Professor Katrijn Maryns explains the linguistic transformations that turn “undocumented migrants” into “genuine” or “bogus refugees”

Language is the inescapable medium through which we live our lives. Access to social goods such as education, employment or community participation occurs through the medium of a particular language. However, all too often we take language for granted and its social role is obscured. One context that exemplifies both the power of language and its invisibility is the asylum determination procedure.

The asylum determination procedure is designed to distinguish between “genuine” refugees – migrants who should be granted asylum because of a well-founded fear of persecution in their home countries – and economic migrants.

Katrijn Maryns, Professor of Translation, Interpretation and Communication at Ghent University, illuminated the linguistic challenges inherent in the Belgian asylum determination procedure during her recent visit to Sydney, where she attended the inaugural “Language and Law” symposium at Sydney University (organized by Alexandra Grey and Laura Smith-Khan) and delivered the first Lecture in Linguistic Diversity of 2019 at Macquarie University. Professor Maryns showed that the determination that distinguishes between “genuine” refugees and economic migrants is essentially a linguistic process. Language is central to producing the asylum seeker’s story in interview with an asylum officer; and the officer’s report of the asylum seeker’s story ultimately forms the basis for the decision.
In this process, meaning is transformed from one language to another, from one person to another, and from the spoken interview to the written report. These multiple transformations are highly complex but their complexity is obscured in the definite binary outcome of acceptance or rejection.

Asylum seekers are mostly talked about in numbers. Sociolinguistic ethnography illuminates the processes behind the numbers (Image credit: Europarl)

So much can go wrong, as Case 1, an excerpt from the asylum interview of a soft-spoken young woman from Sudan illustrates. The woman (in the excerpt represented as “AS” for “asylum seeker”) explained that a man had aided her escape from Juba by stating “one man .. carry me .. help me ...” (l. 20). The Belgian asylum officer (“AO”) misheard “carry me” as “Karimi” and her report – which entered the file and became the version of record of the asylum seeker’s story – stated “A man named Karimi helped me.”

Although the final written report (in Dutch) is written in the first person – as if it were the authentic voice of the asylum seeker – it is obviously highly mediated and undergoes a series of linguistic transformations to arrive at its final form.

Could the “carry me – Karimi” misunderstandings have been avoided if an interpreter had been used? Maybe.

However, before the question of interpreter use can even be entertained, a determination of the asylum seeker’s language must be made by the asylum officer. Asylum seekers often have complex linguistic repertoires that are not easily summed up under one single language name. The complexity of the linguistic repertoires of people on the move clashes with the monolingual assumptions of a neat match between national origin and a named language that typically guides European asylum procedures.
Case 1 (Source: Katrijn Maryns, Guest lecture, Macquarie University, 02-04-2019)

This clash between factual complexity of linguistic repertoires and the bureaucratic drive to simplify means that even something as seemingly simple as determining the language in which an interview should be conducted is not simple at all. For instance, in another example (Case 2), Professor Maryns introduced us to a Belgian asylum officer, who was keen to get the interview done in English.

Given that English is the official language of Sierra Leone, the country of origin of the asylum seeker she was interviewing, this does not seem like such an unreasonable idea. It only becomes unreasonable when one knows that proficiency in English in Sierra Leone, as in many other postcolonial countries with English as an official language, is closely tied to formal education. The asylum seeker tried to explain that much to the officer when she said “I no go to school” (l. 4).

In a testament to the power differential inherent in the interview situation, the officer waves away that objection and makes the asylum seeker “sign” (indicate by cross or circle) that she’s happy to conduct the interview in English.

The asylum interview is a high stakes situation: for asylum seekers, matters of life and death may ride on it. Most of the time, all they have to succeed in this effort is their story: they must tell a credible story, in a plausible linguistic form, in a plausible genre, and of a plausible content. However, what is plausible to the European asylum bureaucracy may be vastly different from the story an asylum seeker can tell with the resources at her or his disposal.
Case 2 (Source: Katrijn Maryns, Keynote lecture, Sydney University, 01-04-2019)

In short, the asylum interview places extremely high linguistic demands on the asylum seeker while severely curtailing the possibilities for the production of a credible story.

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