Regimenting discourse, controlling bodies: Disinformation, evaluation and moral categorization in a state bureaucratic agency

Eva Codó
Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain

Abstract
This article examines, from a critical and ethnographic sociolinguistic perspective, the socio-discursive practices unfolding at the information desk of a Spanish immigration office in Barcelona. Drawing on a corpus of ethnographic materials and interactional data, the article discusses why frontline communication became constituted as it did, what practical routines and ideological considerations grounded it, and how multiple social and institutional orders intersected in the shaping of practical and symbolic gatekeeping. I claim that, through various micro-strategies of control, evaluation and moral hierarchization, the government employees at this bureaucratic agency enacted the disciplinary and exclusionary regime of the nation-state, and socialized their clients into becoming ‘good’ migrants.

Keywords
bureaucratic talk, Catalonia, control, critical sociolinguistics, disciplinary regime, domination, ethnography, institutions, interaction order, migrations, moral hierarchization, nation-state, power, regulation, service interactions, Spain

Introduction
In the era of both post- and transnationalism, there has been a fair amount of academic debate on the extent to which the regulatory capabilities of the nation-state are fading...
away. One of the domains in which its authority remains fairly untouched is in the regulation of migration flows (Abu-Laban and Gabriel, 2002), despite the thus-far unsuccessful attempts to design and implement broad-scale common immigration policies by supra-national entities such as the European Union. The incapacity of national governments to reach an agreement in that area indexes the importance that nation-states attach to retaining the ability to decide who is allowed into their countries and who is not, in ways which are profoundly ideological. They take us back to the formation of the modern nation-state and its establishment as the fundamental matrix for the inclusion and exclusion of populations (Bauman and Briggs, 2003). It is in this sense that Sassen (1996) and Folson (2004) refer to immigration as ‘nationalizing’ politics.

This article examines a state immigration service, its practices, administrative procedures and grounding ideologies. In particular, it focuses on the discursive processes whereby this bureaucratic agency communicated with an undocumented migrant population that sought information from one of its desks. The data was obtained in Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, following the principles of ethnographic sociolinguistics (Heller, 1999).

The data is situated, historically and politically, at a turning point in Spanish immigration policy, as it was collected within the framework of the first mass legalization campaign to be organized in the country (in 2000). The campaign was one of the provisions of a new immigration law (LO 4/2000) passed in 1999. The political circumstances surrounding the implementation of the campaign make it particularly interesting, as the political party in power (the right-wing Partido Popular) opposed it, and voted against the bill in Parliament. (It eventually became enacted as law thanks to the strategic alliance of the rest of the political parties [Ruiz de Huidobro de Carlos, 2000].)

In this article, I want to argue for the political and historical situatedness of interational practice. I want to show how discursive data emerges out of particular socio-political orders and responds to particular institutional logics, and so advocate the need to adopt an ethnographic approach to the study of institutions and to the role of language in them. In Monica Heller’s words, ethnography can be best thought of as the following of webs in institutional spaces to show ‘how moral, linguistic, interaction, institutional, and social orders are related, not as mirrors of each other, but as trajectories creating discursive spaces where things can neither change nor remain the same without the active work of communication in everyday life’ (2007a: 651). In this article, I take frontline communication to be the point of departure to investigate how these multiple trajectories and orders intersect. I explore how they give shape and legitimize not only certain communicative practices but also specific ways of constructing, categorizing and hierarchizing migrant clients through which the disciplinary and normativizing function of the state is carried out.

**Framing perspective: A critical and ethnographic sociolinguistics of language in institutions**

The conceptual tools that I use to analyse language in institutional spaces can be framed within the critical sociolinguistics tradition which, generally speaking, has as its most
fundamental goal to unveil the multiple ways in which situated linguistic practice is implicated in processes of social stratification and in the (re)production of inequality (Blommaert, 2010; Heller, 1999, 2001, 2007b; Pujolar, 2001, 2007, to cite only a few). Language is understood as both social action and social practice. This practice-based approach enables researchers to overcome the micro–macro dichotomy, since every instance of language use is simultaneously micro and macro (Giddens, 1984). Thus, the relationship between local, evanescent talk and the enduring social order is constituted as dialogical, mutually dependent and mutually shaping. Following this line of reasoning, by looking at situated practice, it is possible to understand how (macro) processes of marginalization, group hierarchization and social exclusion are ‘done’ in social interaction, and what consequences (practical and symbolic) they have for certain groups of social actors.

The critical sociolinguistics tradition builds upon a number of research strands, but of particular relevance to this article are its close connections to the work on gatekeeping encounters carried out by Gumperz and his followers (Campbell and Roberts, 2007; Gumperz, 1982; Gumperz and Roberts, 1991; Roberts and Sarangi, 1999, among many others). Gumperz focused on non-egalitarian encounters in institutional spaces where valuable resources were being distributed (but see Lin [2010] for a critique of how Gumperz’ emphasis on the non-egalitarian dimension of talk has often been underplayed). For Gumperz, the cross-cultural nature of these interactions made them doubly unequal: to the power imbalance typical of any interview situation was added the fact that interviewees were judged on the basis of their ability to mobilize social identities and communicative styles to which they did not have access by virtue of their specific social positions. As inheritors of this perspective, critical sociolinguists claim that language is a socially distributed resource and that access to certain forms of talk is not even and democratic, but rather, fairly uneven, and in fact closely regimented in multiple ways. Hence the need to investigate the ‘political economy of language’ (Gal, 1989), that is, to understand who controls access to what linguistic resources with what consequences for whom, and how this regimentation is linked to and feeds into the reproduction of particular socio-political, economic and ideological orders.

