s claim that ‘there aren’t any disadvantages to teamwork’ was highlighted by interviewers as a poor response. Similarly, another unsuccessful candidate, Tahir, was criticised by interviewers for claiming strengths in IT when he had actually done poorly on an IT test which was part of the selection procedure. By contrast, another candidate, Peter, was praised by his interviewer for showing that he recognised, got feedback from others on, and took steps to deal with his problems with time-management.

4.3.7 Able to give valid evidence

In their feedback, interviewers frequently spoke of the requirement for candidates to give evidence in the form of specific examples which illustrated the transferable skills which they had to offer. However, the candidates were also implicitly required to couch this evidence in terms of a more generalised analytic ‘gloss’ (see Section 5.2).

In their feedback on an unsuccessful candidate, Vijay, interviewers commented that he frequently claimed certain abilities – such as being an expert in business management – but did not demonstrate or show these qualities through examples concerning what he had done in his work.

4.4 The interviewer’s implicit criteria

4.4.1 Obedient

Despite the requirements stated above for the candidates to be responsible and empowered, it is still the case that these candidates are applying for low-paid positions, and are implicitly expected to ‘know their place’ to some extent (Auer 1998) (see Sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3). To test this capability, interviewers question candidates about their attitude to change, as they must be willing to accept changes which are imposed on them.

One candidate who was praised by the interviewer for striking the right note of deference was Ahmed, who was successful in the interview. Ahmed spoke a lot about aiming to ‘please the bosses’, and to earn praise from them; he links these aims to personal satisfaction and personal relationships developed with superiors, saying that their encouragement ‘gives you the spirit of working’. The interviewer felt that Ahmed would respond well to training and would be easy to manage.

Candidates who were viewed as potentially difficult to manage, adversarial or disobedient were often judged as such as a result of the interaction in the interview. For example, Vijay was viewed as overqualified and too domineering for the low-paid receptionist position applied for. The interviewer commented that he needed more intellectual challenge and control over decision making than the job required. This was partly a result of his emphasis on his high-level qualifications, and partly a
result of how both sides managed the interaction in the interview: he was viewed as lecturing the interviewers, speaking over them, and positioning himself as equal to or above them.

4.4.2 Honest

Several interviewers gave, as their main reason for rejecting a candidate, the fact that they found them untrustworthy, and that they could, therefore, not take any of their self-assessments in the interview as valid evidence. This quality was not explicitly tested for in the interview, but was judged on the basis of the interviewer's general impressions about whether the candidate was consistent in their self-presentation, clear about their motivations for applying for the job, and did not contradict themselves (see Sections 5.1.2 and 5.8).

An Ethiopian candidate who failed the interview, Yohannes, was viewed by the interviewer as untrustworthy because he was hesitant in his speech, and revealed work experience in the interview which he had not stated on the application form. Sara, who failed the interview, was judged from her partial and inconsistent use of institutional discourse to be ‘telling people what they want to hear’ rather than saying what she really thought (see Section 5.8.4). Another unsuccessful candidate, Tahir, was viewed as making claims to have more responsibility than he actually had as a temporary receptionist, and therefore was seen as dishonest.

4.4.3 Strong personality

In several positions, there was an implicit requirement, which was not stated on the job specification or referred to in the interview, which was that candidates should have the ability to deal with loud or challenging environments or colleagues. For example, in the feedback on the interviews for a receptionist position in a sixth form college, the interviewers commented that the successful candidate would be working with a team full of ‘strong personalities’, and would need to be able to ‘hold their own’. In the delivery company, one interviewer commented that successful candidates would have to be able to deal with a certain amount of back room banter and ‘colourful language’. One of the candidates for the position in the sixth form college was rejected partly on the basis that she was judged to be too shy and timid.

4.4.4 Bland

Although it was not explicitly stated by interviewers, their feedback indicated an implicit requirement for successful candidates to fit themselves into broad, homogenising institutional categories – such as being a good team worker, innovative, flexible and so on. Therefore, self-declarations of idiosyncrasies were usually viewed as negative, and reasons for failure.

For example, Tina repeatedly emphasised that she was ‘very picky’; Alex commented that when at work he tends to ‘go off into a dream world’; Tahir emphasised his ‘love’ of interaction. These declarations were seen to indicate a rather uncompromising attitude: ‘that’s just what I’m like’, and a consequent inability to fit the institution’s categories. In the factory interview, where candidates were asked to give three words to describe themselves, the interviewer commented that she expected to be ‘fed back’ the qualities she had stated were relevant to the job. If candidates failed to do this, and commented on more unique aspects of their personality, their answers
were viewed as anomalous and irrelevant. So, candidates were expected not be too emotive, except in normative or coded ways (such as expressing liking and disliking aspects of teamwork), as this was seen as unprofessional.

4.4.5 Shared perspective on work experience

One of the implicit requirements placed on candidates is the expectation that they will share certain ‘common sense’ assumptions with the interviewer about what their attitude to certain kinds of work ought to be. If they do not hold these common assumptions, or are not aware of them, then this can lead to misunderstandings or failure because of the interviewer’s perception that they didn’t understand the question, or got the answer ‘wrong’.

For example, it is a necessary assumption of many of the interview questions that candidates find repetitive work boring, or enjoy teamwork and satisfying customers. The problems which such routine assumptions can cause in interviews is illustrated in the example given below, where a candidate’s failure to recognise that repetitive work should be understood as making one more efficient, but bored, leads to a rapid shift down to more low-level and closed questions at L11-24.

---

**Example 1. Ire: Nigerian Born abroad, Borderline Successful**

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

**NB** See Appendix B for a key to the transcription conventions used in this extract, and in the extract boxes throughout the report.
4.4.6 Certain (unspecified) level of ability in English

Interviewers frequently stated or implied that in the interview they were implicitly testing candidate’s level of ability in English. A perceived deficiency in this area, or lack of ‘clarity’ of voice was often used as a reason for declining newcomer candidates. However, in the organisations which we researched, none of the interviewers knew of any official guidelines concerning what is an acceptable level of ability in English for a given position. Also, there was very little recognition that, for example, clarity of voice may be relative to the interviewer’s expectations (and their own accent), or that fluency in English may be conversationally constructed. For example, a Filipino candidate was failed by a Nigerian interviewer, because she found him ‘hard to follow’, while she passed another Nigerian candidate with a very similar level of linguistic ability, who she found easier to understand. The idea that the job interview is a suitable arena for covertly testing English ability ignores the impact of the many linguistic constraints which operate in an interview (see Chapter 6, and see also Goffman 1983).

Several candidates were failed mainly on the grounds of linguistic or ‘communicative’ ability (see Chapter 7). When questioned, none of the interviewers were able to give specific examples or reasons for why they made this judgement about a candidate’s abilities, despite the copious notes which they made in the interview. This did not seem to be something which they felt they had to provide evidence for.

4.5 Conclusion

The interviewers’ decision-making criteria as outlined above are largely concerned with judgements of the candidate’s personalities and values. Such judgements are subjective, and are based on culturally relative requirements which are often only indirectly signalled to the candidate. The fact that candidates born abroad are being judged on criteria which they are likely to be unaware of, and which are displayed in culturally specific ways (such as honesty, flexibility and responsibility) means that they are at a clear disadvantage (see Chapter 7).

While the data outlined above is instructive in terms of understanding how interviewers and organisations view the interview process, one cannot always accept uncritically the account which interviewers give of their decision-making process, for the reasons given below.

It is worth noting that many of the requirements of candidates listed above are contradictory – the interview requires the ability to make changes in the business from candidates who will have little opportunity to do so; candidates who are ‘flexible and individual’ but who also conform to a homogeneous global template of a good employee. Finally, the interview demands a candidate who is personable and friendly to their team, but only as a means to an end: getting their job done and increasing the efficiency of the business.
Furthermore, the way in which interviewers make decisions in practice sometimes differs from the stated requirements listed above. For example, Afram, a candidate the interviewer described in the post-interview feedback as untrustworthy and dishonest, saying that ‘if I worked at head office I’d have him checked out’, was successful in the interview. The interviewer justified this decision in terms of Afram’s ‘good communication skills’. Analysing the interview, one can see that, partly due to the candidate and interviewer’s shared ethnicity, a positive interactional dynamic is established (see Section 6.4) and communication in the interview flows very easily.

Interviewers often repeated their organisation’s maxims and broad categorisations of people from company literature or policy to justify their decision along official lines. One interviewer commented (without apparent irony) that it was ‘funny’ how people always fitted into the personality categorisations set out by the interviewing guidelines, such as ‘innovative’ or ‘adaptable’, or how similar different interviewers’ assessments of candidates always were. Interviewers were frequently defensive, and sought to justify their decision to pass or fail a candidate to the researcher. They therefore rarely made positive comments about a failed candidate, or negative comments about a successful candidate.

Interviewers often did not articulate the reasons why they felt that a candidate did or did not possess a required attribute. For example, claims of limited English as the reason for failing a candidate were often given without any specific reference to any evidence of this (see Section 7.10). When probed, even while watching the video recording of the interview, interviewers were generally unable to give further explanations of how they reached their decisions, and sometimes resorted to saying they had a ‘gut feeling’ about a candidate, or didn’t like their ‘body language’. Interviewers very rarely identified interactional causes of the interviews failure or success, or expressed awareness of how their interactional behaviour impacted on the candidate. It was therefore evident that the interviewers were relatively uncritical and self-reflexive about their decision making, and that an analysis which relied solely on their self-reported processes would be fairly limited.

For the reasons given here, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this report will seek to explain how decisions are made about candidates in ways which are not always directly apparent to interviewers, or part of the interviewer’s conscious decision-making criteria. Often, judgements of candidate’s personalities are related to issues of cultural style, the balancing and blending of discourses, and interactional issues, which interviewers do not overtly recognise.
5 The candidate’s contributions

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will show that successful interview candidates (those offered a job) are those who manage to create a version of themselves as purposeful, consistent individuals whose life experiences are ordered towards an end-goal of working for the kind of organisation that they are currently applying for, and so present a persona which is consistent with the interviewers’ expectations. Some aspects of this kind of strategic self-presentation are conceptualised as ‘impression management’ in occupational psychology literature. However, our focus here will be on the detailed interactional aspects of self-presentation which have been central to the approach of sociolinguistics and narrative theory outlined in the literature review, but which have not yet been widely applied to the study of job interview data.

We found that the candidate’s production of a successful persona is accomplished in two ways. Firstly by the way they align themselves to the expectations of the interviewers (Roberts and Sarangi 1999). Secondly by projecting a coherent authorial voice, which says ‘this is who I am’.

5.1.1 Alignment to different discourses

Alignment, literally lining up objects in a straight line, refers to the ways in which individual conduct accords with what is ‘culturally normal’ in a particular setting (Stokes and Hewitt 1976: 843). In a job interview, candidates have to tailor their response to fit the assumptions of the interview questions and follow-ups – to the different discourses which are called up in the course of the interview. They also have to align to the particular social relationship which is expected in the interview, and to the institutional identity of the interviewers. This relates to how informal, egalitarian or familiar their stance can be in relation to interviewers at any phase of the interview. Judging this stance or ‘footing’ (Goffman 1981, 128) appropriately will help to determine whether they have established affiliation or rapport. These two
aspects of alignment, to interview discourse and interviewer identity, are usually interconnected. For example, the opening phase of the interview (before questions or presentations about the job) is often more informal and jokey (at least on the surface) and candidates are expected to align both to the more informal way of talking and to the more familiar and equal relationship which is temporarily invoked. A change of tone, or ‘change of gears’ (Goffman 1981, 186) comes with the shift to the start of the interview proper.

The notion of ‘discourse’ encompasses both the kinds of knowledge that regulate our thinking and all the features that make up oral and written communication. So, for example, the job interview uses discourses of competence and organisational values of motivation, honesty and other appropriate personality features. These discourses define the content of the interview, how interviewers should think about and assess candidates, and also how to relate to them socially in terms of (in)formality. There is no set of features of language or content which define a way of speaking as one kind of discourse. The meaning is always context dependent. However, the clustering of sets of features and how they are responded to by others is indicative of whether a response is aligned (or not aligned) to the interviewer’s discourse at any moment. These different discourse modes are used in our job interview data (see also Roberts and Sarangi 1992):

Institutional discourse: The analytic and more abstract talk which candidates are expected to use to account for and rationalise their experience and attitude.

Occupational discourse: The descriptive talk of work experiences.

Personal discourse: The talk concerned with individual’s experience and feelings.

5.1.2 Authorial voice

The authorial voice of the candidate is the talk through which they project a coherent, unified version of themselves (see also Kramsch 2003, Holland et al. 1998, Heydon 2005, Linde 1993). This is done by creatively mobilising and adapting discourses to the situation at hand – in this case the job interview – to construct a particular persona or impression of oneself (Scheur 2001). Interviewers’ explicit and implicit criteria put great emphasis on candidates being consistent, coherent and credible (see Chapter 4). The focus on personality and the enterprising self require a clear sense of self and agency – of ‘I-ness’. The overall judgement of the candidate’s ability to deal with people will depend upon whether they come across as both coherent and actively engaged. These judgements depend upon both the content of their responses (e.g. whether what they say is consistent with the details on the job application form) and how they come across. Incoherent or inconsistent ways of talking are turned into judgements of untrustworthiness and unreliability.

5.1.3 Alignment, authorial voice and linguistic capital

Producing a combination of alignment and the authorial voice is a complex process. The candidate must be consistent and yet able to attune to the different moments of
the interview, self-aware and yet not too self-orientated. The candidate’s quality as a potential employee should be both embedded in the work context and yet extractable from it to be processed onto the interviewer’s assessment form. The extent to which candidates can do this will largely determine their relative success. However, not all successful candidates manage to present themselves with a strategic use of all the resources discussed below. Some are successful because they are sufficiently strong in one area and/or their overall style chimes with the type of job on offer.

Others fail because they lack the linguistic capital to generate the correct discourse, or mobilise it in the appropriate place. Linguistic capital is distinct from fluency in English – it denotes not features of grammatical ability, but knowledge of specific forms of talk such as organisational discourse. It is not only knowledge of how one ought to speak in a particular setting, but also the fluency in ways of speaking which is acquired through practice in certain social situations – which some candidates will have had more experience of than others (Bourdieu 1986, 1991, Gee et al. 1996). This experience, and the resulting linguistic capital, was evident in some successful candidates’ statements that the interview was very similar to their previous interview experiences. They were able to reel off lists of qualities which interviewers were looking for, and which were like those given by the interviewers themselves (see Chapter 4). As these candidates knew what the interviewer was looking for, and had practised presenting themselves in this way before, they had already worked out a simplified, coherent self to put forward in the interview, which the interviewer could recognise. This successful self-presentation contrasted sharply with that of some unsuccessful candidates, of whom interviewers remarked that they ‘didn’t feel they knew who they were’.

The lack of particular kinds of linguistic capital evident in some candidates’ contributions may result either from being unemployed for some period or from working in jobs where there is no requirement or opportunity to use institutional, analytic discourses to articulate what one’s attitude to work should be. Furthermore, unlike some of the successful candidates in our research (such as Lloyd and Jean), the unsuccessful candidates lacking linguistic and social capital, did not have friends who had successfully applied to the organisation carrying out the interview, who might pass on knowledge of how to ‘do’ the interaction, and a sense of potential shared group membership.

The unsuccessful candidates had often been employed in ethnic work units, membership of which ‘reduces exposure to wider skills and job information…and hinders chances of informal ties of solidarity with dominant group workers’ (Noon 2005, 10, and see Section 3.5). Scheuer (2001) has argued that for people in low-paid jobs, it is often the case that they do not use their work to form their identity – and that there is, therefore, a wider gulf between the personal discourses they use to talk about themselves, and those they use to speak about the institution. For those working at a lower level, particularly in an era of high staff turnovers, fewer ‘jobs for life’ and less loyalty to companies, it is more difficult to identify their personal
motivation with the goals of the company they work for. Yet interviews increasingly demand such identification (Chapter 4, see also Gee et al. 1996). The difficulty for poorly paid workers in presenting their experience positively is evident in Evans et al.’s survey of some of the lowest paid workers in London, the majority of whom were born abroad, which found that, for some sectors of the economy, up to 35 per cent ‘found nothing in particular they liked about their job, considering it “just a job”’ (2005, 19-22). This means that this group have fewer resources with which to articulate their identity in terms of convincing and well integrated institutional, occupational and personal discourses.

The remainder of this chapter looks in depth at the two central features of candidates’ contributions: alignment to discourses and authorial voice.

Alignment to discourses

5.2 Alignment to institutional discourses

These discourses are used to deal with more analytic issues, and are often elicited by more competence type or hypothetical questions, concerning organisational procedure or abstract issues such as candidates’ reasons for applying. However, elements of them are expected to appear in most responses even if this is not implied in the question, since the interview is an institutional event. These discourses are made up of assumed knowledge about workplace institutions and particular features of style. The underlying assumptions about a candidate’s experience of workplace institutions include: that they have transferable skills developed from customer service and teamwork; that they orient to management priorities concerning what candidates can offer the company (and not the reverse); and that they are resilient in the face of difficulties (see Chapter 4).

The stylistic features of institutional discourse are those of impartiality, discretion, a more impersonal and analytic stance and one that creates a certain sense of distance (Bourdieu 1991). The content of institutional discourse, which is often but not necessarily geared to institutional/organisational concerns, is presented through rhetorical devices such as listing and categorisation. An important and related aspect of institutional discourse requires candidates to be self-reflexive, in other words, to be able to show that they can stand outside their work experiences and present them in ways which are ‘bureaucratically processable’ (Iedema 1999, 63) to the interviewer.
5.2.1 Style: Listing in an analytic response

Successful example

Example 2. Paula: White British, Successful

| No. | I: what made you (.) think of applying here as opposed to [anywhere else] | C: well] firstly because I’ve got no doubt I can do the job | I: Mhmm | C: Secondly because shifts don’t bother us | I: Right | C: Right (.) and thirdly because you’ve got quite a secure reputation (X company) has for employment |

Here, Paula demonstrates that as well as listing in detail her particular experience of work, she is also able to provide an analytic gloss to her experience, to generalise about what is common between her experience and that which she is hoping to move into. Finally, she orientates to the company in her flattering remark at line 8.

5.2.2 Aligning to institutional workplace assumptions

Successful candidates frequently align themselves to the management ethos in organisations they have worked for previously. For example, they value co-operation with management, talk of common goals shared with superiors, or how they have been motivated by ‘keeping the bigger picture in mind’. Although in this next example Lloyd does not show so clearly the classic distancing and analytic style of example two, nevertheless, the content of this talk takes a comparative perspective which aligns him to the service job he is applying for.
Successful example

Example 3. Lloyd: Afro-Caribbean British, Successful

1. I: okay ((softly)) a:nd was there anything that you found
2. was easy about starting that job (.) at the warehouse
3. (twenty five seconds of talk deleted)
4. C: it was eas- it was easy t- to deal with because I
5. think when I speak to people I can I can speak to them on
6. a on a level wh- so it was it was easy then just to speak
7. to people (.) rather than as in in labour- with labouring
8. (.) there’s certain the people that you come across ain’t
9. like the people you come across in in there like (.) it’s
10. more pr- it was more professional (.) in that
11. enviro[nment
12. I: yeah]
13. C: it was a more professional environment

Here Lloyd, a British Afro-Caribbean candidate, demonstrates an awareness of institutional cultures, the differences between them, and an ability to adapt to this. He develops a point he has already made in a customer service question about the difference between how team mates treat one another in the construction trade, and in the service industries, demonstrating a preference for the latter. As the job he is applying for is in the service sector, he aligns himself successfully both by showing that he finds incentives to work in the kind of interpersonal relationships fostered in the ‘professional environment’, and through his awareness that he is expected to produce an analytic summary as part of his response (lines 9-13). In this way, Lloyd marks himself as already being a ‘member’ of the institutional culture that he wishes to join.

Unsuccessful example

Unsuccessful candidates often fail to align themselves with the company worked for in their explanations of their previous jobs. For instance, in the example given below, Yohannes, an unsuccessful Ethiopian candidate, fails to orient to management priorities, and foregrounds what he feels he can get out of the company, rather than what he can offer them.
Example 4. Yohannes: Ethiopian Born abroad, Unsuccessful

1. I: okay what would you then say the advantages are (.) by
2. working as a team
3. C: er:m the advantage wherev- wherever you go are the e-
4. if you apply other jobs you won’t find it difficult (.)
5. you already integrate
6. (nine seconds of talk deleted)
7. C: then wh- wherever you go in say (. ) in (xxxxxx) job
8. (.) or in a community job (.) and you won’t get hard you
9. won’t be a- feel ashamed or if y- you (won’t feel) a shy
10. person (. ) you get more powerful a:nd (1)
11. I: yeah ( . ) what more would you say
12. C: e: r (1) you would be open minded you don’t have [to
13. I: okay yeah]
14. C: be worried (4)

Here, the candidate responds in quite a personal, emotive tone about the benefits which working in a team has brought him – he has gained skills which he can transfer to any job, ‘wherever’, and has become less shy (lines 9-10). In fact, the hidden requirement of this kind of analytical, concluding question is for an impersonal, institutional response which aligns the motivations and goals of the candidate to those of the organisation s/he is applying to. Answers to this question by successful candidates may mention some personal advantages of teamwork, but typically foreground points which orient to the organisation’s goals such as ‘in a team, you can work more efficiently and quickly’, ‘you can learn skills from one another’ and ‘you can check the accuracy of each other’s work’.

5.2.3 Aligning to the institutional relationship between candidate and interviewer

The interviewer’s institutional identity is that of someone who is relatively more powerful and knowledgeable than the candidate (see Section 4.4.1). The latter must implicitly align to this, but cannot make overt reference to it, as part of the interview game is the maintenance of the illusion that it is an egalitarian social encounter (see also Auer 1998, Birkner 2004). For example, candidates who say ‘This is an interview so I must…’ or ‘I was reading your brochure and it states…’ step outside the interview ‘game’ to comment on it and so risk coming across as less authentic (see Section 5.8).

Successful example

Successful candidates are able to align to the institutional identity of the interviewer at the right moment. The example given below occurred in the most informal and conversational set of interviews in the data, where the candidate and interviewer already knew one another. The candidate, Paula, is able to gauge this level of informality, and so strike the right balance between egalitarianism and deference in her tone.
Example 5. Paula: White British, Successful

1. I: So (.) you were really (.) in charge of production
2. there what- what tell me what that involved
3. (twenty one seconds of talk deleted)
4. C: What else I do in a day in that is (.) I mean if
5. you’ve ever worked in a small company Brenda (.) thing
6. about when you start up something like that (.) I mean
7. there’s a lot of peaks and troughs (.)
8. I: Yes=
9. C: =Because these they put would customers would just
10. come on and it would literally just be a couple of days
11. notice (( low pitch and falling tone))
12. I: Right
13. C: Right (.) so again I could work every single machine I
14. could do every single job in the contract packing I had
15. to ken (.)
16. I: Yes
17. C: Because if somebody was off or something or s- a
18. customer came on and there was things to be done
19. I: You just had to get on an do it
20. C: That’s the name of the game yeah get on and do it and
21. get it done um I didn’t mind it to be honest (.)
22. I: So you would do all the lifting and the standing and
23. the=
24. C: Oh God yeah
25. I: Running about and all the rest of that
26. C: Oh yeah oh yeah
27. I: Ok so
28. C: No problem with that

Paula has worked as a manager in a factory, and is now applying for a factory floor packing job; in the pre-interview, she expressed concerns that she was overqualified. To mitigate perceptions that she is overqualified, she carefully crafts her position in relation to the interviewer, and her self-description, to show that she can occupy the position appropriate to a lower paid employee, both in terms of her physical ability and her social self-positioning. Stylistically, she assumes an almost equal position with the interviewer – ‘if you’ve ever worked in a small company Brenda’. This statement frames her response with the assumption that this knowledge is shared, which suggests a measure of equality with the interviewer, and she upgrades herself with the claim ‘I could do every single job’ (L13-14). However, Paula is careful not to appear overbearing or sententious. She focuses on what she has done, rather than claims about what skills she has, or what kind of person she is. Her tone of voice is deferential – she uses a low pitch, slow speech, falling tone (L11) and employs pausing effectively, which facilitates feedback from Helen (eg. L7-8). She also echoes Helen’s own speech ‘get on and do it’ (L20), and leaves pauses where Helen can take a turn, so she is not seen as taking over the interview (L15-16, 21-22). Moreover, the content of Paula’s response emphasises that she was working
alongside colleagues on the shop floor ‘doing every single job’ (L13-14) – thus downgrading her from manager to co-worker. In response to Brenda’s prompts at L19 and L25, Paula matches the more informal tone of ‘you just had to get on and do it’ by offering her assessment of this in a personal voice – L24 ‘Oh God yeah’ or L28 ‘no problem with that’ – by using colloquialisms which again downgrade her. Throughout the extract, Paula is careful to allow pauses for Brenda’s feedback, to ensure that she’s getting the delicate balance of self-positioning right.

Unsuccessful example

The majority of unsuccessful candidates have difficulty with how to position themselves in relation to the interviewers as the encounter unfolds. Some unsuccessful candidates commented in the post-interview that they found the interview ‘both formal and informal’; Ian commented that the interview ‘felt like a chat’ and that he had to remind himself that he was in an interview. Typically, some of these candidates position themselves as on an equal footing with interviewers, claiming a spurious solidarity, in statements such as ‘students are impossible as you know’, or seeming to ‘lecture’ at them. They also tend to position themselves above their team mates. But they may also make the hierarchical position between themselves and the interviewers overt with statements such as ‘You are my superiors’ that create awkwardness by drawing attention to the unequal nature of the interview. Misjudgements of what tone to adopt or sudden shifts from too formal to too familiar a register produce uncomfortable moments and an overall negative assessment.

Example 6. Tahir: British Bangladeshi, Unsuccessful

1. I: Um can you tell me about uh what you enjoy in your
2. current job
3. (eighteen seconds of talk deleted)
4. C: so I love the interaction with people th-th-that’s
5. something (. ) which I enjoy ands that’s one of the perks
6. of the job
7. I: Lovely
8. C: [So]
9. I: [Is there] any-anything else you enjoy about it [other
10. than the students]?
11. C: [Um I love the work as well] the work the work side is
12. fantastic I love the work I do doing I enjoy (.) working
13. with my colleagues and the work I get the admin work I do
14. like (.) the typing word processing: and (.) working on
15. SIMS I don’t know if you use SIMS here (.) do you use
16. SIMS? PA system
17. I: We use something [sim- similar which the college
18. (xxxxxxxx) system]
19. C: [similar yeah like things like using SIMS (xxxxxxxx)]
20. photocopier:=
21. I: =M:mmm
### Example 6. Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Candidate Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>C: You know taking message::s operating switchboard those sort of work I love it’s j- (. I enjoy it so (1) that type of work (1) it’s exactly I mean (. when soon as I got the job description this a job description for this position you can see it’s like all marked in red ink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>I: ((laughs))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>C: ‘Cause its exactly the same as- it’s like as soon as I go through went through it it’s like yep I’m doing that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>I’m doing that kind of thing so um (. it’s exactly the same job but in a different school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, Tahir comes across as simultaneously too high-level and too involving at both the level of content and interaction. In lines 24-26, he mixes high involvement or personal style of the anecdote (‘you can see it’s like all marked in red ink’) with the very self-assured ‘it’s exactly the same’. In this way, he assumes a cosy equality with interviewers from a very early point in the interview, before he has had the chance to gauge what kind of interactional relationship they are expecting to have with him. Tahir, like some other failed candidates, shifts rapidly between a formal, listing, analytic style – L22 – and a more animated, self-revelatory and conversational ‘I love it’ (L23). As a result of this rhetorical style, Tahir was seen as dominating by the interviewers, who said that at points they felt he was trying to take over the interview, and that he would not be happy with the relatively low-paid position he was applying for. Examples of the kind of behaviour which triggered these judgements are evident in L15-16, where Tahir asks a question in an inappropriate place, and then gives the interviewers extra information ‘PA system’, presuming that they are hesitating to answer this out of ignorance. He then overlaps with the interviewer’s response to this question at line 17-18.

### 5.3 Alignment to occupational discourses

These discourses are descriptions, often presented as mini-narratives about work experiences. They illustrate how actions are carried out, and issues of interpersonal and empathetic relations with team mates and customers.

These narratives are the most frequently elicited responses from candidates in interviews for low-paid jobs. A particular narrative structure is favoured by interviewers, which corresponds to the normative western narrative structure (Labov 1972). This consists of an exposition or abstract, followed by orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. Indeed, one of the organisations in our research explicitly trained its interviewers to elicit responses structured in these terms: candidates were asked to outline the situation they were in, the task they had to do, their action in this situation, and the result of their work. Those designing the interview were not familiar with Labov’s research – but were unwittingly reproducing this western model of ‘standard’ narrative structure. In the organisation’s interview training literature, this narrative structure is framed as universal and obligatory –
essentially allied with clear thinking, correct exposition and ‘better evidence’ – rather than merely being the form which narratives most often take in western cultures. This type of structure also corresponds to the deductive argumentative structure, favoured in standard varieties of talk in western cultures – which flags up the main points to be made at the outset of the turn at talk, and follows this with evidence, and a conclusion which links the claims and evidence. Because this structure has come to be expected by interviewers, answers in this form are more readily processable, easy to follow-up and believable (see Section 6.4.6, see also Maryns, 2005).

5.3.1 Occupational narrative structures

Successful example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 7. Duncan: White British, Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: yeah so (.) what I’m looking for here is an example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. where you have done a similar kind of like routine (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. repetitive work o- over a period of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. C: well one specific agency contract I got it was only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. four months but it was (.) the complete mind numbingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. same repetitive stuff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I: okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. C: I was working for (xxxxxx) in Harrow and we were</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. building headsets for helicopter pilots and my specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. task was to get this tiny little ear piece and get a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. little drill and glue that and that was all I had to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. (.) all day everyday (.) I didn’t have problem with that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. because I was sat round a table with half a dozen other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. blokes and you know you don’t really need to turn your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. brain on to do something like that you can just chat and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. get the job done and it’s you got to keep yourself amused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. for boring jobs it’s as simple as that and I absolutely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. love working outdoors (.) I’ve got no problem at all with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. (.) doing the same round day in day out (.) I could quite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. easily do that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, Duncan immediately establishes the purpose and relevance of his narrative, or what Labov has classified as the exposition or abstract (L3-4) and gains the interviewer’s agreement with this (L7). He then very quickly lays out the context, Labov’s orientation, (L8-9) before moving on to ‘my specific task’ (L9-10) so directly moving into the ‘task’ and ‘action’ sections. He then gives some more contextual information about the team he was with, before describing his strategies for dealing with the boredom. This is the beginning of his conclusion, in which he moves onto the general, extractable moral of the story, or Labovian resolution, of ‘keeping oneself amused’. It is the movement from the particular to the general and back to the general which characterises deductive reasoning. Duncan then moves into an evaluative statement, or Labov’s coda, which brings him back to the current interaction with the interviewer (‘I’ve got no problem’) and which makes his story into evidence of his suitability for the job applied for.
So these narrative accounts include an element of the more analytic or institutional mode (see Section 5.5.1) in which there is a shift into the present moment and a more explicit alignment with the interviewer.

**Unsuccessful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 8. Alex: White British, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I1: what sort of experience have you had of working with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. groups of people?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: erm (.) quite a lot really <em>mainly</em> with em working at a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. (xxxx) really (.) (xxxx xxxxxx)(.) there’s been a lot of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. people sort of eh (1) well er working with other people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. a lot really (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alex appears to be unaware of the requirements to structure his replies in terms of an argument, narrative or list. Unlike Duncan or Ahmed, he does not give a structured story. The interviewers’ dissatisfaction with Alex’s response was evident in their subsequent reformulations and the negative assessment of this response given in feedback to researchers (see Section 6.5).

Besides those successful candidates who style and structure their narratives in expected and normative ways, and those unsuccessful candidates who fail to do so, there are a third group who fail to meet narrative requirements in an orthodox sense, but nevertheless manage successful performances. These candidates use different coherence principles (Tannen 1989, Chafe 1980) to structure their narratives. Instead of responding to each work experience question with the conventional narrative structure described above, they override this structure with their individual performance and strong authorial voice. Their performances tend to be structured around a key organising theme, such as Bruno’s move to England, Tom’s getting older, or Sandeep’s children moving away (see Section 5.7.1). This is a riskier strategy but provided the performance is telling enough, these candidates are usually successful in the context of interviews for low-paid jobs, with interviewers who tolerate these deviations. In the case of more highly-paid or white-collar jobs these normative requirements may be enforced more strictly.

### 5.3.2 Occupational discourses: context and transferability

The candidate is faced by a continuing problem: how to make their narrative, in all its concrete particularity and idiosyncrasy, immediately understandable and transferable to the interview situation so that it is bureaucratically processable. As well as producing the right amount of context, it needs to be designed so that it is imaginable to the interviewer. This means that the interviewer is able to ask more helpful, contextualised questions such as ‘In that work, I imagine you had to do x...’ (see Section 6.4.6). If sufficient context is negotiated early in the interview, then the narrative becomes a kind of ‘text’ which acts as a shared point of reference. This is useful as a shorthand way of calling up a raft of potentially relevant work experiences, is readily transposable into a written text and also contributes to mutual
alignment and sense of sharedness. This process of contextualisation is much easier when the interviewer is already familiar with the kind of work and life experiences the candidate has. This has implications for candidates whose work experience is predominately overseas (see Section 7.7).

**Successful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 9. Pippa: White British, Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I1: have you had any other (. ) work that you’ve done in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. the past that was very customer facing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: =yeah I’ve worked for (xxxxx) opticians and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. (xxxxxxxxxxxx)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I1: right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: as a lab tech and a O.A (. ) so dealing with them on a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. one-to-one basis (. ) selling them a product (3) meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. the deadlines ((laughs))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I1: ((laughs)) (2) what sort of deadlines did you have to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. meet then?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. C: well you’ve- you’ve heard the advert (. ) glasses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. within an hour=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I1: =oooh=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. C: =so you have to get the glasses to them within the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. hour (. ) and its er- slightly annoying if they actually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. break on the machine (. ) ((laughs))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here Pippa, a white British candidate, draws on the shared cultural knowledge (L11 ‘you’ve heard the advert’) to call up a kind of shared discourse of work and customer service which the interviewers can relate to. She goes beyond explaining the procedures of her previous company, to describing the way she had to work in practice – if the machine broke. This kind of discourse is occupational rather than institutional because it calls up experiences of the ways things are actually done in the job (rather than official corporate discourse about how it should be done). These experiences and occupational discourses are often shared by interviewers who have worked in similar organisations, and invoke sharedness and ‘co-membership’ which positively impacts on the interaction (see Section 6.1.2). For example, Pippa’s interviewer calls on the kind of occupational discourse which has been invoked above by Pippa in his phrasing of another question:

> [you’ve seen] that the frames are laid out in the order that you’re supposed to follow it but in practice yeah so (laughs) people make little changes (.) ehm are there any ah-things small improvements you’ve made in any of the jobs you’ve done?’

Here, a double alignment to both institutional discourse – what you’re ‘supposed’ to do – and the occupational discourse of what happens ‘in practice’ is evident.
5.4 Alignment to personal discourses

The competence frameworks of job interviews largely focus on ‘personality and values’ (Chapter 4). Personal discourses, as the name implies, are more personal and informal, and are therefore crucial in assessing candidate’s ability to relate to others, which is a key criteria of success in the interview (see Section 4.1). How the candidate relates to the interviewers is taken as a proxy for how they will relate in the workplace. Personal discourses are similar to occupational discourses in that they tend to be descriptive and deal with more interpersonal matters. They are characterised by involvement and openness, sometimes to the point of indiscretion in the context of the interview. They are used to self-disclose and so build up a more coherent and authentic picture.

5.4.1 Integration of personal discourse with occupational and institutional discourse

The ‘game’ here is complex. Often personal discourses are most effective when they are inserted as part of an answer to an institutional or occupational discourse question. This demonstrates that the candidate has integrated these more personal discourses into their work persona, and gives the impression that they have invested personally into the organisation’s goals and embody its values, including getting on well with superiors (in this case the interviewers) (see Section 4.1). However, in the case of questions which are explicitly about the personal viewpoint (such as questions about likes and dislikes of teamwork, self-organisation, self-awareness), often the expectation is that these will be answered in an institutional and analytic discourse mode, rather than with real, idiosyncratic self-revelation. Perhaps for this reason, some candidates commented that questions about ‘how they felt’ were particularly difficult to answer. And they mentioned problems with the fact that the questions were often vague and abstract, but required specific, concrete answers. So ‘feeling’ questions had to be answered more analytically and more abstract and analytic questions often required personal and concrete responses.

Successful example

In the example given below, Jim inserts some self-revelatory personal discourse (L12-14) into an answer which predominantly uses occupational discourse (L5-13) to describe what hours he was doing, and institutional discourse (L15-17) which articulates analytically what the relation between work and home life should be.
Example 10. Jim: White British, Successful

1. I: (okay) ((softly)) I know you were saying that in
2. (xxxxx) it was a nine to five job (.) and in (xxxxx)
3. system it was e- y- you you were covering two shifts
4. [(per beat)
5. C: two shifts]
6. I: erm twelve to eight (.) how do you do you find that
7. change because it’s like twelve to eight it’s like you
8. got to
9. C: no no] difference [you know
10. I: forty hours]
11. C: e:r (.) you do get used to it seeing as it’s on a
12. weekly thing you know it’s like are you going you know
13. come out tonight well I’m working til eight o’clock I’ll
14. meet you down there at nine (.) you just adjust yourself
15. to the time clock (.) you know, your work’s more
16. important than your social life, you know, you can see
17. your friends any time of the week (.) you know, so it
18. don’t really matter to them (.) you just adjust yourself
19. to it

Here Jim, a white British candidate, shows he can adjust to different shifts in line 12-14 by creating a mini-scenario in which the interviewers are ‘overhearing’ his conversation with his mates. Instead of claiming his flexibility, he acts it out in a concrete way. But he also blends this with a more analytical statement at lines 15-17.

