

Linguistic shirkers and integration refuseniks? The exclusionary consequences of discourses about migrant language learning

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Most migrant-receiving countries privilege one single language, spoken with a “native” accent, as the most legitimate means of communication and a key marker of “true belonging”. Migrants are expected to make every effort to learn that language. While their language learning successes are rarely acknowledged and often rendered invisible, their failures are widely seen as evidence for their lack of effort to integrate and their resistance to belonging. Taking language proficiency as an index of integration or resistance is based on a number of false assumptions about adult language learning, particularly the idea that individuals exert full control over their linguistic repertoires. In this presentation, I will first examine the discursive construction of migrant language proficiency as an index of belonging. I will then explore the consequences of this fallacy, which, perversely, may include a reduction in language learning opportunities. I will illustrate my argument with evidence from recent ethnographic research in Australia, China, Germany and the UAE.