The above idea is central to critical analyses of institutional practice, as it questions the universalizing ideology of the nation-state, which takes for granted that clients of state agencies have control over the basic communicative resources necessary to participate in institutional life, and, therefore, that bureaucratic state procedures are egalitarian and democratic (Blommaert, 2001, 2005). As Moyer and Martín Rojo (2007) argue, this results in benefits being supplied on the basis of uniform and homogeneous conceptions of citizenship, which migrants’ fundamental heterogeneity challenges, but which, at the same time, it must conform to.

Critical work on language and institutions has drawn extensively on the work of sociologist Aaron Cicourel (1992), who advocates a departure from what he believes is the excessive analytical importance accorded to frontline communication in many interactionist studies of institutional talk (e.g. Drew and Heritage, 1992). Cicourel argues for the need to open up the scope of institutional research, decentralize frontline (face-to-face) communication, and engage in intensive ethnographic fieldwork to comprehend the distributed nature of knowledge and its power dimensions (Heller, 2007a). Thus, over the last
decade, ‘thick’ ethnographic accounts (Geertz, 1973) of institutions have been posited as the only way to understand organizations as wholes and capture the complex interconnections of practices, processes and identities that produce institutions, and, in turn, emerge from them (see, for example, Roberts and Sarangi, 1999).

In this article, I build upon and aim to contribute to critical, ethnographic and discourse-based analyses of language in state bureaucratic agencies. This article draws on and is closely linked to the work undertaken by Sarangi and Slembrouck (1996) on information exchange in bureaucratic contexts from a socio-critical pragmatic perspective, and by Blommaert (2001), Maryns (2006) and Jacquemet (2005, 2009) on various aspects of language use in the asylum-seeking procedure in different national contexts.

The site, the data and the socio-political context

This article examines an information desk, more precisely the service set up by the Barcelona branch of the Spanish immigration services in 2000 to answer the multiple queries applicants had about the one-shot legalization campaign organized by the Spanish state to document non-EU migrants living in the country without legal authorization. During the time I conducted my fieldwork, the service mostly dealt with inquiries about the progress of the individual applications that had already been submitted (for more details, see Codó, 2008). The data I draw on includes intensive ethnographic observations over a period of five months and subsequent sporadic visits to the office over two years, 20 hours of audiotaped face-to-face service interactions, textual materials (information booklets, application forms, etc.) and interviews with key social actors. The interactional data mainly involve two government employees (Miquel and Ramon) who, together with a third person who refused to be observed, bore the burden of information exchange in this office.

The ‘2000 Legalization Campaign’, as it was referred to in the media, began on 21 March 2000 and ended on 31 July 2000. It was intended for nationals of countries not belonging to the European Union2 or the European Economic Area (which included Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway). The two requirements applicants were asked to fulfil were: (1) to prove arrival in Spain prior to 1 June 1999; and (2) to have at some point during the three previous years held or applied for a work or residence permit (Administración General del Estado, 2000).

Showing that they fulfilled the first requirement (arrival by 1 June 1999) was fairly complicated for most migrants. They had to prove eligibility by submitting documentary evidence, but not just any document was accepted. Indeed, as a state institution, this agency protected the state’s regimes of truth (Foucault, 1984), as only certificates issued by civil servants or by individuals working within the public sector or for large bureaucratized organizations (like banks) would count as legitimate documentary evidence. Logically, this enforced restriction on valid documentation became an obstacle for many applicants who proved unable to demonstrate eligibility.

The 2000 Legalization Campaign must be understood in the context of a sudden increase in migrant populations in Spain during the 1990s as a result of the combination of a booming economy and profound socio-demographic changes (most notably, higher
levels of education among the younger generations and the increased participation of women in the labour force). The restrictiveness of the existing regulations for legal entry combined with the traditional weight of the informal sector in the Spanish economy meant that, at the time of the campaign, a large proportion of migrants were residing and working in the country without proper authorization. This situation was viewed as undesirable, mainly for economic and social reasons.

**Analysing discursive practice: From information gatekeeping to the moral regimentation of conduct**

This section analyses the discursive characteristics of social interaction at the service under scrutiny. I do that by moving back and forth from my ethnographic understanding of the socio-institutional order to the socio-interactional practices of clients and government employees. In placing my analytical lens on the interactional material, my aim is not to reify or mystify face-to-face service talk. Likewise, I do not intend to claim that frontline client–employee communication should be considered analytically more central than other organizational spaces in understanding the work that gets done in institutions.

In fact, the desk under analysis was rather peripheral to the work this agency did, as decisions on the granting of work and residence permits were made at different stages and in multiple back offices, and were not connected to what clients might say or do during these occasions of interaction. Yet, at the same time, this desk was extremely central to the legalization process. As the communicative interface between the Spanish state and its citizens-to-be, this was the only space from which applicants could get an idea of their chances of quitting the marginal illegality in which their lives unfolded. While, materially, accessing information was vital for their projects, hopes and expectations, symbolically, the treatment they were accorded revealed the terms under which their incorporation into Spanish society was being constructed.