5.4.2 Amount of personal discourse

Less successful candidates are too personal or not personal enough. Candidates need to be sensitive to the overall institutional frame of the interview and so not self-disclose inappropriately (see Section 4.4.4). In the following example, the candidate is asked about data protection:

Unsuccessful example

Example 11. Alison: White British, Unsuccessful

1. I2: sometimes u:h you might answer a call um from
2. somebody outside ringing up and saying uh oh by the way
3. you know I’m whoever and I’m a relative or a friend of a-
4. a-a of a person who’s been photographed
5. C: Mm
6. I2: Or uh and you might have our address or I’d like a
7. copy of their photograph because they’ve they’ve asked me
8. to call you to to to do that so whatever bit of personal
9. confidential information what what do you think your
10. reaction should be
11. C: Well when I was working in (.) the (xxxxxxx) it was
12. quite important
Example 11. Continued:
13. I1: Mmm
14. C: To um for confidentiality so: (.) with that scenario
15. we I never r-r-real- I mean y-your as polite as you
16. possible can be but
17. (six seconds of talk deleted)
18. C: we’ve never or I’ve never really disclosed too much
19. don’t like shouting out names and things you know so and
20. so got this so and so because you could have a patient or
21. a room full of patients or-or-or relatives in there (.)
22. you’re trying to keep they’ve they’ve- they’re coming I
23. here and hoping that
24. I2: [Yep]
25. C: [Their medical] records which are legal documents are
26. as safe as they possibly could [be]
27. I1: [M:hmm]
28. I2: [Yep]
29. C: [So]
30. I2: So are you familiar with access to medical records
31. C: [Yeah well]
32. I2: [Um um] you know the uh legislation about [regarding
33. (^^^^^)]
34. C: [Yes I mean obviously] you walk round build:ings you
35. don’t walk round you know with them tucked under your arm
36. with the name expo:sed um

The voice which Alison, a white British candidate, employs through the interview is
of someone who is not analytic or high-level (elsewhere she describes herself as ‘not
a medical person by any means’ and ‘not as good on paper’) but who is caring and
understanding with patients, and has experience. The fact that Alison presents
herself predominantly in this personal discourse is helpful in certain questions, but
becomes problematic in the question quoted above, where an analytic and factual
rather than experience based answer is expected. Alison speaks not about what she
knows about data protection regulations, but about her experience of enforcing
them, despite the reformulation on L30-33, which seeks to elicit a more analytic
response. Her register is conversational, and rather than being categorical about
procedure she says (L18) ‘well I’ve never exposed too much’ – implying that this is a
question of personal attitude. In line 22-26, she again emphasises her personal
empathy with patients – and while this is positive, too much of this kind of
identification with clients is seen to indicate a lack of professional distance. Alison’s
response here was contrasted unfavourably by interviewers with that of another
candidate, Natalie, who they said gave a ‘textbook’ answer, quoting the dates of the
Data Protection acts, and speaking categorically and impersonally about the
institutional procedure one ought to follow in such circumstances.
Coherent authorial voice

5.5 Authorial voice and credibility

Central to a candidate’s success is the production of a coherent ‘authorial voice’ (Holland et al. 1998, Kramsch 2003). Without this the candidate is judged as lacking consistency and credibility. This then affects the overall final judgement and, specifically, raises questions about their honesty, motivation and stickability.

Since talk is the fabric of the job interview, how candidates speak is used as a direct measure of who they are. Incoherent talk is deemed to reveal an incoherent person. Similarly, inconsistency in style or making claims without evidence fuels judgements that the candidate is untrustworthy. In addition, if candidates cannot present a rationale that links their various life and career changes, they might be seen as unreliable. For example, one candidate, Owen, failed the interview mainly on the grounds that he did not present (and therefore was seen to lack) a logic in his moves between different companies. He was perceived as not being a sticker, and lacking a clear career path.

The question of the candidate’s identity is therefore linked to the ‘contract’ of employment between the candidate and the organisation, which the successful interview works to establish, by articulating what the candidate and organisation are, and so what they can offer each other. The candidate has to blend institutional and personal discourses to demonstrate that they understand the institution’s rules and values, and has personally bought into them.

In our data, evaluation of a candidate’s credibility, trustworthiness and so on depended, almost without exception, on how they came across rather than on any factual discrepancies between application form and disclosure in the interview. And, similarly, as the example of Owen above shows, it was the presentation of life and career changes rather than the fact of them that was decisive in the outcome.

We found three main ways in which candidates produce a clear authorial voice. First, by blending and appropriately placing institutional, occupational and personal discourses at key points in the interview; secondly, by use of persuasive reporting; and thirdly, by employing organising and linking themes. Failure to use any or all of these tend to lead to overall failure and to criticisms that candidates had been told or trained to talk in a particular way.

5.5.1 Blending of institutional, occupational and personal discourses

Candidates whose responses are overly dependent on a particular discourse mode tend to be evaluated negatively. It is the blending of different discourses to produce a coherent but involved and flexible self-image which is highly rated. For instance, the hidden role of personality and values means that successful candidates tend to distribute personal discourses in their responses in a highly integrated way. Of all the
three discourses (institutional, occupational and personal), it is the personal which have to be the most carefully blended (see Section 5.4.1). For example, in a remark which impressed the interviewers, Alison commented that ‘I am approachable but I’m not a mug’ – thus linking institutional discourses of approachability, personal self-revelation, and pragmatic occupational experience of the need not to be a ‘mug’. Those who fail to do this kind of blending are judged as contradictory, unreliable or lacking authenticity. The distribution of personal discourses is also sensitive to the particular phases of the interview and the overall environment of the interview as relatively formal or informal. Opening stages may deal with why candidates have applied and, in more informal (particularly one-to-one) interviews, a larger amount of personal discourse is tolerated in these stages.

5.5.2 Blending of institutional and personal discourses

This is the most common blend among successful candidates. This blending is done in a variety of ways. Firstly, personalised and idiosyncratic language is used to describe how a candidate implemented institutional procedures. For example, a successful candidate, Jim, described how, as a traffic warden, he implemented institutional procedures and memorised lists, but in a personalised way: ‘so I made myself a little sheet up so I could put it in my little wallet… “just have a check”.’

Secondly, candidates blend discourses by using humour to put a personal gloss on a rather dry list of qualifications and security checks. For example, a successful candidate, Tom, when speaking about his ‘licence to operate plant machinery’ and ‘criminal records check’, intersperses this with more colloquial, jocular statements such as ‘I’ve been a good lad’ and ‘squeaky clean’ – this balances and links the more institutional vocabulary with a personal discourse.

Thirdly, some candidates introduce emotional self-appraisal when their responses have been largely impersonal. For example, one candidate, Sukinder’s interview is going badly until he introduces an emotional or relational element which has been absent from the rest of the interview in response to a question about dealing with change. Whereas before this he has simply repeated institutional discourse about enjoying serving customers, here he talks about how he felt about taking on extra responsibility – how he was ‘aggravated at first’ but gradually overcame this and realised that this was a ‘good opportunity’ for both him and the company. By using a personal narrative description of how his boss came to him and asked him to do this work, he conveys the institutional ‘contract’ which he establishes with the organisation in a personal mode. This linkage of the personal and institutional makes Sukinder more convincing to the interviewer, who specifically praised Sukinder’s response here. This moment in the interview has a pivotal impact on the outcome for a borderline successful candidate. Finally, candidates’ personal history is used to link an analytic overview with disclosures of relevant childhood experience.
**Successful example**

**Example 12. Pippa: White British, Successful**
1. C: erm well it is I think t-m-majority of the jobs that I
2. have worked in I have been erm customer focused and
3. **deadlines and under pressure (. )** hhh erm **catering I’ve m**-
4. you know
5. I1: mmm
6. C: my family own a business and I’ve worked in that since
7. the age of nine (. ) you know helping them out (. ) erm but
8. that that’s I suppose that’s a different field altogether
9. from=

Here, Pippa begins with an institutional, analytic overview which links her various work experiences in terms of the transferable skills she has acquired (L1-3). She then links the skill of customer service to her personal history by disclosing childhood experience (L6-7). She then moves back to an institutional frame – ‘I suppose that’s a different field’ – to ‘apologise’ for this discursive transgression. This final coda reveals a reflexive consciousness of the way in which the interviewers might be seeing her, and so demonstrates self-awareness.

### 5.5.3 Blending occupational and personal discourses

This is done by disclosing personal feelings and values when describing everyday work experiences.

**Successful example**

**Example 13. Jim: White British, Successful**
1. I: is is it Monday to Friday’s
2. C: It was Monday to Sunday=
3. I: oh I see
4. C: day off in the week
5. I: oh right
6. C: but (. ) me being me I worked (10)

Jim works throughout his descriptions of his experiences to bring in snippets of stylised self-disclosure which ‘reveal’ him as hardworking. For example, in line 6 here, he uses an informal idiom ‘me being me’ to reveal how he chooses to work on his day off. In another part of the interview he speaks about how he would get in at eight thirty for a nine o’ clock start, sit down and have a cup of tea while he considered what he had to do. Through these insertions of informal speech which describe how he went about doing his daily work, Jim links occupational and personal identities and ways of speaking.
5.5.4 Blending institutional and occupational discourses

This involves linking institutional discourses about work with descriptions of one’s actual experiences of work.

Successful example

An example of a candidate who does this successfully is Ahmed, who, when answering a question about coping with repetitive work, blends the occupational and the institutional by mixing examples from work and college. Ahmed describes how he managed the conflicting demands of work and college, and links the two in the description of his own personal experience. He describes how he stayed motivated through going to bed late after work, getting up early for college over a year. In describing how he did this, he cites the appreciation of his bosses and team mates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 14. Ahmed: Sierra Leonean Born abroad, Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. C: that encouragement it gives you the spirit of working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I: exactly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I: so when they appreciate- appreciate you then you know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. all the hours that you have put in is- hasn’t gone to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. waste that it’s been appreciated as well [isn’t it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. C: yes] yes exactly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. (twelve seconds of talk deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. C: yes my school was] Monday to [Friday and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I: Friday and th- th]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. C: the job was Monday to Friday=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I: = (God) ((softly))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. C: and sometimes I have to work on Saturdays</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, Ahmed succeeds in impressing the interviewer on two levels. Firstly, the institutional level: the interviewer and Ahmed both construct this work in terms of the professional ideology of motivation to work which is fostered by the appreciation of bosses and co-workers. Secondly, the occupational level: the interviewer’s empathetic understanding of Ahmed as a co-worker is evident in his response ‘God’ (L12) which recognises the physical difficulty of Ahmed’s task.

5.6 Persuasive reporting

Given that the majority of candidate talk in interviews for low-paid jobs takes the form of mini-narratives, the features of good story telling are an important means of persuading interviewers of a candidate’s suitability. As well as the expected narrative structure (see Section 5.3), this persuasion consists of detailed and vivid experiences, rhetorical features such as repetition and lively and consistent speech delivery.

The most successful candidates are those whose personal style of persuasion fits the image of the job – for example, the use of personal devices and spatial metaphors in interviews for a mail delivery company. But since the interview is a social event in
which candidates must engage interviewers who may be jaded by its routine nature, detail and images are effective in any interview. They lend vividness, reportability, credibility and authenticity.

5.6.1 Detailed and vivid experiences

The ability to produce ‘experientially grounded’ accounts, particularly when the job has a physical element, serves to make candidate’s self-presentations more persuasive (Edwards, 1991). According to Edwards, ‘experientially grounded’ accounts are those which make use of the depiction of bodily and sensory experience, vivid and detailed description, first person, present tense narration, and direct speech quotations. These reports engage the interviewers’ attention and empathy, and provide real-world evidence for more analytic talk. This experientially grounded style is a useful resource for making one’s self-presentation centred, coherent and concrete (see Section 5.7.1).

For example, a successful candidate, Tom, describes his experience as an airport construction worker by using vivid descriptions of his embodied experience. He describes how, at times, ‘you’re soaking wet…you’re up to there in a trench full of water and you do think’. Tom co-ordinates this physical description with bodily movement by indicating his chest as he says ‘up to there’. The interviewer, Brenda, empathises with this embodied experience in a response which echoes his speech: ‘if it was pouring rain down the back of my neck it would need to be quite exceptional’. Tom’s next statement - ‘and if you don’t like it – there’s the gate’ – uses the kind of physical description he has been employing as the basis for a move to a more metaphorical depiction of his relationship to and contract with his employer. The direct speech quotation ‘there’s the gate’ makes vivid this combination of personal experience and institutional contract. Through these details, Tom constructs himself in terms of the figure of the dependable, heroic honest working man, which is easily recognisable to the interviewer.

It is the inclusion of apparently insignificant detail, such as Tom’s depiction of wetness, which can make the story (Edwards 1991, Tannen 1989). Psychological studies of witness statements have shown how persuasive these details can be. Together with ‘experientially grounded’ elements they produce a scene which is concrete and imaginable. Metaphors and other images as well as adding vividness are useful at times of potential conflict or strain, such as job interviews, because they cannot be attacked on a factual basis (Drew and Holt 1989). The overall effect of these is to elicit involvement and empathy (Tannen 1989, 150) and to establish credibility (Edwards 1991). As was seen in Section 4.4.2, the candidate’s ability to persuade the interviewer of their trustworthiness is important to their success in the interview.

Rather than talking vividly from their own experience to demonstrate ‘this is what I did’, unsuccessful candidates often make unauthenticated claims such as ‘I’m a good communicator’, or ‘I’ve got a natural ability to learn things’. Interviewers frequently respond to such answers with reformulations which ask for a specific experience from the candidate’s memory, or a time when they had a direct face-to-face encounter with a customer or a team member.
5.6.2 Rhetorical devices

There are several rhetorical devices which are used by interview candidates, including triads, contrasting pairs and linking images, but the use of repetition, and speech delivery which is consistent with one’s story, are the most obvious and frequently used.

For example, when answering the question about dealing with repetitive work, Ahmed uses repetition of words to recreate the sense of motivating oneself repeatedly to do a demanding task. As he says ‘go on, go on, go on you can do it’, with increasing emphasis, a sense of the almost physical goading of the self is recreated in the interview. The repetitive nature of the task is conveyed by the matching of style to the content of the talk. This same rhetorical device is used by Lloyd, who uses repetition (‘every day every day’, ‘just chipping bricks, chipping bricks, chipping bricks’), falling intonation, and a weary tone of voice to convey the routine and repetitive nature of the tasks which he enumerates. Both these candidates follow their depiction of their task’s repetitiveness with a shift in register to a more upbeat passage with raised pitch and stretched vowels (which convey enthusiasm) in which they describe how they dealt positively with this challenge. Candidates such as Ahmed and Lloyd, whose speech delivery is consistent with their story – what Tannen (1989) calls ‘sound and sense’ – tend to be more convincing in persuading interviewers that they possess the kind of hard-working resilience which interviewers are looking for (see Section 4.3.3).

Successful example

The narrative shown below contains several of the features of persuasive reporting mentioned above, as well as rhetorical devices that enliven the story by matching sound and sense, and was a highly effective opening response.

**Example 15. Lloyd: Afro-Caribbean British, Successful**

1. I: when you worked here here at Christmas er:m can you
2. remember one particular day for instance whe:n there was
3. a lot of work to clear and you really had to work as a
4. team to get it
5. (thirty three seconds of talk deleted)
6. C: there was a day where I remember where (.). erm (.).
7. like (.). wi- with (xxxxxx) they’d get piled up wh- quite
8. kind of quickly like between- like I used to start from
9. five till ten that was my shift so between like five to
10. seven it was {[falling tone] quiet like always quiet} (.)
11. so lets say we’d go on facing for a bit and after about
12. seven it would- >>> it would just come loads like just
13. start rushing and so (.). hhh erm like I’ll be going
14. round putting EC1 and then putting EC2 in there and by
15. the time I’ve come- I’ve come back round I’ve gone round
16. to come round I’ve got loads in my EC3 so what I done (.)
17. a lady (.). she us- she was the original EC lady but she
Example 15. Continued:
18. come back so we said alright do you know what you do EC1
19. and 2 and I do EC3 and 4 and then that way once you do-
20. once your EC1 and 2 is finished I’ll take them downstairs
21. and once my EC3 and 4 you’ll take them downstairs and
22. whilst you’re taking them downstairs {slows} I’ll
23. collect them and put them in} (.) so she d- devised a
24. little plan so we can work it a bit mo- more extra free
25. time rather than one person rushing it (.) mm (3) that’s
26. really probably the main time I can think of
27. I: mm
28. C: of when I’ve helped and worked as part of a team

In this narrative Lloyd, gives a concrete, dynamic account of a particular incident which helps to build up his credibility. This is achieved through Lloyd’s creation of an imaginable physical area, and plotting of his movement within it (L13-14 ‘I’ll be going round’). Lloyd quickly sets the context for the story, giving key details which make the scene imaginable and credible to his audience (‘Christmas’, ‘five till ten’) which are interspersed with action ‘they’d get piled up’ and ‘quiet like always quiet’ and ‘just start rushing’.

Lloyd uses pace effectively, pausing or speeding up his delivery to convey a relatively calm or hectic work environment – and so matching his sound to his sense (see L10, 12-13). The use of emphatic repetition (‘downstairs’ L20, 21, 22) and oppositional pairs (‘quiet like always quiet’ L10/ ‘rushing’ L13) serves both to outline what the problem is, and to build up dramatic tension. This tension is also contributed to by the strategic use of pausing and shifts of pitch and tone after ‘quiet’, which delays the introduction of the climatic ‘rushing’, which is accompanied by a louder, faster and more emphatic delivery. Lloyd again slows his speech when beginning his conclusion in line 22-23, thus giving the impression of containment of the hectic work described.

Lloyd’s dynamic narrative style fits with his claims that he is very active, a keen footballer, likes change, and enjoys ‘a bit of movement’. This continuity between style and content contributes to the coherence and believability of his authorial voice.

5.6.3 Self-awareness and ‘outsideness’

An important aspect of self-disclosure is how to manage self assessment. Successful candidates can view themselves from outside and reflect on the self described in their talk, adjusting how distant they want to be from the self they describe (Linde 1993, 105) (see also Section 4.3.6). They can therefore describe themselves from the perspective of an ‘outsideness’ or distance from themselves, which lends their claims more objectivity and credibility. This reflexive awareness which distances the candidate from themselves is balanced by embedding the self-assessment in the work narrative, as Jim does above (see Section 5.4.1).
On the other hand, candidates whose self-assessment is too overt, eg ‘I love this’, ‘I’m too picky’, ‘I’m a specialist in IT’ come across as too categorical or as over-selling themselves and as not being sufficiently objective or distant about themselves. In other words they are not self-reflexive enough. Persuasive candidates’ reports tend to demonstrate personality features by describing their own actions, or other’s reactions to them, rather than making overt, unsubstantiated claims (Edwards 1991).

Successful example

Ire, a Nigerian candidate, effectively demonstrates empathy with a customer and, by describing a customer’s reactions to him, establishes evidence of his own capacity for customer service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 16. Ire: Nigerian Born abroad, Borderline Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: okay the next question is (.) satisfying customers (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. can you give me an experience you’ve had in the past or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. present where you’ve dealt with an irate customer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. (thirteen seconds of talk deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. C: all I’ll do is just calm him down calm down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. sit down have a cup of tea make him a cup of tea alright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. and make him feel relaxed then I asked him the questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. (eighteen seconds of talk deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. C: the problem with the customer this the type of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. mortgage which is signed for (.) that’s not the type he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. wants (.) I g- I got to the bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. (five seconds of talk deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. C: and they cancelled that one and give him a new package</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. (.) that (.) I mean at the end of the day he was very</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. happy with that service that I gave him because before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. right he w- when he came in before he was really</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. upset he e- I m- I mean he was he was boiling that he- he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. you know that he was trying to throw his life away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. because when you sign for a mortgage you sign for a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. package and which you are committed to for the next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. couple of years (.) and that’s what I thought but at the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. end of the day he was satisfied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, Ire demonstrates both an understanding of the customer’s state of mind (‘he was boiling’ L18 and ‘he was very happy’ L15-16) and the reasons for this – his commitment to the wrong mortgage, and the resolution of this problem. This shows his interpersonal sensitivity and his ability to quickly elicit and understand customer’s reasons. He also shows that he dealt with this on both the interactive and the practical level – by making the customer relax through soothing slow, rhythmic, repetitive speech (elongated ‘cal:m’s L5; repetition of ‘cup of tea’ and ‘calm down’ L5-6)); and by effectively dealing with the customer’s problem. Throughout this extract, Ire never directly makes any claims about himself.
Unsuccessful example

In some cases, even though candidates are prompted to describe their team mates’ responses to their actions, they cannot see the significance of the question. For instance, Mohammed, after giving an example concerning how he helped a colleague with a difficult customer, gives this response to the interviewers prompt:

Example 17. Mohammed: Somalian Born abroad, Borderline Successful

1. I: Okay and um what did your colleague say to you
2. afterwards y- you know because you know you stepped in
3. didn’t [you so
4. C: Yeah]
5. I: what did he say to you
6. C: (.) colleague afterwards said didn’t say nothing
7. I: He didn’t say anything [okay

Here, Mohammed is being given an opportunity to demonstrate his interpersonal skills and self-awareness, and to give a positive report of himself through a description of a colleague’s reaction to him – but he misses this chance.

5.7 Organising and linking themes

5.7.1 Organising themes

Some successful candidates present themselves around certain organising themes which recur throughout the interview and structure individual responses (see Section 5.6.1).

Successful example

Example 18. Sandeep: South Asian British, Successful

1. I1: what sort of experience of change have you had,
2. either because of moving to very different jobs or
3. changes in the job that you were doing
4. C: (1) never had any problems (. ) like yo- when you go to
5. the job, you ask them wh-wh- like w-what they want done
6. .hhh and that’s- and that’s how you build the routine
7. .hhh not flexible hours I got nothing (. ) major
8. responsibility at home (. ) the kids are grown up (. )
9. missus working (7)
10. I1: yeah it must have been- from being a shop owner, to
11. [driving people around
12. C: I used to open] say from six o’clock in the morning
13. till half past ten at night (5) that’s one thing I would
14. rather do a job than sit- from six in the morning from
15. all the way to half ten
16. I2: mm
17. C: just by yourself
Although Sandeep gives a response here which is not directly relevant to the question, the consistency of his responses and the coherent identity he builds up are enough to make him successful. His keenness to work is backed up with a description of his home circumstances and his work philosophy, and the practical, flexible and consistent way in which he deals with a range of job experiences ‘you ask what they want done, and that’s how you build the routine’. Both of these self-representations are repeated throughout the interview by Sandeep. Early in the interview, he states that he is ‘willing to work anywhere, anytime’, and later he gives an example of how he worked voluntarily driving a farmer around because he ‘didn’t mind helping out’. This gives the interviewers a sense that they know ‘who he is’ and what motivates him, and this inspires trust. Many newcomer candidates also express this keenness (see Section 7.9) but it is more difficult for them to align themselves to the interview and the interviewers and their answers are judged as insufficiently relevant.

5.7.2 Linking themes: Dealing with lack of continuity in one’s life story

Developing organising themes is one way of dealing with the problem of how to present oneself as consistent when one’s CV contains several apparently unconnected work experiences (see also Linde, 1993). Other strategies used by successful candidates are: linking one’s skills to early childhood experiences (see Section 5.5.2); explaining certain experiences as temporary departures from a consistent goal; and using narratives which are tightly linked, chronologically and logically, to explain a career gap.

Successful example

An example of a candidate who uses organising themes to good effect, to explain and link his very disparate work experiences, is Bruno. An Italian candidate who has worked in varied roles in several different industries both in the UK and Italy, Bruno organises many of his responses around three themes which are often linked together: customer service, the state of the employment markets in London and Italy, and his personal work philosophy. In the example given below Bruno links his experiences as a waiter in London and in TV production in Italy through the organising themes of customer service and teamwork.

1. I: so if you could give me an example where you have
2. worked as part of a team to erm achieve something please
3. C: yes e:r a- as you can see from my CV I us- always here
4. in England I always work in e:r in the catering
5. restaurant so more or less every day we have to achieve
6. something so (. ) which is a good service
7. I: yeah
8. C: and er ha- a good delivery of food good presentation
9. you have to be smart you have to be polite with the with
Here, Bruno frames his answer in terms of his whole work experience, ‘as you can see from my CV’, before initially drawing on his most recent English work experience, and speaking about this in terms of teamwork and customer service skills. He then uses the ‘habit’ of teamworking (L12) to establish continuity between the exercising of these skills in Italy and England, in team environments. He therefore uses the two experiences to emphasise what is the same, and the unified, coherent nature of his personality. Later in the interview, the comparison of the employment market in England and Italy, which he has mentioned in this example, is used to explain his move to London. He also explains his choice to work in a hotel rather than a bar with reference to the greater opportunities for customer service and tips. Through the use of these organising themes, Bruno attempts to draw the interviewer into a shared context or worldview in which Bruno’s actions and emotions make sense. Chapter 7 looks at the difficulties that most newcomer candidates have in creating such a shared context.

5.8 Incoherent authorial voices and lack of credibility

As the previous section illustrates, it is crucial that candidates are seen to be credible since it is assumed that their real selves will be revealed through the interview process. They need to design their turns in such a way that they are seen as coherent, consistent and authentic and, therefore, are deemed credible, persuasive and trustworthy. The consistent, unified presentation of a certain ‘self’ throughout the interview is key to a candidate’s credibility (see also Section 4.4.2, Maryns 2005, Linde 1993, Kerekes, 2003). Negative judgements of untrustworthiness stem from four main problems of self-presentation: lack of blending of different discourses; inconsistent claims about work and self; disparity between content and delivery of responses; and, finally, ‘trained responses’.

5.8.1 Lack of blending

Candidates are required to move smoothly and fluently between institutional, occupational and personal discourses, demonstrating that they feel at home in all three. When candidates are seen to juxtapose different styles and discourses, without any blending or gliding, they are seen as taking on words which are not their own, and being inconsistent and potentially untrustworthy. A similar phenomenon
has been noted in studies of post-unification East German job candidates who produce a jarring mixture of communist official discourse and a more western style (Auer 1998 and Birkner 2004).

As discussed above (see Section 5.5) the blending of institutional and personal discourses is most significant. Often, it is the case that candidates move awkwardly between or fail to blend these two discourses. This problem is linked to the issue of *linguistic capital* and the fact that candidates who have been in low-paid, ‘backstage’ work may not have sufficient practice in using institutional discourses to become fluent in them (Holland *et al.* 1998, 190), do not use their work to form their identity (Scheuer 2001) and can see little that is positive in the kind of work they do (Evans *et al.* 2005) (see Section 5.1.3). In our data, some candidates clearly struggled with the demands of the interview to speak positively about their experiences and identify their motivations with those of their company. For example, Yohannes, when he is asked about motivating himself to do repetitive work, frames his personal motivations in terms of doing work for ‘my community, Ethiopian community’ and arranging a timetable so he can fit his community work around his paid work, rather than being motivated by the job itself. When institutional discourse is used by Yohannes, it is very much in terms of dry lists of procedure, with little evidence of personal investment. The kind of dichotomy which is set up here between a personal discourse and identity and that of the world of work is in contrast to the way successful candidates configure their motivations in terms of getting praise from their bosses, and working with others in the organisation to achieve common goals. For these reasons, unsuccessful candidates fail to present the kind of persona which ‘buys into’ the organisation’s values which interviewers are looking for (see Section 4.1).

**Unsuccessful example**

Sara, a British Maltese candidate for a junior management position, shifts rapidly and jarringly in her talk between institutional and personal discourses and styles of speech. Sara does not combine discourses by couching institutional discourse in informal personal vocabulary, or framing personal narratives with analytic conclusions, but rather moves over the course of the interview from institutional discourse to more personal discourse, and as she does so starts to speak about her emotional reactions to colleagues ‘x really upset me’ ‘I liked y’; and to divulge personal information about colleagues, her friends and family. This led to judgements of lack of professionalism. The interviewer described Sara as moving in the course of the interview from what she felt she was ‘supposed to say’ to an expression of her true, unprofessional self.

In the example given below, Sara has been asked about how she deals with change. This passage is the conclusion to a response in which she has described how she trained in the procedures her supervisees were responsible for implementing so that she could cover shifts and manage them better.
Example 20. Sara: Maltese British, Unsuccessful

1. C: you know you so you’ve got to have a good working knowledge of the job you’re doing
2. I: yeah
3. C: so you can make the choicer that you’re not being taken for a fool taken for a ride because there will always be the [worker] there that says oh I know what I’m doing I don’t need you to tell me you know you know the sort [of thing you know]
4. I: okay] that’s a similar sort of area er:m (.) again looking at improvement and that that type of area can you can you give me an example where you’ve e- encouraged people you’re responsible for to make suggestions (.) for improving the way things are done

Here, Sara begins with a more institutional discourse ‘good working knowledge’ L1-2, which is given in very general, impersonal terms. She then shifts into a more informal, personal discourse ‘taken for a fool’ L5, and a semi-narrative in which she quotes a recalcitrant worker ‘oh I know what I’m doing’, which calls up adversarial situations which she has been in with supervisees, and her emotional reaction to this. The interviewer here, in L8-9, as in much of the rest of the interview, resists this high-involvement style (‘you know the sort of thing’), where Sara invites him to concur with her about ‘what staff are like’, by abruptly cutting into her response to pose the next question. This overlap may be caused by the fact that she does not round off her response with an evaluative, institutional comment. Here, the slippage between institutional and personal discourse and motivations gives the impression that Sara does not really embody the institutional discourses which she marshals to support her case.

5.8.2 Inconsistent claims about life and work

The section above demonstrates how a lack of consistency is perceived when candidates fail to blend discourses. Inconsistencies and contradictions, both at the factual level, and in the presentation of self, are also very damaging to the candidate’s chances of success. There are a few cases in the data where there are apparent factual discrepancies. For example, Yohannes was deemed untrustworthy by the interviewer because he did not mention on his application form that he had temped at the organisation applied to, but he made this relevant in his interview. However, most criticisms relate to candidates’ failure to present their work and life experiences consistently. For example, a British Afro-Caribbean candidate, Michael, gave the impression of inconsistency by repeatedly introducing unrelated work experiences, and rather than linking them together, simply commenting that ‘but the nature of that work is different again’ when moving between topics.

A British Bangladeshi candidate, Tahir, is inconsistent in his self-presentation. On the one hand, he puts himself at a high level as an ‘expert in IT’ who manages a team; on
the other hand, he is doing and applying for quite low-paid jobs, and emphasises that he loves administration and the social aspect of the job. These two aspects of his personality are not linked, but presented in juxtaposition to each other.

**Example 21. Tahir: British Bangladeshi, Unsuccessful**

1. I1: can you tell me about any experiences you have of
2. cash handling
3. C: obviously you have to do the recon-reconciliation and
4. I’ve done we do that well i:n my current job and (.)
5. before when I’ve worked as a sales assistant I’ve worked
6. on tills like operated the g- s like as a cashier so:
7. (. ) [credit card cash] my current job we do like I was
8. saying we do the reconciliation and petty cash and things
9. that I buy to buy tea coffees and (4) I buy the flowers
10. as well ((rising intonation))
11. I2: You buy the [flowers] ((laughs))
12. C: [for reception] yeah but I get refunded though
13. (four seconds of talk deleted)
14. C: If you see our reception [and um]
15. I2: [Yeah]
16. C: I chose some really nice flowers and then get refunded
17. I chose the flowers ((laughs)) but they give you a budget
18. (five seconds of talk deleted)
19. C: The girls really like it like the flowers they come
20. and pinch it though i-i-it doesn’t last more than like a
21. couple of hours the new ones
22. I1: ((laughs))
23. C: But they all come and pinch it and they take it
24. ((Laughs))
25. I1: Ok (. ) the next one is I’ve got a nice scenario for
26. you

Here, in a pattern which is repeated throughout the interview, Tahir presents a list of administrative tasks in an institutional style (L3-9), followed by a loosely linked or unconnected narrative, which is delivered in a personal style and reveals different personality traits to the preceding list. The shift in Tahir’s style to a more personal discourse is evident in the rising tone of L9-10, and the laughter which accompanies his talk (L17, 24). Tahir tends to become more animated when discussing the interactional aspects of his job, giving vivid scenarios which enable the listener to imagine his work, and often goes off the point of the question to do so. Here, as with his other answers, the list and narrative do not reinforce each other or link together to prove a single point, but rather orient to divergent aspects of his self-presentation. The interviewers’ comments on this candidate were that his motivations for applying were questionable, and that they did not understand why somebody with his qualifications in computing was applying for this job.
5.8.3 Disparity between content and delivery of candidate talk

Another inconsistency, linked to a lack of some of the performance features described in ‘persuasive reporting’ (see Section 5.6) relates to the disparity between content and delivery. In the example given below, sound and sense are not consistently linked; for example, an expression of enthusiasm may be conveyed in a low pitch.

**Unsuccessful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 22. Khaleda, British Bangladeshi, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: Ok Khaleda (.) um (.) can you tell me what you enjoy: y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. um about your current job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: at the current moment I have been working (.) at the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. general office for the administrator (.) and I enjoy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. dealing with students staff u::m (.) I mean I enjoy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. everything I do ((falling tone)) (.) I’m giving out- (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. with classes dealing with the student passes- security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. passes (.) um basically where I am the job is brilliant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. (.) I mean student always come in say hell:o (.) even if</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. they don’t come in for anything they still come and say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. hello I enjoy that ((falling tone)) (1) I like helping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. them greeting them (.) very um- it’s really nice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, there is a disparity between the content of Khaleda’s response – that she enjoys her work – and the delivery which is in a low and unvaried pitch, contains little variation in intonation except falling tone (L6,11), and is hesitant and slow-paced, with pauses mid-clause (L3, 6-7) and halting self-interruptions (L5, 7). When watching this segment, the interviewers commented that although she claimed to enjoy her work, and interaction in particular, there was little evidence of this in her interaction with the interviewers – she did not smile or make eye contact. They felt that she was too withdrawn and quiet for the position or for dealing with the other team members who were ‘strong personalities’. Interestingly, the interviewers used features of ‘body language’ rather than sound/sense equivalence in making this negative judgement.

5.8.4 ‘Trained responses’

Many unsuccessful candidates were criticised as ‘looking like they’d been told what to say’. These ‘trained responses’ suggest a lack of consistent authorial voice. Even if these candidates have not been trained formally, or given informal advice, they can give the impression of not speaking with their own voice and so not being their ‘real’ selves. They are often seen as selling themselves in an excessively overt way.

**Unsuccessful example**

Some candidates in low-paid jobs use a local/youth style but shoehorn in institutional terms, thus producing a disfluent delivery which is not effective in convincing interviewers of their suitability for the job.
While Afram was borderline successful in the interview overall, this extract highlights a negative interactional moment. While watching this extract, the interviewer commented that Afram ‘seemed like he had been told what to say’. This could be partly due to this mismatch between the ‘buzzwords’ or ‘interview speak’ and the rest of his talk. In the extract above, Afram is disfluent, interrupting himself and pausing after insertion of segments of corporate discourse (‘What’s it called-customer’ L2) before moving into the cockney or youth style (signalled by words such as ‘whatever’, ‘like’ L3, ‘sometime’, ‘you know’ L10) which seems to come more readily to him. At moments where Afram uses this style, such as ‘whatever job you is doing like’ (L3) or ‘you know some customers could be a bit hard sometime’, he is less hesitant, more rhythmic and fluent. This suggests a jarring discomfort in moving between institutional discourse, of what you ‘have’ to do, such as ‘you have to put customers first’ (L3-4, 10), and the voice of his own personal experience of how customers are.

5.8.5 Failure to align to the interview phase

Some candidates fail to align to the different phases of the interview. For example, the opening of the interview is usually viewed as an ‘ice-breaking’ phase, in which it is appropriate to use more personal discourse (see Section 6.3.3).

Unsuccessful example

In the extract shown below, Nazrul, an unsuccessful candidate, fails to align to this requirement, and uses only an institutional tone in his opening response. He was dismissed by interviewers as someone who ‘had just been told what to say’.

Example 24. Nazrul: British Bangladeshi, Unsuccessful
1. I: Ok um Nazrul (. ) can you tell me what you enjoy about
2. your current job
3. (fifteen seconds of talk deleted)
4. C: I think ‘cause I engage with a lot of um external and
5. internal clients I think once I do that I have a clear
6. understanding .h of the needs of my clients which helps
7. me .h bring the best out of myself in my (. ) job role
This question, which is about what Nazrul enjoys, requires a slightly more personal discursive mode. The use of institutional vocabulary (‘clients’, ‘job role’) is inappropriate and unconvincing, particularly in an applicant for a fairly low-paid job. It might be more effective for Nazrul to give specific examples of clients who he enjoyed working with.

**Unsuccessful example**

Tahir, another unsuccessful candidate, uses the phase at the end of the interview where he is asked if he has any questions or comments, to go for the ‘hard sell’.

**Example 25. Tahir: British Bangladeshi, Unsuccessful**

1. I1: Right (.) that’s the end of all of our questions (.)
2. have you any questions that you’d like to ask us
3. (six seconds of talk deleted)
4. C: ‘Cause the thing is that ‘cause when I first saw it
5. it’s just like (.) I don’t celebrate Christmas but if
6. some one was to give me a Christmas present this would be
7. the [ideal]
8. I1: [((laughs))]  
9. C: This would be like perfect Christmas present (.) but
10. not just perfect Christmas present the best present ever
11. because it’s something this is a job that I feel so
12. passionately about interact- I mean I do voluntary work
13. as well so youth work so I get to work with adolescent
14. stu- like young teenagers and youth from all different
15. sorts of walks of life on a regular basis something I
16. love doing all the time and I’ve got a really strong bond
17. with (xxxxxx) college I mean my sister she’s currently a
18. student here right now and uh my brother was a student
19. and my cousin was a student my uncle was a student I was
20. a student here briefly as well yeah just for three weeks
21. but
22. (five seconds of talk deleted)
23. C: once you’ve dealt with adolescent young teenage
24. ((laughing)) girls you are re- I think you’re up for
25. anything

This is an example of a candidate who has over learnt the maxim ‘sell yourself’ and use the less structured elements of the interview to attempt an overt selling job. Although this closing stage is ostensibly a phase of the interview in which the candidate can ask and say whatever they want, in fact it is bounded by certain norms: candidates generally restrict themselves to asking what kind of training and development opportunities would be available to them in the job.

By contrast to Nazrul, Tahir uses too much personal discourse here, in speaking about his family connections to the college (L17-20) and his dealings with young teenage girls (L23-24). The interviewers felt that this signalled a lack of professional
distance, and that the candidate might have closer links and loyalties to students than to the administrative staff. They questioned his motivations, and felt that he might see the job as an opportunity for socialising.

5.9 Conclusion

To present oneself successfully as a coherent personality, and therefore a successful applicant, in the interview, the candidate must have linguistic capital for formal encounters such as job interviews. There is no notable difference in white and British EM candidates’ levels of success in presenting themselves as coherent and credible, although some candidates from both groups failed to be convincing. However, those born abroad, especially recent newcomers, are more likely to fail in this task, and so to fail the interview. For those in low-paid often ‘backstage’ jobs, work is not likely to be used to form their identity nor is there much opportunity to develop an institutional discourse which links personal motivation to the organisation they work for or are applying to. Although many candidates have developed some fluency in this discourse, the examples above show that this is by no means universal. Relative newcomers, who often work in minority language work units, are least likely to have access to institutional discourse or the assumptions underpinning it. See Section 8.5 for more detailed conclusions for this chapter.
6 Interviewer-candidate interaction

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 ‘Joint production’ and ‘improvising order’

Interviews are joint productions. It is the dynamic between interviewer and candidate which produces an overall impression of the candidate. This dynamic results from the demands placed upon the interviewer to impose an institutional order on the interaction, and yet to be responsive to the candidate – to improvise order. Each individual interview has its own interactional dynamic but there are patterns across nearly all the data which relate to the ‘overall emotional tone’ of the interview (see below). These interactional patterns cut across other contextual features such as the background and experience of interviewers or how equal opportunities legislation is implemented in the interview.

Joint production

In an interview both candidates and interviewers are performing. There is a clear relationship between the perceived quality of the candidate’s response and the interactional dynamic. How well candidates align to the discourses required by questions and how clear and consistent their ‘authorial voice’ is (see Section 5.1.2) will affect interviewers’ responses and subsequent interactional patterns. For example, an answer clearly aligned to the required discourses is rewarded with more open questions and a general relaxation of interviewer control. This in turn can make both sides more comfortable. So, a candidate’s success depends substantially on the interviewers’ performance (see also Drew and Heritage 1992, Adelsward 1988). When a negative dynamic develops, interviewers’ questions and follow-ups usually become more unhelpful and the candidate is ‘talked down’ to much more. In these circumstances, interviewers may blame candidates for what is, at least in part, their own poor performance.
Improvising order

The social dynamic of the job interview combines the maintenance of institutional order with a strong element of improvisation to fit candidate responses into boxes, make them bureaucratically processable, and to respond appropriately to them. There is an element of improvisation in all interaction, however structured (de Certeau 1985). However, this does not mean interviewers are free to say what they like. It is the subtle deviations from the conventional which, like improvisation in jazz, show up the order and regulation in the original themes (Erickson 2004). So these improvisations, whether they help or disadvantage candidates, go largely unnoticed.

