Conflicts of policy and linguistic self-representation in the UK asylum process

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Conflicts of policy and linguistic self-representation in the UK asylum process

Rachel Hanna

28.1 Introduction

The asylum process in the United Kingdom may not appear, at first glance, to be an obvious site of linguistic conflict; after all, asylum exists to provide protection to people fleeing from political and religious violence. A national obligation to protect refugees has been a feature of the UK’s democratic history since the signing of the 1967 UN Convention (UNHCR, 2011). Nevertheless, the process by which an asylum seeker is granted or refused refugee status is not without conflict and is designed to keep some people from attaining refugee status. Upon arrival in the UK, many who have already experienced animosity encounter a new form as they become entangled in the complex web of the institutional decision-making process. As a successful outcome depends upon the credibility of their story as evidence (Herlihy et al., 2010), the root of conflicts between the UK Home Office and asylum-seeking applicants is often linguistic. From the ways in which questions are asked and responses are recorded, to the use of inadequate translators, the asylum process requires an awareness of institutional expectations that is not attainable for most applicants. As 35.6 percent of “known” appeal outcomes were successful in 2014,¹ and 38.2 percent in 2015, the government statistics suggest that the margin of error in initial asylum decisions is considerable, and the problem does not appear to be improving over time (Hawkins, 2017, p.9). Recently released statistics show that the process cannot keep abreast of appeal outcomes, as 70 percent of those listed for 2015 were “unknown”, meaning that only 30 percent of appeals lodged had received decisions. Thus, the rate of success could be much higher than it currently is, preventing unnecessary appeals processes for institutions and protracted waiting times for applicants.

This chapter identifies and discusses a number of issues causing conflict such as narrative construction, entextualisation (producing a written record of spoken discourse) and interpretation. Critical discourse analysts have analysed conflicts of ideology and identity in many types of texts, and other researchers in Europe (e.g. Maryns (2005, 2006) and Blommaert (2001, 2009) on Belgium; Corcoran (2004) and ten Thije (2008) on the Netherlands; Kjelsvik (2014) on Norway; Jacquemet (2009) on Italy) have explored linguistic issues in the asylum process. These issues include clashing cultural frames of reference

¹ The percentage of successful appeals is based on the number of appeals that were actually processed and not on the total number of appeals lodged.
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and interactional expectations, interpretative errors, interrogative elicitation methods and unequal power relations between applicants and institutions. Their findings, however, have had little impact on asylum policy and caseworker training in the UK. Indeed, Barsky’s (1994) work on refugee hearings was one of the first studies to draw attention to imbalances of power in western adjudication systems, but his observations are over 20 years old and the challenges identified therein remain problematic in the contemporary process. For example, asylum seekers are still prevented from being heard even if they are “given the chance to speak” because they are “talking at cross-purposes with officials who have profoundly different concerns and validity criteria than their own” (Barsky, 1994, p.242). The present work develops prior discussions and is situated in the UK context. By presenting an original methodological design and analytic aim, it gives participants opportunities to reflect upon and discuss the linguistic conflicts they encountered in the asylum process. As the methodology shows (Section 28.2), narrative elicitation methods in the interviews conducted were not constrained by the institutional concerns and validity criteria that influence the progression and reception of the discourse in the asylum process.

28.2 Methodology

Between November 2015 and March 2016, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six asylum seekers living in Belfast, Northern Ireland. A number of prompt questions were prepared in advance, but only one participant (Kulomba, see Table 28.1) was reliant on continual prompting to produce responses. Most participants produced lengthy and complex narratives in response to occasional prompt questions. Participants were recruited through the “friend of a friend” method (cf. Milroy, 1987) and in accordance with ethical practises in refugee research (see Block et al., 2013). The interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded using a Zoom HandyRecorder. As the asylum seeker population in Northern Ireland remains small in comparison with the rest of the UK, participants’ ages and first languages were not included in order to protect them from being identified.

The analysis in this chapter explores the participants’ real-life experiences of the asylum process, especially their awareness of the linguistic and cultural inequalities that led to communicative conflicts and diverging communicative goals. The comments of participants concerning the asylum process are framed using Interactional Sociolinguistics (see Section 28.4.1), narrative theory (see Section 28.4.2) and Text World Theory (Gavins, 2007,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>Interview length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elijah</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>45m 44s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmanuel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>DRC*</td>
<td>52m 28s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaidayal</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>85m 21s**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kulomba</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>17m 39s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amal</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>31m 3s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munashe</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>34m 19s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Democratic Republic of Congo.

**Combined length of two separate interviews. The first interview was interrupted, and we rescheduled another to continue our discussion.
Discussing the asylum process through these theoretical frameworks reveals the problematic nature of text creation and interpretation in the UK asylum process, and data from the interviews provides real-life examples of the effects of current practices upon individual applicants. On the basis of my findings, I intend to challenge institutionalised hierarchies of knowledge and encourage the development of linguistic equality within the asylum process, perhaps mitigating against future conflicts with informed recommendations (see Section 28.6). It is argued that sharing taken-for-granted epistemological insights from the many branches of linguistics could lead to meaningful change in asylum policy and practice, ensuring that the voices of the most vulnerable are heard and understood.