**Battling over information**

One of the paradoxes defining the space investigated is that, despite it being, officially, an information service, information was difficult to come by. In fact, the unequal social distribution of institutional knowledge and discursive capitals between clients and servers that typifies talk in any institutional space did not only get built upon here, but, crucially, significantly amplified as a result of the many contradictions that emerged from the way the status of specific applications was being represented to clients, as I shall illustrate. Sarangi and Slembrouck (1996) claim that in bureaucratic contexts it is common practice not to reveal insider procedural details, as they may put the institution at risk, and lay it open for public criticism. However, the extent to which even basic information was withheld in this context, and the specific characteristics of how it was done, sets this agency apart from similar bureaucratic organizations.

I will begin by illustrating the discursive strategies that the institutional agents routinely deployed to answer clients’ inquiries. These encounters would consist of an initial
opening episode, where the client (C) would hand in a copy of his or her application form to the government employee (E), who would then proceed to locate the information on that specific file in the computerized database. The excerpt presented here would come after that often silent computer-searching routine.

Extract 1

1  E: trámite ale. 1  E: process there you go.
2  C: okay (?)? 2  C: okay (?)?
3  E: ↓no (.) trámite. 3  E: ↓no (.) process.
4  C: falta. 4  C: [papers] missing.
5  E: falta two weeks. 5  E: missing two weeks [two weeks to go]
6  (4) 6  (4)
7  E: after two weeks come here. 7  E: after two weeks come here.

It seems clear from this interaction that the government employee, in this case Ramon, has no intention of engaging in cooperative or meaningful communication with the client. On the one hand, Ramon’s interactional retreat is evident in line 1, where by using ‘ale’, he announces his desire to bring the already minimal interaction to an end; and in line 3, where he merely disconfirms the client’s previous interpretation of his turn but elaborates no further. On the other hand, his non-investment in meaningful communication is epitomized by his conduct in line 5, where he re-uses the client’s previously employed lexical item (falta) while inserting it into a temporal expression, totally changing its meaning and baffling the client. It seems clear that achieving intersubjective comprehension is not a concern for him, but rather getting out of social interaction as quickly as possible. However, on the surface, he collaborates; he provides answers, corrects interpretations and offers reformulations when there is evidence of non-understanding (as in line 7). Yet this is mere ‘discursive orderliness’, as Thornborrow (2002) calls it. There is no minimal complementarity of goals, as in most service encounters (Merritt, 1976), but rather, a manifest clash of interests. The divergence of actors’ interactional agendas goes beyond what some authors have identified as the (rather unintentional) frame conflict (Prego-Vázquez, 2007; Todd, 1983; Wodak, 1996) between a lay citizen and an institutional insider; what we are witnessing in this case is intentional and strategic minimization of information. Importantly, this way of delivering information, albeit with some differences among officials, was not exceptional but rather habitual in this office.

Ramon’s interactional demeanour foregrounds the profound asymmetry of pragmatic rights and obligations holding in bureaucratic talk, where government employees can afford to be uninformative but clients are routinely asked to provide as many details as possible (Sarangi and Slembrouck, 1996). As Fairclough (1989) points out, there is nothing natural but rather profoundly ideological about the unequal nature of these interactions, in which it is generally assumed that institutions (and their representatives) are entitled to exert a fair amount of discursive domination over citizens.
whose individual lives they increasingly subject to regulation and control anyway (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). In this interaction, Ramon exercises power at various levels, but one of the key ways in which he does it is as I mentioned, by retreating from the communicative process and placing the onus to interact on his interlocutor.

The sense-making process is extremely difficult for the migrant client, given the two interlocking asymmetries he has to juggle with: being an institutional outsider and having limited competence in the medium of interaction. Spanish in this context is not only the language chosen by the government official to deliver information. As the agency granting legal access to Spanish citizenship, Spanish was in numerous ways constructed as the only legitimate language of this institution (see Codó, 2008, for further details) and a technology for, symbolically, screening applicants on the spot. Not being competent (enough) in Spanish was constructed as indexing non-entitlement (because of recent arrival) and migrants’ low moral status (for trying to cheat the procedure), in what was a fairly regimented moral order. I will come back to this later.

In the exchange under analysis, we see how the client is forced to mobilize whatever resources he has available if he wants to stay in the conversation. He takes a fairly active stance and probes twice into Ramon’s words. He needs to make sense of Ramon’s trámite, a Spanish word he may not be familiar with, but a lexical item that, even if he understands it, carries little informative value (merely that his file is being processed). Line 2 contains his first try at getting more concrete details, and may be interpreted as an attempt to negotiate a new language for the exchange, one in which he would feel more comfortable in speaking, as he is of South Asian origin. Yet this implicit language negotiation strategy (Auer, 1998) is not picked up by Ramon at that time.