According to the dynamic of the interview, interviewers reformulate, change their line of questioning, respond to an unfamiliar way of structuring a narrative or bring in their own stories. Interviewers may also improvise additional questions where the scheduled questions have not produced an adequate ‘thumb nail sketch’ or if there are doubts about the candidate. This dynamic means that follow-ups – additional questions, comments and feedback – are just as, and in many instances more important than, the main questions.

6.1.2 Emotional tone, sharedness and co-membership

The ‘overall emotional tone’ of an interview – the degree of friendliness between interviewer and candidate - predicts its likely outcome (Erickson and Shultz 1982, 169). This, in turn, depends upon the extent to which candidates can negotiate membership of a community of shared knowledge and understanding. Although to-day’s job interview is far removed from the interviews of the past where the ‘old school tie’ or ‘fitting in’ decided the outcome, nevertheless establishing some degree of sharedness is crucial to the development of a positive dynamic, and the overall success of the interview. The ‘sharedness’ which contributes to interview success relates to three broad aspects of the interview interaction:

i) Shared assumptions about the purpose and management of the interview. This includes how to manage the interaction, for example knowing how to interpret the interviewer’s cues and prompts.

ii) An ‘authorial voice’ based on a candidate’s communicative style which broadly fits the institutional and social requirements of the job interview and the job (see Section 5.2).

iii) ‘Co-membership’: shared understandings about the candidate’s work experience, particularly when they had worked in that organisation or a similar one; or to a lesser extent some interest or attribute in common – for example enjoying the same sport (Erickson and Shultz 1982, 17).

All three aspects are negotiated through candidate-interviewer interaction. The amount of interaction depends upon the type of interview (see Section 6.1.4).
6.1.3 Indirectness – the hidden rules of the game

Changes in interviewing practice over the last twenty years have led to fewer hidden lines of questioning and more explicitness. However, all talk is less direct than we realise and the constraints on interaction in the interview mean that there is more indirectness than in ordinary conversations. As Chapter 5 has illustrated, the interview requires special institutional methods of reason and inference (see Section 5.2) (Levinson 1979). For example, the feedback from interviews has to be interpreted in institutional ways: ‘Good’ or ‘thank you’ may not be praise for the candidate’s answer but a cue that enough has been said. If candidates cannot make the appropriate inference, this may lead to an immediate interactional problem and also conveys a misleading impression to the candidate that he or she has done well when they have not. The major cause of misunderstandings and misalignments stems from interviewers’ intentions being conveyed in an institutionally indirect mode.

6.1.4 ‘Presentation’ equal opportunities interviews

There are two main types of interviews in the data: ‘presentation’ interviews and semi-structured interviews.

‘Presentation’ interviews are equal opportunities interviews which are highly structured and controlled to minimise interaction and so bleach out the social and the subjective from the interview. All questions are written down and read out exactly as they are written. The candidate is not expected to clarify or negotiate the purpose or meaning of the question. The candidate then presents their answer. They are not given any cues as to how long their answer should be and there are no follow-on questions or reactions beyond very occasional minimal backchannels (such as head nods, thank yous etc.). While the candidate speaks, the interviewers write. This type of interview is designed to meet the requirements of equal opportunity legislation but produces its own difficulties for candidates. It assumes that candidates will understand questions without needing to negotiate their purpose; that each response is a complete and adequate answer and that candidates should not be ‘helped’ to provide more; and that candidates can produce lengthy answers which respond to all aspects of the question. The example given below is from a ‘presentation’ interview for an administrative post.

Unsuccessful example

Example 26: Binta, Ghanaian Born abroad, Unsuccessful
1. I1: Ok (. ) um (. ) please describe the administrative experience you’ve had (. ) especially in devising and implementing tracking and monitoring systems
2. C: (. ) Uh as a l- as a learning facilitator .hhh in tracking the students um sometimes you look at the files
3. (. ) if the per-person hasn’t been for a while you just go
4. on site uh on the (xxxxx xxxxx) uh administration section
Example 26. Continued:

8. (.) and the check how many times the person has logged in
9. onto a course (. ) if the person hasn’t actually accessed
10. the course at all for about a week ( .) then you give them
11. I give them a call ( .) and I tell them you know they are
12. they have an obligation to meet the deadline if they are
13. not interested or they have any difficulties then (.)
14. they should let us know why they haven’t been able to
15. access the course ( .) and if there’s any help that we can
16. give them we ca- we have to support them ( .) so basically
17. that’s u:m ( .) what I do for the tracking and monitoring
18. and if on a second level they are not sometimes they
19. tell you I got so much u:m domestic problems I can’t do
20. the course so can I suspend it and then re-enrol at a a
21. later date ( .) so they you have to take them off the
22. course and um ( .) wait ‘til they come back ( .) for a
23. re-enrolment
((long pause while interviewers write))

This example shows the difficulty the candidate has in answering all four parts of the
interview in one turn. Binta does not mention any experience of devising tracking
and monitoring nor does she draw a distinction between the two procedures. The
lack of any follow-up means she has no opportunity to add more or re-interpret the
question. Her response also illustrates the difficulty candidates have in performing
when there is no feedback or response cues from interviewers. Binta commented
that she found the style of interview intimidating, and that she felt it limited her
responses, prevented a natural flow developing and stopped her from explaining
herself as well as she might in a more informal, interactive interview. She said that
the lack of acknowledgement and style of the interview caused her to get uptight
and ‘lose’ her way.

Audience response is integral to the construction of a performance since spoken
discourse is designed to create an involved response (Chafe 1980) and in a more
interactive interview, candidates can monitor their own performance. However, in a
presentation interview, the candidate’s answer has to have the qualities of integration
and detachment (the characteristics of written discourse) since the candidate has to
produce an extended answer with no support or display of involvement from the
interviewers. This more detached style puts greater demands on the structuring and
grammatical skills of the candidate. Not surprisingly, there are no narratives given by
candidates in the presentation interviews, in sharp contrast to the other interviews
considered in this report. These findings support Blackman’s (2002) claim that less
structured interviews can produce more accurate perceptions of the candidates’ job-
related personality traits since they provide more opportunities to relate to the
interviewers. They also support Posthuma et al.’s (2002) contention that structured
interviews are not free from conflict and prejudice (see Appendix A 2.1).
6.1.5 Semi-structured interviews

The rest of this chapter focuses on semi-structured interviews which represent the great majority of the data collected for this study. Some semi-structured interviews in the public sector are more ‘presentation’ like than the majority of the data. For example, questions are asked with exactly the same wording but there is some opportunity to negotiate the meaning of questions. The majority of the data are characterised by improvisations as well as fixed elements and, since all interviews are joint productions, there is a tendency for them to become increasingly positive or negative encounters as they progress.

Presentation interviews consist of main questions, phrased in the same way to all candidates, with no follow-ups or any other type of interaction. By contrast, semi-structured interviews have about five to ten key questions, each of which are followed by a range of follow-ups. In the latter type of interview, interviewers’ contributions, which generate the talk, are mainly made up of the following types of utterance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Follow-ons: Questions which elicit more information or ask for development of a point the candidate has made.</th>
<th>Reformulations: Repetition of a question either in a similar form or with new phrasing, usually because the question was inadequately answered.</th>
<th>Confirmatory/summary statements: Statements which summarise or interpret candidates’ answers – often used as a device for concluding a topic.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secondary stories: Stories which the interviewer tells in response to the candidates’ talk.</td>
<td>Clarification questions: Questions which ask the candidate to make clear a point or piece of information which the interviewer is unsure of.</td>
<td>Non-question prompts: Statements which elicit further response.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These contributions, combined with the overt or hidden means of controlling candidates’ talk are a major factor in determining the amount that candidates talk in the interview. See Sections 6.4 and 6.5 below for more on how these different types of interviewer contribution can impact on the interview interaction.

6.1.6 Amount of talk elicited by questions

The type and amount of questions, in combination with other factors, has a decisive impact on the amount which candidates talk. Often, it is candidates who are perceived to talk too much or too little who fail. Generally, successful candidates do somewhere between 50-70 per cent of the talking in the interview – not more or less. However, interviewers’ perceptions of how much candidates speak are not always accurate – and candidates whose talk is bureaucratically unprocessable might be seen to talk more than they actually do.

Unsuccessful BA candidates tend to talk ‘too much’ – on average, this group do 74 per cent of the talking in the interview and at least some of this talk is taken as bureaucratically unprocessable (seen as waffling, taking over the interview etc.). This ‘excessive’ speech on the part of born abroad candidates is often the result of
failure to read interviewers’ cues, for example about when to move to the next topic or finish a turn (see Section 6.2.2 below). It also reflects the reduced amount of feedback and interviewer contribution which occurs in many born abroad interviews as part of the negative dynamic (see Section 6.5). By contrast, unsuccessful white candidates talk for less of the interview – 53 per cent on average. This is close to the lower end of what is an acceptable amount of talk. White candidates tend to talk less than their ethnic minority (EM) counterparts overall – on average they speak for 57 per cent of the interview, compared to 61 per cent for newcomers and 65 per cent for British EM candidates.

6.2 Overview of the data

6.2.1 Misalignments, misunderstandings and reformulations

Misalignments and misunderstandings occur in nearly all interviews and their occurrence and management are central to the evaluation of candidates. We have seen in Chapter 5 how misalignments over the use of discourse can lead to negative assessments of candidates (see for example Yohannes, Section 5.2.2, Tahir, Section 5.2.3, and Alex, Section 5.4.3). However, the impact of misalignments and misunderstandings on the final outcome depends crucially on whether they occur early on, are difficult to repair or remain unresolved. Where they are particularly intractable, they often lead to a negative dynamic (see Section 6.5). Where candidates share an understanding of ways of speaking with the interviewers, this common ground becomes a shared resource which the participants can draw on to successfully prevent or resolve misunderstandings and so lead to a more positive dynamic (see Section 6.4).

Problems of understanding run on a continuum from clarification problems – simple slips of the tongue or ‘slips of the ear’, which are usually fairly easily and quickly resolved – to more intractable and fundamental differences in the way participants align to institutional, occupational and personal discourses (see Section 5.1.1). Between these two ends of the spectrum, simple slips and misalignments, lie misunderstandings where either side has misinterpreted a particular question or response.

Misalignments are difficult to identify accurately and repair, and so tend to produce a negative dynamic characterised by long reformulation sequences. The presence of misalignments in interviews feeds directly into negative assessments of candidates, who are viewed by interviewers as ‘out of phase’, ‘hard to follow’ or dubious. The major causes of mistrust in job interviews, along with doubts about consistency discussed in Chapter 5, are misalignments which are not consciously recognised or repaired in the interview (see also Kerekes 2003). See Section 6.3 below for illustrative examples of misalignment.

Interviewers do not draw a distinction between simple clarification issues and deeper issues of misalignment, and often perceive candidates who are misaligned as simply not understanding the content of the interviewer’s talk. This means that
problems of understanding, which are interactionally produced, are often attributed to a lack of linguistic or cognitive ability on the part of the candidate.

Reformulations are rewordings of earlier questions which seek to elicit more acceptable, appropriate, expanded or focused responses. They usually follow what is perceived as an inadequate answer and so are closely connected to misunderstandings and misalignments. Reformulations are the most critical types of follow-ups in establishing a positive or negative dynamic in the interview. They are either an opportunity for positive contributions, or can lead to protracted, difficult sequences which close down opportunities for the candidate and construct him or her negatively. A high number of reformulations are an indicator of an unsuccessful interview, in most cases. Very occasionally, reformulations are part of an individual interviewer’s style and do not indicate difficulty.

6.2.2 Numbers of misalignments, misunderstandings and reformulation sequences for different groups

Figure 6.1, taken from a sample of twenty-five interviews, shows there is a clear tendency for interviews with born abroad candidates to have a higher proportion of misunderstandings, misalignments and reformulations. It is also interesting to note that with white and EM British candidates, the number of reformulations closely corresponds to the number of misalignments, whereas with born abroad candidates the number of reformulations is much higher. This indicates more repetitions or recycling of questions even though there is no overt misunderstanding; this can be down to certain interviewers’ style, attempts at prevention of misunderstanding, responses to candidates’ negotiations of questions, or to misalignments, which are ongoing throughout the interview, but not evident at that moment, which interviewers are seeking to repair. Reformulations are an ambiguous phenomenon – on some occasions they can constitute helpfulness in repairing a misunderstanding, but in most cases they constitute intrusive and unhelpful over-questioning which results from (and confirms) stereotypical assumptions about candidates’ levels of understanding and ability. Whether the reformulations are helpful or not, they involve interviewers in hard interactional work and this in itself can be used to shed doubts on candidates’ ability and personality.
6.2.3 Unrepaired misalignments and misunderstandings

In unsuccessful interviews, problems of understanding tend to result in either protracted reformulation sequences (see Section 6.5.3) or a complete lack of recognition of or attempt to repair the problem. Often, this occurs because the participants are at cross-purposes and do not realise that a misunderstanding is occurring. Alternatively, later in the interview, the interviewer may give up on unsuccessful candidates, and therefore view repair as pointless. Instances of unrepaired misunderstanding or misalignment are particularly damaging to the candidate as they are not recovered from and can lead to negative judgements and mistrust (Kerekes 2003, House et al. 2003).

When the interview is going badly, interviewer and candidate have fewer interactional resources with which to repair misalignments and misunderstandings (see Section 6.5). For this reason, 71 per cent of all unrepaired misalignments or misunderstandings occurred in unsuccessful interviews (from the coded sample). Of these unrepaired misalignments, the majority occurred in interviews with born abroad candidates (see Chapter 7). For example, in the interview with Vijay, an unsuccessful South Asian candidate, there are seven instances of misalignment, all of which are unrepaired. Also, some interview formats appear to be less conducive to repair than others. In tightly structured ‘equal opportunities’ presentation interviews where questions conform to a strict structure, there are fewer opportunities to repair misalignments. For example, out of the seven misalignments which occurred in the three of these interviews which we coded, only one is repaired.

6.2.4 Length of reformulation sequences for different groups

‘Short’ reformulation sequences consist of three or four turns or less.

‘Long’ reformulation sequences are any sequences longer than three or four turns.
Interviewers with born abroad candidates clearly have a higher proportion of long reformulations – indicating that misalignments and misunderstandings are less quickly and effectively resolved with this group, for reasons explored in Chapter 7.

6.3 Causes of misalignments

The primary causes of these misalignments were not linked to candidates’ ability in functional English. Rather, these misalignments resulted from the indirect ways in which interviewers’ intentions were conveyed and to the complex demands on the candidates to produce extended answers using different discourses. Indeed, the causes of misalignments among all candidates were remarkably similar – although the different communicative styles and assumptions about interviews among born abroad candidates exacerbated these problems (see Section 7.2). In this section, the causes of misalignments are grouped into discourse and topic issues and interactional problems.

6.3.1 Discourse misalignments

In Chapter 5, we looked at how candidates align to different (institutional, occupational and personal) discourses throughout the job interview. Misalignment occurs when candidates are not able to interpret the hidden request for a particular alignment in either a main question or a follow on. For example, ‘how did you feel?’ questions sound personal but are eliciting a more analytic, impersonal institutional discourse (see Section 5.4). Similarly, when a candidate is expected to give a narrated account, and instead they provide an analytic list of reasons for something (or vice versa) this can cause misalignment. When a candidate is expected to give an account of their actual experience, and instead they respond hypothetically, by describing what one should do, this can cause extended misalignment.
Discursive alignment includes alignment to the identity of the interviewer and, as Chapter 5 illustrates, problems frequently occur when the candidate misjudges the social relationship or footing between interviewer and candidate at any particular moment in the interview.

For example, in the extract shown below, when discussing administrative work, Rachael uses a more institutional discourse than the interviewer who is more conversational and qualifying (L11 ‘left a little bit’).

Example 27. Rachel: White British, unsuccessful
1. I: [Did you] enjoy?
2. C: I like the work
3. I: [Ok]
4. C: [The] work is very very varied I like that I was working for several different par-departments and bringing things together
5. I: Ok
6. C: I saw the (4.0) the challenge that it presented in in that there was there where a lot that needed .hhh updating and redoing
7. I: Ok had it been left a little bit if you like so it
8. C: I: Ok had it been left a little bit if you like so it
9. needed [to be]

Another example of misalignments is with candidates who are either too personal or impersonal in their responses – who use too much or too little personal discourse (see Section 5.4.2).

6.3.2 Topic misalignments

Topic misalignments, like discourse misalignments, result from interviewers’ implicit, unarticulated assumptions concerning what the content of talk about certain topics should be. In the example given below, Tina’s failure to negotiate the interviewer’s meaning leads to her ultimate failure in the interview. These misalignments may result from a lack of shared cultural assumptions, as in Rakesh’s interview (see below), or because the requirement to make all answers relevant to the post on offer is not made explicit.

Examples of superficial topic misalignments occur most frequently in interviews with born abroad candidates, such as Rakesh. In Rakesh’s interview, the interviewer asks a question about teamwork, and as a follow-on to this question he asks ‘so what did you enjoy about this work?’. Rakesh responds by speaking about enjoying sorting out parcels – which is solitary work – and the interview is thrown off course for a few turns. The source of this misalignment is that the interviewer does not make explicit the fact that he wants to know what Rakesh enjoyed about team working, as this is taken to be implicit in the placing of the question, and the fact that team working is generally acknowledged as something one ought to ‘enjoy’ in British work culture.
Examples of ‘deeper’ topic misalignments occur repeatedly in interviews with some born abroad candidates when they are asked about their daily work routine. This topic is usually slipped into larger questions as a subtopic by the interviewer, as it no longer has a clear place in the competence based interview. Questions like ‘what does your job involve?’ although apparently quite routine, are asking indirectly for the candidate to talk about their skills and the extent to which these are transferable. Candidates are often not aware of this hidden meaning (see Section 6.5.8 for more on ‘hidden cues’). For example, one candidate answered this question by listing his hours of work and lunch break.

An example of a deeper misalignment by an unsuccessful candidate which is not corrected by the interviewer is given below.

**Unsuccessful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 28. Tina: White British, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: what about being organised or possibly methodical is a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. better way of putting it (.) do you see yourself as being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. that kind of person?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. C: I’m very picky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I: are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: ooh I’m such a fusspot [(laughs)]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I: tell] me how that- how that works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. C: how that works? Oh [god</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I: either] at work or home?=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. C: =it was (.) just everything I’m quite a precise person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. if I- I like to- once I know how I’m doing it and I’ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. been shown and ken like that and then (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I: mhm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. C: and then even if I do adjust it to suit myself better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. slightly- I’m I’m very oooh and if it doesn’t work right</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I’m kind of like ooh god</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, Tina misaligns to the purpose of the question, which she thinks is testing her precision and quality control – skills she has developed as a machinist. In fact, the interviewer, Brenda, is looking to test her ability to stay calm in a crisis and methodically organise her work. So, the question is not about quality standards, which would be important for a skilled job, but about the general attitude which is appropriate for the unskilled packing job on offer. As this misalignment is not corrected, Tina’s answer is viewed negatively by the interviewer, and was cited as the reason she failed the interview.

It is telling to contrast the way this question is dealt with in Tina’s interview with the same question in Tom, a successful candidate’s, interview with the same interviewer. Tom negotiates the question, asking ‘do you mean like pernickety?’ Tina does not pause to gauge the interviewer’s response in this way. Brenda responds to Tom’s enquiry with an ‘Oh no, I don’t think about pernickety’ and, after some further
response from Tom, explains the purpose of the question in more detail, describing the kind of scenario, of a machine breaking down, which she is referring to. Tom is then able to give a relevant and convincing response to the question, demonstrating how he had dealt with contingencies calmly and with due process. The ‘positive dynamic’ which has been established facilitates the easy repair of misalignments (see Section 6.4.3).

6.3.3 Interactional: misalignments to stages of interview

These relate to the overall structuring and management of the interview. Just as candidates need to align to the discourse and social relations of the interview, to get on the right footing at any point, so they have to manage it as an interaction. This means orientating to the ‘sequential organisation’ (Drew and Heritage 1992) of the different stages of the interview.

Most job interviews consist of roughly four stages (Adelsward 1988), in each of which the use of different interactional behaviour and deployment of different discourses is appropriate.

1) Ice breaking – more informal
2) Housekeeping and information about the job given by the interviewer
3) Interviewer questions – in this stage, the candidate generally just answers, without asking questions or introducing new topics
4) Candidate questions

Some candidates are apparently less aware of the differences in the behaviour appropriate to these different stages of the interview. For example, some candidates offer responses (other than listening cues) during the second stage, ask their own questions or introduce topics in the third stage, and give comments or reflections rather than questions in the fourth stage (see Tahir in Section 5.8.4). Such behaviour can be viewed as showing a ‘lack of respect’ by the interviewer, and often makes interviewer feel the need to keep a tighter control over the interview. However, the enforcement of these requirements by interviewers varies between different candidates – and often successful candidates are allowed to, or are even praised for, transgressing these boundaries.

6.3.4 Interactional: misalignments over lengths of turns

As with any encounter, the question of who gets to speak and for how long, or the management of turn-taking, is fundamental to establishing the overall ‘emotional tone’ of the interview. Misalignments occur where candidates give replies which are deemed by interviewers to be too short or too long. This can result in interruption, struggle over turns, reformulation sequences, and presumptions about the candidate’s ability to understand the content of the question.

An example of a misalignment over turn length with Luis, an unsuccessful Filipino candidate, is given below.
Unsuccessful example

Example 29. Luis: Filipino Born abroad, Unsuccessful

1. I: right okay have you ever done early shift, late shift and night shift
2. C: (. .) yeah (. .) always
3. I: where did you do that
4. C: e:r sometimes (. .) yeah here in the bar, in the restaurant as a- as a bar (. .) sometimes ah (. .) they said that (. .) my-my work will ga- will only be until nine in the after- in the [evening in the after- in the evening
5. (. .)
6. I: mm (. .) mm
7. C: but sometime, there’s gonna be a s- some appointment of thirty persons
8. I: so you do late
9. C: yeah
10. I: okay (. .) [right (. .)
11. C: sometimes] (. .) [I went on-
12. I: the next question is eh] wearing uniforms (. .) have you ever worn uniforms to work for a whole day
13. C: every- yeah ev-ev- yeah [every day
14. I: would y-) would you be proud to wear the (xxxxxxxxxxx)
15. uniform
16. C: I am very proud [yeah
17. I: okay]
18. C: because I always seen .hhh [some (xxxxxxxxx) -
19. I: the next question] is eh handling cash

In this extract, the candidate is clearly unsure of how much information he needs to give – he is prompted for more at lines 4 and 20-21, but interrupted for giving ‘too much’ at lines 17 and 25. These problems of misalignment over length of response are ongoing throughout the interview, and lead in this extract to struggle over turns, and doubts cast over the candidate’s proficiency in English (see Section 7.10).

6.3.5 Interactional: misalignments over interpreting interviewer response

Misalignments also arise when interviewers’ responses are misinterpreted. Back channels such as ‘uh huh’, ‘mhm’ and ‘yes’ usually allow or encourage the candidate to say more. However, where there is very high frequency of these backchannels they may indirectly convey that the candidate’s turn has been too long. Other feedback is more problematic and will depend upon intonation to convey its purpose. For example, ‘right’ and ‘ok’ often function to constrain the candidates’ contribution (see Section 6.4.6). Such utterances tend to mark closure when there is a falling tone but can be requests for more when accompanied by rising intonation. These subtle cues were often misunderstood by born abroad candidates; this contributed to interviewers’ perceptions that the candidate was not listening to them and that it was therefore more difficult to ‘control’ the interview.
6.4 The positive dynamic

The pressure on interviewers to ‘improvise order’ by responding to differences between candidates and yet process their responses in accordance with institutional accountabilities, means that each interview has its own dynamic. This is interactionally created through reformulations, informal exchanges and additional questions, and serves to develop an ‘overall emotional tone’ which is relatively positive or negative. These dynamics also depend on the extent to which candidates’ contributions are bureaucratically processable.

Examples of the positive dynamic are taken from the most successful candidates. The negative dynamic characterises interactions where candidates are least successful. Interviews with borderline candidates exemplify aspects of both the positive and negative dynamics.

Although most interviews tend to follow either a positive or negative trend, there are some interviews in which a turning point in the interaction can reverse the dynamic. One unacceptable answer can lead to failure even when a positive dynamic was established up to that point. Similarly, some interviews are ‘rescued’ when the interviewer and candidate work together to help the candidate produce a good answer (see Section 6.4.11).

A positive dynamic often develops early on in successful interviews, when an initial good impression leads interviewers to use a more positive interview style (Posthuma et al. 2002). It is characterised by two main features. There are low levels of misalignment, misunderstanding and reformulation (see Section 6.2.2) and more opportunities to break the established order of the interview. In sum, the interview becomes more conversational and less institutional, and the candidates are given more special help by the interviewers.

The example given here illustrates all the key features of the positive dynamic listed below, and will be referred back to throughout the rest of Section 6.4.

Successful example

Example 30. Pippa: White British Successful
1. I1: okay that’s all right erm (.) what about in oth-
2. other jobs er-were there changes ei-either because the
3. nature of the job changed while you were ther:e or you
4. moved into something that was very different from what
5. you’ve previously had experience of (.) because your
6. work in (xxxxx) opticians must have been a little bit
7. different
8. C: mm well what p-between the two companies or
9. I1: yeah
10. C: or as in (.)
11. I1: eh-I mean (.) that’s quite an unusual you know
Example 30. Continued:
12. actually making the spectacles
13. C: mhm
14. I1: ehm (.) and the time pressure that- that you’re
15. under to achieve that
16. C: mhm
17. I1: that must have been quite different from just about
18. anything else you’ve ever worked in
19. C: erm well it is I think t-m-majority of the jobs that
20. I have worked in I have been erm customer focused and
21. deadlines and under pressure (.).hhh erm catering I’ve
22. [m-you know
23. I1: mmm]
24. C: my family own a business and I’ve worked in that
25. since the age of nine (.).you know helping them out (.)
26. erm but that that’s I suppose that’s a different field
27. altogether from=
28. I1: =yeah
29. C: customer focus but (1) I’ve sort of gone off on a
30. tangent now .hhh (3)
31. I1: n:o it’s (1) I mean the range of experience just
32. [shows you
33. C: mmm]
34. I1: in many ways that you’re used to=
35. C: =yeah I’m quite
36. I1: having new things thrown at you so (.).no I-I don’t
37. see anything (.).anything you need to add to that
38. Daniel?
39. I2: no I’m comfortable with that

6.4.1 Candidate awareness of the positive dynamic
The features of interaction described here both enhance this dynamic and reflect it
back to the participants. Most successful candidates were aware of the positive
dynamic and their confidence was clearly boosted by this so that, they said, they
were able to perform better. They frequently reported feeling comfortable and
relaxed in the interaction, an atmosphere of informality, a sense that they had ‘hit it
off’ with the interviewer, and were given permission to elaborate as they wished on
the topics the interviewers introduced. They felt that they were given enough time to
answer and the interviewer didn’t ‘butt in’ to their responses. The interviewers were
seen to be responsive to their queries, gave useful information, and explained their
questions clearly. They reported interviewers as being friendly and positive, sometimes
making jokes, and not ‘hounding’ them or having an ‘us and them’ mentality.

6.4.2 Relaxing the interview structure
In successful interviews the overall structure is relaxed. This is particularly noticeable
in organisations where large numbers of staff are taken on and only weak
candidates are sifted out. When a positive dynamic is established, there is less
recording and following of institutional procedures. Since these candidates are clearly successful, there is less of a need to produce defensible reasons for the interviewers’ decisions.

Although there are set questions in every interview, this format is not always strictly followed. Successful candidates are not necessarily asked all of the set questions. Even though the set questions are asked in most interviews, they are not necessarily given the same weight in all interviews. In some cases difficult or negative questions were not dwelt on, or even asked at all, with successful candidates (see similar findings in job interviews Kerekes 2003, 231; and immigration interviews Jacquement 2005, 13). For instance, questions about negative topics such as the disadvantages of teamwork or boring work are dealt with perfunctorily with the most successful candidates. An example of this relaxation of the interview structure is evident in the extract from Pippa’s interview quoted above, where the topic at hand, how she adapts to changes, is glossed over, as she is permitted to digress from it.

Instead of being very formal, institutional encounters in which the interviewer is only the spokesperson for their organisation, they become more relaxed. For the interviewer, there is less ‘animation of words [they] had no hand in formulating and sentiments [they] do not hold’ (Goffman 1974). In the video feedback some interviewers said they were uncomfortable with some of the questions they were required to ask. This comment was made more frequently when watching interviews with successful candidates where a conversational frame had been established. In these interviews it was not uncommon for interviewers to apologise for having to follow institutional procedures or asking certain questions (e.g. ‘this is a silly question but-’).

6.4.3 ‘Easy’ repair and prevention of misunderstandings or misalignment

Successful repair of misunderstandings and misalignments occurs with relative ease in felicitous interviews. Where there is a high level of empathy, involvement, feedback, and a shared style, participants usually manage to resolve misunderstandings quickly and with minimal metacommunication (talk about the misunderstanding) so that it doesn’t disrupt the interaction. In such cases, interviewers often ‘embed’ reformulations of their questions in the candidates’ responses (see Section 6.4.6), and gradually work the conversation around to the point which they want to cover in a way which is sensitive to the candidate’s style and experience, rather than bluntly repeating their question. This ease of repair is an aspect of the special help more often enjoyed by successful candidates, and those born in the UK.

In the above quotation, Pippa is initially unsure of the meaning of the question (L8-10), and the interviewer responds to this by framing it differently, indicating that he wants evidence of her adaptability and resilience in the face of difficulty (L11-18). Because Pippa is able to negotiate the meaning and relevance of the question, the misunderstanding never becomes overt or disruptive to the interaction.
Where the positive dynamic has been established, interviewer contributions such as that seen at line 8 (Pippa extract) above are more forthcoming. There is extra information and feedback about how to answer the question in terms of discourse type (formality, content, structure, amount) and this acts to prevent misalignments. This extra help is also more available when a shared interactional rhythm (Erickson and Shultz 1982) has been established as is the case in the following example.

**Successful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 31. Natalie: South Asian British, Successful for another post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: Ok well what about the patient who rings up and says</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I’m the patient can I have a photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: .hhh um hhh well I’ll have to I’ll have to ask the consultant or .hhh um I’m not sure about I think I’ll have to ask .hhh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I: Ok but it’s le- - [it’s le</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. C: ah but it] will still remain confidential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I: Absolutely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. C: It would [still</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I: yep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. C: remain [confidential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I: yep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. C: because=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I: =Is [its d’y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. C: It would be] the property of the trust by now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. [wouldn’t it so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I: yeah yeah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviewer and Natalie have already established a conversational rhythm in which both sides tolerate a high level of overlapping speech with minimal responses from the interviewer. This is illustrated in lines 6-17. Natalie quickly reads minimal responses, such as that given by the interviewer at line 6, to adjust her responses—so that long reformulation sequences are prevented. Having repaired her first attempt (lines 3-5), in line 7 she reinforces her ‘correct’ answer ‘it will still remain confidential’ by repeating it (lines 9, 11), and by giving a rationale for her answer (line 15). All three responses are punctuated rhythmically by positive responses from the interviewer. This extract from Natalie’s interview contrast sharply with the same question in Alison’s interview (shown in Section 5.4.2), in which Alison does not read the interviewer’s reformulations accurately, is given far fewer cues, and produces a much lower-rated answer.

Another example of ‘easy’ repair of misalignment occurs in an interview with Tom, a white British airport construction worker. Tom is inexperienced in formal interviews, misaligned to the structured nature of the interview, and has misunderstood the question being asked (which refers to the physical demands of his current job). He runs on past his turn allowance, and speaks about all the skills he has, not just those relating to the question at hand. The interviewer gradually draws him into her
interview frame, using jokes, feedback cues, non-question prompts and embedded questions (eg. ‘so really quite a physical environment that you’ve been working in is that right?’). These cues draw Tom back to the topic at hand and make his reply relevant, without intruding on his narrative flow, so that he is ultimately successful.

6.4.4 More topic control, topic negotiation and topic gliding

Successful candidates are able to introduce new topics and have them taken up by interviewers. They are also able to weave their own topics into a question or topic initiated by the interviewer. This leads to more topic gliding (Adelsward 1988). Rather than a strict question and answer sequence with abrupt shifts in topic, new topics are anticipated and brought into the flow of the conversation naturally, so the interviewers do not have to work so hard.

In the extract given above, the relaxed interview structure can be seen in the fact that Pippa successfully negotiates the meaning of the question (L8-10), and is allowed to bring a question about change around to a different topic – that of the unifying features of her work experience and her early experience of work with her family. Such details are aspects of the ‘thumb nail sketching’, which are not specifically elicited by the main interview questions, but are key to a candidate’s success.

6.4.5 More follow-ons and fewer negative reformulations

Follow-ons elicit more information or ask for the development of a point the candidate has made. Unlike most reformulations, these are not markers that the response was inadequate. As with all questions, follow-ons which have context embedded in them, such as the interviewers follow-on to Pippa in L11-18 of the extract above, tend to be more helpful. When topics are introduced and developed more conversationally (as in Section 6.4.3), this is done through the use of more follow-ons and fewer reformulations. There are some clarification questions in felicitous interviews but these are usually to do with uncertainty and not to do with unacceptable answers. They are usually short sequences which elicit unproblematic responses.

For example, in Pippa’s extract above, her negotiation of the question is responded to in lines 11-18 not with a flat repetition of the question or narrowing reformulation (as with some unsuccessful candidates) but with an explanation of why the question is being asked – it is testing the candidate’s ability to adapt to increased and unfamiliar difficulties such as time pressure. This is an embedded and open continuer, characteristic of conversational exchanges, and it is accompanied by feedback cues from the interviewer at lines 23 and 28.

In small numbers, reformulations of questions as well as follow-ons can, on occasion, be a positive or neutral feature of interview interaction. Some interviewers routinely recycle important questions, to ensure that the candidate has said everything they have to say on the topic. Furthermore, in the context of the positive dynamic, reformulations can be an aspect of the extra help given to a candidate with a question they are struggling with. This is the case in the example given below, from an interview with Jean Luc.
Successful example

Example 32. Jean Luc: Afro-Caribbean British, Successful

1. I: (.) okay (.) erm the last one in there then is
2. improving the business erm what we looking for here is
3. (.) a- erm ( . ) an example where you have come up with a
4. different idea ( . ) to obviously to better things
5. C: yeah I know what you kind of mean but it’s quite hard
6. because I’ve got set rules and regulations to follow
7. I: okay
8. C: foot[ballers don’t
9. I: (no you don’t yeah)] er you don’t have to give
10. football [as
11. C: mmm]
12. I: an example you can ( . ) just give a
13. C: well erm ( . ) it’s kind of really hard considering the
14. jobs I’ve I’ve been in like I haven’t I’ve not been in
15. position where I’ve had to ( . ) where pressures been put
16. on me for me to make a change of any sort like or for me
17. to say to somebody ah you I think you should do something
18. this way
19. (seven seconds of talk deleted)
20. I: how d- how did you find er school or college did you
21. have any er:m wh- whe- when you had a input ( . ) n- n- you
22. could have come up with suggestions to ( . ) say oh lets do
23. this project this way or something like that
24. C: oh oh oh okay I see what you mean [like
25. I: (yeah)]
26. C: suggestions
27. I: yeah
28. C: brainstorming [kind of stuff like
29. I: that’s right yeah yeah]
30. C: that ( . ) yeah like erm I used to do that in college
31. all the time like I e- even used to do it in a lot of the
32. courses what we er:m ( . ) used to do Fulham like you know
33. [stuff like that
34. I: mmm]
35. C: brainstorming like ( . ) er:m for instance there we had
36. to do a project one time for Fulham football club e:r
37. that was e:r

In the extract given above, the reformulations are very positive and open. The interviewer phrases the question in different ways, explains its purpose, and gives the candidate ideas as to how he might answer the question. In line 9-12, Tobias emphasises that Jean can use an example from a work experience other than football. In Lines 20-23 he suggests that the example might come from school or college, and that it doesn’t have to involve improving a business, but just showing a capacity to share and develop ideas. Once Jean sees that he might give an example of sharing ideas (L24-28), he launches into one (L35-7).
6.4.6 More shared context and embedded questions

Felicitous interviews depend upon calling up shared contexts and co-membership (see Section 6.1.2). Two inter-related means of doing this recur frequently in the data: the use of embedded questions and the establishment of shared past experiences.

Embedded questions are questions which use information about the candidate, or the content of the interaction, to construct a question. So, for example, the interviewer might ask for an experience of teamwork in two ways:

1) Embedded: ‘When you were working in X job, how did you work with colleagues to achieve Y task?’

2) Non-embedded: ‘Could you give me an example of a time when you worked with others to achieve something?’

Successful candidates tend to be asked more embedded questions. These questions advantage the candidate because they give him or her more information about the form and content expected in their answer.

When candidates have previous experience of working in the organisation, embedded questions and shared experience become mutually reinforcing. This means that later in the interview, both sides can infer the context from the question or response. This allows the interview to progress more quickly and requires less hard work on both sides. Such exchanges also elicit more positive confirmatory statements. But even where there is less shared knowledge of the organisation, more embedded questions provide a context-rich environment which helps candidates to tune into interviewer expectations.

In Pippa’s extract above, a basis of shared knowledge has already been established through a series of exchanges and jokes about experiences of work in the organisation where the interview is being held – in which Pippa has already been working on a temporary basis. Pippa has established a shared understanding of her past experience working at an opticians, and this is referred back to here spontaneously by the interviewer in lines 11-12, and at L17 his imaginative investment in this is revealed – ‘that must have been quite different’. He embeds the question in his previous knowledge of the candidate, which itself has been gained through the positive interview dynamic. Here, one can see the self-perpetuating nature of the ‘positive dynamic’ at work.

The example below shows the way in which embedded follow-ons are asked by an interviewer, in the context of a customer service question, to a candidate who has done very similar delivery work to that involved in the position applied for, and therefore shares past experience with the interviewer.
Successful example

Example 33. Ahmed: Sierra Leonean Born abroad Successful

1. I: so I-I know you said fourteen stories I mean i-is it
2. such a big building=
3. C: = mhm
4. I: so you need to cover (. ) up up and down for the whole
day=
5. C: =yeah
6. I: er:m delivering mail and picking up mail [and
everything else
7. C: picking up mails yes yeah]
8. 10. I: okay (4) so has there been instances where people have
11. by mistake (. ) or (. ) er:m said for m- a mistake said oh
12. okay post this and then they phone you up and say [I want
that retrieved
13. C: yes yes we do that so many times so many times and
14. it’s like sometimes we even have to retrieve all the bags
15. because what we do is we have a loading bay=
16. (thirteen seconds of talk deleted)
17. I: =okay (. ) I I know it’s such a ((slight laugh)) (1)
18. task in the sense that all the bags got to be tipped erm
19. tipped over and checked and all of that stuff yeah=
20. C: =yeah
21. I: so when when you w- retrieve that item do the customer
22. know what length you have gone to get that mail back
23. C: yeah we do explain to them

Despite not having specific customer service experience, Ahmed is able to make his experience of serving colleagues relevant here. Before the extract given above, he negotiates this by introducing his mailroom experience, and relating this to the question with the statement ‘where a customer in a sense is like a member of staff’. The interviewer accepts this negotiation and gives prompts (L7-8, 10-13, 18-20) which draw heavily on their shared contextual knowledge to indicate to Ahmed what kind of response he should give. What is also notable here is the lack of disturbance to the flow of the interaction as a result of these follow-ons (in contrast to reformulations). The tone is conversational and empathetic, with the interviewer and candidate overlapping (L12-14) echoing each others speech and finishing off each other’s sentences (L8-9).

