Who is a real refugee?

The refugee crisis in Europe has caught a lot of global media attention. Countries at the entry points and their official actions, as well civil organizations, get a lot of attention in online media; furthermore, social media comments quite often focus on the refugees’ origins, intentions, religion, and behaviour. For instance, in the coverage of how a parish near the Hungarian border helps refugees, one interviewee voices her misgivings:

They spend a lot of money for coming, but if they are real refugees, they can come on order, on normal way. Not this other ways how they are trying.

While not uncommon, comments such as this one miss a key aspect of the refugee experience. Having taught refugees in Australia, I am aware that people intending to leave their countries may sell all their possessions to be able to afford a journey to a safer place. When it isn’t possible for whole families to move together, they may raise money to enable a select member who may try to help others once they have reached safety.

So what are some of the possible origins of this ‘not a real refugee’ discourse?

It is quite often attributed to politicians. Earlier this year, in June, the Deputy of the ruling party in Hungary commented on national radio that people entering Hungary are not ‘real refugees’ as they have the funds to buy even first class plane tickets to Europe, but somehow they prefer to pay thousands of Euros to people smugglers and walk all the way. This comment, of course, blatantly ignores the fact that one needs both a passport and a valid visa to board a plane. While it is virtually impossible to trace the origins of such ideas, the above opinion seems to be a popular one globally present in reader comments on social media as well.

Undoubtedly, Hungary is just one of many countries using the ‘not a real refugee’ discourse, and possible reasons, like having enough money to buy plane tickets, and the issue of these people having smart phones, have been discussed in the media in other countries, too. Consequently, ideas and concepts linked to the construction of ‘non-real refugees’ are not localized to Hungarian politicians and media only. However, it is obvious that the position and role of the country in tackling the refugee crisis gives Hungary a central place in the discussions, so I will focus on the Hungarian context.

Confusion regarding terminology can be a possible reason why refugees are not seen as ‘real’. When analyzing discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press 1996-2006, Baker et al. (2008) mention a fundamental disagreement in defining refugees and asylum seekers in official bodies and sources, such as the Refugee Council or various dictionary definitions. By commonly applying the term ‘migrants’ to all people on the move, refugees and their rights for asylum can become invisible or even associated with those of ‘economic migrants’. In an attempt to clarify the issue, the UNHCR has published a statement saying:

Conflating refugees and migrants can have serious consequences for the lives and safety of refugees. Blurring the two terms takes attention away from the specific legal protections refugees require. It can undermine public support for refugees and the institution of asylum at a time when more refugees need such protection than ever before.

http://www.languageonthermove.com/who-is-a-real-refugee/
Since early September, when Hungary sealed its border with Serbia and made border-crossing punishable with up to three years imprisonment, the terminology used in the media has been shifting to ‘unauthorized or irregular arrivals’.

Could it be that, apart from politicians fanning the flames, Hungarians simply have a different picture of ‘refugees’ in their minds? To answer this, I have examined how two historical events are linked to the construction of ‘real refugees.’

Based on Ruth Wodak’s (2001) discourse-historical approach in her work exploring anti-Semitic and populist discourse in Austria, I firstly focus on the historical dimension of the discourse, then briefly look at argumentation strategies, also called *topoi*, to examine claims about refugees, and finally focus on metaphors.

**Linking refugees to history**

In media and social media comments world-wide, Hungary's response to the refugee crisis is most commonly linked to two events in the country’s history: the Holocaust, and the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, both of which produced huge waves of Hungarian refugees needing to be resettled in various parts of the world. In a reaction to these parallels, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance even released a statement in September, stating that:

> The circumstances surrounding the current refugee situation are notably different from the persecution of Jews and other victims before, during and after the Holocaust; nonetheless, there are parallels between the treatment of refugees then and now – particularly regarding the shameful closing of borders, the rise of xenophobia, and the use of dehumanising language.

In referring to these two historical points, contemporary events become understood against these foils invoking above all shame. Reader comments on social media, however, oftentimes reject any kind of connection to the actions producing the present refugee situation, sometimes even clearly stating ‘we are not responsible for what happened to them’. Responsibility then, is an important element in constructing the meaning of ‘real refugees’.