The client’s second attempt at meaning making (line 4) draws not on the mobilization of English but on a widely circulating and informationally charged word for migrants in this field: falta. Falta is an interesting case of a neologism that emerged from this site and that enjoyed widespread currency, especially among the South Asian community, when I did my fieldwork. It came from the expression faltan papeles (literally, there are papers missing), which officials would employ to indicate that the eligibility evidence submitted by the undocumented migrant had not been accepted, and, thus, that more (in fact, different) papers were needed to demonstrate arrival in Spain by 1 June 1999, or else the application for legal status would be rejected. South Asian migrants would shorten the expression to the single word falta and take it to mean that some kind of ‘fault’ had been found with their application.

In choosing to use falta with falling intonation, the client is, thus, presenting a tentative understanding of Ramon’s trámite for confirmation. Instead, Ramon does something else, that is, he does not confirm or disconfirm falta, but tells his client to wait for two more weeks. The way he chooses to say that, though, is intriguing, as he recycles falta and then code-switches into English (two weeks), obviously puzzling the client who does not seem familiar with the standard meaning of falta. More than the code-switch, what is interesting here is that Ramon does not make the verb agree with dos semanas (two weeks), as would be normative in standard Spanish (faltan not falta). Rather, Ramon seems to be mimicking his interlocutor’s peculiar use of falta while, interactationally, seemingly building on it.
Mocking imitations of migrant clients were part of Ramon’s derogatory language games, which I analyse in detail in Codó (2008); in this case, the reusing of *falta* in a resulting ungrammatical sentence could be interpreted as a form of foreigner talk. While in this exchange Ramon’s goal does not seem to go beyond creating interactional chaos, in other cases he was openly provocative (although playing havoc with the interaction is also an act of provocation). His language games, his often extremely conversational register (as with the use of *ale* in line 1) and his mobilization of rapport strategies and solidarity markers in what are fairly formal interactions between strangers were a way for him to display his authority and reinforce inequality (for similar effects of conversationalization, see Fairclough, 1992; Martín Rojo, 2010; Patiño Santos, 2008; Prego-Vázquez, 2007). My argument here is that he could afford to behave like that because he knew that he would not be challenged.

The majority of the undocumented clients he served daily were not highly fluent in Spanish, and, thus, would probably not comprehend his rather fast speech or have the resources to challenge him. Others would choose not to do so, as they, unaware of where decisions were made and by whom, might have worried that their attitude would jeopardize their case (as also observed by Sarangi and Slembrouck, 1996). Still others might have internalized what Han (2007) calls ‘the disposition of the marginalized’. This is an accepting and subordinate habitus that forms as a result of the experiences of marginalization, *decapitalization* (Martín Rojo, 2010) and symbolic and material domination that migrants go through in their settlement trajectories.

However, those who did challenge Ramon and even reported him to the institution (as in the case of an Argentinian client) would only get him out of the service for a couple of days. Later, Ramon would be back with the same practices. What is more, when his contract was terminated (he was only temporarily employed), he was hired again, while some of his colleagues were not. My point here is that although Ramon’s offensive and even aggressive interactional behaviour was his choice, the institution did not only not stop him but rather legitimized his practices by allowing him to continue to serve the public and even hiring him back upon termination of his contract. It is my contention that, in fact, Ramon’s disdainful stance towards clients was not that different from the way the institution positioned itself towards its clientele. I will illustrate this in what follows.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I was told that the agency was on the verge of collapse due to the amount of initial applications awaiting processing and the high number of additional documents being filed for already submitted cases. One of the reasons for the lagging behind in the handling of paperwork was the understaffing of the agency, both the back offices and the frontline information desk, where people would regularly queue for hours in the street before the doors opened at 9.00a.m. In the face of such processing delays, the agency decided to stop informing clients that the evidence they submitted to prove eligibility was not accepted, so that no more documents were filed. This created confusion among clients, as, overnight, they started to be provided with different pieces of information.5 Interestingly, the managers asked the employees to describe the status of ‘faulty’ petitions as being ‘in *trámite*’, a word that they themselves had devised to discursively represent files that were pending a final decision.6 Apart from the informational chaos that the now pervasive use of *trámite* created, this example illustrates very vividly the routine ways in which employees’ individual practices got institutionally legitimized.
The bottom line of this story is that, faced with organizational difficulties, the institution decided to curtail the amount of information to be provided in ways that were consequential for the fate of many cases and which compromised the rights of applicants to equal and fair treatment. Safeguarding the institution was given priority over migrant clients’ need for accurate and truthful information. In a way, this can be considered the institutional counterpart of Ramon’s interactional mistreatment of clients; while, obviously, these two phenomena were different in scale and scope, it is hard not to see them as fuelling each other. They also shed light on the extent to which regulation and control were, individually as well as institutionally, articulated around the Foucauldian power–knowledge node (Foucault, 1980).

In the perception of foreigners, officers’ non-cooperation and erratic information practices, together with the institution’s processing delays, incoherent organizational strategies and the eventual rejection of a large number of applications (cf. Codó, 2003) constituted the image of arbitrariness of this agency (see Jacquemet, 2005, for a similar discussion in connection with the asylum-granting process during the Kosovo conflict). For many observers (cf. Guia, 2011), the particular ways in which the 2000 legalization procedure was handled by the Barcelona branch of the Spanish immigration services (as opposed to other branches which had, and still have, looser criteria for legalization), and the feelings of unrest its practices engendered, were responsible for the mass migrant sit-ins that took place in January 2001 in different churches in Barcelona. In these sit-ins, which forced the government to start a new legalization process, pleas were made for the state to ‘open the gate’ and document the large number of applicants that had remained illegal aliens.