6.4.7 Making inferences from prompts and cues

The extent to which candidates can make appropriate inferences from prompts and cues depends upon both their understanding of the hidden meanings of questions and the interviewers’ ability to assess how much knowledge they share with the candidates. Successful candidates learn over the course of the interview what interviewers are looking for and adjust accordingly (see also Posthuma et al. 2002, Huffcutt and Roth 1998). They largely read this through interviewer back-channels
which steer the interaction (see Section 6.3.5) and function to align the candidate to a relevant topic or discourse. For example, Ahmed infers from the interview follow-ups that he is expected to give more descriptive detail. Similarly, Tom uses a specific indication that one of his answers was irrelevant to re-frame all his subsequent responses so that they are more explicitly relevant. Frequently, as in the example given below, follow-on questions are implicitly seeking to elicit from candidates a change of discourse alignment (see Section 5.1).

**Successful example**

Example 34. Terence: Ghanaian Born abroad, Successful

1. I: right] okay (.) erm and what was you really trying to
do
2. C: oh we raised money and then (?) and it was an all
4. students association so (?) we paid visits to old school
donated some (?) items like sanitary (?) bins and=
6. I: =right [okay
7. C: and some]times sponsored er:m prizes for (^^^^) day
8. and=
9. I: =right=
10. C: =and that kind of thing
11. I: er:m (.). did you enjoy working (.). [in the group
12. C: yes I did] yeah=
13. I: =what did you enjoy most
14. C: erm there was (.). was erm the challenge of it cos erm
15. m some- some are very critical when things do:n’t go
16. right sometimes and (.). living up to that challenge was-
17. was- was i- interesting for me (3)

In this response to the question on teamwork, Terence, a Ghanaian candidate, is able to read cues to move rapidly between two kinds of talk. In the first (L3-10), he describes the tasks which he performed in an occupational discourse. The interviewer’s follow-up ‘what did you enjoy most?’ is read by Terence as a cue to more into a more institutional, analytic, abstracted mode (L14-17), in which he provides motivations for doing this work which match the institution’s requirements. Here, he shows himself to be aware of the motivations behind other team mates’ responses, to be able to ‘rise above’ and diffuse potential situations of conflict, and to enjoy this work. The sense that he would maintain a professional distance is reinforced by the analytic style of speech which he adopts. He does not mention specific individuals and his personal feelings about them, but rather uses generalised responses and reactions to them such as ‘interesting’ and ‘challenge’. These are institutionally acceptable means of conveying contained irritation with workmates, and not emotional self-disclosures of the kind which some less successful candidates provide in response to questions about ‘enjoyment’.
6.4.8 Confirmatory statements

These statements perform several functions which can contribute to either the development of a more positive or more negative dynamic. They wrap up a section, indicate that the information given is complete and understood, and claim the turn back for the interviewer. These statements can make a comment institutionally relevant, show support and co-construct an answer. This is the case in the extract from Pippa’s interview given above, where the interviewer replies ‘the range of experience just shows that in many ways you’re used to having new things thrown at you’ (L31-6). As well as being used to make answers institutionally relevant, confirmatory statements work to create ‘co-membership’ (see Section 6.1.2). Confirmatory statements can indicate the interviewers’ understanding and acceptance, or the correctness of an answer (eg. ‘that’s what I was looking for that’s a good example’). In the context of the positive dynamic, these statements are key moments of acceptance or augmentation of candidate’s responses by interviewers. However, these statements do have the potential to contribute to the negative dynamic, when they are used by interviewers to take control over or even hinder the efforts of the candidate to produce an answer.

In the context of a positive dynamic, confirmatory statements are variously used by interviewers to show understanding of candidates’ motivations and positively appraise their responses, to make an answer institutionally relevant and to co-author the interviewer’s written text. For example in the extract below, the interviewer co-authors a response with Ahmed, guiding him on both how to interpret the writing process, and how to produce bureaucratically processable answers.

Example 35. Ahmed: Sierra Leonean Born abroad, Successful

1. C: that encouragement it gives you the spirit of working
2. I: exactly
3. C: yeah
4. I: so when they appreciate- appreciate you then you know
5. all the hours that you have put in is- hasn’t gone to
6. waste that it’s been appreciated as well [isn’t it
7. C: yes] yes exactly
8. I: okay (11) okay I’m just writing in bullet points and
9. I’ll be writing everything (.) as soon as we (.) have
10. finished
11. C: okay

These confirmatory statements are supportive and, like the fill-ins described below, function differently from the ‘translations’ of candidate talk found in less successful interviews.
6.4.9 Tolerance of extended narrative

Free, uninterrupted, more associative narrative is tolerated, and even facilitated in some cases, in interviews with candidates who are highly rated by interviewers. This allowance of extended narrative is indicated by interviewer feedback, fewer reformulations and a higher tolerance of apparent irrelevance. In the extract from Pippa’s narrative above, the tolerance of digression which comes with the positive dynamic is clearly evident.

Similarly, in contrast to many unsuccessful candidates, Bruno is permitted to run on in extended narratives which last over three minutes, with feedback but no interruption, to give extra contextual details, shift between examples, and digress from the point at hand. For large parts of his responses, he is not speaking about the topic of the question, but about the limited opportunities for progression within the catering industry in London (see Section 5.7.1 for extract from this narrative). Part of the reason why Bruno is allowed to give an uninterrupted narrative is that his opening uses a normative, easily processable narrative structure for presenting work experience (see Section 5.3.1). He begins by outlining the situation in London, and then moves on to his task and action within this, finally providing a conclusion.

6.4.10 Other indicators of the positive dynamic

There are many other indicators of the positive dynamic which manifest in idiosyncratic ways in different interactions. These other indicators include: secondary stories early in the interview; the interviewers and candidates moving out of their assigned institutional roles; and filling in of phrases for candidates by interviewers.

Secondary stories are stories which interviewers tell in response to candidates’ talk. When they occur near the beginning of the interview they are a marker of a more conversational tone. In such cases, relatively early on the candidate and interviewer agree implicitly on this more egalitarian mode of interaction in which both sides share stories rather than only the candidate offering them for the interviewer’s assessment.

For example, in Pippa’s interview, there is the occasional transgression from the interview rules which enables Pippa to ask her interviewers about their work experiences. Pippa’s interviewers also go off-script to ask her on a personal level about her colleagues’ views of changes to company policy ‘just out of interest’. Again this signals a more conversational mode, and a switching of roles between interviewer and candidate.

Another feature of the positive dynamic is that it enables the candidates to momentarily break or expose the ‘rules of the game’ by making ironic comments on the interview situation, such as adopting a different tone of voice when using ‘interview speak’. Such jokes about the interview situation are rarely well-received in the context of the negative dynamic.
Some candidates are given special help when they are apparently searching for an appropriate word or phrase. Interviewers fill in the word when the interview is going well.

**Successful example**

**Example 36. Terence: Ghanaian Born abroad, Successful**

1. I: When you recently worked (.) have you noticed anything
2. that hasn’t worked very well (.) and erm sort of put a
3. recommendation through
4. (eleven seconds of talk deleted)
5. I: did the shop become more profitable
6. C: I n- I I suppose so I v- [(I it was yeah yes)
7. I: cos the queues weren’t so long were they]
8. C: cos the queues weren’t so long and (.) cos
9. sometime people came and when they saw the queue they
10. would just go back

Here, at L7, the interviewer prompts the candidate by filling in some of the answer for him. There is a subtle difference between helpful fills-ins, which build constructively on candidate’s points, as in this example and a more wholesale, pejorative ‘translating’ of candidates’ responses (see Section 6.5.6).

**6.4.11 ‘Rescued’ interviews**

Some interviews show many of the features of a negative dynamic but are ‘rescued’ by the interviewer and candidate collaboratively. For example, in the early stages of the interview with Mohammed, strict interview orthodoxy is adhered to, with tight question and answer sequences, reformulations and closed questions being employed. However, the interviewer then provides more supportive reformulations with helpful examples once Mohammed has negotiated the meaning of the question.

**Successful example**

**Example 37. Mohammed: Somalian Born abroad, Borderline Successful**

1. I: (10) okay (4) and can you tell me any ways that erm} 2. {[looks up] you used to help your colleagues and even if 3. it is just little things that you used to do any ways 4. that you helped each other to get the job done {[looks 5. down, begins writing]
6. C: (3) er- what do you mean (.)} {[I looks up] what do
7. you mean by that
8. I: erm anything that you did to help erm [other-other
9. C: colleg-] 10. I: people with what they were [doing
11. C: Yeah]
12. I: t-t-to get the task done quicker=
Example 37. Continued:
13. C: =er there was some time I was working in for example
14. {[I nods|in party shop} in Chelsea}{[I looks down]
15. Kensington there was a customer who ordered the balloons
16. (.) five year old balloons=
17. I: =Yeah

At lines 6-7, Mohammed negotiates the meaning of the interviewer’s question. The latter responds at line 8-12 with a more explicit reformulation and this sets Mohammed off on a narrative which is rated highly by the interviewer and leads to Mohammed being a successful, albeit borderline, candidate. The other element of the rescue relates to Mohammed learning how to manage the implicit cues and the rhythm which serve the interviewer’s requirement to write up Mohammed’s responses (see Section 6.6).

6.5 The negative dynamic

Just as the positive dynamic leads to more opening up and relaxation of the interview structure, a negative dynamic does the reverse. The interview becomes more formal, as candidates’ responses are more controlled and they are ‘talked down’ to more (see also Erickson 1979). Often, these increased restrictions can lead to an increase in problems of understanding (see also Thornborrow, 2002, 53) and, unsurprisingly, a profusion of misunderstandings and misalignments can lead to an interview being unsuccessful.

Some of the causes of misalignments and misunderstandings are examined above (see Section 6.3). This chapter looks in detail at the kind of interactional patterns and interviewer contribution which often accompany interviews in which there are several misalignment and misunderstanding sequences. Such behaviour is both indicative of and contributes to misunderstandings and misalignments.

A negative dynamic can be set up right at the start of the interview, even before the first main question, particularly in the case of born abroad candidates if their English is already judged as inadequate (see also Gumperz 1992) or where questions about immigration status preface competence questions (see Section 7.7.2). However, in some cases, there is a turning point in the interview when one jointly negotiated ‘good’ answer can change the dynamic (see Section 6.4.11 above).

The example from an interview with a Filipino candidate given below illustrates all the main features of the negative dynamic, and so will be referred back to throughout Section 6.4.
Unsuccessful example

Example 38. Luis: Filipino Born abroad, Unsuccessful
1. I: but could you] tell me er what do you like most about
2. working with a team
3. C: ah- yeah ah (.) on- on the restaurant I work it- I
4. like to work it because er of er ahhm some er (.) ah
5. working on an on young people and on older people because
6. you’ll get to know ah ah s-you know ah y-o::h about some
7. ((clicks tongue)) because you know some young people are
8. some- some high temper and y-you’ll never know [how
9. I: yeah what] do you like about working in the team [is
10. that
11. C: ah]
12. I: what do you like, the young people or the [old people
13. C: ah yeah]
14. I: what do you like most
15. C: all er-any-any of th- any of two because (.) because I
16. like working of them and even if-
17. I: yeah what do you enjoy most
18. C: on working there
19. I: uhh
20. C: yeah- its like that (.) ah:h sometimes um (.) if they
21. need help
22. I: mhm
23. C: I on- I-I and my work- my job description is only just
24. a bar staff
25. I: bar staff
26. C: but [when
27. I: yeah what] do you enjoy most as working as a bar staff
28. C: yeah its its ah its-its cool work its its ah- its ah
29. nice because you- you work- you’re learning some, some
30. new, some new experiences because
31. I: so you learn the new- you like the new experiences
32. C: yeah [you some new
33. I: what do you like]
34. C: challenges and some new timefactor that they’re
35. telling me that I had to do it a-just in one- a minute, a
36. second- doing some drinks .hhh [but sometimes when
37. I: so you enjoyed] the time factor or the=
38. C: =yeah an-and so:me some ah ah some- (.) what do you
39. call this ah (.) ah (.) preparing- preparing all the
40. things I need for I-I go to work even they (.) they don’t
41. tell me that because I’m going to be the one who will be-
42. that will gonna be affected if (.) if i- if I lo- if I er
43. run out of somet- for wine something so [before I work
44. I: right okay tell me]
45. C: yeah
46. I: what do you dislike about working with a team of
47. people
6.5.1 Candidate awareness of the negative dynamic

Candidates who were unsuccessful were often aware of the negative dynamic which had developed in their interview, and the impact this has on their success. These candidates commented that they found it difficult to build up a rapport with the interviewer or read their responses as they had little in common with them; they saw the interview as being a very formal, stiff interaction, with a big focus on writing. Failed candidates also frequently said that they felt less confident coming out of the interview than they did going in, and mentioned negative questions which they felt were foregrounded by the interviewer – such as questions about how long they had been unemployed. Some candidates felt that they were being asked these questions because the interviewer was ‘unsure of them’.

Other unsuccessful candidates commented that they were not able to get across experiences or points which they stated at the opening of the interview that they wanted to bring into the interview, due to ‘time pressures’. For example, Yohannes commented in the pre-interview that he wanted to speak about his involvement with the community and his hobbies and interests, but watching the interview one can see that he was not able to develop these topics, as the interviewer did not pick up his attempts to introduce them (see Section 7.7 for more on candidate expectations).

6.5.2 Tightening of the institutional structure

Interviewers become more formal and more controlling when the interaction is not going well. Main questions tend to be repeated verbatim, follow-ups increasingly limit candidates’ opportunities for extended talk, and requirements for ‘relevancy’ are increased. The interviewers are placed under stress because they did not receive the required answer, and tend to become less fluent and clear, to interrupt themselves, hesitate, generalise, and give closed questions (see Section 7.5.1, see also House et al. 2003, 95). This, in turn, adds to the candidate’s problems, and increases the incidence of problems of misunderstanding. A tightening of the relevancy requirements and profusion of closed questions are evident in the extract from Luis’s interview above, where the interviewer repeatedly asks him what he liked about teamwork. This is in sharp contrast to the extract from Pippa’s interview (see Section 6.4.1) where the question is not repeated despite the questionable relevance of her response.

Previous research on job interviews has found that, in comparison with ordinary conversation, job interviews offer very limited opportunities for repair of misunderstandings or misalignments (Button 1992 and Birkner 2004). However, Section 6.4 demonstrates that when the flexibility provided by the positive dynamic is present, both sides can take opportunities to repair and negotiate meanings. Conversely, when the negative dynamic is in play, it becomes very difficult to repair problems of understanding, and protracted reformulation sequences become more frequent.

Additional questions are added to the schedule when interviewers are doubtful about candidates. These tend to be either questions which focus on motivation,
such as ‘Why do you want this job?’ and ‘Why did you leave your previous job?’, or questions which imply that the candidate may not be suitable for the job, such as ‘Would you consider a different job?’ and ‘Is time management an issue for you?’. These more conceptually difficult questions, which require a carefully measured presentation of one’s feelings, often lead to lengthy reformulation sequences with failing candidates.

6.5.3 Negative reformulations and ‘talking down’

The single most significant indicator of a negative dynamic is the increased number of misunderstandings, misalignments and subsequent reformulations (see Section 6.2.2). Reformulations in unsuccessful interviews tend to consist of narrowing, closed questions, and more low level questions (which are less abstract and analytical), as the interviewer attempts to elicit a bureaucratically processable answer. This ‘talking down’ phenomenon (Erickson 1979) means that the questions are less demanding, require a minimal answer and so construct the candidate as less competent. For example, in Luis’ interview, the interviewer shifts down from an analytic question ‘what do you like most about working in a team?’ (L1-2), to, at line 12 ‘what do you like, young people or old people?’

The point at which reformulations are used is also important, both over the whole interview and in relation to individual responses. They are a marker of discomfort when they build up over the course of the interview, or are not used in a positive way once the interviewer has failed the candidate. There is also a sharp contrast between encounters where reformulations occur after candidates have gone some way towards answering the question (which tend to be more supportive) and those where they occur immediately after the question is posed. In the latter case, they contribute to a negative dynamic.

In some cases, once the candidate is presumed to not understand the questions, they are repeatedly given explanations, often at lower levels of abstraction, before being given the chance to respond, and are then over-questioned on their responses. For instance, in example 38 from Luis’s interview, the interviewer, Abeni, keeps repeating her question about what Luis enjoyed most about teamwork, and he casts around, trying to find a suitable style in which to answer her, as all his openings are quickly rejected. He is, therefore, unable to build up a unified personality of the kind required. In contrast to the positive reformulations given by Tobias to Jean Luc in Section 6.4.5 above, here the reformulation of lines 9-10 to Luis is almost a direct repetition (rather than rephrasing) which is not embedded, and gives no information about the purpose of the question. In response to the question here, Luis initially embarks upon a narrative about the contrasts between the ages and temperaments of his colleagues (L3). Once this is apparently rejected (L9-10) he begins a narrative about going beyond his job specification. When this too is rejected he struggles for a stylistic frame, shifting to the informal, ‘its cool work’, and a general statement of liking new experiences, challenges such as deadlines, and preparing for contingencies. Luis moves from more narrative to less complex and more ‘listing’ style replies. At this point, Abeni draws out some brief points –
(‘learning’, ‘time factor’ L34), and his response is reduced to a few rather banal, but easily processable, points. However, she fails to ‘read’ the many cues (L 34-36, 38-43), when he tries to tell her how he has taken the initiative and gone beyond his job description.

6.5.4 Self-perpetuation of problems of understanding

In our data, we repeatedly noted the recurrence in unsuccessful interviews of self-perpetuating sequences of misalignment, misunderstanding and reformulation. Although Section 6.3 above describes different types or causes of misalignments separately, in practice these misalignments often occur simultaneously and reinforce one another in extended reformulation sequences. In these sequences, interviewers respond to what they perceive as ‘inadequate’ answers with more problematic, orthodox and closed questions, which are often harder for candidates to answer, and do not address the actual cause of the problem. This phenomenon is evident in the extract from Luis’ interview above, where the interviewer simply repeats the question. The perpetuation of problems of understanding is played out differently in the example from Alex’s interview, given below, where the original hypothetical question is reformulated in narrow and unhelpful ways.

Unsuccessful example

Example 39. Alex: White British, Unsuccessful

```
1. I2: okay while he’s writing that one down em you say
2. there that you would go to the manager (.) erm if you
3. weren’t happy with the way a customer spoke to you (.) if
4. you were successful with this on the collection route (.)
5. what would you do then?
6. C: (.) if a customer
7. I2: if you was unhappy with the way that they had spoken
8. or behaved (.) yeah?
9. C: yeah
10. I2: how would you react and how would you resolve the
11. situation
12. C: that would depend what the er- the sihhh-situation was
13. really em I don’t tend to let things er (.) annoy me
14. anyway really I don’t sort of er- sort of er wash it off
15. my back if they er would’ve have done something like that
16. anyway (2)
17. I2: okay well lets say that (.) it’s a regular customer
18. and every day they’re saying (.) you’re late (.) I’m fed
19. up (.) I’m unhappy (.) you know what you going to do
20. about it and you feel as though it’s a personal attack
21. C: and I haven’t been late?
22. I2: and you haven’t been late
23. C: and I haven’t been late (.) well then I’d uh (.) uh
24. I’d probably (.) go to their manager (.) and-and come to
25. my manager and say look ((laughs)) to them (.) not to the
```
Example 39. Continued:

26. actual person themselves
27. I2: mhm
28. C: look I’m not late every day (...) and they say I am
29. (...) they’re obviously crazy ((laughs))
30. I2: okay (...) lets say you were late how would you
31. handle the situation then?
32. C: that’s different then (...) then they’re right and I
33. go (...) oh fair play (...) yeah er (...) I’ll be on time
34. tomorrow ((laughs))
35. I2: okay (?)

As can be seen from this extract, in unsuccessful interviews, misunderstandings are not isolated and resolved quickly (as they are in successful interviews). Rather, they contribute to one another, and build up with misalignments on many levels to reinforce one another. Often in unsuccessful interviews repair too overtly done by a candidate or interviewer (for example by saying ‘excuse me, I think you misunderstood this’) itself disrupts the interaction and counts against the candidate. As with other attempts to be helpful by being more explicit, ironically, overt repair, because it is overt, tends to be unhelpful.

The first misunderstanding occurs in L6, where Alex appears not to have followed the sudden change of topic which the interviewer, Daniel, introduces, and attempts to re-negotiate the question. There is an instance of misalignment over turn-taking in L4-5, where Daniel pauses to elicit feedback indicating understanding, which he does not receive, and then demands a feedback token indicating understanding (‘yeah?’). In L12, Alex does not align to the speaker position which Daniel has given him – his statement ‘that would depend on what the situation was’ rejects the hypothetical nature of the question. In L14-15, he reveals misalignment to the institutional nature of the question, which asks about procedure for dealing with customers, and instead speaks in a personal discourse mode about how he relates to others – the phrase ‘wash it off my back’ is a physical and metaphorical depiction of his own personal response and feelings, rather than a response couched in terms of occupational or institutional discourse modes.

Daniel’s reformulation of the question (L17-20) puts the scenario in more closed, more extreme terms. This practice of ‘funnelling’, or challenging the candidate by reducing the terms of the question is recommended to interviewers by some organisations as general interview practice, but seems to be more frequently used with unsuccessful candidates. Here, this ‘funnelling’ practice drags out a negative question, so that more time is spent on it here than in two successful interviews with the same interviewers. In Pippa and Sandeep’s interviews (with the same interviewers), this question is not reformulated and is dealt with in a few lines, whereas here it continues for thirty lines.

Further misalignment is indicated by Alex’s use of colloquialisms such as ‘they’re obviously crazy’ (L29) and ‘fair play’ (L33), which are inappropriately informal, and
his laughter, which Daniel does not respond to. The impact of this misalignment sequence becomes evident when one considers that it is the sixth case of misalignment, misunderstanding or reformulation, out of seventeen which occur in Alex’s interview as a whole, some of which are linked to the causes of misalignment explicated above.

### 6.5.5 More sudden shifts of topic, less topic initiation allowed to candidates and more struggle over topics

The high level of ‘talking down’ with unsuccessful candidates means that candidates have fewer opportunities to initiate topics and so there is less gliding between topics and more structured question and answer routines. Occasionally, candidates seem so boxed in that they struggle to get what they want to say across. This is a sharp contrast to the kind of conversational gliding between topics and tolerated digressions seen in the positive dynamic.

An instance of a very sudden shift of topic can be seen in the extract from Luis’ interview above, in lines 46-47, where Abeni interrupts Luis’s response to shift onto the new topic of dislikes of teamwork. In this extract, Luis’s repeated attempts to initiate topics are disallowed by the interviewer. At points throughout the rest of this interview there are more interruptions and struggles over turns, and Luis commented to the researcher at the end of the interview that he felt there were some ‘time constraints’ on his responses. These sudden interruptions and shifts in topic have a clear negative impact on the candidate’s fluency, ability to structure turns at talk and to align to the requirements of the new topic. Here, compared to other points at which he is not given such frequent reformulations, he hesitates, interrupts himself and repeats himself more.

### 6.5.6 Negative confirmatory statements/questions and conclusions

In contrast to the use of confirmatory statements in successful interviews, criticism of the candidate’s response is not uncommon in unsuccessful interviews. Interviewers respond to candidate’s answers with comments such as ‘that’s debatable’, ‘that was in India’ or ‘you don’t find [that work] boring?’ Also, in interviews where the interviewer has decided to fail the candidate, they may confirm statements which they do not agree with, and so let them ‘dig a hole’ for themselves. Some interviewers, when watching extracts of the video where they were replying to candidates with confirmatory statements such as ‘yes that’s lovely, thank you’, explicitly stated that they disagreed with what a candidate was saying, or that it was not the answer they were looking for.

In the context of the negative dynamic, confirmatory statements can be used to finish off the candidates’ answer for them: ‘so this is what you’re saying’. This is very difficult for the candidate to contradict and it can be disabling for them, and lead to unrepaired misalignments or misunderstandings. These statements are particularly powerful as they ask candidates to confirm completed propositions rather than to shape the content of what was discussed (see also Thornborrow 2002, 25).
Another form of confirmatory statement is interviewer ‘translation’. Interviewers’ tend to draw conclusions for candidates or in effect translate their response into an answer that is bureaucratically processable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 40. Renard: Polish Born again, Borderline Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: okay (.) right so I mean looking back (.) what would</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. you say the advantages are (.) as working as part of a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. (twelve seconds of talk deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. C: less res- responsibility is err- on your shoulders (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. [everyone is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I: ok or you can] put it [another way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. C: [yeah]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I: saying] that responsibility will be shared=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. C: =because=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I: =amongst [everybody that’s it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. C: equal for everyones and]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. I: okay ((starts writing))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The placing of these statements is significant. In the context of the negative dynamic (which is evidenced here despite the fact that Renard is borderline successful overall), negative confirmatory statements are often made just before the interviewer writes—as here (L13). By contrast, positive confirmatory statements are usually given after the writing and have an interactional rather than a substantive function (see also Section 6.6 below).

While, in unsuccessful interviews, these translations may help to smooth interactional problems locally, they often contribute to problems of understanding over the course of the interview. If these translations are repeated, and are quite distant from the original words or meaning of the candidate’s statement, they can feed into misunderstandings and negative constructions of the candidate. Candidates who were repeatedly given such translations were criticised by the interviewer with comments such as ‘I had to give him the answer’; and these assessments could be transferred to judgements of the candidate’s character – that they would require ‘spoonfeeding’ or would not take on responsibility. This is another example of candidates’ talk being used to make general judgements about personality (see also Chapter 7).

6.5.7 Disallowing alternative narrative structures

One of the main reasons for using reformulations, closed questions and negative confirmatory statements is to disallow narratives which do not conform to interviewers’ expectations. As with asylum seeking interviews (Jacquement 2005, Maryns 2005) cutting off narratives is a strategy of control and interviewer requirements become stricter in situations of mistrust.

The operation of this restriction can be clearly seen in example 38 above L3-8, where Luis attempts to structure his response using an inductive narrative structure, which
does not set out at the opening of the turn the main points to be made, but rather
gives a general introduction to the material to be dealt with. This structure is rejected
by Abeni, who immediately demands the main point to be made (L9-14). The fact
that the candidate usually does not understand the reasons why his response is
being disallowed contributes to the potential for miscommunication.

6.5.8 Problems with hidden cues and less context

Just as interviewers use closed questions and reformulations to control the content
and structure of candidates’ responses, they also use indirect means for controlling
the amount candidates should talk. Inferring the meaning of closing cues such as
‘right’, ‘ok’, and ‘I understand that’, depend upon both an understanding of what is
an appropriate amount to say and what counts as relevant as well as reading the
meaning implicit in the intonation of these cues.

Interviewers commented negatively about candidates who they said they could not
control. This perception may be the result of the fact that candidates could not read
the subtle cues which interviewers were using to attempt to control them. For
example, Bruno, an Italian candidate, is led by his experience of interviews abroad to
treat the interview as an open conversation among equals. By contrast, the
interviewer is attempting to keep the interview within a competence structure,
which contains set questions with a specific amount of time allotted to each of them.
However, he does not state this explicitly, but rather uses tokens such as ‘okay’ to
indicate that enough has been said. The candidate took these tokens as signs that he
should continue speaking.

Main and follow-up questions which are less embedded and give fewer details also
require higher levels of inferencing since there are fewer cues as to how the question
should be interpreted and answered. For example, a British Afro-Caribbean
candidate Lloyd, and a Polish candidate, Renard, are given contrasting amounts of
help by the interviewer when asked the same question about how they managed
repetitive work, in an interview for a manual job. Lloyd is given more clues in the
question: ‘Is there anything you did in the way you got things organised, set things
out for instance?’. He is therefore able to gauge the right level on which to answer
the question and goes on to describe strategies he used to deal with boredom in
physically organising his work. Renard, by contrast is asked more generally: ‘How
did you cope? How did you stay focused?’ and his answer, which concentrates on
the fact that his boss needed him to do this work, is rated less highly because it is
viewed as overly analytical and removed from his experience of the actual work he
was doing. Similarly, in the extract from Luis’ interview given above, the interviewers’
reformulations simply repeat the question, and so do not give any extra information
on the meaning and purpose of the question, and how he might answer it.

6.5.9 Situational questions

Situational, or hypothetical questions (which focus on what one would do in a given
situation, rather than actual past experiences) can lead to miscommunication
sequences, where candidates struggle to grasp the exact parameters of the hypothetical scenario. An example of such a situational question is shown below:

“If you weren’t happy with the way a customer spoke to you (.) if you were successful with this on the collection route (.) what would you do then?”

As is evident here, hypothetical questions frequently relate to how the candidate would perform certain tasks in the position applied for. They therefore disadvantage candidates who have little knowledge of the job or company procedure, and benefit those who have worked for the company applied to, or in a very similar role, beforehand. They do not lend themselves to embedding, as they do not concern past experience and are decontextualised. For example, in the interview of one unsuccessful candidate, Alex, there are several long reformulation sequences following situational questions (see Section 6.5.4). Alex is hesitant to respond here, asks for clarifications of the scenario, and raises the obvious problem that his actions ‘would depend on the situation’. The ‘funnelling’ of hypothetical questions is more problematic than that of experienced-based questions where prompting can act as a memory jog. The reformulating of hypothetical questions leads to more negotiation about the nature of the scenario rather than successful elicitation of a response (see Alex extract in Section 6.5.4 lines 20-21). Although we did not find that these questions were particularly difficult for any ethnic group, we did find that situational questions can exacerbate interactional problems in the context of the negative dynamic; this may partially explain Huffcutt & Roth’s (1998) finding that Black and Hispanic candidates perform better on behavioural, rather than situational questions.

6.5.10 Other indicators of a negative dynamic

As with the positive dynamic, the negative dynamic manifests in idiosyncratic ways in every interview. Further features of the negative dynamic which appeared in some interviews are given below.

More secondary stories and fewer follow-on questions near the end of an interview usually indicate that the interview has not gone well and that the interviewer is no longer processing the candidate’s responses. This is in contrast to very successful interviews where they may mark a relaxed and informal atmosphere when they appear near the beginning of the interview.

Another marker of difficulty is a high level of metacommunication (talk about talk). For example, when interviewers are trying to help a candidate produce more processable responses, they sometimes ‘step back’ to explain the whole interview process to them. For example, Tobias, in the extract below, interrupts Yohannes’ response to explain the purpose of all the interview questions to him.
Although it is indirectness which causes so many problems in the interview, this type of direct, critical and lengthy explanation also seems to cause problems. It makes explicit the interview frame, bringing out into the open that this is a ‘game’ and so creating discomfort. The implication is that knowing how to do the interview game is itself a marker of a candidate’s suitability for the job. So, the fact that the interviewer gives the explanation quoted above marks Yohannes as incompetent, as the interviewer commented when watching this extract.

‘Translation’ (See Section 6.5.6) is one response to unprocessable answers but the alternative can also be damaging to candidates once a negative dynamic has been established. In these cases, interviewers do not attempt to fill in words and long word search pauses by candidates are then used as evidence of ‘poor English’.

### 6.6 Managing writing

The requirements of equal opportunities legislation and the trend towards increasing accountability and record keeping mean that the job interview is now a text-based event. In all the data, interviewers wrote up candidates’ answers. Often this required considerable negotiation including reformulations, confirmatory statements and comments about the writing process. This was particularly the case when there was a single interviewer who had to both interact with and write about the candidate. Since all candidates and interviewers are faced with managing talk and writing, the writing component of the interview affects the social interaction in several ways, often making the interview longer. In many cases half the interview is spent writing. Some interviewers and candidates expressed concern about the impact of this on communication in the interview.

#### 6.6.1 The purpose of writing in the job interview

Often within organisations, there seemed to be a lack of clarity concerning the purpose of the copious amount of writing carried out in the job interview. While those responsible for designing job interviews and more senior managers stressed
the objectivity which the writing was seen to lend to the interview process, interviewers often stressed the accountability and protection against discrimination charges which the writing produced. While official organisational policy framed the writing as offering a space for reflection between observation and judgements, in practice interviewers rarely read over the (often copious) notes which they made before coming to a decision. Indeed, they routinely told the researchers what their decision was immediately after the interview had finished.

6.6.2 Synchronising of talk and writing

Candidates have to decide when to pause, whether to segment talk into units (so that it is processable in written form), and when to start talking again to attract the interviewer’s attention and gaze. Similarly, interviewers have to write, but they also have the problem of showing they are listening through gaze and back channels. For example, Lloyd effectively manages the writing by describing his job in small information units. After a longer turn, he uses raised pitch and hand movements to attract the interviewer’s gaze and maintain involvement. He keeps talking through the writing so that there are no uncomfortable silences. Lloyd and his interviewers’ co-operative work to achieve the written record of the interview helps to create a good interactional relationship, evident in jokes they make about the problems that the combination of talk and writing produces.

6.6.3 Respect and embarrassment

Some interviewers indicated that they found it difficult to be professional interviewers and write. They felt a certain loss of face, or embarrassment, in trying to interact and write simultaneously. Similarly, some candidates criticised the lack of feedback they received, which they felt signalled a lack of respect on the part of the interviewers. Writing, therefore, is potentially face-threatening for both sides. It creates embarrassment but is also used to hide some embarrassment when the interaction is not going well. For example, Mohammed’s talk trails off as the interviewer begins to write. The interviewer then asks several low level questions, looking down at the form and beginning to write as soon as Mohammed responds. This in turn is interpreted by Mohammed as a cue to stop. This negative dynamic continues until Mohammed starts to continue talking while the interviewer writes. This creates a new dynamic in which the interviewer lifts his gaze while writing, asks more open questions and attends to Mohammed as he talks rather than immediately looking down at the form. It is at this point that Mohammed begins an effective narrative, and a turning point in the interview is achieved (see Section 6.4.11).

6.6.4 Writing to track relevance

Writing is one of a number of channels used as implicit cues (see Section 6.5.8). In most cases, a candidate can track how relevant their response is perceived as being in two ways: firstly, by noticing when the interviewer is writing or not and, secondly, by the overall amount of writing done by interviewers. Long stretches without writing usually indicate the candidate’s response is not bureaucratically processable.
For example, in the case of Vijay, an unsuccessful Indian born abroad candidate, only 43 per cent of the interview time is spent writing, compared with 80 per cent for a successful candidate with the same interviewers. However, there are exceptions to this rule, as with the early stages of Mohammed’s interview, (see above).

Unsuccessful candidates often fail to read the non-writing cue and continue with content that is not bureaucratically processable for the interviewer. Translating a candidate’s response (see Section 6.5.6) before writing down the translation is another indicator of a negative dynamic. Some candidates such as Mohammed have more expectations of feedback than the interviewer accounts for, and are put off by the writing, so that their speech trails off when the writing starts. In these ways, the amount of writing seems to further impede the already strained interaction with candidates who fail, and to contribute to the negative dynamic, thus encouraging snap judgements rather than preventing them.

A large amount of time, interactional energy, and organisational resources are spent on making a written record of the job interview. Writing is a measure which is intended to increase objectivity and remove the space for discrimination in the interview. However, because writing contributes to the negative dynamic in unsuccessful interviews, it can contribute to disadvantage to candidates who struggle to manage the interaction in an interview.

### 6.7 Conclusions

Because the interview is a joint production, interviewers’ performance plays a large role in their judgement of candidates. The candidate may be blamed for interviewers’ own poor performance. Except in the case of ‘presentation’ type interviews, there is plenty of scope for improvisation within the conventionalised order of the interview. This can lead to a positive or negative dynamic developing which sets the overall emotional tone of the interview. Most of this improvisation occurs in interviewer responses and follow-ups to candidates’ answers, so these are just as important as the main questions. Training that only focuses on main questions and subsequent funnelling will only partially affect the intricate ways in which interviewers and candidates have to manage the whole interaction.

The interview is hard interactional work for both interviewers and candidates. The demands it places on the interviewer have been underestimated as have the effects of their role in the final outcome. They are caught in the tension between, on the one hand, the need to bureaucratically process candidate answers, to ask orthodox competence based questions, and to adhere to the hidden rules of the interview game; and, on the other, the pressing need to sustain this face to face event as a social encounter where some level of involvement and interpersonal exchange is inevitable. When there is less shared knowledge and styles of communication are different, as is most frequently the case with born abroad relative newcomer candidates, the interactional work for both sides becomes even harder as the next chapter shows. See Section 8.6 for more detailed conclusions for this chapter.
7 Language and diversity

7.1 Introduction

One group of candidates, those who were born abroad and are bilingual speakers, and particularly those who are relative newcomers to the UK, are much less likely to succeed than either white or British ethnic minority (EM) candidates. The job interview constructs a linguistic penalty against them. There are three sets of reasons for this. Firstly, they experience the potential difficulties that all candidates face (as Chapters 5 and 6 have shown) but much more intensely. Secondly, there are specific factors that disadvantage them because of their relatively recent arrival in the UK. For both reasons it is more difficult to negotiate a shared understanding of the culture of the British job interview and interactional problems are common. Finally, difficulties are readily attributed to a general, undifferentiated and unsubstantiated explanation of ‘poor English’.

As Chapters 5 and 6 have shown, the job interview requires a special rationale and set of inferences and puts unusual communicative demands on candidates (and interviewers). We use the term ‘linguistic capital’ to describe the communicative resources and cultural knowledge required to perform successfully in the interview. Born abroad candidates experience the demands of the interview for specific kinds of linguistic capital, which often differ greatly from those used in everyday interaction, as a more frequent cause of interactional problems and interactionally produced disfluency.

In our data, this group were bilingual with at least a functional command of English (many had used English at work in the UK or overseas and the great majority had learnt English at school overseas or in a learning setting in the UK). Nevertheless, the combination of the demands of the interview and a communicative style that was, in nearly all cases, different from the interviewer’s, meant that they were disproportionately likely to be unsuccessful. Those who failed were judged either as ‘having poor English’ or as possessing other negative qualities as a result of interactional difficulties evident in interviewer comments such as ‘He took control of the interview’, ‘I had to spoon-feed him’, or ‘I didn’t trust him’.
These judgements indicate that there is a linguistic penalty that this group faces, analogous to the ethnic penalty. They are judged as lacking the linguistic capital to do the job well because they are failed by the demands of the job interview. It is assumed that if you cannot talk well in the job interview you will not be able to do the job well.

Judgements of ‘poor English’ are problematic. They sweep together a complex range of difficulties in the interview under an unverified generalisation. Unlike the type of reasons for rejection now quite unacceptable, such as ‘she wouldn’t fit in’, ‘poor English’ is not challenged as a reason for failing a candidate. What is meant by this judgement and how it came to be made is not scrutinised.

Born abroad candidates bring to the interview different experiences of work and of job interviews and an internalised set of concerns which we call ‘the immigrant story’. These relate to anxieties about possible discrimination, failure and negative ethnic stereotyping. Given the difficulties faced by all EMs in accessing employment (DWP 2004), these anxieties may also affect British EM candidates but there was no evidence of this in the interviews. These different experiences, allied to differences in communicative style lead to the high number of misunderstandings, misalignments and reformulations in interviews with born abroad candidates discussed in Section 6.2.2.

Given that interactional problems are common, an equal opportunities stance might lead one to suggest that more ‘presentation’ type interviews are the answer (see Section 6.1.4). However, the born abroad bilingual candidates experience the disadvantages of these interviews more intensely than British white and EM candidates (just as with semi-structured interviews). Candidates who commented on the presentation interviews they underwent found them ‘intimidating’, saying that if you ‘get uptight, you lose your way’. These candidates said that they would prefer more informal interviews, ‘when you can explain yourself better and there is a natural flow’. They were also disappointed about the lack of interaction with and feedback from interviewers (see Section 6.1.4, see also Chafe 1980).