The other element is resilience, at least the attribution of it to a certain group, which manifests in two ways: firstly, Hungarian refugees of the 1956 Uprising are said to have experienced the same treatment in refugee camps before they were admitted in other countries. This can be seen from the following excerpt from a reader comment detailing what those refugees had to endure:

> How do you think the 1956 dissidents were treated? They slept in wooden barracks for at least 20-27 months. […] it was very cold. In summer it was scorching hot. In the meantime they worked in labour camps. There was no talking back or demanding things, blackmail or other things. If they were late, they risked being returned… [my translation]

It is clear that strength and endurance are values attached to the 1956 refugees, and this seems to be contrasted with contemporary refugees who are constructed as lacking these characteristics.

The second way attributed resilience gets expressed is by linking it to moral worth and referring to Hungarians who stayed behind during the events in 1956 as patriots. For example, a Hungarian conservative paper suggested that it as a moral obligation towards the country to stay rather than to flee, i.e. those who fled are...
‘exiles with bleak souls’ while those who stayed have ‘the homeland in their hearts’. What this romantic presentation of the past does is that it positions people staying behind as superior to people fleeing war, and consequently, it questions the moral worth of all refugees.

**Argumentation**

Getting back to my first example from *Al Jazeera*, it is clear that commenters have clear arguments to support their views on refugees. The noun for ‘refugee’ in Hungarian (‘menekült’) derives from the verb ‘to flee’ (‘menekülni’), which suggests leaving everything behind and run. Having no possessions then is an important feature of a refugee. Linking these to *topoi*, we can apply the *topos of definition* to this case, which says “if an action, a thing, or person (group of persons) is named/designated as X, the action, thing or person (group of persons) carries or should carry the qualities/traits/attributes contained in the (literal) meaning of X” (Wodak 2001, p. 75). And being able to organize an escape and pay people smugglers clearly contradicts the above picture of a ‘menekült’.

Another reason brought up in the argument that contemporary entrants to Europe are not real refugees is their behaviour: they are violent, they refuse help; consequently, they are not ‘real refugees’. An example of this can be seen in a [Tweet](http://www.languageonthemove.com/who-is-a-real-refugee/) of two pictures presented side by side: on the left, people apparently protesting against Hungary’s closed borders, and on the right, a woman and children lying on bundles of clothes. A commenter mentions that the ‘real refugees’ are in the right hand side picture. Although this particular tweet emanates from the UK, it is a good example for what can be found in local comments in Hungary too. The reasoning behind this distinction between ‘real’ vs. ‘not real refugees’ is based on their behaviour – filtered through media coverage, of course – and suggests that ‘real refugees’ should be humble and behave so that they could ‘earn’ their admission into Europe, quite like the 1956 Hungarian refugees supposedly did 60 years ago.

**Language use**

Metaphors are important linguistic devices used to create these ideas, and, ultimately, the picture of ‘real/non-real refugees’ in people’s heads. On *Language on the Move*, we have discussed the effects of metaphors [here](http://www.languageonthemove.com/who-is-a-real-refugee/) and [here](http://www.languageonthemove.com/who-is-a-real-refugee/). In her recent article in the Austrian newspaper *Kurier*, Ruth Wodak explains that certain word choices in the discussion of the refugee crisis in Europe can gear people towards thinking about refugees as armed and violent. The use of metaphors of natural disaster (‘waves’ and ‘floods’ of refugees) creates a menacing picture. Wodak argues that these metaphors create the misconception that the reasons for the refugee movements are not human-made, which ties in well with the idea of ‘responsibility’ discussed above.

However, there are more direct references to danger, too. Wodak mentions the construction of Europe as a ‘fortress’, which needs to be ‘protected’ from refugees by Hungary’s ‘border guards’ who ‘hunt’ refugees. It is not difficult to see how these metaphors of war can relate to the reasoning regarding ‘behaviour’ discussed above, and thus further strengthen the idea that these refugees are not ‘real refugees’.

In sum, historical experience, argumentation and metaphors have contributed to creating a powerful anti-migration discourse in Hungary and Europe as a whole. This may feed the interests of certain political elites and parties but it cuts short any attempt at having an objective and effective discussion on the issue.
References