**Implicit interactional norms, subversion and control**

A crucial insight from the data is that the need for regulation and control of the employees investigated extended far beyond the micro-strategies they employed to block clients’ access to information. In fact, the sequencing of turns and actions in their exchanges with clients was also tightly regimented, as illustrated by the fact that most interactions had a very similar episodic structure. The discursive moves by clients that did not follow the ‘canonical’ order imposed by the employees never got taken up or built upon. However, this is no exceptional feature. What is fairly extraordinary is the way in which interactional order was constructed. First, interactional rules were mostly implicit, so it was assumed that clients knew how to play the game. Second, the way employees chose to organize the talk in many cases contravened what is standard practice in service contexts. A case in point is their determination to gather all the applications a client had for consultation at the beginning of the encounter. However, this is no exceptional feature. What is fairly extraordinary is the way in which interactional order was constructed. First, interactional rules were mostly implicit, so it was assumed that clients knew how to play the game. Second, the way employees chose to organize the talk in many cases contravened what is standard practice in service contexts. A case in point is their determination to gather all the applications a client had for consultation at the beginning of the encounter.

As became explicit in a number of interactions, clients’ expectations were that copies of applications would be handed over to the server one at a time in the same way that requests are usually made one at a time in service contexts (Ventola, 1987). However, in line with my discussion in the previous section, no spaces were open for the clients to comprehend what they were expected to do and when; they were just assumed to know the rules of interactional conduct, and, more importantly, would be held accountable if they did not follow them (with employees, again, quickly linking ‘transgressions’ to issues of moral worth, as illustrated in the excerpt below).
Extract 2

1 C: hola buenas.
2 E: hola:
3 ((The client hands his application form over to the employee))
4 E: sólo traes uno?
5 (1)
6 E: no traes de nadie más?
7 ((The employee checks the status of the client’s application on the computer))
8 E: ¿qué: three week?
9 E: qué?
10 E: en ↓trámite >tienes< you have to wait three more weeks.
11 E: entiendes?
12 (1)
13 C: ¿three week? 3
14 E: yes.
15 C: wait.
16 (3)
17 E: mucho wait.
18 C: ¿three week muchos sí.
19 E: a lot of wait.
20 C: a lot!
21 E: a lot!
22 (3)
23 C: pero otro: (.) uh no problema?
24 E: ¿they are looking for- i:f it is alright or ↓don’t I don’t know.
25 E: ¿you have another one?
26 (6)
27 E: mira mira mira mira!
28 (2)
29 E: la butxaca del davant.
30 ((The employee takes the form handed over to him by the client))
31 E: MÁS?
32 E: YOU HAVE MORE?
33 (.)
34 E: YOU HAVE ANOTHER ONE?
35 C: =this is my my friend.
36 ()
37 E: YOU DON’T HAVE ANY MORE?
38 C: uh?
39 E: YOU DON’T HAVE ANY MORE?
40 (.)
41 ((The employee turns the form handed over to him by the researcher))
42 E: I was about to repeat it again but then I thought don’t overdo it.
43 R: no ho ha entès!
44 E: I know (.) since there was nobody a ↓round (.) if a friend of his had come I would not have taken it.
The questions in lines 5 and 7 are to be understood as requests by the government employee, in this case Miquel, to hand over all the applications the client has for consultation. However, his interlocutor does not react to Miquel’s requesting moves either verbally or non-verbally. In spite of not having received a response, and aware as Miquel is of the fragility of mutual understanding in this setting (as he will admit later), he decides to move on interactionally, locates the information on the client’s case on the computer and supplies it. Admittedly, his response is a bit more informative than Ramon’s laconic trámite in (1), as Miquel tells the client right away that trámite means he has to continue waiting. Like Ramon, however, he offers no more details. Also like his colleague, Miquel’s contemptuous stance towards clients transpires in line 21, after the information seeker complains about long processing times. Miquel’s reaction to the complaint is, again, superficially cooperative, in that he produces something that looks like an agreement. Yet the particular form it takes (‘muchos!’) works as a contextualization cue which reveals Miquel’s footing towards it.

In Spanish, agreeing to somebody’s request (or complaint, as in this case) by repeating the first person’s words without explicitly uttering ‘yes’ is a way of pragmatically indexing the speaker’s non-committal stance. This formula is typically used with children or mentally deranged people. The idea is that one tells them what ‘they want to hear’ so that they stop asking or complaining, but that, in fact, one has no intention of pursuing that line of action. To an adult speaker, it sounds downright offensive. Although these inferential meanings did presumably not become available to the client, Miquel’s construal of his interlocutor is open for everyone to see.

Now I would like to focus on the analysis of what happens from line 24 until the end of the exchange. After receiving information on the status of his first application, the client reaches for his pocket and takes out another one. Miquel seems shocked, as he addresses me in Catalan, repeats ‘look’ four times and then explicitly directs my attention to the client’s front pocket. His reaction indicates that he thinks he has caught the client out red-handed (although in the way the client proceeds, that is by openly taking the documents out of his front pocket, he does not show traces of his being aware of the unlawful nature of his actions). The client’s attitude is interpreted as transgressive, and his actions as intentional subversions of the social order of the office. Instead of assuming that the client does not know (after all, why should he?) or that he did not understand the employee’s questions at the beginning of the exchange (or why he was asking them for that matter), Miquel conjectures his interlocutor is intentionally violating the norms of interactional conduct. However, instead of making the violation explicit, he reacts aggressively and asks the client up to five times if he has other applications for checking.