7.2 Communicative style

A candidate’s authorial voice (see Chapter 5) consists of their communicative style, a particular version of which they are using for the job interview. Some aspects of this style are individual, for example a voice quality or ‘acoustic signature’. But most aspects associate the individual with a social group. This style consists of assumptions about how to present oneself, rhetorical strategies, choices of vocabulary and grammar and, at the most micro level, largely hidden, automatic ways of conveying meaning through intonation, tone of voice, rhythm and tempo. Communicative style affects both how speakers design their talk and how they interpret others’ talk; it therefore feeds into both the candidates’ contribution and the way the interaction is played out.
When the stakes are low or speakers are not being judged on how they come across, differences in communicative style may not be attended to at all. For example, football players recruited from overseas do not have a linguistic penalty held against them, despite the variance in their communicative style from more ‘standard’ British styles. However, in the job interview, the further apart the communicative styles of the interviewer and candidate are from each other, the more likely the interviewer is to make negative assessments about the candidate’s competence in English and their personality. These differences may also confirm negative ethnic stereotypes related to a particular group’s competence in English.

In a heterogeneous society such as Britain, there is no necessary or simple one-to-one correspondence between an individual’s ethnicity and their communicative style. Some aspects of style are common across large cultural areas and any individual’s style will depend upon the intensity of particular networks of relationships and, for those born abroad, the length of time they have been in the UK. For example, a recently arrived Italian speaker will use English heavily influenced by their Italian communicative style. They may remain within an Italian speaking network or may interact regularly with members of other linguistic communities, in which case their style may change. A speaker may have one aspect of style which appears to align them to a particular ethnic group and other aspects which seem more typical of another ethnic group. For example, an Italian newcomer may structure his stories as someone speaking local or ‘standard’ English will, and yet he may have a very different way of taking turns in a conversation. For those who are not expert in English, differences in style may also be combined with the fact that they are struggling to produce or process language. For example long pauses between utterances may be a feature of a particular style but also be the result of the speaker searching for the appropriate word.

No one style is intrinsically better than another. For example, the western linear or ‘teleological style’ (Auer and Kern 2000) in which talk is structured around some final outcome or purpose and which appears natural and universal to western speakers, can appear naïve or unpersuasive to non-westerners (Chafe 1980, 52) (see the western narrative structure discussed in Sections 5.3 and 7.2.2). However, in the context of the job interview, interviewers (often unconsciously) value certain styles of speaking over others. A complex set of, largely unarticulated, assumptions about how a candidate or member of one’s workforce ought to speak become generalised as ‘communication skills’ – so it is difficult to interrogate what they consist of and whether they are really relevant or necessary to the job being interviewed for.

7.2.1 Knowledge and assumptions brought in

The assumptions about the kind of personality interviewers look for are linked to western ideas about, and ideals of, the self. Decisions about how personal or impersonal, individualistic or collective, to be in the interview are influenced by such norms. For example, candidates from former communist countries tended to be more oriented to collective work and less individualistic in the way they answered questions (see also Auer and Kern 2000). Similarly, ideas about what constitutes
evidence – what counts as a reasonable explanation or believable motivation – are culturally constructed. Disparities between the candidates and interviewers’ understandings of evidence can lead to misunderstandings and, fatally, mistrust of candidates. So, for example, some candidates of South Asian origin felt that their qualifications were the best evidence of their ability, and sought to foreground them but the significance of qualifications was not appreciated by interviewers since it was not evidence of actual work experience.

Contradictory assumptions about self-presentation, particularly about how to position oneself in relation to the interviewer, often cause interactional problems. Candidates have been advised to ‘sell themselves’ and yet many bring along to the interview expectations of a more deferential relationship to the interviewers. This can lead to judgements that candidate’s are unnecessarily formal and stiff, repeating ‘trained’ interview responses or inconsistent in their orientation to the interviewer (see Section 5.8.4).

7.2.2 Rhetorical strategies

Different linguistic and cultural traditions produce different ways of organising and structuring arguments and stories. The western ‘teleological’ style works out the ending first (as Conan Doyle is said to have done with the Sherlock Holmes stories) and then uses a tight ‘cause and effect’ structure to get there. The ‘standard’ western narrative style (see Section 5.3.1) exemplifies this structural tendency. However, candidates bring different rhetorical strategies to the interview. These may be more inductive styles, in which time is given to context setting first and evaluative points emerge later. Similarly, candidates may employ associative styles (Michaels 1981, Akinnaso & Ajirorutu 1982), in which the connection between topics is inferred not through overt logical or structural links but via a gradual building up of associative relationships between themes. By contrast, a more assertive strategy, in which maxims, proverbs and general truths are seen as making one’s talk more authoritative is used by some born abroad candidates (see also Günthner and Knoblauch 1991), including several candidates of South Asian origin. This assertive style is often manifested in extreme case formulations, such as a comment by Vijay, an Indian candidate, that ‘If you don’t like your job, there’s no way you can work there’.

In practice, the styles listed above leak into more ‘standard’ western strategies that candidates are also using. Previous research suggests that in stressful settings, such as job interviews, speakers are more likely to fall back on these earlier strategies (Gumperz 1992, 302; Hawthorne 1992, 95). This finding was corroborated by an Italian candidate, Bruno, who commented in the post-interview that when he got nervous he forgot his words in English, and spoke in an Italian style. Candidates with this mix of different styles may be judged as having poor communication skills or being less than credible or coherent. Everyday workplace communication in low-paid, routine jobs does not require the extended narratives or analytic summaries evident in the job interview data, where differences in rhetorical strategies become more marked.
7.2.3 Grammar, vocabulary and micro features

Grammar, vocabulary and features of intonation, stress and rhythm together cue the particular discourses, and shifts in discourse, which occur in interviewers’ questions and candidates’ contributions. They also act in a dynamic way to indicate what aspects of context are relevant at any moment. These contextualisation cues (Gumperz 1982a), include features such as the stress on ‘you’ to indicate that the answer should be about specific personal experiences and not a more general answer, or the falling tone which can indicate ‘thank you, you have said enough’. They are crucial to the alignment of the candidate to the interviewer and the interactional ‘health’ and overall emotional tone of the interview.

7.3 Discourses and misalignments

Chapter 5 illustrates the complex ways in which candidates are expected to align themselves to the different discourses which the interviewers’ questions seek to elicit. Different communicative styles and a lack of familiarity with institutional (and corporate) assumptions create a much higher incidence of misalignments in born abroad interviews (see Chapter 6). There are three particular areas where newcomers face more intense difficulty than other candidates: discourse misalignment over how personal and specific to be about previous work experience; misalignment about how to relate to the institutional identity of the interviewer; and difficulties with claims and evidence – how to come across as credible.

7.3.1 Institutional and occupational discourses

Newcomers find the hidden contextualisation cues of the interviewers about what discourse is expected hard to pick up. This is often because the question on the surface asks for one discourse, but the expectation is for another (Roberts and Sarangi 1999) (see Section 5.4.1). For example, Mohammed was asked ‘What do you like about teamwork?’ but failed to understand the implied message. The question was posed in a personal discourse, and asked for an evaluation of the positive aspects of teamwork. But the interviewer was actually looking for a response which used occupational discourse to describe Mohammed’s positive experiences of teamwork. The interviewer subsequently successfully reformulated the question, explicitly stating that he wanted to hear ‘how you had to work as a team to get something done’ and with this accurate cueing of the required discursive response, Mohammed gave an appropriate answer. Several candidates mentioned that they found this mismatch between ‘vague and abstract’ questions and expectations of specific concrete answers difficult to manage.

Similarly, misalignments occur when the question is apparently in occupational discourse mode but actually requiring a more institutional, analytic answer. Some members of this group of candidates find questions about their daily routine, such as ‘What does your job involve?’, hard to answer (Roberts et al. 1992). They are not being asked to describe what time they start and end the day, as Rakesh assumes, but what transferable skills in the current job are relevant to the job applied for.
The mismatch between institutional discourse questions and expected answers in occupational discourse is reinforced by some candidates’ use of a more assertive and impersonal style, which offers general maxims when the interviewer is looking for occupational discourses. For example when Rakesh is asked about his work experience he answers: ‘When we are approaching a customer we should be very polite’. He is admonished by the interviewer for failing to conform to the narrative demands: ‘What I’m looking for like specific examples as what you have done or whether anything has happened’. This is one of many difficulties that this group has with the style and discourse expected in talking about work experience.

### 7.3.2 Occupational discourses

If a candidate’s narrative structure when talking about their work (see Section 5.3.1), does not conform to the interviewer’s, it is more difficult for the interviewer not only to understand the whole story but also the many individual points and perspectives which it frames. Unfamiliar structures mean that interviewers cannot infer from candidates’ cues the wider context of their story or track where it is going. This unfamiliarity also leads to ‘talking down’ and a negative interactional dynamic (see Section 6.5).

#### Unsuccessful example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 42. Luis: Filipino Born abroad, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. C: okay (.) g- ah- here my p-ah I have a part-time work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. as a bar staff as a bar tender? (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. (seven seconds of talk deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. C: i-it’s a in a restaurant ba- yeah then (. ) ((coughs))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. in ah I’m [working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I: what is the] name of the bar?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. C: the bar- name of the bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I: mhm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. C: is it’s ah the (xxxxx)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I: (spell that for me)] please? (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. (five seconds of talk deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I: okay (.) now tell me about (xxxxxxxx)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. C: oh [yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. I: how many people were there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. C: ah we a- I think we are- we only eh nine [staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I: mhm]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. C: and two managers (.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I: okay [and wh-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. C: and] working in a restaurant is er- really busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. [really</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I: what w-] what was your main role your responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. what did you [do there</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Luis’s narrative structure is repeatedly fractured by the interviewer because it is perceived as failing to conform to requirements. This failure is in turn viewed as evidence of ‘poor communication skills’
Abeni interrupts Luis’s answer (L6) to ‘correct’ his narrative structure – she demands the name of the restaurant as an opening context before he can continue to the main body of his answer. After an opener (L9 ‘tell me about xxxxxx’), she cuts into his replies to ask closed questions how many people were there, and what his main responsibility was (see Section 6.5.3). Abeni’s prompts here conform to a pre-formed structure: she demands an opening description of the situation which includes the name of the company, the size of the team, and what drinks were served; a description of Luis’s particular role; a specific action which Luis took; and (after this extract) a conclusion in terms of his feelings about the advantages of teamwork which have been evinced in the narrative (see Section 5.3.1). These overall narrative requirements are very clear to the interviewer, but they are invisible to the candidate, whose story is broken up into closed, factual question/answer sequences.

Luis’ exposition ‘working in a restaurant is er- really busy’ (L19) seems to be unacceptable to Abeni, perhaps due to stylistic features: the lack of personalisation (which her reformulation which explicitly demands ‘what was your main role, your responsibility, what did you do’ L21-22), the generality of the statement, or the fact that it does not immediately establish relevance to the topic at hand, that of teamwork. Luis is using a more inductive style, building up the context first. The way in which the demand for a particular narrative structure constrains Luis’ responses here is evident in his later responses, which again reveal that his strategy seems to be to give more general contextual information before giving specific information such as where the work was located.

7.3.3 Personal discourses

Unsuccessful candidates were sometimes criticised for not describing enough what their role was in their previous jobs, or what initiatives they took. Some of these candidates were from ex-communist countries or states, and their modes of self-presentation in the interview seem to have been influenced by the discourses of their past socialisation – which emphasised collective achievement over individualism (Auer 1998). For example, Renard is asked to describe his particular role in the team.

Unsuccessful example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 43. Renard: Polish Born abroad, Borderline Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: okay so how do you see your role in the- in the- the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. team and I- I- I know there are only three people err=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: =yeah=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I: =doing it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. C: yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I: but</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. C: e::rrm we were like err trying something new (.) in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Poland (.) and err this was like e::rr we have to write</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. everything what we’ve done and we dis- err- cuss (.) for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. example (.) my friend said to me (.) err I will do this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. err by this way (.) and I listen them what they’ve got to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Renard’s introduction and conclusion relate not to his particular role, but the wider structures and circumstances which his work occurs in – Poland and children’s education. In this way, he foregrounds the ‘common good’ rather than his personal motivations. He doesn’t appraise himself, and his focus is on group effort (L7 ‘we were trying something new’) and the actions he describes are performed collectively (‘we write everything’, ‘we discuss’ L8-9). Although Renard was borderline successful in the interview, this particular contribution was perceived by the interviewer as indicating a lack of initiative and willingness to take on personal responsibility (see Section 4.3.1). However, Renard’s style may simply reflect the dominant ways of speaking about and understandings of work which he was brought up with. Other born abroad candidates, including Rakesh, Yohannes and Afram, were also criticised for not identifying their specific role in a team, but rather speaking too much of what ‘we’ did.

By contrast, some candidates were criticised for using too much of their personal discursive mode to structure their responses, and so not aligning to the institution. These candidates tend to organise their responses around the self as an emotional being, rather than the competence based structure which the interviewers are attempting to employ. For example, Bruno, an Italian candidate, moves in an associational manner between narratives which link comparisons between work environments in Italy and in London with his reasons for wanting a certain kind of job. This attempt to initiate the interviewer into one’s personal universe of meaning was sometimes seen as ‘unprofessional’ by interviewers who resisted such involvement.

Standards concerning the amount of detail which it is appropriate to give on certain topics are culturally relative (Tannen 1989, 164). Attempts to involve the listener emotionally by giving detailed descriptions is reacted to in various ways by different interviewers. With Sara, a candidate who is perceived as excessively emotional in her manner, the interviewer becomes more formal. The response of Bruno’s interviewer, Tobias, was more subtle, but he commented ironically in the video feedback, during a detailed, emotional section of Bruno’s interview (as he put his hand to his face) ‘I think that’s me wiping a tear away’. Both viewed the candidates as performers in a negative sense; these assessments contrast with interviewers’ perceptions of vividness in storytelling as lending authenticity to the contributions of several British white and EM candidates (see Section 5.6.1). There appears to be a subtle line between being vivid and persuasive, on the one hand, and over-emotional, on the other.
7.3.4 Appropriate footing

Relative newcomers tended to misjudge how to place themselves in relation to the interviewer and the institutional hierarchy. This can be a particular problem for born abroad candidates, who may be highly qualified, with a professional identity which does not match the low-paid job being applied for. Some candidates put themselves very much on an equal footing with the interviewers, using a ‘lecturing’ style which was seen as sententious, and presumptuous overriding of turn-taking rules. For example, a South Asian candidate, Vijay, who had an MBA, was seen by interviewers as over-qualified and too assertive, in using extreme case formulations such as ‘I know everything about business management’, which assumed a professional equity with, or even superiority to, his interviewers (see Section 7.5.1).

7.3.5 Claims and evidence

Different communicative styles put different emphases on the relationship between claims and evidence. In the western tradition, claims have to be backed up with evidence if the speaker is to be credible and convincing. Many assertive styles use claiming and general maxims as persuasive rhetorical strategies as with Rakesh above ‘When we are approaching a customer we should be very polite’. However, the interviewers were predisposed to favour an evidence-based approach which uses specific examples to show the candidate’s personal strategies in solving problems.

Similarly, written records in some societies are more persuasive evidence of suitability and competence than in the British interview, where convincing talk is more important. This is the case with overseas qualifications but also with other forms of evidence as in the following example from Rakesh’s interview, where he gives this evidence of customer satisfaction.

Unsuccessful example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 44. Rakesh: Indian Born abroad, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: okay so when when you normally er prepares the meal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. (.) special dishes fo- for them [the restaurant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. customers] how do they normally take your help (. ) how do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. they how do they react to that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. C: yeah often because the restaurant used- is just erm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ( .) er book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I: comments yeah [okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. C: as in] yeah then they write that’s a- a anybody can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. see that=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I: =okay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. C: compliments that they write sure ( .)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So, whereas the interviewer is looking for an account of a direct face-to-face interaction which took place between Rakesh and a customer, which demonstrates empathy with the customer on the part of the interviewee, Rakesh sees a written account as more convincing evidence of his customer service skills.
7.4 ‘Authorial voice’

Consistency, coherence and credibility are largely judged on speech delivery and how far candidates can present their experiences to show rationality and continuity in their working lives – ‘You are what you talk’. Both these aspects present particular difficulties for born abroad candidates.

7.4.1 Blending discourses and persuasive reporting

Successful candidates add humour and more personalised language to their analytical answers (see Section 5.5.1) and manage self-disclosure in subtle ways. By contrast, many unsuccessful born abroad candidates can have particular issues with hybrid styles, which combine discourses dominant in the western interview with more familiar linguistic and cognitive strategies acquired in their ‘native’ language environment to produce styles which can appear ‘fragmentary’, ‘incongruent’ and ‘jarring’ to interviewers (see also Auer 1998). These interviewer perceptions of candidate’s communicative style in turn produce negative judgements of inconsistency and doubts about trust and trustworthiness.

Interviewer perceptions of successful candidates’ as ‘persuasive’ (see Section 5.6) are a product of the vividness which comes from the use of imagery in narrative and the blending of sound and sense. Both the blending of discourse and employment of persuasive reporting represent challenges for candidates whose functional English is adequate but whose resources in literate, idiomatic and image-based language are more restricted.

7.4.2 Trained responses

Trained answers and ways of talking that seem grafted onto the candidate’s communicative style sound ‘scripted’ and also feed into a judgement that the candidate is unconvincing or untrustworthy (see Section 5.8). Often, born abroad candidates have been selected for job interview training or have picked up advice about how to ‘sell’ themselves and are struggling with how to integrate their own style with these new precepts. In this context, it is harder for such candidates to produce a consistent authorial voice, as they shift between styles or slot prefabricated chunks into a more personal and less fluent style (see Sara in Section 5.8.1, and Auer 1998).

7.5 Negative dynamic with candidates born abroad

7.5.1 Negative dynamic experienced more intensely

In addition to the difficulties that lead to a negative dynamic (see Section 6.5), candidates born abroad face two major related problems. Firstly, interactional and communicative difficulties and, secondly, difficulties related to their status and lack of (extensive) British work experience. In both cases, interviewers are jointly responsible for the production and exacerbation of these problems.
Because the interview is a ‘joint production’ interviewers are implicated in the construction of candidates as ‘having poor English’, ‘needing spoon feeding’ and other judgements which are the result of problems of understanding and attempts at repair. There are more misalignments and misunderstandings with born abroad candidates and more and longer reformulation sequences. Sometimes additional questions are asked which are more conceptually demanding and more face-threatening since they often question the motivation of the candidate. There is more ‘talking down’ to candidates, as reformulations become increasingly simple and narrow, and more sudden topic shifts without sufficient contextualisation or signposting by the interviewer.

Since this group is also more likely to be unsuccessful, there is a clear connection between failure, misunderstandings and the interactional discomfort that they produce. One of the main difficulties is the amount of failure in attempted repair sequences of which long reformulations are, in most cases, an example. One aspect of this discomfort is the effect it has on interviewers’ own competence. They become less fluent, which in turn makes their questions and follow-ups harder for candidates to process. For example, Sukinder’s interviewer, in a difficult moment taken from a borderline successful interview, becomes nervous on having to reformulate a question about the difficulties of repetitive work.

**Unsuccessful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 45. Sukinder: Indian Born abroad, Borderline Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: right okay] (. ) okay (. ) so what’s the most difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. thing about that task (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: it’s (. ) it’s not difficult (. ) cos I-I used to get I-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I’m getting used with it [so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I: yeah]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: m- as long as I get used with it (. ) so it’s m- it’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. more easier for me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I: mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. C: so I don’t think it’s hard for me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I: okay (2) so what- what do you have to do- to sort of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. motivate yourself to get through that (. ) I mean you the-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. the- the newness of the job being-being new to the job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. is- is you know you’re-you’re not new anymore you know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. you’ve been there nearly- nearly- nearly two months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. C: yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. I: so (. ) how do you motivate yourself through that (. )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. task doing that same thing every day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, when the interviewer is faced with a misalignment which means that he has to reformulate, he stammers (L11-14), makes numerous false starts (L12-13) and contradicts himself (first speaking about newness to the job, and then saying ‘you’re not new any more’), all of which give the candidate less comprehensible input than he would expect.
In interviews with candidates who were born abroad, particularly relative newcomers, a negative dynamic is often established early on. As Chapter 6 shows, once there is a negative dynamic, and with born abroad candidates this can happen even before the main questions begin, the interview tends to become more formal and institutional (see Section 6.4.1). So this group of candidates experience a ‘triple whammy’ from the negative dynamic: there are more misalignments and misunderstandings and the attempts to solve them (on both sides) put more demands on their least strong resource, their communication skills in English in formal settings. These misalignments and misunderstandings are compounded by the lack of shared knowledge between candidates and interviewers of work experiences and other aspects of their lives which may be relevant to the job interview.

This lack of understanding of the other speaker’s context in interviews with born abroad candidates undermines the conditions for shared understanding. It is difficult for both sides to ‘imagine’ the wider context implied by the other (see foreign work experience below) and read the implicit cues which should help to call up a context (contextualisation cues). Born abroad candidates need more context, not less, than other groups and more explicitness to help them interpret hidden meanings in questions and follow-ups. Yet, interviewers’ questions in interviews with born abroad candidates are often less embedded and contextualised (see Section 6.5.8) than the questions posed to white and EM British candidates. Ironically, although interviewers try to help by being more explicit, this can lead to negative judgements of ‘spoon feeding’.

The following example, taken from Vijay’s interview, demonstrates many of these general points and the more specific ones covered in Sections 7.5.2 to 7.5.5. This interview is for a low-paid receptionist post in a hospital.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 46. Vijay: Indian Born abroad, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I1: can you tell us about your skills and experience that you’ve got erm that’s useful for the job that you’ve applied for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. C: Right .hmm first of all I would like to tell you about my qualifications that I’m a master graduate I’ve got a masters degree in information technology and business administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. (fourteen seconds of talk deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. C: Then regarding my work experience I started working for the hospital in the hospital line as a ward clerk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. (four seconds of talk deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: what you are doing you’re putting records on the system changing records amending records updating ()</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. (eighteen seconds of talk deleted)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. C: I- when I read through the job description I said I oh yes I’m confident I can do this job definitely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I1: Ok can I ask you a question I mean obviously um ()</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example 46. Continued:
20. two thousand and thre:e
21. C: yeah
22. I1: that’s when you obviously worked in the college
23. C: that’s right yeah
24. I1: Ok (.) and you was an admin officer so [therefore
25. C: yep]
26. I1: In terms of (.) I know you said that you um (1)
27. worked with um students, why did you discontinue work I
28. know you said obviously you was interested in working in
29. a hospital
30. C: yep
31. I1: [But it seems
32. C: It was a] fixed term job actually=
33. I1: =It was a fixed oh
34. (ten seconds of talk deleted)
35. I1: So does it have any more career prospects for you to
36. obviously work in the college or you just really felt it
37. the best sensible thing to [work in hospitals
38. C: well] wherever I work I enjoy my job that’s the only
39. thing which can keep you there right if you don’t if you
40. don’t like your job y- there’s no way that you can [work
41. there
42. I1: Ah well ok] so can I ask you know obviously you’re
43. studying your masters
44. C: yeah I’m doing my
45. I1: Your BA=
46. C: =yeah ((nods)) [yep
47. I1: yeah] what I was how d’you work it around your
48. working [life

7.5.2 ‘Talking down’ and misdiagnosed causes of misunderstanding

Failed attempts at repair occur when the interviewer (and/or candidate) cannot correctly identify the source of the misunderstanding or misalignment. This problem is sometimes exacerbated by the problem of ‘talking down’ to candidates by interviewers who assume that the problem is related to linguistic ability. ‘Talking down’ is experienced more intensely among the relative newcomers and here, an additional feature is the limited speech and highly accented style typical of what is called ‘foreigner talk’ used to talk to people who are presumed to have limited English. Some interviewers, as soon as they judge the candidate to be a poor speaker of English, shift into this style.

In the extract given above, the interviewer responds to the misalignment by giving more closed, negative questions (L13-22, L26-28, L32-7), which presume a lack of understanding. These negative questions are extra questions which are not given to other candidates, and which cast doubt on Vijay’s motivations in applying for the
job, and ability to do it, so constructing him as a failure. The focus moves away from showcasing his skills, and onto potential problems. He is also given less interactional control, and an adversarial atmosphere develops.

Vijay does not realise what these oblique extra questions are getting at – the need for him to demonstrate the specific skills, motivations and career trajectory which has led him to do this job (and not an administrative or educational position – L35-7), rather than speaking generally about his work history, and making unsubstantiated claims. The fact that he does not orient to these hidden meanings is evident in his responses such as ‘wherever I work I enjoy my job’ (L38), which ensure that he is marked negatively.

Another example of this problem is of a misunderstanding in Yohannes’ interview, where he misinterprets Tino’s question about dealing with changes which managers bring in as a question about changes which he himself has made and their impact on colleagues. However, Tino does not respond to this particular communication problem in a constructive way, but rather criticizes the lack of specificity in Yohanne’s style overall ‘I’m looking for specific examples’.

### 7.5.3 Recognition and attempts at repair too late

With born abroad candidates, as suggested above (in Section 7.2) there may be a general misalignment about how to answer all the questions (for instance, over issues such as whether they should describe hypothetical or actual scenarios, or how much they should personalise). This is not acknowledged (except in very subtle ways) until late in the interview, when attempts at repair are too overt, and disrupt the interaction with long explanations.

For example, in the extract given above, Vijay’s response from L1-18 is truncated for the purposes of brevity, but in fact he runs on for one hundred lines before the interviewer stops him to pose another question. By this time, he has gone off the point of the question and is seen by the interviewers as having wasted their time and lectured at them.

Another example of this is evident in Rakesh’s interview, where the interviewer allows one of his responses to run on for several minutes, only to subsequently disallow it and pose the question anew so that Rakesh has to begin again. By contrast, successful candidate’s responses are often intercepted by interviewers early on, so that they can be guided into giving an acceptable response. Again, there is a subtle distinction between helpful early guidance and early interruption.

### 7.5.4 Misread implicit (contextualisation) cues

One of the main reasons why effective repair comes too late is that interviewers tend to give implicit cues to the candidate about expected answers (see above). One way of cueing the candidate is by offering non-question prompts which ‘translate’ the candidate’s response into more institutionally relevant terms. However, these non-question prompts are often taken by candidates as requests for confirmation, rather
than cues to give more relevant and specific detail and analysis. Similarly, the cues to
stop speaking are also frequently misread. For example, in the full text of L1-18 of
the extract given above, Vijay failed to read subtle prompts by interviewers, such as
‘okay’, as cues to stop speaking, but rather took these as encouragement to
continue.

The next example is taken from Renard’s interview, which is borderline successful
overall. However, it contains a difficult interactional moment, quoted below, where
Renard fails to pick up implicit non-question prompts to give a conclusion about
how he worked with a team of teachers to design sports exercises for schoolchildren.

Unsuccessful example

Example 47. Renard: Polish Born abroad, Borderline Successful

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I: okay (. ) so oh- every exercise (. ) [you put forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>C: so after that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I: as a group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>C: yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I: you- you discuss as a group to see whether- what is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>good about that=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>C: =yeah=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>I: or what is bad about it=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>C: =yes=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>I: =and I take it the good ones you take it (. )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>C: =yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>I: =and the bad ones=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>C: =yeah=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>I: =you don’t=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>C: =yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>I: (30) ((writing notes)) okay (. ) right so I mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>looking back (. ) what would you say the advantages are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>(. ) as working as part of a team</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tobias, the interviewer, offers non-question prompts throughout the extract in an
attempt to encourage Renard to provide a conclusion in terms of the outcomes of his
work. Renard seems to feel that no further explanation is necessary, and takes
Tobias’ statements as requests for confirmation, rather than prompts to say more, or
to speak in a certain style. Tobias reformulates the question at L16-18 because of
what he perceives as Renard’s lack of response. Part of the problem here is that
Renard does not appear to pick up well on oppositional pairs in speech, where the
second half is unsaid in order to prompt a response, which Tobias uses twice in the
above extract (eg. ‘what is good about that’ L5-6 ‘the good ones you take it’ L10).
Such misunderstandings, caused by candidate’s misreadings of prompts, and
interviewer’s interpretations of minimal responses by born abroad candidates with
no elaborative comment or additional information, have also been found in other
research on British interviews with South Asian candidates (Gumperz 1992).
7.5.5 Less repair and negotiation of questions

Although there are more and longer reformulations with newcomers, there is also evidence of high numbers of unrepaired misunderstandings with this group. For example, the above extract from Vijay’s interview is taken from the opening stages when there were several reformulation sequences. However, towards the end of the interview these were absent. The unrepaired misunderstandings which occur in such situations are damaging as they feed into negative judgements (see Section 6.2.3).

Born abroad candidates do negotiate questions, but generally not as often nor as successfully as white British or EM British candidates. Frequently, negotiations by born abroad candidates are direct requests for repetition or clarification of the question (which may contribute to assumptions about poor English), rather than subtle negotiations of the kind of discourses and content required. They also usually elicit simple decontextualised repetitions of the question, rather than more adaptive, embedded or co-constructed responses.

7.6 Positive dynamic

Even in interviews which contain repeated problems of understanding, some good interviewers manage to achieve repair by using a flexible, improvisational approach, adapting to the candidate’s style, and taking joint responsibility for resolving problems – features which occur routinely in successful interviews (see Section 6.4). Some of these features are particularly important with candidates from this group, where reformulations are more frequent, intense and long.

The example given below from a Ghanaian candidate’s interview, where a misalignment is successfully resolved, demonstrates several of the points made below about achieving a positive dynamic. This interview has also been used to illustrate other aspects of a positive dynamic, (the reading of prompts and cues in (Section 6.4.7) and help with ‘filling in’ (see Section 6.4.10)) and so sheds light on the interviewer’s role in producing a felicitous interview with a candidate who might otherwise be written off as having ‘poor English’.

Successful example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 48. Terence: Ghanaian Born abroad, Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: erm ((clears throat)) (. ) have you ever had to sort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. of help a friend out in when they’ve got a problem or a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. difficulty (. ) have you ever been asked to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. C: eh yes [erm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I: friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: just just recently actually with with target (. ) e:r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. (. ) o- one morning e- m- normally I I work in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. evenings but I was called to come and cover for somebody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. who (. ) who’s- a man that had- had turned ill so I =</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example 48. Continued:
10. I: =who was ill sorry=
11. C: =yeah th- the husband wasn’t [well
12. I: right]
13. C: so she she had to leave (. ) the workplace
14. I: an- erm (. ) so what did you have to do cover her shift
15. C: yeah cover her shift (. ) I m- it involved actually
16. serving breakfast at the ward (. ) (and that kind of thing
17. ((softly))
18. I: erm (. ) did this friend talk to you or was it a
19. manager [that spoke to you
20. C: it was a( ) manager who who called [and
21. I: right]
22. C: spoke to me=
23. I: =have you had a a sort of a personal erm (. ) or even
24. a work colleague that’s actually spoken to you ( . ) that
25. you know they’re finding something difficult (. ) you know
26. they’re finding part of the job difficult (. ) has anyone
27. ever spoken to you (. )
28. C: th- tha- i- it well there’s there’s been
29. experience of that sort but then that that was erm when I
30. was a research assistant at a banking college back in
31. Ghana=
32. I: =yeah=
33. C: =yeah a:nd e:r (. ) it was a research that that we had
34. we had to do but then e- y- it had been divided up [so
35. I: mhm]
36. C: so everyone had a part to play (. ) but then one
37. colleague (. ) was having a problem (. ) getting his
38. together so (. ) we had to stay over night one time to
39. finish up [(so)
40. I: and] how did you cope with that

7.6.1 Reserving judgement for longer
The misunderstanding which takes place here (from line 5 onwards) occurs over
halfway through the interview and after several other misalignments and
misunderstandings. The misunderstanding occurs because Terence does not read
the implicit cue in ‘helping a friend out’. Amy, the interviewer, is looking for an
example where Terence has taken the initiative, informally, as a good team member,
to help a colleague. Despite the fact that this is fairly far into the interview, and the
interviewer, Amy, does not initially get the response that she wants, she still
continues to initiate repair. It is also significant that Amy does not immediately
dismiss as irrelevant the examples of foreign work experience which Terence offers,
as some interviewers do, but rather accepts them with backchannelling (L32, L35).
Other interviewers, such as Amy, continue to initiate repair midway through the
interview or in the penultimate question and this can make the difference between
a borderline failed interview and a successful one.
7.6.2 Accurately identifying the causes of misunderstandings

Rather than relying on stereotypes or taken for granted assumptions of why a candidate has misunderstood a question (such as ‘poor English’), interviewers who use best practice look to the candidates’ responses, and their own statements and interactional behaviour for clues as to what has caused a misunderstanding (see Section 7.5.1 for the reverse of this).

Here, Amy accurately diagnoses the source of the misunderstanding (L18-19), that Terence has not understood the need to show his interpersonal skills and use of agency in talking through a problem with a colleague *himself*. In fact, the initial question (L1-3) does not make explicit the requirement for showing one’s initiative and personal skills in talking directly with a colleague, and Amy recognises this and makes the requirement explicit (L23-27) (see Section 6.4.3).

7.6.3 Being direct, embedding questions and avoiding protracted clarification sequences

The interviewer has to strike a balance between making the purpose of the question explicit, and over-explanation which interrupts the candidate and disrupts the interaction. Embedded questions, where more context is given, and the question is linked explicitly to previous talk, foster chances of participation and draw out relevancy (see Section 6.4.6 where there is another example of a candidate from this group being asked more embedded questions). Rather than moving towards less embedded, more closed questions as reformulation sequences progress, good practice involves offering more information, asking the question in different ways and ‘tuning in’ to the candidate’s style. Embedded questions allow the candidate’s narrative flow to develop unimpeded (see Section 6.4.9 where there is also an example of tolerance of extended narrative from a candidate from this group). More embedded questions often involve a measure of toleration of ambiguity, digression, and acceptance of evidence which is relevant but is not given in the right topic phase or in an easily processable form. For example, an interviewer may accept and cue a candidate response about team working which follows a customer service question. Effective interviewers sift through talk to draw out the relevant points and prompt candidates to develop them.

For example, in the extract given above, Amy is direct in indicating the problem to Terence (L23-27). However, she does not repair by cutting into or dismissing Terence’s initial response, but rather recognises his point and co-constructs it with him (L14), before leading the discussion round to the right direction. She is direct, but not autocratic. She suggests an alternative way of giving his next response, but is flexible and takes into account and validates the response he has given so far in the statement ‘or even a work colleague’ (L23-24). Once Terence understands he has to restart, and begins to do so, Amy accepts his response and starts giving more feedback (L32, 35), without cutting into his responses. After this extract, she helps him to develop his points with short, embedded questions.
Another example of this kind of gradual informing and redirecting of a candidate by an interviewer is in Sukinder’s interview. When Sukinder fails to respond in the desired way to a question about his dislikes of repetitive work, and is unwilling to speak about the negative aspects of his job, the interviewer reformulates the question using different angles, such as asking him what his strategies for dealing with repetitive work might be – thus making explicit the purpose of the question, and taking the focus away from the negativity which Sukinder seems to find problematic.

7.6.4 Using empathy and involvement

Interviewers foster a positive dynamic and understanding atmosphere by giving feedback, showing that they are listening, acknowledging the problematic nature of certain questions, and taking care not to discourage or insult the candidate. Positive confirmatory statements (see Section 6.3.8) are one means of developing a positive and relaxed overall emotional tone.

For example, Sukinder’s interviewer, when reformulating a question, does face-saving or empathetic work which recognises the problems of the question asking for an example of one customer: ‘I know you dealt with them everyday lots of customers you know but one maybe that you...’. The interviewer also engages with and acknowledges Sukinder’s responses, in particular the ‘immigrant story’ of working hard, when guiding his responses in a new direction: ‘okay so I appreciate that you know you were working very hard but did – did this cause any problems within the team’. Sukinder knows that his perspective has been acknowledged, and is therefore able to align himself to the intention of the interviewer’s question.

Even in relatively unsuccessful interviews, interviewers can often find some kind of social bonds in common with the candidate which they can draw on (co-membership) to foster a positive dynamic, and make the candidate more comfortable. For example, Tobias, whose parents are from South India, accommodates an unsuccessful candidate from Kerala (Rakesh), by using Indian English to prevent and to attempt to overcome misunderstandings.

7.7 Foreign work experience

There are many challenges in making foreign work experiences (FWE) seem understandable and relevant to interviewers. These difficulties stem from interviewer assumptions about the irrelevance of FWE; the lack of shared knowledge of FWE and the need for more explanation of context; the effect this has on the structuring of narrative; and the search for equivalences in work experience abroad and in the UK. All these add a linguistic penalty and use up valuable time in which candidates could be advertising their skills to the interviewer.
7.7.1 Dismissal of FWE

FWE is sometimes dismissed by interviewers as irrelevant, either from the outset or later as in the following example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 49. Vijay: Indian Born abroad, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. C: because I worked as a ward clerk I’ve handled the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. reception I’ve got two years working=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I1: =Yeah I [understand that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. C: experience also] so I’m not afraid of anything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I2: But that’s obviously [in India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: right]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I1: not here ((laughs loudly))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. C: ((nods)) that’s in India yeah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. All: ((laughter))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. C: But patients are patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I1: ((Clears throat loudly)) ((looks at I2)) debatable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here the dismissal of Vijay’s work experience may also be attributed to his assertive style in using extreme case formulation (L4), and again in line 10 where his attempt to repair the situation is given in the form of a generalisation about patients, which is disallowed by the interviewer at line 11.

7.7.2 Lack of shared knowledge/context

Interviewers’ understanding of British candidates’ work experience is aided by their cultural knowledge of UK companies, and their experience of routinely eliciting information from candidates in familiar low-paid occupations, such as building or shop assistant work. Relative newcomers have to provide interviewers with more context than would be required in describing a British workplace. However, in attempting to make their experience relevant they are seen as ‘waffling’. This increased amount of context setting also foregrounds the differences between their work abroad and that in the UK, so constructing them as ‘foreign’.

7.7.3 Requirement for ‘Backgrounding’

Born abroad candidates have to work harder, with fewer interactional resources, to link their disparate experiences to those of the low-paid job applied for. The task of structuring talk, particularly narrative, becomes more difficult when one has to provide a lot of background information – as newcomers have to here. This is because, to give contextual information, candidates have to move between foregrounding (telling the story in chronological order) and backgrounding (adding in extra information and context). The requirement for candidates to move between these two modes of speaking makes the rhetorical task more complex, and can reduce fluency in both expert and non-expert speakers of English (see also Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005).
7.7.4  Lack of equivalences

Born abroad candidates (or interviewers) may lack the vocabulary to communicate about foreign work experience in English, as this work often involves particular technical or bureaucratic idioms and categories and structures unfamiliar to the interviewer. For example, one candidate in our study, a civil engineer, had worked as a civil servant in the Philippines, surveying land and ‘mapping’ the tax for different areas. As he was operating under different governmental structures, there is no direct equivalent for his job in the UK.

This difficulty in finding equivalences in work experience reflects the wider problem that ‘there is no standardisation for the equivalence of qualifications awarded in the UK and abroad’ (RSA 2005, 6). The incommensurability of skills and lack of standardisation at the level of both government policy and organisational practice contributes to the inability of highly qualified and experienced migrants to gain employment, or to earn a living wage, in the UK (RSA 2005, Evans et al. 2005). Although candidates from this group are often highly skilled, they were often unsuccessful in our data largely as a result of the difficulties involved in fitting their skills to a pre-defined organisational mould – in other words, their presentation of work experience lacked bureaucratic processability.