Miquel’s subsequent comments addressed to me (lines 45–6) enable us to see his construction of the situation. This is a type of data researchers rarely have access to. In lines 42–3, Miquel admits that his reaction has been a bit excessive, but, more interestingly, when I give him my interpretation of the client’s mode of proceeding (as resulting from non-comprehension), he agrees with me. His comments reveal that he did entertain the idea that the client might not have understood, but nevertheless did not suspend judgement. The question that arises is why Miquel jumped to the conclusion that the client was intentionally being subversive of his authority.
Sarangi and Slembrouck (1996) explain that mistrust generally defines the relationship between members of the public and bureaucratic institutions. For them, bureaucracies’ working assumption is that clients will try to cheat the procedure. Clients are often scrutinized in ways which make sense only against the background of that prevailing institutional ideology. Jacquemet (2005) illustrates how suspicion gets entrenched in organizations dealing with migrant populations. Undoubtedly, ideological mistrust is the defining characteristic of all national immigration services, as gatekeeping institutions controlling access to the most valuable resource a non-national can hope for: citizenship. Because the stakes are high and because of widespread social suspicion of the Other, institutional mistrust is felt at all levels. However, in this case, mistrust was also tied to the specificity of the socio-political circumstances of this legalization campaign. A great deal of media and political attention was devoted to the extent to which the campaign was having a ‘magnet effect’ and was, in fact, attracting undocumented migrants living in neighbouring countries who were not eligible. This enhanced the feelings of suspicion towards a great deal of the applicants, a perception that could be sensed up and down the line. At both ends, mistrust was highly operational, though, as it legitimized unfair institutional decisions (such as withholding information from migrants, as I have recounted earlier) and contemptible interactional practices, both premised on the idea that migrants did not ‘deserve better’.

**Evaluation, hierarchization and the moral order**

I have discussed how employees’ aspirations for regulation and control were present at many levels. In fact, they ranged from information delivery and interactional participation, as shown in the earlier sections, to other dimensions of migrants’ conduct, such as their use of the office space and of time. Employees strove hard to discipline clients not to wander about the office, to sit on benches until their number was called and to wait the prescribed amount of time before going back to the office for consultation. They devised ways of knowing how often a person had inquired about his/her application and reprimanded him/her severely for not following their instructions. These sanctions took the form of direct commands and prohibitions, and even threats of police action. In sum, these government employees were trying hard to discipline what they viewed as a largely unruly population. Obviously, servers’ intentions met with limited success, as applicants found multiple ways of circumventing their technologies of discipline and control. For example, before they used the service for the first time, they would make copies of the stamped application form they needed to produce in order to have their files checked. This way, if they wanted to go back to the office earlier than told, they would simply take another copy with them which did not have employees’ handwritten codes on it.

Faced with such regular ‘subversions’, employees imagined their practices of control as ways of creating order out of the perceived social chaos generated by applicants, and as techniques of containment of what they constructed to be a defiant clientele. Over time, as they experienced more and more ‘acts of subversion’, employees’ feelings of suspicion and distrust got essentialized: they were not directed at what clients did but at who they were. Applicants were ordinarily constructed as immoral individuals needing to be disciplined. As Foucault brilliantly describes:
Through this micro-economy of a perpetual penalty operates a differentiation which is not one of acts but of individuals themselves, of their nature, their potentialities, their level or their value. By assessing acts with precision, discipline judges individuals ‘in truth’. (1977: 181)

Discipline operated on the otherization of migrants’ attitude and bodily demeanour, a process that was visible in and through the numerous occasions of moral evaluation to which they were subjected. Any individual actions which violated whatever element of the institutionally prescribed order of things (from forging documents to simply dressing inappropriately) was taken as one more instance of clients’ true immoral nature.

It must be conceded that, at times, employees showed more ambivalence in their comprehension of clients’ motives than the embodiment of their official roles allowed for. However, those moments of revelation were few and far apart. As the visible face of the legalization procedure, their routine practices created the impression that the gate of Spanish citizenship was closed and would only be open for a few ‘deserving’ individuals.

This impression was created through fairly explicit processes of hierarchization and moralization of would-be citizens. Clients often had their attention drawn to the fact that they displayed inadequate forms of behaviour, like inattention or absentmindedness. The purpose of many of these for the most part unmotivated remarks was to make applicants feel their deficiencies – moral or otherwise, remind them of their fragile circumstances (at the mercy of officials’ arbitrary criteria), and, simultaneously, reinstate employees’ own power and authority. Their practices of hierarchization and moral evaluation (see extract 3 below) constituted the node at which the social, the moral, the interactional and the institutional were brought together in ways which made it unfeasible (and undesirable) to disentangle one from the other.

Extract 3

1 C: hola. 1 C: hello.
2 E: hola. 2 E: hello.
3 C: perdona= 3 C: excuse me=
4 E: =si quieres que miremos algo necesitas 4 E: =if you want to have anything
5 número. 5 checked you need a number
[ticket].
6 C: yo número. 6 C: I number.
7 E: este número no es de aquí. 7 E: this number is not from here.
8 C: si número ya está aquí pero para allá mira 8 C: yes number is already here but for
9 por favor. there check please.
10 E: esta gente está aquí esperando en la calle 10 E: these people have been waiting
11 desde las tres de la mañana para que le 11 in the street since three in the
12 miremos y está haciendo cola en el sol y tú 12 morning to have [their files]
13 acagas de llegar y no tienes número (.) no te 13 checked and they’ve been queuing
14 lo voy a mirar. up in the sun and you’ve just
15 arrived and don’t have a number
16 (.) I am not checking it.
Situations like those shown in this excerpt, in which somebody approached the counter without an appropriate number ticket, were frequent (tickets were handed out at 9.00a.m. and were usually gone in a few minutes). As there was another government service with a number ticket dispenser (though dispensing tickets of a different colour) on the same premises, some clients would, inadvertently or not, produce those other tickets at the immigration consultation desk.

Employees systematically constructed the situation as an attempt by clients to jump the queue, and would refuse to serve anyone who was unable to hand them the appropriate ticket. On these occasions, it was not uncommon to hear employees command clients to leave the place, often through blunt directives like fuera de aquí (get out of here!) or a la cola (line up!) addressed to clients. What is interesting about (3) is that the government employee’s refusal to serve the client is preceded by an appraisal of the client’s intentions in moral terms (lines 10–13). Miquel constructs his justification in a way that the moral baseness of his interlocutor is foregrounded. He accomplishes that by highlighting the harshness of the circumstances surrounding fellow applicants’ waiting conditions with skilful dramatic strokes and assuming that his interlocutor was intentionally trying to circumvent the obligation to queue up (‘you have just arrived’).

The moral normativity to which social spaces like this office are subjected does not only entail evaluation; it also entails hierarchization. The goal of hierarchization is to normalize, that is, to compare, differentiate, homogenize and eventually exclude individuals (Foucault, 1977).

Of the two servers observed, Ramon was more vocal than Miquel in hierarchizing clients. Once, aware of my interest in finding out about clients’ migration trajectories, he suggested that I should speak to a client he was serving in the following terms: ‘aquest és més persona que tothom. Clar, ell diu a mi no me lo van a dar porque yo no tengo pruebas. Pa(ra) uno bueno que hay!’ (‘This one is more human than all of them. He says they are not going to give it to me because I don’t have evidence. The only good one there is!’).

Ramon’s comments bring nicely together the different elements which constituted this office as a morally regulated social space: first, the essentializing judgement (this client is presented as a better ‘human being’); second, the classifying and ranking of clients (this applicant is ‘more human’ than the rest); third, the extremely negative and distrustful perception of the population served, a typical strategy of covert racist discourse (Van Dijk, 2008) which is employed to legitimize evaluation and hierarchization. In a more general sense, the case of this particular employee illustrates very lucidly that interactional practice and the imagination of clients stand in a dialectical relationship to each other, and that understanding the constitution of this dialectic and its operations is pivotal in unveiling what gets constructed as ‘service’ in specific institutional contexts.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The examination of the multiple micro-strategies of domination mobilized by the government employees in this discursive space foregrounded the ways in which their job was not understood as the delivery of a ‘service’ in the classical sense in which it is
understood in the service encounter literature (see Aston [1988] and Merritt [1976] among others). Rather, the extreme uncooperativeness, rudeness and aggressiveness which transpire from these interactions construct a conflictual space which both servers and their clients felt as extremely hostile.

On the part of the employees, hostility was often attributed to the clients’ demanding attitude and their repeated attempts at circumventing the institution’s procedures. More infrequently complaints were voiced about how servers were (mis)treated by the agency they worked for, and, yet, it is my contention that it was from the agency that a great deal of the hostility came.

These employees were aware that, as temporary workers, they were performing a strenuous job nobody wanted to do. Most permanent members of staff had chosen to be in the back office, where they could regulate the pace of work, and, most importantly, did not have to engage in the complexities of human interaction. The temporary staff felt abandoned by the institution, without practical support (they had only one day of training and no regular follow-up meetings) and with a symbolic lack of interest in the ordinary difficulties they faced. In addition, they were underpaid and often complained that, unlike permanent civil servants, they received no extra allowances for working frontline. When the institution decided to curtail the information to be provided, they felt trapped and rather indignant, but those feelings were, for the most part, suppressed in the hope of being able to secure a position within the civil service in the future. In this way, they became the institution’s buffer zones, the agents of containment and discipliners of an increasingly angry clientele. These employees exerted and, at the same time, endured a great deal of institutional power. In Foucault’s terms, they were both agents and subjects of power, which, in a web-like fashion, was everywhere to be sensed.

This office was, thus, a field of struggle, in which both groups of actors – clients and employees – were trying to make some sense of what was going on. The institution had its own bureaucratic logics of screening and mistrusting applicants, logics that were enhanced by the socio-political climate in which the campaign unfolded, and which became internalized and symbolically performed by employees in situated frontline talk. As the institutional gateway to Spanish citizenship, this agency reproduced the exclusionary logic of the state, and viewed applicants as non-citizens who were in ‘no position to complain’, as one of the employees once said to me.