Although equivalences in trade and professional qualifications would help to shortcut attempts to explain them, the key point here is that this group of candidates have a greater communicative demand placed on them because of their interviewers’ lack of knowledge of their foreign work experiences. So those who may have a range and quality of experience that easily meets or exceeds the demands of the job are often, understandably but unfairly, required to provide more context and explanation. This requires them to do extra work in what is often their only vulnerable area: their communication skills in English in formal settings.

7.8  Different interview experience

Unlike most candidates, many of this group are less likely to have had experience of a formal British job interview and may not have social networks which could be sources of informal advice on how to play the interview game. There are also many distracters for them: most have had experience of job interviews in the countries they have left and may have had experience of immigration interviews where self-presentation demands are similar but by no means the same as those of job interviews. Furthermore, recent research into low-paid migrant workers in London found that 63 per cent of those surveyed found their current jobs through family and friends, and that many other respondents found their jobs through agencies or informal enquiries, with very few responding to adverts or going through formal recruitment procedures (Evans et al. 2005). The disparity between some born abroad candidate’s perceptions of the interview, and that of the interviewers, was graphically highlighted in the case of two unsuccessful born abroad candidates – Vijay and Rakesh – who were apparently confident that they had done well, giving themselves a nine out ten chance of success.
7.8.1 Differences between British interviews and interviews in the country of origin

These differences are realised in the high level of misunderstandings and misalignments, even with candidates such as the border-line successful Renard who has read the booklet provided about the interview by the organisation, and prepared answers accordingly (compared with other British candidates who are successful despite admitting they have not read the booklet).

Several relative newcomer candidates brought assumptions along that contrasted with the cultural norms of the British interview: that the candidate is assessed according to the needs of the organisation and their contributions should be constrained by this requirement. For example, candidates orientated to their training and job needs and wanted to talk about the experiences they thought were interesting and important rather than designing their responses around the competence demands of the interview questions. For example, one candidate, Yohannes, wanted to speak about his hobbies and volunteering work, but was given limited opportunity to do so in the interview.

Candidates mentioned differences between interviews abroad and in the UK in terms of variances in the kind of evidence required, interviewer styles and the level of formality. Some South Asians and the one Filipino candidate were accustomed to interviews that focused on qualifications and not experience. Candidates’ comments included ‘In the Philippines, if you had a degree in a subject then you would be successful in the interview’; and ‘In India you could ‘forecast’ what questions will be asked, they would be about your qualifications’. In terms of interviewer style, one candidate reported that in Poland, interviewers were more formal and overtly aggressive and asked questions like ‘What do you see yourself doing in three years time?’ This issue is also related to the fact that candidates would often have applied for higher-paid jobs in their countries of origin. By contrast, other candidates, particularly those coming from smaller scale societies reported that in their countries of origin ‘most jobs were found through friends’ and screening interviews involved very different interactional dynamics. For example, one candidate, Bruno, had experience of Sicilian interviews which were more informal, often ‘chats’ arranged through social networks. He assumed that in the interview, as in a conversation, he needed to work with the interviewer to structure the interaction. He did so by organising his speech around themes such as why he left his previous job, and the differences between the Italian and English job markets. He therefore unintentionally overrode the formal interview structure which the interviewer sought to impose on the interaction. Several candidates expressed surprise at the level of formality and length of interviews for low-paid jobs. These assumptions were played out with negative consequences in some interviews, for example, where candidates mentioned qualifications when asked about experience or conducted themselves in what was seen as an ‘overly’ informal way.
7.8.2 Experience of other interview types

The other kinds of interviews which candidates have undergone in the past may govern their expectations of the job interview, particularly those who have had few (or no) formal interviews in the UK.

Professional interviews in the country of origin

Most of the relatively recent newcomers to the UK had professional experience in their country of origin (see also Evans et al. 2005). For example, Luis and Renard were, respectively, employed as a civil servant and a teacher overseas. As they have only had work in building or catering since being in the UK, they see their experiences of interviews and work from back home as more relevant to the formal interview (even when this is for a low-paid job). However, these experiences were seen as irrelevant and either discounted or played down by the interviewers. Ironically, the more demanding the job done overseas the more complex and difficult to explain it is. There is a need for candidates to give more contextual information so that the interviewers can understand this experience, and it is anchored to the very different experiences of the low-paid job (see Section 7.7).

Home Office interviews

Many of the relative newcomers do not yet have permanent residence and it is common for these interviews to start with questions about visas. Since this group of candidates are likely to have experienced immigration interviews, candidates sometimes align to this different type of interview and so these visa questions can elicit defensive or confused responses from candidates. This start to the interview has the potential to affect the whole encounter since it can put candidates on the wrong footing and so set up a negative dynamic (see Section 7.4).

7.9 The ‘immigrant story’

7.9.1 Being positive

For those who have experienced being an immigrant to Britain, anxieties about possible discrimination and failure, negative ethnic stereotyping and anxiety about having the necessary work documents contribute to a form of self-presentation that may damage their chances. Born abroad candidates are therefore eager to contribute as much as possible in the interview, to the point where they are often seen as speaking too much (see Section 6.1.6). Furthermore, they seek to present themselves as always working hard, willing to do anything, and denying anything negative about past work experiences. The ‘immigrant story’ is often problematic because a key underlying competence required by many interviews is resilience in the face of difficulties (see Section 4.3.3). So, many questions concern difficulties, dislikes and weak points. However, the ‘immigrant story’ excludes any public admission of problems or difficulties in case they are used against members of a group who know they are vulnerable to discrimination.
Some candidates orient to discourses of foreignness and integration which interviewers find uncomfortable. For example when describing his team working experience, Yohannes flags up his born abroad status by asserting that ‘I was integrating’. Luis, a Filipino candidate, produces a narrative about not initially fitting in and then going out of his way to be accepted, in response to a question about the disadvantages of teamwork.

**Unsuccessful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 50. Luis: Filipino Born abroad, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. C: my colleague sometimes (. ) they don’t- at first they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. don’t like to- the-th:e beginner because I am just a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. beginner at first, they don’t- they say they don’t like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. me but- but still I make friends with them then e-every</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. day anything they want I give them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although this is a determined attempt to come across as positively as possible, it falls flat because these assertions are not tuned to the particular demands of the question – to show the ability to manage one’s team members (see Section 4.3.1). Also, the extreme case formulations often used in this form of self-presentation – as in L5 above ‘anything they want I give them’ – make the candidate appear less convincing since they are seen as claiming too much without evidence, and not balancing the different demands of their job.

### 7.9.2 Difficulties with negative questions

A topic type which frequently occasions misalignment with born abroad candidates are ‘negative’ questions such as ‘what are the disadvantages of teamwork?’ or ‘what do you dislike about repetitive work?’ which candidates said they found hard to answer. Sukinder responded with incredulity to this question and several candidates including Khaleda responded by saying that ‘there are no disadvantages’. These replies caused misalignment sequences which were difficult to resolve, as it was hard for candidates to go back on this initial statement without seeming inconsistent – as in the example given below from Igre, a Nigerian candidate who was borderline successful overall but whose interview contained several difficult interactional moments, including this one.
Unsuccessful example

Example 51. Ire: Nigerian BA, Borderline Successful

1. I: right what would you tell me is the advantage of a
2. repetitive job (1)
3. C: advantage of a
4. I: repetitive job (1)
5. C: er I mean the advantage of a repetitive job is that
6. er:m it makes you it- i-it keeps you going, er it doesn’t
7. make you bored, you don’t feel bored you keep on going
8. (eight seconds of talk deleted)
9. I: you don’t get to know it better
10. C: yeah we get to know the job better we I mean we learn
11. new ideas lots of new ideas as well
12. I: right what is the disadvantage of a repetitive job
13. C: well, disadvantage er:m- er disadvantages (1) you may
14. you may f- offend customers you may f- offend our
15. customers in there that’s a disadvantage of it
16. I: you don’t find it boring

Here, Ire initially seeks to emphasise the positive in an upbeat response to a question about the negative aspects of his job (L6-7). However, he inadvertently fails to meet the covert expectation that he will discuss the fact the repetitive work is boring, and analyse how he deals with this boredom. He then finds it difficult to respond in the way the interviewer expects to the subsequent question about disadvantages of repetitive work (L12); in lines 13-15 he pauses, hesitates and interrupts himself as he struggles to respond appropriately. This is also a clear example of the assumptions embedded in interview questions about how candidates should orientate to certain assumptions such as ‘repetitive work is boring’.

7.9.3 Lack of awareness of stereotypes

Candidates may not be aware of the stereotypes that circulate about them, for example of Indians as over qualified, Afro-Caribbean people as ‘work shy’, or people from Mediterranean countries as overly emotional and flamboyant (as identified by one Maltese candidate, Sara). If candidates are not aware of these stereotypes, then they cannot subtly work against them, and may inadvertently reinforce them.

Some candidates explicitly make relevant their ethnic identities in ways which may work to reinforce negative stereotypes on the part of interviewers. For example, Yohannes, an unsuccessful candidate, positions himself as an outsider, belonging to ‘my community, Ethiopian community’, and describes how he ‘was integrating’ into his old workplace. Another candidate, Bruno, repeatedly positioned himself as foreign by making references to the differences between his home in Sicily and the situation ‘here in London’, stating that ‘I am Italian and I’m not used to live in a multi-racial city like London’. He described experiences of ethnic segregation at work in the UK, which the interviewer said, in feedback, made him uncomfortable because he felt that Bruno might make ethnicity an issue where it wasn’t one, and could be
paranoid about racism against him in the workplace. Sara also made several references to her ethnicity in the course of the interview, commenting that she had to be careful not to wave her arms around too much in meetings because she was Maltese. However, this kind of metacommentary on her ethnicity, besides framing her ethnicity negatively, is judged by the interviewer as being too overt – he commented that it made him ‘uncomfortable’. When giving feedback on Sara’s performance, the interviewer listed some of what he saw as her bad points, such as being ‘patronising’ and ‘cocky’, qualifying these with the remark that ‘I know she’s Maltese, but...’. This suggests that he linked her personal characteristics to her ethnicity or cultural identity in a negative way, and that this provided some of the basis for her failure. These candidates are often attempting to use their ethnicity as capital, by highlighting their awareness of issues of intercultural communication. However, this does not seem to be a successful strategy in our data, perhaps because it contravenes the implicit requirement for homogeneity and ‘blandness’ in interview candidates for low-paid positions noted in Section 4.4.4.

The kind of active mitigation against stereotypes that Jean does in the following extract is rarely found among born abroad candidates. Here, he implicitly mitigates against dominant stereotypes about Afro-Caribbean young men, that they are ‘lazy, happy-go-lucky, or slow’ (Modood 2005, 79). In contrast to this image, Jean emphasises the settled, committed nature of his lifestyle.

**Successful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 52. Jean-Luc: British Afro-Caribbean, Successful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: okay (.) so erm a- after then your sleeping patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. did your s- social life also (.) affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. C: er not really because e:r (.) I-I got my own place er</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. but (.) mo- most of the time I stay with my girlfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. (.). like she’s like my soul mate kind of thing so you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. know I do everything together like (.). I got loa- a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. of friends outside my (.). girlfriend and that but I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. prefer to just mainly, you know, with her most of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. time when I finish work go home (.) eat my dinner, watch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. a little film (.). go to sleep, wake up, maybe go to the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. gym, to work (.) same thing you know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This awareness of stereotypes is part of the reflexive self awareness (see Section 5.6.3) that candidates can use to balance and compensate for potentially damaging judgements by the interviewer.

### 7.10 Non-expert language use and the linguistic penalty

Those bilingual candidates who are not yet expert users of English in British job interview settings face a linguistic penalty on two counts: taken for granted assumptions about English language ability, on the one hand, and the complex communicative demands of the interview on the other. Expertise in a language is entirely relative (Blommaert 2003). So many of these candidates might be considered expert users of English in their countries of origin but ‘poor English speakers’ when
evaluated in a British job interview. This may account for the greater disparity within this group on how they rated their success. Whereas with most candidates, there was a correspondence between their self-rating and the interview outcome, there were several in this bilingual group who reported a high level of confidence in their success both before and after the interview and yet failed. Such a disparity could fuel perceptions of discrimination and perceived discrimination can be as damaging as actual discrimination.

7.10.1 Taken for granted assumptions about English language ability

‘Poor English’ is a catch-all for any communication difficulties in the interview. It is an undifferentiated judgement which sweeps up different communicative styles, interaction differences and linguistic oddities into one unchallenged statement. This judgement is made early on if interviewers cannot immediately process a candidate’s response.

Ability ‘levels’

Interviewers presume that a candidate’s linguistic ability corresponds to a kind of fixed, objective (but unarticulated) ‘level’, which can be judged from the interviewer’s perception of the first few minutes of their talk in the job interview. However, linguistic ability is not fixed, but shifting and interactionally produced (Gumperz 1982a). Even within one encounter, both candidates’ and interviewers’ ability to communicate varies, depending on topic, opportunities to structure their own accounts and amount of misunderstanding, misalignment and attempted repair.

This is well illustrated in the increase in fluency, as the interview progresses, in Luis, the Filipino candidate, who is ‘talked down’ to early on in the interview, and allowed more space to structure responses for himself later in the interview.

This extract is taken from the opening minutes of Luis’s interview (discussed in Section 6.5 above), when Luis was repeatedly interrupted by the interviewer.

Unsuccessful example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 53. Luis: Filipino Born abroad, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. C: yeah] an er an it was er you’re gonna say its gonna be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. physically demanding because you have to be alert, you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. have to be always on motivated because [you’re in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I: but could you] tell me er what do you like most about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. working with a team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: ah- yeah ah (...) on- on the restaurant I work it- I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. like to work it because er of er ahhm some er (...) ah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. working on an on young people and on older people because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. you’ll get to know ah ah s-you know ah y-o::h about some</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. ((clicks tongue)) because you know some young people are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. some- some high temper and y-you’ll never know [how</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I: yeah what] do you like about working in the team [is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. C: ah]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A number of factors, including the interviewer’s talking down, the mismatch in their rhythms, and the candidate’s uncertainty about how to align to the question, and initial nervousness, combine to produce disfluency – false starts, replacements of words and pauses mid-clause. The interviewer’s cues constantly interrupt Luis’ talk so that he has to put a lot of focus on the interactional work, to the detriment of his fluency and relevance. He hesitates as he struggles for an appropriate discourse and footing and each attempt is found wanting. By contrast, later in the interview, he is given more space to develop his story.

**Successful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 54. Luis: Filipino Born abroad, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. C: as a bartender sometimes I do handle the waiter job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. (.) when the- during the manager told me, Luis can you eh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. after you do the cocktails can you do the waiter, then</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. you go back to the bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I: mhm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C: then I do that yeah because it’s a new challenge for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. me- and but if I think its not m- its not on more my job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. description any more because I work as a bartender- my</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. work is a- a bartender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I: mhm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. C: but- waiter is a new ch- a new job for me and a new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. challenge, a new experience (.) so, I work as a waiter to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. some yeah m- most of the time because eh- there’s only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. that the manager ask me because if I see my colleague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. which is eh which eh they are hardly eh enough to handle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. some customer, they’re busy they’re s- m- there’s more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. customer coming inside the restaurant (.) there’s,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. there’s no more question that I-I-I didn’t make more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. question ah-any question to my colleague they need help-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. I just take, I just take some menu book and I’m going to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. the customer ready at the front door and- and I’m g- and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. serve him-their serve them their drinks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, Luis has more opportunity to structure his response for himself, and to develop a rhythm and narrative flow which results in a more fluent answer. The interviewer just gives feedback in appropriate places (lines 5, 10). Unfortunately, the reason Luis is able to do this is that, as the interviewer informed researchers in feedback, she had already decided that he had failed by this point and was therefore no longer asking follow-on questions or making notes. As the interviewer reported, a decision to fail Luis on the basis of ‘poor English’ was made in the first few minutes of the interview. In this way, a judgement of ‘poor English’ is constructed out of interviewer perception of moments of the interview interaction despite the fact that, given better conditions for speaking freely, candidates frequently demonstrate greater fluency.
Stereotypical assumptions

Only two interviewers explicitly stereotyped a group on the basis of their language, by making judgments such as ‘Filipinos have poor linguistic ability’ which soon became a self-fulfilling prophecy in the interview interaction. Other interviewers, although less explicitly stereotyping, were making judgements of language ability based on their own style of communication. There was some evidence that where interviewers and candidates shared a communicative style because they came from the same cultural area, for example, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, the candidate was more likely to succeed than if they did not, although some candidates of similar ethnicity to the interviewer were unsuccessful. Comments made by interviewers and the establishment of a positive or negative interactional dynamic in most interviews suggested that the interviewers’ judgements of the candidate’s ability were highly subjective and dependent on such factors as their own linguistic background. So, for example, an interviewer from East London might find cockney intonation and turn structures easily understandable, but a Polish accent and communicative style less easily processable: but this does not mean that one or the other is objectively better English. Once a candidate has been judged as poor in English he or she may get less special help, such as less filling in of pauses or less context embedded in questions (see Section 6.5).

7.10.2 The demands of the job interview for non-expert users of English

As Chapters 5 and 6 have shown, the job interview for low-paid jobs is a complex, often indirect process which is hard interactional and presentational work for candidates. The language of non-expert users of English is not always easy to process. But rather than blaming the candidate, this study suggests that it is the interview itself which is at fault. It puts communicative demands on the candidate for jobs which do not require the level of institutional knowledge, interactional complexity or narrative and analytic skills being tested for.

There are two significant linguistic aspects of the candidate contributions which lead to misunderstandings by interviewers: how events are sequenced and positioned in time or temporal ordering, and how connections are made within longer chunks of talk both through intonation and word choice. These two aspects help listeners track the progress of speakers’ turns, provided that both sides can interpret the systems that the other is using to do this. There is also the additional processing problem that candidates often pause and restart their talk when they find they cannot easily finish an utterance. These false starts and re-starts occur in all talk but are more noticeable in high stakes encounters and when speakers are using their non-expert language.

These features are illustrated in the talk of two candidates: Yohannes from Ethiopia, whose expert language is Tigrinya, and the Filipino Luis whose expert language is Tagalog. Both candidates are unsuccessful. In the video feedback Yohannes’ interviewer describes him as: ‘Mumbling, hard to follow, waffling, unreliable,
contradicting himself’. Luís’ interviewer said she was ‘confused’ within forty seconds of the opening of the interview, that ‘he was telling me a story but I couldn’t follow it’ and that ‘he knew what he wanted to say but lacked the vocabulary for it’. These comments illustrate well the generalised way in which interviewers react to ‘hard to follow’ candidates, which does not attend to the different interactional causes of problems of understanding, including the interviewers’ contribution to them.

Although time and connection are not expressed in an ‘expert’ way, the difficulty in processing the talk of candidates like these is embedded in many other misalignments illustrated in Chapters 5 and 6. Deeper level misalignments in fundamental understandings of how to play the interview game and different rhetorical strategies are combined with these surface differences in language to cause negative assessments by interviewers. For example, Yohannes uses rhetorical strategies which involve an inductive approach rather than the expected deductive approach. He gives a brief sketch of a situation and then goes back over it, repeating and filling in the details rather than using a claims-evidence-conclusion strategy. His conclusions follow implicitly from the narrative rather than being foregrounded by a western ‘standard’ linear structure focused on logical progression to a conclusion.

These deep and surface differences are often not differentiated by interviewers, who simply label responses as ‘hard to follow’ and ‘irrelevant’, and cut into them rather than taking them on board. This lack of accurate diagnosis of what the problem with a candidate’s answer is means that effective repair is unlikely to occur.

7.10.3 Temporal ordering

Interviewers expect precision and detail, a clear sequencing of events, and the speaker to take up a fixed vantage point from which s/he looks backwards and forwards in time. Maryns (2005) notes similar requirements being imposed on candidates’ self-positioning in narratives in immigration interviews. This narrative form requires control over verb tenses or some other clear markers of time (such as ‘always’ or ‘on that occasion’). The speaker’s vantage point may not be clear because of a lack of precise marking of when something occurred, or unexpected shifts in tenses. As a result, a lack of narrative progression can be conveyed, again reinforced by different rhetorical strategies.

In the extract shown below, Yohannes is asked to give an example where he worked as part of a team to achieve something.
Unsuccessful example

Example 55. Yohannes: Ethiopian Born abroad, Unsuccessful

1. I: an example where you been working as part of a team=
2. C: =mhm
3. I: to achieve something=
4. C: =yes (.) er:m I was working in er valet service which
5. is the linen room=
6. I: =mhm
7. C: and when I was working with er:m erm there was five
8. groups in one (.) one department
9. I: yeah
10. C: and we were friendly we were not er:m bothering to
11. argue this is your- your job is my job we are all
12. together we had togetherness (.) they are very helpful
13. (.) they are a lot of integration each other e:r if
14. something happen we have to sort it out ourselves (.)
15. instead of complaining to each other we have to (.) know
16. (.) the first thing whoever comes first mm say for
17. example if you have a job today interview and then he
18. offer the job in that place we tell that person if he
19. doesn’t understand he asks he can ask us five to six
20. times doesn’t matter =
21. I: = mhm
22. C: er:m because he is new at least for one month he might
23. get confused he might
24. I: (what to do has to do) okay ho- how many of you in th-
25. in that team

At line 16 (‘the first thing whoever comes’), Yohannes starts to give a detailed example of how the team co-operates by explaining what happens if there is a new member of the team. This is a hypothetical case and he switches from the descriptive past to the present (so avoiding complicated conditional tenses eg ‘we would tell the person if didn’t understand he could ask’). His use of the time marker ‘today’ works if the listener, like Yohannes, has shifted into the present narrative (which is widely used by local speakers of English) but Yohannes is not consistent as he shifts back into the past ‘he might get confused’.

While Yohannes is speaking the lines quoted above, the interviewer stops writing, apparently unable to process his speech. And at lines 24-25 he interrupts with the first of a series of closed questions, ‘talking down’ to Yohannes. The questions are about contextual detail and do not allow Yohannes to score any interview points such as demonstrating transferable skills. The lack of precision over time is also reinforced by a lack of precision over space: ‘in that place’ and the fact that Yohannes talks about interpersonal relationships and general practices rather than specificity and detail. So differences in rhetorical strategies are combined with ambiguity over time and space.
Luis also marks shifts in time indirectly or uses only the present tense in a long narrative, which contributes to a perceived lack of progression. He combines time markers such as ‘sometimes’ (suggesting recurring action) with a one off example, ‘at first’ quoting his manager (see line 8-9 Luis example 56 below). This switch from the habitual to the one off example appears contradictory. In Tagolog, shifts in time are marked more indirectly than in English (Gumperz 1982b) which may account for Luis’ more indirect way of conveying time and affect the difficulties he has on occasion in interpreting subtle cues linked to verb tenses in the interviewer’s questions.

7.10.4 Making connections

Intonation, stress and pausing are central ways of conveying connections between utterances. These systems are markedly different across languages and varieties of a language (e.g. Indian English) and influence speakers’ talk in a second language and their interpretation of implicit cues (see Section 7.4.3 above). Interviewers’ reports of ‘not following’ born abroad candidates are made because these systems from the first or dominant language are mapped on to the bilingual speakers’ English and interviewers are assessing candidates on the basis of their own speech conventions (see Gumperz 1982a, 1982b). One of the most frequent examples of this in the data is the use of direct speech quotations. Both bilingual and other candidates quote directly rather than using reported speech. This can add vividness to the account provided that the distinction between the ongoing narrative and the direct quote is clearly made. Local and standard speakers of English tend to do this through intonation, stress and pausing. At the onset of a quote, there is a slight pause, a rise in tone and sometimes an increase in volume which stresses the opening word and marks off the quote from the surrounding story. Similarly, there is a short pause and often a shift in tone to take the listener back to the main story. Many bilingual speakers do not use these strategies and therefore it is harder for the interviewers to distinguish these quotes and trace the progression of the narrative.

In this next example, Luis finds himself trapped by the question ‘What do you dislike about repetitive work?’ There is a fundamental misalignment here. Luis draws on the ‘immigrant story’ to be as upbeat as he can, showing he can take the initiative and do extra work but the interviewer wants an answer in a institutional discourse mode in which the candidate would talk about strategies for overcoming boredom.

**Unsuccessful example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 56. Luis: Filipino Born abroad, Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I: what do you dislike about a repetitive job=</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. C: =oh no e:r I- ther-there’s nothing I dislike in repet-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. repetitive job its j-its only i-it’s a new- it’s a great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. chance for me because (. ) I think some [new work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I: you don’t find it boring and eh- you don’t find it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. boring?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. C: but- I find it boring but sometimes but sometimes em</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Example 56. Continued:
8. the manager ask me for some- yeah some- yeah (.) at first
9. you’re going to find it boring but when you get used to
10. it, and you know the- you handle the job eh properly (.)
11. then- then ah then th- then there’s a time that you’re
12. going to ask the manager just there’s some you have to
13. give me because I finish here already and the manager
14. going to- you finish already? okay you- you can rest now
15. sometime is that [((laughs))]
16. I: okay]
17. C: because I do it- I do it ah g- ah ah one by one and
18. its straight an- I ha- I want it to be finish and that’s
19. it
20. I: right [okay
21. C: th-th]
22. I: now, let’s go to the next question

At line 8-9 ‘at first you’re going to find it boring…’ Luis appears to shift to quoting
the manager but it is difficult to establish when he shifts back to the narrative. Then
at lines 13-14 he quotes both himself (‘I finish here already’) and the manager (‘you
finish already? okay’). This rapid switching between speaker positions is coupled
with the undifferentiated use of ‘you’ to address the interviewer, and to mean ‘one’,
and the lack of specificity in time mentioned above. The interviewer’s lack of
understanding and failure to prompt is evident in the fact that she does not write
anything down here, or pursue any of his response but interrupts him (L21-22) to
move rapidly on to the next question. This is relatively late in the interview and in the
feedback the interviewer indicated that she had already decided to reject him by this
point.

Yohannes also shifts between narrative and direct quotations without using the
markers of intonation and pausing listed above: ‘if they phone us down er to the
valeting department (.) erm good morning or good afternoon sir’ and as with Luis
this lack of distinction reinforces the judgment that he lacks precision.

7.11 Conclusions

Bilingual candidates born abroad, particularly relative newcomers, face a linguistic
penalty which means they are more likely than white or EM British candidates to be
rejected. They experience the demands of job interview talk more intensely than the
other two groups; they also face specific difficulties because they have worked
abroad; and are likely to be judged by a catch-all ‘poor English’ comment which is
used to account for the other two difficulties. They are failed by the demands of the
job interview, which has no direct relationship to the job on offer.

See Section 8.7 for more detailed conclusions for this chapter.
8 Conclusions

8.1 Key findings

The research did not uncover any overt discrimination by interviewers against candidates on the basis of ethnicity. Differences in success rates between intraethnic and interethnic interviews were negligible. However, ethnic minority (EM) candidates who were born abroad fared less well in the interview. In our small data sample, 21 per cent more born abroad than British (white or EM) candidates were unsuccessful. Born abroad candidates from the ‘other’ ethnic category, including white linguistic minorities, suffer as much disadvantage as their born abroad Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian counterparts.

Interviewers’ decision-making was based on judgements of candidates’ personalities, competences, and ability in English. However, interviewers were largely unreflective about how they made these judgments of candidates, and assumed that they could unproblematically discern whether candidates possessed certain competencies from their talk. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have attempted to uncover some of the discursive, rhetorical and interactive processes, many of them unconscious, through which these judgements are made, to demonstrate their subjective nature and potential to disadvantage certain candidates, in particular those born abroad.

Interviews with born abroad candidates were marked by greater difficulties for candidates in presenting themselves in expected ways and more interactional problems between interviewers and candidates. Proportionately, fewer of these candidates were successful in being selected for employment. This confirms previous research, in demonstrating that the job interview creates a linguistic penalty for this group.

The linguistic penalty arises from the largely hidden demands on candidates to talk in institutionally credible ways and from a mismatch of cultural expectations evidenced by mutual misunderstandings, protracted attempts to resolve them and negative judgements by interviewers.

These problems are not exclusive to first generation EM candidates. All candidates
may suffer some difficulties because of the complex communicative demands of the job interview compared with the stated requirements of the job. This study focused on interviews for low-paid, mainly manual work in large conurbations with a high density of EMs. In these circumstances, second generation EM candidates fared as well as white British candidates. Over 60 per cent of interviews in our data were interethnic and the differences in success rates for these compared to intraethnic interviews were negligible. This demonstrates that differences ascribed by ‘tick box’ ethnicity could not in themselves account for the process by which certain EMs were disadvantaged in our data. However, the performance of distinctive ethnic identities and communicative styles by born abroad candidates often drew a linguistic and ethnic penalty.

The communicative demands of the interview are more specific than the general notion of ‘communication skills’ in person specifications and interview criteria. There is also no evidence that the functional talk used in low-paid jobs corresponds to the sophisticated communication requirements inherent in interview processes.

The gap between the communicative demands of the job interview and the communicative requirements of the job raises questions about the fairness and effectiveness of job interviews for manual and other low-paid work where interview talk is harder than workplace talk.

In our interview data for reception and administration work, there is evidence that the analytical demands of interview talk are higher than in interviews for manual jobs. For management, technical and professional interviews, these demands are likely to be even higher and the linguistic penalty may therefore operate for a wider section of candidates both EM and white, as is suggested by studies which highlight the difficulties of accessing highly-paid employment for certain groups of EMs (Philips 2003, Platt 2005, Modood 2005). Further research, therefore, is needed to establish whether, in such interviews, particular ethnicities are factors in success.

The evidence points to two main factors which are shaping interviewer practices and which work especially against the interests of born abroad EMs: competence frameworks and equal opportunities legislation. In addition, the nature of the job interview ‘game’ means that its rules are hidden and this compounds the other two factors.

8.2 Competence frameworks

Organisations that employ a ‘competence framework’ (nearly all in the sample) require interviewers to frame questions that need a high degree of candidate knowledge about institutional cultures, and require a high level of analytical ability and communicative competence, although the job itself is manual work and demands only basic functional communication. Those candidates who are unfamiliar with these demands are at an immediate disadvantage even if their experience and skills match, and often exceed, the job requirements. Despite the move towards
more competence based and more accountable interview practice, the linguistic penalty faced by those born abroad is similar to that faced by candidates in the 1980s and 1990s when small scale discourse analytic research was carried out.

Interviewers working within this framework appear to recruit primarily on the basis of candidate ‘attitudes’ – assuming that candidates with the right attitudes can be trained into the job when hired. Candidates’ talk, therefore, must be persuasive so that they come across as credible, trustworthy and adaptable. This means picking up on the hidden assumptions in interviewers’ questions and managing their talk in line with the unstated expectations of the interviewers. This research shows that this framework puts unreasonable demands on first generation EM candidates. Interviewers are not convinced by their responses and so consider them unsuitable for the job.

8.3 Legislative requirements

Interviewers are aware of anti-discrimination legislation and adhere to equal opportunities interview frameworks. However, this emphasis on equality means that in equal opportunity interviews, they are constrained from helping candidates whose style of communicating and expectations are different from theirs. Thus interviews tend to be ‘equal’ but not ‘fair’ for first generation EM candidates, especially relative newcomers. Equal opportunity ‘presentation’ style interviews (where all are asked exactly the same questions and there is no follow-up or opportunity for repair) do not take account of candidates who may have less experience of the British job interview and its institutional demands, since what is required is not made explicit through interaction and there is no opportunity to negotiate meanings.

Ethnically mixed panels, while desirable, are not a sufficient guarantee of a fair interview since the communicative complexities of the interview are not necessarily better understood by EM interviewers than their white counterparts.

8.4 The ‘interview game’

The job interview is a paradoxical interaction, governed by unwritten, implicit and culturally specific rules. The procedures, including equal opportunities requirements, are in place to make it an objective, institutional encounter. Answers must be bureaucratically processable. People have to be fitted into boxes. But it is also a social encounter in which both sides mutually take account of and adapt to the other. Personality, motivation and credibility are judged on the basis of how well interviewers and candidates interact together. There is an ongoing tension between making the interview human and making it institutionally defensible; there is always improvisation but it is always constrained by regulative talk. The inherent contradictions of the job interview flow through all processes and affect both interviewers and candidates.
This research supports earlier discourse analytic research which found that managing these contradictions leads to a high level of indirectness in the interview. For interviewers, the rules and features of the ‘interview game’ are routine and self-evident. However, for those with least experience of the British job interview this game is hard to play. These hidden rules are an interpretive minefield. It is impossible to determine even in the frankest encounter between close friends exactly what a speaker’s intention is. In the job interview it is much harder. So interview questions and follow-ups demand a high level of interpretive skills from candidates and even apparently straightforward questions like ‘What does your job involve?’ require a high level of shared knowledge to be answered appropriately.

Interviews are hard interactional work for interviewers as well as candidates. The institutional and personal demands on interviewers can outstrip their skills and, since interviews are joint productions, candidates can be blamed for interviewers’ poor performance. These demands are exacerbated by equal opportunity requirements that entail a written record of the candidates’ responses. The large amount of writing has to be often overtly managed by interviewers. How both sides manage the problem of interacting and writing affects the overall tone of the interview and contributes to its outcome.

8.5 The candidate’s contribution

To present oneself successfully as a coherent personality, and therefore a successful applicant, the candidate must be in command of the specific types of linguistic capital which are required by formal encounters such as job interviews. In our sample, white British and British EM candidates are about equally successful in presenting themselves as coherent and credible. However, in this data sample, those born abroad, especially recent newcomers, were found to be more likely to fail.

Linguistic capital consists of the language resources that are deemed appropriate for formal, institutional encounters. Two forms were identified in this research: the ability to produce responses which contain an appropriate mix of personal, work-based and analytical discourse; and the ability to produce consistent, credible and coherent talk as the basis for interviewer judgements of honesty, motivation and reliability.

For those in low-paid and often ‘backstage’ jobs, work is not likely to be used to form their identity nor is there much opportunity to develop an institutional discourse which links personal motivation to the organisation they work for or are applying to. Although many candidates have developed some fluency in this discourse, this is by no means universal and relative newcomers, often working in ethnic work units, are least likely to have access to institutional discourse or the assumptions underpinning it. We could extrapolate from these findings that candidates from any ethnic background who are working in small, isolated and homogenous work units are less likely to have developed the linguistic capital to manage the competence-based job interview.
8.5.1 Alignment to different discourses

Even low-paid manual and service jobs are framed by institutional requirements and at least some answers must contain analytic (institutional discourse) elements as well as collegial descriptions of work (occupational discourse) and descriptions of oneself (personal discourses). The answers which are most readily bureaucratically processable contain a blend of all three, so that the speaker comes across as a person who the interviewer can relate to, who has had experience but is also aware of the institutional reality of the selection interview.

Institutional discourse requires an analytic, impersonal style of talk about self and work, which orients to corporate needs and transferable skills. A more formal relationship or ‘footing’ with interviewers is assumed. Occupational discourses usually require mini-narratives, using taken for granted western narrative structures. The challenge is to produce enough context to give interviewers a shared point of reference without being seen to ‘waffle’. Since none of the real contexts are present, candidates have to conjure work scenes out of their linguistic resources. Personal discourse relates to self-disclosure and involvement and is crucially linked to judgements of personality and ability to relate to the interviewer in more informal ways. Successful candidates integrate personal discourse into answers requiring institutional and occupational discourse, so showing that their work and their personal identity are closely related – or that they ‘buy into’ their organisation’s values.

8.5.2 Authorial voice

Successful candidates are those who impress as consistent, credible and coherent. These aspects of what are assumed to be their ‘real’ selves are then used to make judgements of honesty, motivation and ‘stickability’. Three types of successful authorial voice are identified: blending different discourses, persuasive reporting and organising themes.

The blending of different discourses, especially the institutional and personal (see above) produce a coherent impression and are most readily bureaucratically processable. Rapid shifts, by contrast, are usually unconvincing. Persuasive reporting consists of the use of vivid, detailed language, rhetorical strategies of involvement, consistency between speech delivery and content and the use of others’ positive evaluation rather than self-evaluation. Achievements are claimed in a modest, mitigated way, through others’ evidence.

Unsuccessful candidates often come across as ‘being told what to say’, as if their responses were trained and grafted on to their own style. Combined with sudden shifts in discourse, the overall impression given by ‘trained responses’ is of a hybrid style (a mix of unintegrated styles) and, since ‘you are what you say’ in the interview, of an incoherent, less convincing and less trustworthy person.

Overall, it is more difficult for candidates to link personal and institutional discourses if they have been working in low-paid ‘backstage’ work since they are unlikely to
have used institutional discourses or to have used their work to form their identity. Those who most need help with the job interview and are given training are often newcomers who are already grappling with their own and new styles of communicating. The ‘scripted’ responses learnt in training add to this hybridity.

Discourse alignment and establishing an authorial voice is a complex and, for some candidates, contradictory communicative task. They have to be consistent and yet flexible in how they tune into the different stages of the interview; be self-aware but not too self-orientated, impersonal and personal; show their involvement in their work experiences but be able to stand back from it so that it is bureaucratically processable; and manage these tensions while still appearing authentic. Job seekers unfamiliar with these demands require more than a short training course, if they are to establish a convincing voice and ‘author’ themselves effectively in the job interview.

However, candidates whose work experience closely matches the expectations of the interviewers, so there is sufficient shared context, can be successful even if they do not strategically employ all of the aspects of linguistic capital mentioned here. This is particularly true of candidates whose answers are grounded in the concrete, physical world of jobs familiar to interviewers. This favours candidates who can give vivid and detailed accounts about experiences of jobs in the UK. It also disadvantages relative newcomers. However, this finding may only be relevant to low-paid and largely manual work.

Candidates who cannot manage these complex communicative demands are not suitable for the job interview. However, there is little in the job descriptions for shop floor factory work, delivery work or receptionist positions which indicates that the communication skills tested in the interview are the same as those required for the job. Candidates are judged not suitable for the job interview but may be suitable for the job.

The possession (or not) of linguistic capital for the job interview has consequences for the interview interaction. Judgements about the candidates’ contribution are based not only on what the candidates produce but are a joint production between interviewer and candidate.

8.6 Interviewer-candidate interaction

8.6.1 The interview as a joint production

Because the interview is a joint production, interviewers’ performance plays a large role in their judgement of candidates. Except in rigid equal opportunities interviews, there is plenty of scope for improvisation within the conventionalised order of the interview. This can lead to a positive or negative dynamic developing which sets the overall ‘emotional tone’ of the interview. Interviewers can, unwittingly, disadvantage candidates who may be blamed for interviewers’ own poor performance. Conversely, interviewers may give special help by relaxing the interview structure, or helping to ‘rescue’ candidates even after extended misunderstandings.
The interviewer is looking for a candidate who fits the organisational mould. There is a taken for granted assumption that the interview is a proxy for the job so that how candidates talk to interviewers stands for how they will talk to work colleagues and superiors. However, talk is used quite differently in the interview: candidates’ contributions are controlled by the interaction. But these are then extracted from the interaction and bureaucratically processed as a complete account of the topic under question and so a display of the candidate’s skills or personality. This cultural assumption is not made clear to candidates nor indeed acknowledged by interviewers.

Except in the case of ‘presentation’ type equal opportunities interviews, interviewer responses and follow-ups to candidates’ answers are just as important as the main questions. So training that only focuses on main questions and subsequent funnelling will only partially affect the intricate ways in which interviewers and candidates have to manage the whole interaction.