Data of this type often beg the question to what extent the socio-discursive practices analysed are any different from those found at similar gatekeeping and/or bureaucratic organizations, and whether or not dissimilarities can be attributed to the specificity of the clientele served. In many ways, this dichotomic analytical approach is resonant with discussions about the institutional or intercultural dimension of certain interactional moves. My position is that, as data situated at the intersection of multiple regimes, any attempts at disentangling them are unrealistic and analytically unproductive. I will illustrate this point by moving back to the data.

By virtue of its embeddedness in a gatekeeping and bureaucratic agency, the interactional practices examined share multiple traits with interactions in analogous settings: their fundamentally non-egalitarian nature; the employees’ assumption of clients’ familiarity with the institutional game; the institutional overlooking of pre-interactional
inequalities of capitals, and of the differential access of actors to the mobilization of effective resources; the divergence in actors’ agendas; the rigid and routine character of institutional discourse; the impersonal ethos; and the defining asymmetries in pragmatic possibilities for interaction, among others. As communication taking place in a Spanish bureaucracy, the forms of talk documented also echo traditional ways of enacting a bureaucrat’s role (Nieto, 1996). The almighty and tyrant Spanish civil servant is a familiar image to many. Yet, as an office processing applications for immigration status, this is a special type of agency, where, incidentally, comparisons with interactions as they unfold between nationals is unfeasible, simply because they hardly exist. National immigration services, with their own ideological regimes of social selection and regulation, are one of the most visible agencies of inclusion and exclusion of foreign populations. To this institutional scenario must be added the specific trajectory of the Barcelona branch, with its notorious history of understaffing, irrational organizational criteria, uncivil and untrained personnel (Masreal, 2011) and even tighter requirements for legalization than other branches. With all this in mind, what specifically can be attributed to which constitutive dimension of discourse is hard to tell.

However, at the same time, there is one crucial aspect that, to me, sets these interactions apart from similar exchanges, namely the overt evaluative gaze, that is, the singularly explicit ways in which employees engaged in processes of judgement, hierarchization and moralization. Foucault (1977) contends that state institutions can only operate on the basis of other existing power relations, that is, that the fundamental point of anchorage of power asymmetries is to be found outside the institution. Here, I want to argue that it is these actors’ differential position in the social structure, fundamentally constituted along the national–non-national axis, that informs their perceived prerogative to evaluate clients and moralize talk. Similarly, Pujolar (2007) contends that, in the context of free language classes for African women provided by a Catholic organization in Catalonia (Spain), members of the local population get imbued with the authority to cast an evaluative gaze on the migrant language learners, their habits, behaviours and practices. As Pujolar also discusses, many students could not mobilize enough communicative resources in the local languages to contest or defend the legitimacy of their own ways of being and doing, and, thus, it was possible for the locals’ self-constructed roles of expert and evaluator to become normalized. As in my office, social relations between foreigners and locals get constituted as both hierarchical and moral.

I want to argue that, rather than being totally dissimilar, the data shown here have many traits in common with practices in similar institutions; yet the grounding social inequality among actors, which was constituted on differential access to moral power, amplified and deepened many of the recurrent features of discourse in non-egalitarian contexts, and, simultaneously, exacerbated the exclusionary and disciplinary dimension of the institution as a body of the nation-state. If, as Goffman (1983) claims, actors’ occasions of interaction form the fabric of their experience in the wider community, then it is hard not to see how the ways in which foreigners were treated at this agency socialized them into the ‘appropriate’ bodily disposition for a ‘good migrant’: the acceptance of uncivility, lecturing and surveillance, and the need to constantly prove oneself worthy of being allowed to stay in the host society.
Notes

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2. Although not members of the European Union, Swiss nationals are included within this group by virtue of the agreement signed on 21 June 1999 between Switzerland and the European Union.

3. The transcription of the extracts follows the notation conventions devised by Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

4. The reason why he opts out of confirming or disconfirming falta may have to do with the decision made by the agency to stop informing migrants that the documentation they had filed was found to be problematic.

5. All the interactions examined in this article occurred after that decision was made.

6. They saw the use of this word as a way of simplifying complex bureaucratic information for applicants (such as in Sarangi, 1996), although it had the effect of muddling clients’ understanding of the procedure even further.

7. This became evident by looking at the high number of applications rejected at the end of the campaign in Barcelona as compared to other provinces (c.f. Codó, 2003), and has also become known to me through my subsequent fieldwork with providing legal advice to NGOs and trade unions in the Barcelona area (see Codó and Garrido [2010] for further information on that study).

8. Clients were allowed to have up to five applications checked, and many offered to take applications from acquaintances or relatives, given the office’s long queues.

References


Eva Codó is Associate Professor of English and Linguistics at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain. Her research explores issues of mobility, multilingualism and social inequality from a critical sociolinguistic perspective. She has carried out ethnographic field work in a number of institutional spaces, most notably a tourist information service, a non-governmental organization and a state immigration office. Her research has been published internationally in journals such as Langage et Société, Sociolinguistic Studies and Discurso y Sociedad. She is also author of the monograph Immigration and Bureaucratic Control: Language Practices in Public Administration (Mouton de Gruyter, 2008).