### 8.6.2 Misalignments and misunderstandings

Things can go wrong early on in the interview and are usually because of unresolved misalignments and misunderstandings. Misalignments, fundamental difficulties in aligning to the cultural norms of the interview, and misunderstandings, where specific aspects of questions and follow-ups are misinterpreted, occur in most interviews, even successful ones, but their impact depends upon whether they occur early on, are relatively minor and easy to repair and whether they remain unresolved. They are a major contributor to judgements of mistrust. Since no distinction is made between simple clarifications and deeper issues of misalignment, candidates are failed on general grounds of having poor communication skills or ‘poor English’ (see below).

In a coded sub-set of the data, interviews with white British candidates have a slightly higher proportion of misalignments and misunderstandings than British born ethnic minorities. But these two groups have a much lower proportion of misalignments and misunderstandings than born abroad bilinguals. Among this group, there is also a much higher proportion of reformulations (rewordings of earlier questions usually to elicit a more acceptable answer), both in absolute terms and relative to misunderstandings and misalignments, and these reformulations are longer.

The causes of misalignments and misunderstandings are the same across all three groups and do not relate to a lack of functional English (see below for a more detailed discussion). They are largely the result of the lack of shared assumptions about the interview and the indirect ways in which interviewers convey their intentions and deal with problems of understanding. Three major causes of misalignments and misunderstandings were identified: discourse misalignment, topic misalignment and misunderstandings, and turn taking problems.

Discourse misalignments occur most frequently when the question is posed in one discourse but the answer is expected in another. For example, questions about enjoyment or liking are apparently asking for a personal discourse response but the interviewer expectations are for a more analytical, institutional discourse. These misalignments also occur when the candidate fails to ‘read’ what is appropriate conduct for the different stages of the interview.
Topic misalignments occur at three levels. One is a more surface problem when the candidate fails to connect back the specific question to an earlier overarching one; at the next level there are problems of the meaning of a particular word or phrase in context; at the deepest level there are misalignments over what type of answer to give. This is particularly the case with relative newcomers who are asked questions about daily routine.

Turn taking problems are linked to an understanding of the different stages of the interview. Misalignments in this area occur when candidates’ length of turn does not meet interviewers’ expectations. Often subtle cues for when to take a turn and how long that turn should be are misread. This is reflected also in interviewer’s perception that some born abroad bilinguals speak too much (see below).

### 8.6.3 A positive dynamic

Interviewers and candidates together can create a positive dynamic which itself then creates an easier environment for candidates who are already doing well. The reverse is also the case, with the interview becoming more difficult interactionally as a negative dynamic develops. When the interview starts off well, communication is aided by the relaxation of the formal interview, and the fostering of a conversational environment, where a shared context of knowledge and views is established. In effect, more special help is given to candidates who are part of this dynamic. The interview structure is relaxed so that not all set questions are asked and sometimes more difficult questions are dealt with in a more perfunctory way. The interviewer becomes less of an institutional spokesperson, and more of a mediator between the candidate and the institution, as the encounter becomes more conversational.

In the context of the positive dynamic, candidates are able to gain more control. They are able to successfully negotiate questions, introduce new topics, co-construct responses with the interviewer, and structure responses as they wish. In turn, their answers become more predictable and more processable and any problems are easier to repair. When the positive dynamic develops, interviewers are more likely to give open, informative and embedded follow-ons, and positive confirmatory statements. The more shared context that is established, the easier it is for each side to infer the other’s meaning and so the overall emotional tone is more comfortable.

An interview initially dominated by a more negative dynamic can be ‘rescued’ by interviewers who persist with helpful reformulations and so negotiate more aligned responses from candidates which, in turn, contributes to the relaxation of the tight institutional structure of the interview.

### 8.6.4 A negative dynamic

A negative dynamic in an interview leads to a tightening of interview structures, more ‘talking down’ and less repair. The contributions of both candidates and interviewers can become less clear as both sides struggle to negotiate meaning.
Negative reformulations and ‘talking down’ (narrower and lower level questions) are the most damaging. Questions become more closed, decontextualised, drawn out and unhelpful. Often the reformulations are near repetitions rather than useful follow-ups which provide more contextual information. These practices produce self-perpetuating problems of understanding. Related to closed questioning and part of the overall tightening of the interview structure is candidate topic control. Once a negative dynamic has been established, there are more, and more abrupt, shifts in topic and candidates are given less control over the topic. For example, unexpected narrative structures are not allowed and the candidate is required to be more strictly relevant.

The negative dynamic is reinforced in several ways. A negative image of the candidate is produced and reproduced by the interviewer giving negative confirmatory statements or not intervening when the candidate is ‘digging their own grave’. The interviewer finishing off the candidate’s answers for them leaves the latter having to agree even if they disagree. Both too much indirectness and too much explicitness can fuel the infelicitous interview. The hidden cues in interviewer questions, follow-ups and responses contribute to the misalignments and misunderstandings discussed above. However, the more explicit surfacing of difficulties can also create problems. Talking about the talk of the interview (metacommunication) brings out into the open the asymmetrical power relations and game-like quality of the interview which, itself, creates more discomfort.

The text-based nature of the interview, the amount of writing required, has to be often overtly managed by interviewers. How both sides manage the problem of interacting and writing affects the overall tone of the interview and contributes to its outcome. There are three aspects to this management: Synchronising talk and writing is achieved through rhythmic co-ordination and gaining the attention of the interviewer; acknowledgement of the potential face threatening business of having to talk, listen and allow time for writing; and candidate’s use of writing to track how bureaucratically processable their answers are. Answers not written down are a marker of irrelevance.

8.6.5  Hard work for both sides

The candidate is constructed as a success or a failure via interactional special help or added difficulties. Reversal of the positive or negative dynamic is possible, but rare. However, interviewers seldom recognise these features of the interaction, which seem to be largely unconscious. When interaction was mentioned by interviewers, it was spoken of in terms of the candidate’s communicative ability. In this way assumptions about the candidate’s personality are made from the jointly produced ‘emotional tone’ of the interaction. For example, when interviewers talk-down or prompt, and see themselves as ‘spoon feeding’ the candidate, this is read as a sign that the candidate cannot act independently and take on responsibility.

The interview is hard interactional work for both interviewers and candidates. The demands it places on the interviewer have been underestimated as have the effects
of their role in the final outcome. On the one hand, they have to orient to the
demands of equal opportunity legislation and orthodox competence based questions,
the need to bureaucratically process candidate answers and the hidden rules of the
interview game. On the other, the pressing need to sustain this face-to-face event as
a social encounter where some level of involvement and feeling is inevitable places
conflicting demands on the interviewer. When there is less shared knowledge and
styles of communicating are different, as is most frequently the case with born
abroad relative newcomer candidates, the interactional work for both sides
becomes even harder.

8.7 The ‘interview game’: Language and diversity

Bilingual candidates born abroad, particularly relative newcomers, are failed by the
cultural and linguistic demands of the job interview. They face a linguistic penalty
which means they are more likely than white or EM British candidates to be rejected.
They experience the demands of job interview talk more intensely than the other
two groups; misalignments and misunderstandings are more frequent, protracted
and less likely to be resolved; they also face specific difficulties because they have
worked abroad; and they are likely to be judged by an unsubstantiated, catch-all
‘poor English’ comment which is used to account for the other two difficulties.

8.7.1 Linguistic penalty 1: Different communicative styles

Since ‘You are what you talk’ in the job interview, candidates with a communicative
style that does not allow them to come across in a way acceptable to interviewers,
are judged negatively both in terms of their communication and their personality.
Differences in style are tolerated in low stakes encounters or where the speaker in
question has power and resources, but much less so in the high stakes job interview.
A complex set of largely unarticulated assumptions about how the workforce
should speak, which broadly aligns to most interviewers’ style, becomes generalised
as ‘communication skills’. These are then tested in what is an interpretive minefield
for this group of candidates.

Different assumptions about how to present the self (particularly how personal or
impersonal to be), different rhetorical strategies and more micro features of
language and intonation help to constitute a communicative style. Candidates’
rhetorical strategies contrast with the western claims-evidence-conclusion
(teleological) model by being more inductive, more associative, more assertive or
mixing western styles of speech with styles borrowed from other cultures or
languages. At the micro level, implicit cues, often conveyed through intonation,
(contextualisation cues) are also culturally relative.

Candidates are often not aware of the basis on which they are being judged. Several
candidates rated their performance at the interview highly but they had failed the
job interview. This gap between perception and the outcome may fuel perceptions
and accusations of discrimination.
There is no simple relationship between ethnicity and communicative style, so it is not helpful to attempt to establish a systematic style for ‘South Asians’, ‘Nigerians’ ‘Italians’ and so on. However, stereotypical assumptions about how different ethnic groups communicate circulate widely in society and on two occasions in our data were explicitly used to justify a rejection.

8.7.2 Misunderstanding, misalignment and communicative style

Different communicative styles are a major contributor to the higher levels of misalignment, misunderstanding and reformulations which cause interactional discomfort and put extra demands on the least strong resources of this group – their communication skills in English in formal settings. This is particularly the case in the context-reduced environment of the job interview where work contexts have to be conjured from talk. The very resources which contributed to problems of understanding in the first place have to be used to repair them.

Questions are designed on the assumption that a candidate can interpret their hidden purpose. They are often general or ambiguous or assume an analytic competence that the candidates are unprepared for. Several candidates commented on questions as being ‘vague and abstract’. This results in misalignments to the different discourses of the interview being experienced more frequently by this group. Questions in one discourse are often used to elicit an answer in another, (particularly personal discourse questions expecting a more institutional answer), and so put a high inferential load on the candidate. For example, questions about feelings expect an analytic, institutional response.

Unsuccessful candidates’ occupational discourses did not follow a western narrative structure and their personal discourses were either too collective and impersonal or, on the other hand, too emotional, personal and detailed. They faced difficulties in positioning themselves in relation to the interviewer’s identity. Those who were former professionals tended to claim too equal a footing with the interviewers.

Misalignments also occurred because of different orientations to claims and evidence, either claiming too much with insufficient evidence or giving too much credence to evidence less valued in the British interview, such as written records.

The taken for granted institutional norms relating to the balance between different discourses, how personal and impersonal to be and what narrative structure to use, are a barrier for those with different styles of communication and different expectations.

8.7.3 Authorial voice

Establishing and maintaining a credible and persuasive ‘authorial voice’ is particularly challenging for this group. Credibility depends upon how consistent and coherent the candidate sounds, which in turn depends upon a smooth blending of discourses, a fluent ordering of disparate experiences and a precise control over the linguistic detail of time, space and evaluation. Humour, subtle self-disclosure and vividness
are also options not readily available. In addition, this group is often targeted for interview preparation and the new advice on institutional self-presentation is difficult to integrate with their brought-along styles and assumptions. Their style appears hybrid, with trained aspects grafted on, and so they are judged as inconsistent and less credible or trustworthy than other candidates.

8.7.4 Positive and negative dynamics

The negative dynamic which can be experienced by candidates whatever their ethnicity (see above) is experienced more intensely by this group, as the higher proportion of misalignments, misunderstandings and more frequent and long reformulations show. Attempts to repair these reformulations lead to interruptions and more ‘talking down’ to candidates, which reduces their opportunity to present themselves in the best light. This group face more conceptually demanding and face-threatening questions and more sudden topic shifts. They experience more difficulty in reading the hidden cues that guide and control interaction, especially when indirectly conveyed through stress and intonation. Other non-verbal features such as rhythmic co-ordination between both sides, are challenging for this group, particularly in the management of writing. There are fewer context-rich questions and follow-ups, because it is harder to share contexts of unfamiliar work experiences, and this, in turn, leads to more misalignments and misunderstandings. So, more time is spent attempting to repair these than in building up shared points of reference. These factors in combination produce a mutually reinforcing negative cycle.

There are four areas where this group face particular problems. Firstly, candidates have difficulty diagnosing the cause of the misalignment or misunderstanding and are further hampered by the interviewer ‘talking down’. Secondly, recognition that the interview has been based on fundamental misalignments comes too late for their repair. Thirdly, implicit intonation cues are misread, particularly the reading of interviewer prompts for more relevant answers which are sometimes taken by candidates as confirmatory statements which need no further response. Finally, there are fewer repairs initiated by both sides compared with interviews with white and EM British candidates.

Interviewers who are flexible, use an improvisatory and adaptive style and take joint responsibility for repair of misalignments and misunderstandings create a positive dynamic. Four interviewer strategies, in particular, were effective: reserving judgement for longer and persisting in facilitative repair throughout; identifying causes of problems early on and awareness that their own questions were ambiguous or vague; providing more context in questions to foster chances of participation; and showing appreciation of a candidate’s point before moving on to elicit a more relevant answer.
8.7.5 Specific difficulties because of working abroad and experience of other interview types

This group of candidates face specific difficulties if their work has been mainly abroad and experience of other interview types can act as distracters. In addition their anxieties about possible failure lead to claims which are often met by interviewer scepticism. These different experiences contribute to the construction of them as ‘other’ in an encounter where interviewers have a pressing need to establish the candidate as ‘one of us’ – a coherent convincing person whose self-presentation fits the boxes and who passes the unspoken test of ‘acceptability’.

Foreign work experience is often dismissed as not immediately relevant. When candidates are given the opportunity to report it, it requires hard interactional work because so much unfamiliar context has to be conjured up. It is harder for interviewers to imagine than familiar British work experience. This, in turn, creates problems of inner coherence in narratives and other longer sequences since candidates have to move between foregrounding (describing chronological events) and back grounding (setting the context). So foreign work experience may itself be a disadvantage to which is added a linguistic penalty.

This group lack information about the hidden assumptions of the British job interview and bring experience of other job interviews that can distract them from the requirements of the British one. Those with professional backgrounds tended to focus on this work, although it was taken as less relevant by interviewers. Equivalences between professional categories and experiences are particularly difficult to make. In both the interviews and in comments afterwards, candidates from this group tended to orient to their training and job needs, a focus on qualifications and formality or conversely an expectation of informality and candidate control, and on different styles of impression management (see above). Formality and length were mentioned as aspects of interviews for low-paid jobs that surprised them.

As well as bringing different assumptions to the job interview, the start of the interview itself can be very different for this group. Since relative newcomers are less likely to be citizens or have permanent residency, interviews routinely began with questions about visas. This calls up an ‘immigration interview’ frame which requires somewhat different self-presentation from the job interview and may contribute to general anxieties about exclusion. The increasingly complex laws on migration may mean that checks on those who are ‘immigrants’ will take up even more time in job interviews and disrupt or distract from the interview purpose. This is a potential cause of discrimination against this group.

Allied to these differences in interview practice, is a bundle of anxieties about fears of discrimination and exclusion which underpin aspects of self-presentation. This can be characterised as the ‘immigrant story’. Candidates bring this story to the interview where they present themselves as always hard working, willing to do anything and seeing no disadvantages in any work they have done. These positive claims are over-generalised rather than being tuned to a particular question and so
are often responded to as unsatisfactory with interviewer reformulations and other forms of repair. For example: ‘I’ll do other people’s work for them’ as opposed to discussing the components of team work. Negative questions such as ‘what’s difficult about x?’ or ‘what’s the disadvantage of y?’, therefore, pose special problems. This group may also be less aware of how to mitigate against negative ethnic stereotypes.

8.7.6 Linguistic penalty 2: Non-expert language use

The third area of particular difficulty lies in non-expert language use. Catch-all judgements such as ‘wouldn’t fit in’ are no longer acceptable in the selection process. But ‘poor English’, a similar unverified generalisation, goes unchallenged. The taken for granted assumption that a candidate has language problems is produced by the peculiar linguistic and discursive demands of the job interview, and the dynamic of the interviewer-candidate interaction. ‘Poor English’ is a catch-all term that sweeps together different communicative styles, interactional difficulties and perceived linguistic oddities and disfluencies. Candidates who used English in their countries of origin may have been ‘expert’ users there but are failed by the job interview process in Britain. Expertise is relative and these differences may account for some of the discrepancies between how candidates thought they had done and the actual outcome. It is in such discrepancies that perceived discrimination may lie.

Poor English also assumes that there is a fixed level of English that can be assigned to an individual. However, in actuality ability shifts according to setting and even within a single encounter. Like the rest of the interview, judgements of English language competence are jointly produced. Linguistic ability is highly subjective and dependent on the interviewer’s own communicative style.

The linguistic demands of the interview are part of the wider communicative demands described above. It is the interview itself which is to blame for the difficulties in processing some aspects of candidate contribution. The pressure to produce extended responses in a context reduced environment puts great demands on two aspects of language: how time (the temporal order) is conveyed and how connections between parts of the narrative (or other long answers) are made. This pressure often leads to a high level of false starts which adds to the difficulty of processing time and connections between points made.

Time is particularly important in narratives of work experience which require precision in establishing what happened when, from a clear vantage point. Precision depends upon verb tenses and other markers of time such as adverbs. The additional problem of conjuring context adds to the complexity of conveying temporal order. The apparent lack of progression conveyed as a result is evident in the high level of reformulations and talking down displayed by interviewers.

Narratives also convey a speaker’s (changing) stance and logical relationships, such as cause and effect. Interviewers have to make the connections between these different parts of a turn. Shifts in stance are largely conveyed through the micro
processes of intonation, stress and pausing. For example, one of the most frequent narrative strategies in the data was to tell part of the story and then shift to direct speech quotations. Interviewers responded to what they perceived as a lack of clearly marked shifts (caused by candidates using different systems of intonation) with more reformulations and talking down.

There was no clear evidence that candidates’ accents caused any basic processing problems. This was not remarked on by interviewers or oriented to in the candidates’ contributions. The linguistic penalty is the result of much more complex processes created by the contradictions of the interview and the different experiences and styles brought along by candidates and misjudged by interviewers.
9 Recommendations

These recommendations relate to selection interviews for low-paid, manual or service jobs only.

9.1 Recommendations for policy

Since the competence framework used in most interviews produces interview talk which is more demanding than the communication skills requirements of low-paid jobs, consideration should be given to alternative means of selecting staff for these types of jobs. A trial period or simulation would match the demands of the job to the demands of the assessment.

The complex demands of the job interview mean that all jobseekers, especially those with little or no experience of interviews, should be offered training informed by these findings. Jobseekers born abroad, particularly relative newcomers, should be given additional training focused on their needs, including an understanding of the hidden rules of the interview ‘game’, detailed support in presenting themselves and their foreign work experience. This group need more than short courses which give information – they need opportunities to develop their own voice in the interview setting.

Interviewers should be given training which focuses on the difficulties candidates face as well as on developing their own interactional skills. There should be awareness raising on how to take account of linguistic and cultural differences so that suitable candidates are not rejected on the grounds of ‘poor English’.

There should be a move away from rigid equal opportunities interviewing, where questions are read out and interaction is reduced to an absolute minimum, as this is equal but not fair interview practice. Rigid equal opportunities interviews can be particularly disadvantaging for relative newcomers. Guidelines should be put in place and circulated which outline how to work more flexibly and fairly within the framework of current equal opportunities legislation. Organisations should consider how they can stay within the law but promote diversity and not act unfairly towards certain groups of ethnic minorities (EMs).
Candidates from the ‘other’ ethnic category, or white candidates who are often not classified as EMs, particularly candidates born abroad (for example in Eastern Europe, South America or the Middle East), often suffer as much disadvantage at interview as their Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian counterparts. This will become an increasingly pertinent issue as Britain looks to accept more workers from the European Union (EU). It is therefore important that ethnic categorisations and equal opportunities practices should reflect this ‘hyper diversity’.

The particular difficulties and linguistic penalty faced by first generation EM candidates, which contrast with the minimal differences in success between second generation EMs and white British candidates, illustrate the importance of distinguishing between first and second generation EMs. Research design, statistical records, policy and practice must aim to identify and address the differences in the forms of disadvantage faced by these groups.

Interview panels: An ethnically mixed interview panel, while desirable, is far from being a sufficient guarantee of a fair interview. EM interviewers may have no more understanding of the issues of intercultural communication than their white counterparts, given that shared language and ethnic background is not very common in situations of ‘hyper-diversity’. Our data showed a tendency for private sector interviews to consist of only one interviewer. While this may help make interviews more informal, questions need to be asked about whether this is a fair system.

The new legislation on immigration, asylum and nationality may lead to more checking up on the status and documentation of candidates. This should not be carried out as part of the job interview.

Interviewers would benefit from guidance and further training on the implications of the law on indirect discrimination for their interviewing practice as it relates to foreign work experience. Candidates with substantial foreign (often professional) work experience struggle to explain equivalences which make their experience relevant to the job applied for. The tiered system for classifying migrant workers being proposed (Home Office February 2005, 13) is problematic in this respect. More guidance on possible equivalences should be widely available to organisations.

9.2 General recommendations for interviewers

To ensure that the processes of the interview are fair to all, interviewers should be given specific training on language and communication issues when interviewing candidates from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. This training would focus on how to provide for all candidates, especially those born abroad, the interactional advantages given to successful candidates.

Interviewers should recognise that the interview is a joint production, and that their interactional behaviour can feed into the candidates’ responses, constructing them as successful or unsuccessful. Interviewers need to be aware of the allowances and
special help which are given to successful candidates in terms of negotiating questions, allowing digressions and helping with responses. Once they are aware of the ‘special help’ given to successful candidates, they can try to give all candidates the same level of help. A useful practice for interviewers would be frequent self-review and discussions where they can share solutions to particular problems and raise their own level of self-awareness. This will help to foster the kind of flexibility which is necessary for good interview practice while ensuring adherence to the institutional demands of the interview.

In formulating main questions and follow-ups, interviewers should strike a balance between being equal, asking all questions of every candidate in the same way, and being fair, posing questions in a flexible way which is understandable to the individual candidate in that particular moment. This means approaching problems of understanding on an individual basis with each candidate, to accurately diagnose their causes, and create a positive environment which gives the candidate the opportunity to present themselves well.

The following are specific recommendations:

**9.2.1 Build a good interactional environment**
- Reserve judgment for longer – do not construct the candidate as a success/failure early on.
- Give clear feedback and acknowledge problematic and potentially embarrassing questions.
- Tolerate some ambiguity and digression with all candidates.
- Acknowledge relevant evidence from candidates, even if given as an answer to a different question.
- Use these strategies to give candidates some degree of control over and ability to negotiate topics, and so to foreground what they see as their strengths.
- Be aware of the candidates’ unfamiliarity with the writing load in interviews and the need for feedback. Management of the writing process needs to be a special focus of any training, and the amount of writing should be minimised to making a record only where this is necessary and useful.

**9.2.2 Make questions informative**
- Be direct – make the purpose of question explicit, without over explaining.
- Do not use obscure vocabulary.
- Use follow-on questions which include information about, or already given by, the candidate (embedded questions). Be careful not to move to less embedded and more closed questions in problematic interviews.
- Repair problems by giving the candidate more information, asking the question in different ways, and ‘tuning in’ to the candidate’s style.
• When problems arise, avoid sudden shifts in topic and interrupting and repeating the question baldly. Instead, use follow-ons, which move with the candidate’s narrative flow and guide them to develop the most relevant aspects of their responses.

9.2.3 Accurately identify the causes of problems of understanding
• Do not assume because of misunderstandings that have arisen that the candidate has ‘poor English’. Interviewers need to take account of the many causes of misunderstandings.

• Accurately diagnose the cause of misunderstanding and misalignments.

• Use the ‘special help’ given to successful candidates in repairing problems of understanding with all candidates.

9.2.4 Discourses and narrative structure
• Distinguish between the ability to interpret and move between personal, occupational and institutional discourses, and the ability to do the job. If fluent movement between these discourses is not necessary for the job, then alternative questions should be developed.

• Tolerate narrative structures other than those normatively expected. Do not assume that help given to produce a western narrative structure can be readily taken up by all candidates.

• Question the basis for judgements of candidate personality and motivation. These judgements may be based on how candidates talk, or be the result of the interview dynamic.

9.2.5 Particular issues with candidates born abroad
• Recognise that the interview ‘game’ is culturally specific and that many born abroad candidates will not be familiar with the British ‘game’ and may be judged negatively as a result.

• Acknowledge that the talk required in formal institutional settings (interview talk) may be particularly demanding for this group and that the strategies outlined above may be needed more with this group than with others. It is particularly important to be direct about the purpose of questions with born abroad candidates, as it may be harder for them to pick up cues in intonation or discourse, which depend on cultural knowledge and style.

• Challenge general judgements of ‘poor English’ since they sweep together a complex range of difficulties in the interview.

• Take account of the fact that born abroad candidates may use different rhetorical styles to those expected by the interviewer, for example paying greater attention to context-setting than might be typical.
• Acknowledge the value of foreign work experience and take account of the fact that candidates may need additional support in showing its relevance.

• Acknowledge that their situation leads to born abroad candidates’ tendency to put a positive gloss on all aspects of their experience, and to find negative questions difficult.

9.3 General recommendations for training job seekers

• Judgements of candidates are based, primarily, on how they talk. Training, therefore, should be given to all candidates on how to present themselves, structure their responses and manage the interaction of the interview. Candidates should also be given advice on the different types of interviews they may face.

• Candidates who are relative newcomers should have training tailored to their needs. The interview is a ‘game’ with hidden rules and assumptions which are specific, in many ways, to British modes of behaviour. This training, therefore, should tackle issues such as communicative style and talking about foreign work experience. This group need longer courses so that they can develop their own voice for the interview.

• Specific materials, including a DVD based on the research data, should be developed for general use on all ESOL and Jobcentre Plus classes at level Entry 2/3 and above.

Self-presentation

9.3.1 How to structure responses

• Align to and strike the balance between institutional, occupational and personal discourses matching the level of formality/informality required at the levels of vocabulary, style and content.

• Structure responses using the western narrative mode which is expected by interviewers – include an exposition, complication, resolution, evaluation and conclusion.

• Produce a relevant amount of contextual information about previous work.

9.3.2 Appearing honest and convincing

• Avoid apparent or real contradictions in the facts given in examples or arguments.

• Be consistent and balanced in the picture of yourself you present in order to be coherent and believable. Do not switch suddenly between formal and informal language. Also, when using institutional modes, blend these with personal perspectives and work experiences to show identification with organisational values.

• Include specific details to make a report more convincing.
• Admit to some self-criticisms or faults and acknowledge disadvantages, but also give strategies for improving on these.

• Do not make claims which the interviewers might perceive as unrealistic, or which you cannot back up with evidence.

• Try to match style of speech with subject matter. For example, when speaking about dynamic or enjoyable work, the style should be upbeat and tone and pitch varied.

9.3.3 How to speak about the self

• Show rather than claim. It is often better to foreground the self, using ‘I’, when giving examples which show qualities rather than making analytic claims about oneself, particularly when these constitute unqualified self-praise. Any self-assessment should be modest and careful, particularly at the start of the interview.

• Do not be too impersonal and sententious, as this can give the impression of ‘lecturing’ to the interviewer(s). Instead tell stories about your experience.

• Be aware of any stereotypes about oneself as part of an ethnic, linguistic, occupational or social group, and use this knowledge to build a self-presentation which mitigates against these.

Managing the interaction

9.3.4 Interpreting the question and reading interviewer cues

• Listen and infer from the way the question is asked, and its particular location, the type of answer expected: institutional, occupational or personal (see Section 9.3.1).

• Assess what stage the interview is in, and so what kinds of response are appropriate. In the housekeeping stage, show you are listening, do not engage in extended comments and questions as these may be seen as presumptuous. In the main questions phase, do not overtly ‘sell yourself’, as this should be done implicitly throughout the interview.

• Use brief pauses to allow the interviewer to interrupt or give feedback on one’s response, but continue if they do not do so.

• Maintain ‘relevance’ in interactive ways, for example by echoing or reformulating the interviewer’s questions in one’s introduction and conclusion, taking cues as to whether one’s digression is acceptable or not.

• Give feedback while the interviewer is speaking, by making eye contact and feedback cues (such as ‘yes’ or ‘mhm’) to prevent over explanation of interviewer questions.

• Use interviewer back channels to assess the amount to speak in any one response.
• Manage the writing component of interviewing by accepting long pauses, be prepared to continue speaking while the interviewer is writing, adjust talk for writing and add more to the answer if necessary after some writing has been done.

• Managing the hierarchy: The interview is ostensibly a meeting of equals, but actually operates on a strictly hierarchical basis. So, find a balance between being too formal or too conversational. Avoid making the hierarchy explicit in one’s talk.

9.3.5 Managing and preventing problems of understanding
• Develop a capacity for identifying interviewers’ problems in understanding candidates. These are routinely indicated by interviewer’s reformulations, inaccurate confirmatory statements, and in some cases by a lack of back channelling.

• Negotiating understanding: develop strategies for requesting clarification and negotiating the relevance of their answer in ways that do not feed into negative interviewer judgements.

9.4 Particular issues for training candidates who were born abroad

Many of these issues are potentially problematic for candidates from a wide variety of backgrounds. However, our data shows that the problems for born abroad candidates, particularly relative newcomers are more frequent and more extensive.

9.4.1 Influence of previous interview types
• Develop an understanding of how previous interview types may determine expectations of the job interview, particularly for those who have had few (or no) formal interviews in the UK. These interviews might include: professional interviews in the country of origin, casual interviews (for jobs such as building or bar work) in the UK or abroad; and home office interviews where quite different interactional rules would apply. Compare these interviews with the expectations of job interviewers in the UK.

• Develop strategies for relating professional experience to the job being interviewed for.

9.4.2 The ‘immigrant story’
Candidates born abroad often seek to present themselves as upbeat, willing to do anything, work extra hard, do other people’s work and so on, because they are aware of the disadvantages they face. But this self-presentation does not necessarily pay off. Similarly, professional backgrounds gained overseas may not be highly rated by interviewers.
• Develop strategies that show a positive attitude without appearing overeager.

• Show self-awareness by admitting to some problems or weaknesses, but show how these have been overcome.

9.4.3  Talking about foreign work experience

• Acknowledge and prepare for the fact that interviewers may not see the relevance of foreign work experience.

• Develop strategies for convincing interviewers that this experience is relevant. These include:
  – Giving enough context but not too much, interspersing context with active narrations of experience.
  – Developing the linguistic skills to produce extended explanations of context, moving between past and present.
  – Explaining differences but also emphasising parallels.

9.4.4  Mitigating against stereotypes

• Be aware of any stereotypes based on linguistic or ethnic generalisations and the dangers of inadvertently reinforcing them.

• Mitigate against these stereotypes in self-presentation (see Section 9.3.3).

9.4.5  Making inferences

• Make appropriate inferences from language, intonation etc. in interview cues.

• Leave short pauses in talk so that interviewers can take a turn at talk if they wish.

In addition, all the points listed in Section 9.3.4 are particularly demanding for relative newcomers to the UK.

9.4.6  Issues of communicative style in self presentation

• Develop strategies for gauging how distant or familiar to be. An overly deferential stance combined with some uncertainty about interpreting meaning can lead to candidates agreeing to formulations of their talk by interviewers which are incorrect. An overly assertive stance might lead to candidates being seen as ‘taking over’ the interview, and a tightening of interviewer control.

• Develop strategies for blending different discourses, on the one hand, without juxtaposing a hybrid mix of newly learned styles with communicative styles brought from abroad (which may be less ‘linear’ than those offered in job preparation courses).

• Develop the capacity to sustain an appropriate communicative style even when nervous or when things go wrong in the interview.
• Develop new ways of talking about the self and making claims, for example the need to back up claims with evidence.

• Recognise that the candidate’s rhetorical styles may be different from those expected by the interviewer. For example, they may employ more initial context-setting than might be typical or use repetition of points and parallel structures to persuade rather than using a strict temporal and linear order, and a claims-evidence-conclusion structure.

• Develop skills in new rhetorical styles and/or strategies for compensating for the unexpected differences in communicative style in the interview.
Appendix A
Extended literature review

The first part of this literature review looks at the literature on direct and indirect discrimination in the labour market. The second part looks at psychological literature on how discrimination manifests in aspects of the job interview such as structure, types of question, and panel composition. The third part examines research on the various discourse practices and social dynamics of the job interview. The fourth part reviews literature which addresses how discourse practices and social dynamics work out in interviews with candidates who have communicative styles which are at variance to those demanded by the job interview, thus linking to the question of indirect discrimination and how the apparently neutral process of the job interview might disadvantage certain groups.

A.1 Direct and indirect discrimination in the labour market

A.1.1 Direct discrimination

Over the past thirty years in the UK, through efforts such as strengthening race relations legislation, there have been developments in tackling racial discrimination. Nevertheless, several types of evidence such as statistical analysis, discrimination tests, outcomes of Employment Tribunals, personal testimonies of ethnic minorities (EMs) and public attitude surveys suggest that racial discrimination and disadvantage continue in workplaces throughout Britain (Strategy Unit 2003, 101; Modood 1997; Mason 1995; Jenkins 1986). Currently, the gap in employment levels between EMs and their white counterparts stands at 16 per cent. The level of unemployment is higher for specific groups such as Bangladeshis (at 39 per cent) and Pakistanis (at 47 per cent) (DWP 2004). ‘Ethnic penalty’ is a term used by sociologists to refer to any remaining disadvantage, or gap in levels of employment, that persists in EMs’ chances of securing employment after taking account factors such as qualifications and human capital (Heath and McMahon 1997, 91, Berthoud 2000, Carmichael and Woods 2000).
A.1.2 Indirect discrimination, cultural assumptions, and communicative styles

Definitions of indirect discrimination emphasise that it is often embedded in apparently neutral cultural assumptions. The EC Race Directive states that:

‘Indirect discrimination shall be taken to occur where an apparently neutral provision, criterion or practice would put persons of a racial or ethnic origin at a particular disadvantage compared with other persons unless that provision, criterion or practice is objectively justified by a legitimate aim and the means of achieving that aim are appropriate and necessary.’

(Strategy Unit 2003, 101)

Much recent research emphasises that today, discrimination most often occurs on an indirect level, and that we must ‘look for subtle acts of exclusion rather than grand, overt forms of discrimination’ (Noon 2005, 9). Often, it is apparently neutral workplace cultures and relations which work to exclude EM candidates. This point was illustrated by Sanglin-Grant’s reports ‘Widening the Talent Pool’ (2003) and ‘The Space Between’ (2005), which showed that the managers of the 21 FTSE-100 companies surveyed were confident that discrimination was not occurring in recruitment, with 95 per cent agreeing that EM staff were readily accepted and respected in their organisation (2005, 2). However, within some of these same companies, Human Resources (HR) managers commented that ‘We’re struggling to convert application from ethnic minorities into appointments’. At the level of internal progression, managers recognised that there were potential issues of cultural background, people ‘identifying with their own kind’, and concern over whether EM staff would ‘fit in’ (2005, 8). Some EM staff themselves expressed difficulties in fitting in to a culture of drinking and potentially offensive ‘banter’. However, when questioned about the recruitment process, HR managers did not raise the issue of cultural difference, but rather placed the blame on EMs themselves, who they said didn’t submit enough applications, had problematic accents, and had ‘an inability to make themselves come across well at interview or to make themselves understood’ (2005, 8).

The underlying assumption behind these managers’ assertions, that job interviews are neutral activities, is erroneous. Interviews rely upon subjective, culturally informed judgements of candidates’ ways of presenting themselves and linguistic ability. These, in turn, are dependent on the culturally relative assumptions and communicative styles of the candidate and interviewer (see Sections 1.3 and 1.4). This was illustrated by Jenkins’ (1986) research on racism and recruitment, which focused on the two selection criteria used by employers: suitability and acceptability. Suitability criteria are defined by the job requirements. Acceptability criteria include: appearance, manner and attitude, maturity, a manager’s ‘gut feeling’, the ability to ‘fit in’ and speech style. These acceptability criteria may cause indirect discrimination against candidates whose qualifications and experience are suitable for the job, if employers use an ethnocentric and prejudiced set of criteria (Jenkins 1986, 79).
The issue of cultural and communication differences is becoming increasingly important in the context of the wider agenda of managing diversity. Hopkins et al. (1994), in a US based survey, ‘Training priorities for a diverse workforce’ identified the top two training priorities of a group of high-level human resource managers as: first, improving interpersonal communication skills, and secondly, understanding and valuing cultural differences. Kikoski (1999) emphasises that an effective interpersonal communication model for managers has to reflect the increasingly culturally diverse nature of society.

The issue of cultural background and communicative style is of particular relevance in the case of EMs who arrive in the UK after being formally educated overseas. Studies of this group have found that they enjoy less success in the labour market than those from the same ethnic group with the same (or lower) qualifications who are born in the UK (Wheatley Price, 1999). One of the causes behind the underperformance of this group is linked to fluency in English and the kind of communication skills which are prioritised in the UK job market (Schellekens, 2000; Bloch, 2003). Another difficulty which these groups face is that of gaining recognition by interviewers of qualifications obtained overseas.

A.1.3 Migration and employment policy

Recent changes to the law on migrant workers have been met with concern that complex laws which employers don’t fully understand can lead to confusion and fear about employing migrant workers. A recent Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) briefing on the new ‘Immigration, Asylum, and Nationality’ (IAN) Bill 2005, states: ‘[The CRE] are convinced that this latest proposal will yet again cause confusion, misunderstanding, and cases of discrimination…the onus should be on the Home Office to provide clear right to work documentation and permissions rather than on placing additional burdens on employers…these proposals are likely to impact on legal migrants as risk-averse employers are less likely to employ anyone who may be considered “illegal”‘ (CRE, 2005). The issues raised here may have implications for the job interview interaction, particularly where long checks of migrant’s documents precede the interview questions.

The recent Home Office Five-Year Plan (February 2005) outlines aims to classify and process migrant workers according to a three tier system. However, recent studies suggest that is problematic to define and categorise migrants according to whether they are considered ‘high-level’ or ‘low-level’ workers. Migrants working in low-paid jobs are often highly qualified (Evans et al. 2005, 4), albeit with qualifications which are not immediately commensurable with British standards. Furthermore, tiered systems can ‘entrench inequality’, and trap certain groups of migrants in low-paid jobs with poor working conditions (RSA Migration Commission 2005, 14).
A.2 Job interviews and discrimination

A.2.1 Structured and unstructured interviews

Much recent research has argued that structured interviews provide more accurate assessments of candidate performance than unstructured – they enhance validity, standardization and ‘psychometric properties’ and reduce discrimination (Palmer & Campion 1997, 656, Campion et al. 1997; Harris 1989; McDaniel et al. 1994; Wiesner and Cronshaw 1988).

However, Blackman (2002), in a simulated study which compared structured and unstructured job interviews, found that the unstructured format produced more accurate perceptions of the candidates’ job-related personality traits. Other research has found that even structured interviews are not free from conflict and prejudice, for example, interviewers can differ in how they understand and use rating scales to assess candidate performance (Posthuma, Morgenson and Campion 2002).

So, there is a constant tension in the interview between finding out more about the candidate through unstructured interviews and introducing more structure to reduce bias and the subjectivity of judgements.

A.2.2 Types of interview questions

The type of interview question is an important aspect of the overall structure of job interviews (Campion 1997, Palmer and Campion 1997). Much of the literature in this area examines two types of interview questions: the situational question and the past experience question.

The situational question, based on the theory of goal setting (Locke and Latham 1990), presents candidates with hypothetical job related situations and asks them what they would do. Since the first study which focused specifically on the situational interview was published (Latham et al. 1980), research has shown the situational interview to be highly valid (Latham 1989; McDaniel et al. 1994) and resistant to contrast error (Maurer & Lee 1994) and race or gender bias (Latham et al. 1980; Lin et al. 1992).

Another type of question, the past-experience (or behavioural) question requires respondents to answer questions in terms of their previous jobs or life experience, based on the presumption that the most significant indicator of future performance is past performance in situations that are similar (Janz 1982). However, there has been some concern that experience based questions may be less valid for and possibly disadvantage applicants with little or no prior job related experience resulting in the rejection of potentially suitable job candidates (Campion et al. 1994; Latham et al. 1980; Pulakos and Schmidt 1995; Taylor and O’Driscoll 1995). Roth et al. (2002) found that EM candidates tend to do worse than their white counterparts when faced with behavioural interview questions.

Nevertheless, Huffcutt & Roth (1998) in a meta-analysis of 31 studies of ‘racial group differences’ in employment interviews report that Black and Hispanic candidates
perform better when faced with structured behavioural questions (eg ‘Can you think of a time when...what did you do?’) rather than situational questions (eg ‘Assume you were faced with the following situation...what would you do?’). They claimed that the difference between the scores of different ethnic groups for behavioural questions was negligible. Their findings are corroborated by Gibb and Taylor (2003), whose New Zealand study of 130 simulated interviews found no appreciable ethnic group differences for either question type.

A.2.3 Panel composition and discrimination

To minimise the risk of racial bias in panel decisions many organisations adopt the practice of ensuring that interview panels are racially mixed where possible (Campion et al. 1988; Lin, Dobbins & Farh 1992). The general assumption behind this practice is that interviewers will have different biases. They will also be accountable to each other and have to justify and explain their ratings (Tetlock 1983; Tetlock and Boettger 1989). To maximise good practice, an evaluation procedure to ensure fairness in the discussion of each candidate’s performance is also often adopted (Huffcutt & Woehr 1999; Pulakos, Schmitt, Whitney & Smith 1996).

Several studies have found that mixed race panels reduce the potential for discrimination against EMs. McFarland et al. (2004) in a recent research study on interview ratings suggest that the use of a mixed race panel reduces the impact on interview outcomes of shared ethnicity among interviewers and candidates. Posthuma et al. (2002), in their meta-analysis of job interview literature, report that ethnic minority applicants are given higher ratings if the interview panel are of the same ethnicity as the applicant (the ‘similar-to-me’ hypothesis). Other research studies have also found this (Lin et al. 1992; Mount et al. 1997; Prewett-Livingstone et al. 1996). However, Posthuma et al. (2002) also found that minority group panel members can be influenced by majority group panel members, if they strongly identify with them.

However, Huffcutt & Roth (1998) reported that the ‘similar to me’ effect tended to have a fairly minimal influence on interview outcomes: Black and Hispanic candidates were rated 0.25 of a standard deviation lower than white candidates across 31 studies, but Huffcutt & Roth observed that there were wide variations between studies.

A.2.4 Conclusion

• Findings about candidate performance and the validity of interviews are clear but most of them do not directly relate to the discrimination experienced by EMs.

• The disparity between the results for structured (and more standardized) and unstructured interviews (where the candidates speak for longer), revealed a tension between finding out more about the candidate and reducing the subjectivity of the interview process.
• Some studies have found that black and Hispanic candidates tend to provide better answers to behavioural rather than situational questions, although others have found that the difference between ethnic group’s responses to these types of questions is negligible.

• The degree to which candidates share ethnicity with members of their interview panels has consistently been found to be a factor in selection – it has been found that generally, where shared ethnicity is higher, candidates are more likely to be successful.

A.2.5 Gaps in the research

In most of the research studies considered in this section, the job interviews were simulated, and often used college students as subjects. This issue reflects the wider problem of the lack of focus by researchers on the contextual factors of the ‘real interview’ (Maurer et al. 1999). Maurer notes that failing to account for such factors is an ‘important “hole” in interview research’ (Arvey & Campion 1982, 311) and that researchers have failed to consider the relationship between the interviewers’ judgements and the interview context impacting on candidate assessment.

More generally, Posthuma et al. reported with surprise in their 2002 review that ‘the social dynamics of panel interviews have not been investigated’ (2002, 13-14). Although this is largely true of the social and occupational psychology literature, qualitative studies using discourse and conversation analysis methodology have focused on talk-in-interaction in high stakes interviewing and the cultural and communicative factors in intercultural interviewing. The third and fourth parts of this review will consider this area of study.

A.3 Discourse analysis and social dynamics in job interviews

Research in the psychological and policy oriented literature demonstrates that indirect discrimination based on interview structures may disadvantage minority groups and negative ethnic stereotyping may account for the inequalities in recruitment and selection, as has been outlined in part two. However, to understand how the detailed processes of indirect discrimination occur in the job interview, a much closer analysis of the job interview as an activity has to be undertaken.

The job interview is an interaction between two or more people consisting of talk, writing, bodily conduct and physical appearance. Of these four factors, the talk between candidate and interviewer(s) and how that talk is recorded in the interviewers’ writing produce the great bulk of the evidence on which decisions are made. For this reason, research methodologies which focus on the detailed processes of talk and writing are the most relevant for shedding light on the relationship between the interaction of the job interview and its outcomes. Indeed, following Goffman (1983), many micro-sociological and discourse analytic studies treat interaction as a separate order of analysis to be studied.
Discourse analysis encompasses a range of methodologies for the analysis of language and non-verbal communication. Most discourse analysis of talk requires audio and/or video recording of naturally occurring interaction. Discourse analysis connects society level knowledge, values and assumptions, the wider social context, (at a macro level), for example stereotypical assumptions about ethnic minority groups or ideologies about correct or standard English (Irvine and Gal 1998) to more micro analysis of talk and writing. At the mid level of analysis, it looks at the way speakers design their turns at talk, how interactions are sequenced (Drew and Heritage 1992) and speakers’ choices in terms of rhetoric and vocabulary. At the most micro level discourse analysis is concerned with the hidden ways in which we convey meaning and attitude through intonation, rhythm and other linguistic cues (Gumperz 1982).

Compared with the very substantial literature in applied and occupational psychology, there are relatively few studies that analyse the talk and interaction of the job interview. The main reason for this is that naturally occurring video and audio recordings of job interviews are hard to collect. Some studies have made useful theoretical and analytic contributions to job interview studies using simulated data. However, the analysis of both the interaction and the decisions based on a simulated interview are vulnerable to the criticism that they are contrived. Moreover, all the studies considered here are case-studies of very different interview settings, made in different cultures (both institutional and ethnic) and at different historical times – and weren’t necessarily intended as statements on the job interview.

Relevant studies of talk and interaction in job interviews fall into two categories: analysis of job interviews where issues of ethnicity are not an issue and those where it is. The third part of this literature review draws largely on the former – particularly studies from Scandinavia. Theory and findings from these empirical studies, most pertinently where issues of social class are at stake, illuminate the intercultural analysis. Part four focuses on ethnicity and cultural and linguistic diversity in studies based in the US, Australia, Germany and the UK. These latter studies draw substantially on Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS), a branch of discourse analysis which has made a special study of ‘gatekeeping encounters’ (Erickson and Shultz 1982). These are encounters of intense communication where the stakes are high in attempting to gain access to scarce resources such as a good job. Developed by the American anthropologist, John Gumperz, IS has informed all the discourse analytic research on intercultural selection interviews in the UK (Gumperz 1982 a and b) and a series of BBC training programmes (1985 – 1992).

Discourse analytic research on the job interview challenges the notion that it is an objective and neutral activity (Heritage 1985). Both its wider purpose, in maintaining the particular character of the organisation, and its practices, of judging people on the basis of how they talk and comport themselves (Erickson and Shultz 1982) reveal an encounter that is both subjective and highly constrained by institutional and organisational assumptions and procedures.
A.3.1 Institutional discourses

The job interview does not stand alone as a social or interactional event, but rather creates and is created by the organisation within which it takes place (Silverman and Jones 1976). As Auer and Kern (2000) point out, the interview is not solely concerned with the reaching of mutual understanding through communication; it is also the site of the production and maintenance of institutional and social order (Makitalo and Saljo 2002; Mumby 1988).

Several researchers looking at corporate discourse and bureaucracy have noted that personality and ‘values’ have become a huge focus of what organisations require of their employees, over and above experience and technical knowledge (Halford and Leonard 1999, Gee et al. 1996, 17). Gee et al. argue that organisations are training employees to ‘buy into’ a corporate ideology. The view that the successful candidate should embody the organisation’s values is evident in the move within organisations towards an ‘accountancy’ (Miller 1994) or ‘enterprise’ (Du Gay 2000) culture, whereby individuals are required to become ‘autonomous, productive and self-regulating’.

Several studies have found that the rigidity of institutional practices concerning how the candidate can speak and what roles they can take on can become a barrier to communication (Auer 1998, Makitalo and Saljo 2002, Iedema and Wodak 1999). To overcome this barrier, candidates need what Bourdieu (1999) terms ‘linguistic capital’ – knowledge of and fluency in the particular institutional discourses, bureaucratic languages and power structures of the organisation to which they are applying, which determine the ‘proper rules of behaviour’ in the interview (see Chapter 5). The institutional nature of the interview is evident in interviewers’ assessments of candidates which inevitably focus upon a limited number of bureaucratically processable ‘skills’, ‘values’, ‘attitudes’ and ‘deficiencies’ which the candidates’ responses are said to reveal (see Chapter 4).

A.3.2 Contradictions in the interview

As Linell & Thunquist (2003), Komter (1991) and Auer & Kern (2000) argue, the activity of the job interview contains certain inherent contradictions. The participants are aware of a tension between the personal and the official ‘institutional’ understandings of the interview. The smooth management of these contradictions and equivocations is part of the delicate task of the candidate.

Auer, in his study of eighteen simulated interviews of East Germans by West Germans, held in post-unification Germany, argues that the western job interview juxtaposes a superficially egalitarian mode of interaction, that of the friendly conversation, with an underlying and unmentioned process of selection which is highly unequal, as the candidates are always subordinate objects of evaluation (Auer & Kern 2000).

In Komter’s 1991 study of thirty five job interviews in the Netherlands, she argues that one of the biggest obstacles to those who study interviews is that many of the
issues which are key to the dynamic of the interview are ‘unmentionable’, and so the participants’ understandings of the interview situation are often only conveyed to one another implicitly (Komter 1991, 8; Birkner 2004, 298). Among these ‘unmentionables’ are the personality, social status or ethnicity of the candidate, which the interviewers are often prohibited from referring to, or recognising as a factor in assessment. Komter argues that the unstable boundaries between personality and ethnic and cultural identity might provide one explanation for the silence around the issue of the candidate’s personality. If these factors were openly acknowledged, this would weaken the interview’s claims to objectivity and meritocracy.

Adelsward, in her 1988 study of 30 Swedish job interviews for graduate level positions, emphasises that it is important to the candidates’ success that they are able to subtly incorporate the institutional definition of the interview situation into their self-presentation and so demonstrate an ability to view themselves from the perspective of the interviewer. This kind of reflexive self-awareness indicates the ability to view oneself analytically, from many perspectives, and is indicated by a balanced view of oneself, in which one states one’s achievements positively but also modestly and flexibly. She shows that moderate ironic comments on the interview situation and their own conscious self-promotion by candidates are well-received by interviewers – as this kind of play upon the tensions between personal and official definitions of the interview situation fosters empathy between the interviewer and candidate. In a similar vein, Scheuer (2001, 231) argues that the ability to display meta-consciousness about the interview game, for example in knowing jokes, is a valuable asset to candidates which helps them to establish a common understanding with the interviewer.

A.3.3 Shared definitions of the interview situation

Gumperz, in his comparative study of South Asian and local white British candidates in selection interviews for job-training programs (1992, 303) makes the point that the interpretation of what a speaker intends to convey at any point in the interview ‘rests on socially constructed knowledge of what the encounter is about’. In problematic encounters, participants often do not share the same sense of what the interaction is about, what its structure is, and what their role in it is. This can lead to misunderstandings and, ultimately, potential failure at interview (Kerekes 2003). However, when an understanding of their respective identities, styles and modes of speaking is shared by the interview participants, this can make up a common framework through which they make sense of the interaction, and provides the potential for a successful interview (Erickson and Schultz, 1982).

However, the candidate’s task here is complicated by the fact that the interviewers’ definition of the interview situation is not entirely fixed or pre-determined, but changes in the course of the interaction. Linell and Thunquist (2003), in their Swedish study of twelve simulated interviews taken from a vocational youth training project, argue that any conversation will move between several situation definitions, as participants adopt different roles and struggle for control over the interaction.
The ability to read covert signals to move between situation definitions is essential to success in communication, and therefore the job interview. Linell and Thunquist note that the transition points between frames are marked by indirect linguistic cues: rhythmically, by pauses; lexically, by markers such as ‘so’; and by changes in volume and pitch (see also ‘contextualisation cues’ below). This research illustrates how even in brief exchanges the tone of an interview might move from a formal to an informal register. For example at the closing of the interview a movement is made between the main body of questioning to ‘housekeeping’ and small talk. These signals are processed largely unconsciously and can cause misunderstandings if they are not shared. So, whether the job requires a high level of communication skills or not, the job interview certainly does (see Section 5.3).

A.3.4 Social status in the interview

‘Today, [the interview] has grown into a key situation where social inequality is ritually dramatized, where basic differences in class, ethnicity, access to power and knowledge, and culturally specific discourse conventions mediate the interaction between participants’

(Akinnaso and Ajirrotutu 1982, 120)

Researchers such as Adelsward, Akinnaso and Ajirrotutu have tended to see the social identity of the candidate as a fixed, predetermined entity which, if the interviewer holds negative stereotypes about their group, acts as a barrier to success in the context of the interview’s ‘strict allocation of rights and duties’ (Akinnaso and Ajirrotutu 1982, 121). However, writers such as Auer, Erickson and Schultz have argued more optimistically that the interviewer and candidate’s senses of their social identities are negotiated and change in the course of the interview, and that the candidate can therefore employ strategies to influence the interviewer’s perception of their social identity.

Adelsward (1988, 71) argues that the social identity of the candidate is ultimately what is at stake in the interview, and candidates must employ discourses and techniques which the interviewer will recognise and accept to establish this identity. For those who have lower social status, or are part of very different social groups from their interviewers, the problem is that they are likely to have less in common with their interviewers in terms of shared knowledge, understandings and ways of speaking – so the conversation will flow much less easily, and the interviewer will have difficulty in identifying what type of person the candidate is constructing themselves as. Adelsward (1988) highlights the difficulty in an example from her research where a working class young man and a middle class young woman are asked similar questions about their brothers and sisters’ education and occupations. The female applicant successfully strikes up a conversation about her brothers’ career aspirations, comparing and contrasting her own skills and interests with theirs. However, the male applicant is unable to say much beyond the fact that his siblings have not gone to university, and are not really pursuing ‘careers’. The candidate’s social status is in this way linked to the interviewer’s ‘acceptability criteria’ mentioned in part 1.2 of this review (Jenkins 1986, 79; Silverman and Jones 1976).
However, as writers such as Auer have argued, the role of the candidate is also to some extent emergent in the course of the encounter, as the way the participants define the situation develops (Linell and Thunquist 2003). Auer (2000) argues that the researcher cannot take for granted that roles and identities can be attributed to participants by virtue of their social backgrounds, but must rather look to how these backgrounds are made relevant by the participants in interaction. In a similar vein, Erickson and Schultz (1982), in their study of the counselling interviews of college students, highlight the distinction between normative and performed social identity – the former is dependent on one’s social status, while the latter is open to construction in the course of the interview. This point underlines the potential for manoeuvre, agency and flexibility in encounters – so that social status is seen to be a factor in interviews, but so is the way it is played out and constructed in each particular instance of interviewing.

**A.3.5 Interactional norms and interview roles**

This section compares the rules for behaviour in the interview, which the candidate must learn and adhere to, with the norms of ordinary conversation. The main differences that have been identified are that the interview is controlled almost entirely by the interviewer, and offers few opportunities for repair of misunderstandings.

Komter (1991) and Button (1992) have noted that in the interview, unlike a conversation, one speaker, the interviewer, governs the interactional norms, allocation of turns and speaking roles. If the candidate misunderstands, violates or undermines their decisions in this regard, they are liable to be punished. For example, if the candidate asks a question during an interview, when they ought to be providing an answer, this norm violation is punished by the interviewer’s removal of the applicant’s question rights, and the withholding of information (Birkner 2004, 307). Furthermore, as Button and Birkner argue, the adherence to strict turn-taking procedures on the part of the interview participants means that it is very difficult for the candidate to correct misunderstandings or misapprehensions of their answers.

However, interviewers are not tied to an authoritarian role. Erickson and Schultz (1982) and Kerekes (2003) argue that interviewers can choose between different aspects of their role and in practice frequently move between these roles in the interview, at various points acting as a ‘bad cop’ authoritative representative of the institution or, alternatively, as a ‘good cop’ or representative of the candidate within the institution. The candidate has, therefore, to responsively adapt themselves to the various roles which the interviewer elects to play in the course of the interview. The role that the interviewer plays limits the roles then available to the candidate, and makes their interactional work easier or harder; it is thus another facet of the special help which the interviewer can give to, or withhold from, the candidate. For example, as Komter argues, in cases where the interviewer chooses to embark upon a monologue, only limited listening roles are available to the candidate, in which they can do little to improve their chances of success other than demonstrating attentiveness.
The limited opportunity for repair of misunderstandings afforded by the interviewer’s tight control over the interaction is revealed in Birkner’s comment on her interview data that ‘participant’s roles and specially linked turn-taking systems never gave rise to repair or negotiation sequences throughout the forty one hours of our corpus’ (Birkner 2004, 295). This finding is corroborated by Button in his British study of an interview of a prospective headmaster (1992), where he points out that, in ordinary conversation, a questioner will attempt to repair misunderstandings of their question at the first opportunity, and the answerer has the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings. In an interview, this is often not the case: the interviewer often does not correct a candidate when they can see they have misunderstood the question (see Section 6.2).

A.3.6 Interview structure: movement between interview topics and phases

Adelsward (1988) emphasises the joint responsibility of the interviewer and candidate for constructing and managing interview structure. She argues that while the interviewer is usually responsible for larger scale topic changes, the successful candidate is often responsible for initiating shifts between sub-topics, and so turning the interview to their advantage. This point is linked to Posthuma et al.’s finding that successful candidates often take the initiative in interviews.

Adelsward notes interviewers can choose between a ‘sudden shifting’ style and a more gliding, gradual change of topic. In cases where applicants and interviewers share an understanding of the interview and aspects of social identity, there is more of a tendency for the conversation to naturally ‘glide’ between topics, via extensions of questions and answers, and less sudden shifts of phase or topic are evident. In such cases, interviewers, who do not have to work to ‘guide’ candidates through topic shifts, perceive the candidate to be more responsive and focused.

The ability to ‘read’ or infer the underlying purpose of a question is key to giving an appropriate answer, and such reading is closely linked to an understanding of the structure of the interview (Gumperz 1992; Adelsward 1988; Akinnaso & Ajirrotutu 1982). For example, the placing of a question at the start, at the end, or in the main body of the interview alters the point of the question. So a question about the applicant’s future aspirations at the start of the interview might signal ‘small talk’; in the main body of the interview its purpose is probably to elicit an account of the candidate’s career plan; placed at the end of the interview the question most likely serves the administrative purpose of discovering whether the candidate needs to be informed of an offer soon. So understanding where one is at in the progression of the interview is essential to giving appropriate responses (Komter 1991; Adelsward 1988).

A.3.7 Communicative styles

For the candidate, the job interview is about ‘the presentation of self’ (Goffman 1959). The importance of interpersonal communication skills in employment is given particular focus in the intense, high-stake moments of the job interview. The
interview is largely made of talk, and so how candidates talk, their style of communication, is central to its outcome. The concept of ‘communicative style’ (Tannen 1984, Lakoff 1990, Scollon and Scollon 1995) denotes certain ways of speaking which candidates and interviewers utilise, some of which seem to lead to more successful interview outcomes than others. Features of communicative styles would include: rhythm of speech, patterns of emphasis, specific vocabularies, discourses and methods of eliciting response. Communicative styles are defined by Luckman (1988) as ‘patterns of communicative acts’ which are part of a ‘social stock of knowledge’ which is ‘acquired and handed down in communicative experiences’.

The multiple communicative styles which any individual employs have been obtained in the various kinds of communicative situations which they have participated in – for example at school, at social events, in past interviews and so on. It is this ‘exposure to similar communicative experience’ which ‘lies at the root of shared culture and shared inferential practices’ (Gumperz 1997). Erickson and Schultz argue that the interview game is ‘rigged’ in favour of ‘those individuals whose communication style and social background are most similar to those of the interviewer with whom they talk’ (1982, 193), or those who share a high degree of co-membership of social, educational and professional groups with the interviewer. Those who have co-membership are more likely to share a definition of the interview situation, an understanding of the work environment, and a way of speaking. This in part explains the ‘similar-to-me’ effect noted in Section A1.4, whereby interviewers were found to select candidates of a similar background to their own.

The important difference here is that ‘co-membership’ does not just rely on the backgrounds of candidates and interviewers but is interactionally produced. Erickson and Schultz found that the presence (or lack) of relations of co-membership, indicated by the style and content of the speech between interviewer and candidate, had a decisive impact upon the amount of special help given to candidates, the ability of the participants to resolve misunderstandings, and the candidate’s success or failure.

The phenomenon of ‘special help’ being given to subsequently successful candidates has been noted by several researchers (Adelsward 1988, Silverman and Jones 1976, Roberts 1985). In such instances, the interviewer guides the candidate in playing ‘the game’ of the interview by giving positive receipt tokens, back-channelling, well-placed pauses or secondary stories which encourage the candidate to develop a point, or negative ‘clues’ (in the form of retroactive or evaluative ‘questions’) that they ought to adjust their position. All these actions are aided by and also help to produce a shared ‘communicative style’ in the course of the interview. However, where the interview participants do not share styles of speech or relations of co-membership, it is often much more difficult for them to recover from ‘awkward moments’ of communication breakdown.
A.3.8 Recontextualisation and communicative styles

‘Recontextualisation’ is the process of taking talk from one context and reworking it in another. So, for example, describing work experience in ways which make it relevant to the interview context. Scheuer (2001), in his Danish study of twelve authentic job interviews argues that the mark of a successful candidate is often their ability to recontextualise styles from different facets of their work, education and private lives in the interview setting, and to move between these styles with ease. Scheuer argues that this ability to move between styles would aid the candidate in presenting themselves as a flexible and rounded individual, for example by striking a balance between the levels of personalisation and formality required in the interview.

As Scheuer points out, the ability to recontextualise discourses successfully or indeed to access them in the first place, is not equally distributed among members of different social groups (See Section 2.3 above). This point is illustrated by Hawthorne (1992), in her Australian study of two simulated job interviews of Eastern European migrant engineers, who fail to recognise and adopt the appropriate – managerial – register in their interview, and instead use a style which might be expected of a labourer rather than a manager.

A.3.9 Conclusion

In the psychological literature explored in part one (see above), some general factors in the dynamics of the interview are accounted for, but it is only in the sociological, anthropological and sociolinguistic literature that these factors are analysed and their complex relations discussed in any detail. In this section, we have considered the influence of a number of factors on the success of candidates in job interviews:

• Whether they share a definition of the interview situation with their interviewer.

• How they are positioned socially in relation to their interviewer

• Whether they are able to read and conform to norms concerning what can be said in the interview and how the interview is structured.

• The kind of style of speech which they adopt

All these factors can lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication. As the literature shows, these may be at the lowest level of minor and/or local misunderstandings, at the level of individual or group communicative differences or at the highest ideological level where the maintenance of institutional order overrides concerns about mutual understanding (Coupland, Giles and Wiemann 1991). The following section will examine how these factors might be played out differently in the context of the intercultural interview, and the impact that this might have on the degree of success enjoyed by an EM candidate.
A.4 Ethnicity and linguistic diversity in the job interview

As the previous section demonstrates, success in an interview depends on the skilled deployment of knowledge about institutions and interactional norms which is specific to a particular industry, social group or organisational culture. British job interviews are specific ‘communicative cultures’ which ‘prestructure what can or should be talked about, and how’ (Auer 1998, 28, see also Gumperz, Jupp and Roberts 1979). These institutional contexts often assume a highly literate, ‘middle class’ style which, as the previous section shows, can disadvantage anyone whose repertoire of talking styles does not include at least an approximation of this style.

In addition to these wider social class differences, there are ethnic or cultural differences which have been the focus of a sub-branch of discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics (IS), which has made a study of high stake interviews where people are assessed on the basis of face-to-face ‘gatekeeping’ interviews. These interviews have included education counselling (Erickson and Schultz 1982, Gumperz 1982b, Chick 1990), advice and counselling (Gumperz & Roberts 1991) and oral assessments in medical settings (Roberts et al 2002).

The key question of IS is: how does diversity affect interpretation of meaning in interactions and how do differing interpretations lead to discriminatory outcomes? Gumperz (1982a) argues that as well as racial prejudice, there is a communicative element to discrimination. Different ethnic groups, whether they use English as their heritage language or not, may use culturally specific styles of communicating which are different from local or standard English, as a result of belonging to a particular communicative culture, and being unfamiliar with institutional norms. Differences include a range of rhetorical and presentational features: how personal or impersonal to be, what to stress and what to play down, how direct to be in self-presentation, how to structure and sequence responses, choice of words and idioms and a range of paralinguistic features, such as intonation and rhythm. The process through which these conventionalised features of talk automatically convey meanings, attitudes, assumptions and expectations was labelled ‘conversational inference’ by Gumperz. Since both sides interpret and judge the other through their own conventions, wrong judgements about a speaker’s intention and so personality, ability and attitude can routinely be made (Gumperz 1982a and b, 1992, 1996).

While some correlation has clearly been found between certain ethnic groups and the employment of particular communicative styles, many of the authors mentioned here have been at pains to avoid the kind of essentialist categorisation which would equate one ethnic group with one style of speaking (Auer and Kern 2000). Erickson and Schultz (1982) make a clear distinction between ethnicity and co-membership, pointing out that participants could be from ethnically distinct groups which nevertheless share many social ties, and that this could engender a shared ‘cultural style’. In the context of our increasingly diverse society, individuals are able to draw on a vast array of cultural styles (Rampton 1995), depending how and if the interaction makes these relevant (Auer and Kern 2000). So, one has to look at whether, and how, participants’ ethnicity is made relevant in the interaction before
defining an event as intercultural, and considering whether this contributed to interactional issues (Sarangi 1994, Shea 1994).

A.4.1 The culturally specific nature of interview discourse

Although interviews are frequently assumed to be culturally and ideologically neutral, they are in fact closely linked to the culturally relative ideologies, and attitudes to work, of the society and organisation in which the interview occurs. In cases where the candidate is seen to fail to comply with the dominant cultural ideologies at work they become ‘exoticised’, and are less likely to be successful in the interview (Murray and Sondhi 1987, Auer 2000, Birkner 2004).

Birkner, in her study of West and East Germans applying for jobs in West Germany, looks at the meta-comments about the interview process in which interviewers defend Western interview discourse as universally valid, in opposition to the perceived transgressions of East German candidates. Interviewers assumed ignorance of the interview on the part of East Germans, over-explained it to them, refused to tolerate attempted negotiations of what could be said, and translated GDR terms to those of West Germany. Thus, the interviewers implicitly made relevant the East Germans’ social and cultural background in the context of negative assessments of their performance. Furthermore, these interventions sometimes caused misunderstandings to occur (Auer and Kern 2000). Birkner found that successful East German applicants tended to use knowledge of the culturally specific nature of the interview to consciously mitigate against the negative stereotypes which interviewers might hold about them. For example, one successful East German candidate adopted an individualistic style of self-presentation which emphasised the amount of personal decision making which she had in her career in the GDR, which served to offset interviewers’ preconceptions of the limited social roles which would have been available to her in a communist society (Auer and Kern 2000).

A.4.2 Assumptions about purpose, role relationships and allowable content

Several researchers have found that EM candidates encounter greater difficulties in adopting the interviewer’s definition of the interview situation, and so in inferring the implicit meanings of questions, and successfully answering them (Jupp et al. 1982, Akinnaso & Ajirotutu 1982, Roberts et al. 1992, Birkner 2004). Research on intercultural institutional encounters, generally, has shown that some cultural groups are reluctant to ‘talk-up’ their skills and ‘sell themselves’ (Fitzgerald 2003, Scollon and Scollon 1995, Young 1994). Jupp et al. (1982), and Bhatia (1993) found that some minorities tended to minimise the significance of previous job achievements when writing application letters.

The culturally relative communicative styles employed by interview participants can lead to misunderstandings by the candidate concerning what type of content the interviewer is attempting to elicit with a particular question (Roberts and Sayers 1987). In intercultural encounters, questions about motivation, attitude and previous
experience are often interpreted literally, naively or too generally, rather than as opportunities to perform. For example, questions such as ‘Why do you want the job?’ are answered by statements about needing a job, or the fact that the job is better paid or offers more holidays (Roberts 1985, Roberts et al. 1992).

Longmire, in his study of intercultural interviews between white American interviewers and Cambodian candidates born abroad (1992), found that the Cambodian understanding of a successful interview was defined by emphasis on hierarchies and group membership. This was evident in factors such as the marked deference towards the interviewer which the candidates demonstrated. American interviewers could not understand why Cambodians were behaving in this way in the interview, or the values which they were seeking to emphasise. Similarly, Wong and Pooh-Ching (2000), in their study of interviews of Chinese candidates by multinational corporations, found that Chinese candidates, who emphasised modesty and collectivism, were seen as deferring too much to the interviewer and focusing too much on the group or family.

A.4.3 Interactional norms and the structuring of responses

If candidates in intercultural interviews sometimes have difficulties in gauging the kind of content of response which is appropriate, they can also structure their answers in ways which deviate from interviewers’ expectations. A number of studies of narrative theory and the ways in which rhetorical practices are used by different cultures to construct the teller’s identity have drawn attention to the culturally specific nature of narrative practices, though not in the context of the job interview (Chafe 1980, Tannen 1989, Zimmerman 1998, Holland et al. 1998, Linde 1993).

Gumperz and his associates have looked at patterns in the way in which South Asian candidates structure openings to responses. There is a tendency for these candidates to build up to their main point by setting the context first, which contrasts with the western style of putting the main point first, and then explaining the background (Gumperz 1979/91). He also found that when interviewers remained silent after a response by a candidate, white British candidates were likely to elaborate their initial comments, thus putting themselves in a favourable light, whilst Asian candidates would remain silent, waiting for the next question.

Akinnaso & Ajirotutu (1982) argue that African-American candidates, particularly those with minimal knowledge and experience of interview discourse, tend to employ an associational mode when talking about past experience. This mode, or what Michaels calls topic association, is contrasted with the tightly structured style, with explicit connections, of the ‘topic-centred’ or ‘problem-centred’ mode, which they argue is more typical of white American candidates (Michaels 1981). The associational mode is entirely coherent within its own terms, of frequent shifts in space, time and themes and implicit connections made through intonation, rhythm and repetition. However, interviewers perceived this structure as insufficiently formalised, lacking in analytic lists, (for example of transferable skills), and treating the narrative as an end in itself rather than a goal-oriented exposition of skills.
A.4.4 Ways of speaking: ethnicity and micro-level interaction

This section will examine how miscommunication might occur in an intercultural interview at the micro level where features of conversation such as rhythm, pitch, stress are unconsciously processed. Interviewers and candidates use these features to cue what is happening at each point of the interview. These ‘contextualisation cues’ (Gumperz 1982a/1992) signal what is to be expected in the encounter, flag the transition between topics and stages of the interview, convey dissatisfaction and initiate repair of misunderstandings (Gumperz 1996, 396-7; Erickson and Shultz 1982, Kerekes 2003, Roberts and Sayers 1987). These cues are part of a group, or culture’s, taken for granted communicative style and, where they are not shared, they are a significant source of misunderstanding and prevent interactional coherence.

Gumperz (1992) shows how, in one interview a white British candidate was able to match the interviewers’ topic changes with changes in his pitch and tempo. By contrast, Gumperz found that the participants in an interview with a South Asian candidate were unable to interpret each others use of pitch changes correctly. For example, when the interviewers used a high register to indicate a new topic, the white British candidate would match this cue with a high register response, thus indicating understanding of the question, whereas the South Asian candidate failed to do so. It is partly as a result of these kinds of variances in communicative style that ethnic minority candidates may be perceived by interviewers as unresponsive, uninterested, rude, and incapable of inferring meaning.

Erickson and Shultz (1982) found that when interactants were from different speech communities, they were more likely to miss culturally relative cues such as pitch and stress changes and body movement, which maintained interactive rhythm. As a result, interviewers sometimes missed listening cues from candidates (such as subtle nods), and consequently over-explained points which they felt students were not taking in. Similarly, Akinnaso and Ajirotutu (1982) found that techniques such as back channelling, vowel lengthening, rhythm patterning and voice quality were employed and manipulated by African-American candidates in distinctive ways, which may not have been recognisable to their interviewers.

Erickson’s (1985) study of the interaction in the job interview of an Italian-American revealed that this candidate’s culturally learned expectations of active listening behaviour led him to interpret his interviewer’s lack of eye contact or response as showing a lack of interest, and so to become ‘disfluent’ in his speech at points where he felt he was denied feedback.

Thus, culturally specific communicative styles can cause damaging communication breakdowns, and create (or reinforce) negative perceptions of individual candidates, and stereotypes of particular ethnic minority groups (Sarangi 1994; Gumperz 1982a, 1992; Roberts et al. 1992). As Gumperz (1992, 302) argues, it is often through this process that ‘minorization’ occurs, whereby certain individuals are stereotyped as members of stigmatized minorities. In this way, the successful (and unsuccessful) candidate is, in part, constructed by the interviewer in the course of their interaction.
A.4.5 Conclusion

- Job interviews are largely made of talk and so a detailed analysis of how both sides communicate is central to an understanding of ethnicity and disadvantage in the job interview and challenges the notion that job interviews are neutral and objective.

- Candidates are selected on the basis of whether they meet fixed institutional requirements when they talk about themselves.

- Candidates who are unfamiliar with, unable to meet or are resistant to these requirements are likely to fail. The communicative demands of the job interview are subtle and complex and so vulnerable to misunderstandings.

- There is a strong association between a candidate’s ability to perform the required institutional discourse style and their social class. Assumptions about how to perform in the interview, interactional structures and norms and ways of speaking are all factors disadvantaging lower social class groups.

- Culturally specific assumptions and styles in the job interview create a further level of misunderstandings and negative evaluations, particularly for those whose primary or heritage language is not English.

- Many of these misunderstandings and misevaluations arise from the fact that the differences in communicative style are processed unconsciously and so uncomfortable moments and apparently irrelevant or incoherent responses are treated as failures in competence or attitude.

- But when cultural differences are made explicit, they too help to construct the candidate as an ‘outsider’.

A.4.6 Gaps in the research

With some exceptions, the research has failed to examine the detailed processes of the job interview with candidates from EM groups for whom ethnicity, race, social class and disadvantage may be issues but who use a local variety of English. There has also been no attention given to what impact changes in job interview practices in the last twenty years may have on the wider question of ethnicity and disadvantage. For example, the role of writing in the job interview has greatly increased and has an effect on how both sides manage the interaction. Finally, most of the studies of intercultural and intracultural job interview are based on case studies of one or two interviews rather than on a substantial data base.
Appendix B
Transcription conventions

Throughout this report, the transcripts use ‘C’ to refer to the candidate, and ‘I’ to refer to the interviewer. Where there is more than one interviewer, the interviewers are labelled I1 and I2.

The report uses the transcription conventions shown below, which are adapted from Psathas 1995. This list is not definitive. It has been simplified for the purpose at hand. Reference to intonation and pitch is marked in transcripts only where it has particular significance.

[ Beginning of overlap e.g.
  T:  I used to smoke [a lot]
  B: [he thinks he’s real tough

] End of overlap e.g.
  T:  I used to smoke [a lot]
  B: he th]inks he’s real tough

= Latching ie. Where the next speakers turn follows on without any pause
  A: I used to smoke a lot=
  B: =He thinks he’s real tough

( ) Untimed brief pauses

(0.5) Timed pauses approx. seconds & tenths of a second e.g.
  (0.5) / (0.1) / (2.0)

: Sounds stretch e.g. I gue:ss you must be right
:::  More prolonged sound stretch (using multiple colons) e.g. I’m re:::ally sorry

-  Cut-off prior word or sound e.g. ‘I thou- well I thought

Yes  Emphasis ie. Perceived stress indicated by volume and pitch change

hhh  Exhalation / out-breath, number of h’s indicate length of feature

.hhh  Inhalation / in-breath

(s’pose so)  Unclear talk/possible hearings indicated by stretch of talk in parentheses

(s’pose so/spoke to)  Unclear talk / possible hearings in the case of multiple possibilities

(^^^^ ^^^)  Unrecognisable talk, words replaced by insertion marks to indicate length of talk

((bell sounds))  Description of conversational scene e.g. ((telephone rings))

((snarled))  Description of characterisations of talk e.g. ((snarled)) ((whispered))

((child’s name))  Description of named person anonymised name e.g. ((patient’s name))

>>>>-  Speeded/hurried beginning of conversational chunk

<<<<-  Speeded/hurried ending of conversational chunk

......  Horizontal ellipses, indicates partial report

{[ ]}  Non-spoken activity which overlays the stretch of talk bracketed off
### Appendix C

**Key to candidates**

NB: All the candidates’ names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Born in UK?</th>
<th>Successful?*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NHS Trust</td>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHS Trust</td>
<td>Vijay</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NHS Trust</td>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory</td>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory</td>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory</td>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory</td>
<td>Will</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Vignesh</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Joan</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Ed Centre</td>
<td>Binta</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Ghanian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Ed Centre</td>
<td>Amela</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Bosnian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Kavita</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Form</td>
<td>Tahir</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Form</td>
<td>Nazrul</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Form</td>
<td>Khaleda</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Sandeep</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Kalif</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Pippa</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Continued*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Born in UK?</th>
<th>Successful?*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Arvinder</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Punjabi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Nadim</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Jamil Hafeez</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Iqbal</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Punjabi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Maltese</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>white British</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Jacqueline</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>white British</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Gerard</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>white British</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Black British</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Liberian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Jehinger</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Sri Lankan</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black Caribbean</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>white British</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>white British</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Renard</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes - Borderline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Mohammed</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes - Borderline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Jean Luc</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Afro-Caribbean</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Jose</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Brazilian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Ahmed</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Sierra Leonean</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Afram</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Ghanaian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes - Borderline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Lloyd</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Afro-Caribbean</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Afro Caribbean</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>white British</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>white British</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Luis</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Rakesh</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>white British</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Bruno</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Duncan</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Scottish</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Ire</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes - Borderline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Afro-Caribbean</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Yohannes</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Ethiopian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Terence</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Ghanaian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery Service</td>
<td>Sukinder</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes - Borderline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Successful candidates are those who were offered the job.
References


Evans, Y. Herbert, J. Datta, K. May, J. McIlwaine, C. and Wills, J. 2005 ‘Making the City Work: Low Paid Employment in London’ Queen Mary, University of London.


Fitzgerald, H. 2003 *How different are we?* Multilingual Matters Ltd.: Clevedon.


Jenkins, R. 1986 *Racism and recruitment: managers, organisations and equal opportunities in the labour market* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


Merry, S.E. 1990 *Getting justice and getting even* Longman: Chicago & London.


Phillips, T. speaking at JPMorgan’s leadership day 2003 CRE New release Tuesday 25 November 2003 [www.cre.gov.uk](http://www.cre.gov.uk)


Roberts, C. 1985 *The Interview Game.* London: BBC.


Roberts, C. 2003 Transcription KCL and FTDL www.beinnovative.co.uk/ftdlIndex.htm


Schellekens, P. 2001 ‘English Language as a barrier to employment, education and training’ RBX3/01. DFEE, Sheffield.


Tannen, D. 1984 Coherence in spoken and written discourse Ablex: Norwood.