28.3 Definition of terms, processes and political context

It is important to initially clarify the definition of three categories: “asylum seeker”, “refugee” and “migrant”, which are often conflated in public discourses on immigration. Asylum seekers claim to have fled their home country because of fear rather than choice and seek humanitarian protection from another country; while they wait for the outcome of their case, they remain asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are differentiated from migrants because their movement was motivated by necessity, rather than volition or ambition. Daily life for asylum seekers living in the UK is constrained by legislative restrictions: they are not permitted to work and are placed in shared social housing, with a weekly allowance of £36.95 (UK Government, 2016). After an initial screening interview with UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) (formerly the UK Border Agency), asylum seekers are given a temporary residence permit and required to report regularly to UKVI, or face immigration detention or enforced removal. Caseworkers aim to make decisions on asylum applications within six months (UK Government, 2015), but an increasing number of applicants in the UK are waiting much longer than the suggested time (Bulman, 2017). The purported temporariness of “asylum seeker” status is often protracted into a long-term category of existence. The negative psychological impacts of waiting “in limbo” are well documented (Newman, 2013, Sundram and Loi, 2012).

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is a person who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

(UNHCR 2011, p.14)

To attain refugee status, an asylum seeker must fit at least one of the above criteria; their ability to prove whether their fear is well-founded largely depends upon the appropriateness and credibility of their responses in the asylum interview. Obtaining “leave to remain” gives individuals the freedom to work, study and lead a “normal” life for a specific period, usually five years, after which they can apply for indefinite leave to remain and settle in the UK (UK Visas and Immigration, 2016). If a claim is unsuccessful, applicants are classified as “refused asylum seekers”; they have the right to appeal initial decisions and submit further evidence to support their claim. If their appeal is also unsuccessful, a second
appeal to the Upper Tribunal is possible, but if the refusal is upheld at this point, applicants without dependants will lose their housing and any financial support provided through the National Asylum Support Service and Section 4 (Home Office, 2018). Then they face imminent deportation to their country of origin, either voluntarily or by force. If they refuse to leave for fear of mistreatment in their home country, destitution is the most likely outcome (Crawley et al., 2011).

28.4 Linguistic issues in the asylum process

This section draws together linguistic theories and issues identified by participants in the interviews, demonstrating how the perceptions of asylum seekers are supported by linguistic evidence. As such the data analysis is thematic in nature, and extracts selected for analysis were chosen on the basis of their contribution to issues such as clashing communicative goals (Section 28.4.1), discourse modes and their function in the asylum process (Section 28.4.2), linguistic medium and its impact upon decision-making (Section 28.4.3), sociocultural interpretive issues (Section 28.4.4), the role of interpreters (Section 28.4.5) and the “culture of disbelief” that exists within the UK asylum process (Section 28.4.6).

28.4.1 Clashing communicative goals

UKVI caseworkers are responsible for both collecting and evaluating the credibility of the evidence presented by asylum seekers, most of which is elicited through two interviews. The Home Office guidelines on conducting these interviews adopt a minimalist approach in terms of the amount of detail required in the first (screening) and second (substantive) interviews. The caseworker should “gather enough evidence to be able to properly consider and determine the claim”, but they do not insist upon obtaining any further information, so they must see contextualising information as unnecessary (Home Office, 2015a, p.4). For the caseworker, the screening interview is a short fact-finding exercise, in which applicants establish the basic details of their claim. In the longer substantive interview, the applicant’s evidence, motivations and movements are tested and questioned further; as a result, this interview is much longer than the first. Though the guidelines indicate that a positive, respectful and secure environment should be established for asylum seekers (Cf. Drew and Heritage, 1992) (Home Office, 2015a, 2015b), applicants who are unfamiliar with the interactional aims, expectations and intentions of formal institutional processes may find themselves at an immediate disadvantage. For example, asylum seekers might expect a hospitable and understanding environment, where they can elaborate upon their experiences and emotions (as evidenced in the first comment below). Meanwhile, caseworkers may have strict deadlines to meet and time pressures urging them to prioritise expediency over elaboration. By “talking at cross-purposes” (Barsky, 1994, p.242), asylum seekers and caseworkers may perceive each other as unco-operative, becoming increasingly frustrated with each other. Failure to comply with interactional expectations will lead to negative judgments on both sides, especially in formal settings. Unfortunately, an asylum seeker’s inability to adhere to institutional expectations is likely to have more serious consequences than a caseworker’s failure to meet the applicant’s expectations – even though the latter can be deeply troubling for the applicant. For example, the interrogative nature of asylum interviews comes as a shock to many asylum seekers (see the first example from Elijah below), but they do not have the authority to challenge the manner and tone of a caseworker if they perceive it to be unco-operative.
The co-operative principle (Grice, 1975), which conversational interlocutors follow in order to ensure mutual understanding (or co-operation), contains four maxims governing interactions. It is assumed that speakers will provide truthful, relevant, clear and necessarily (but not too) informative contributions, reflecting the maxims of quality, relevance, manner and quantity respectively. Hymes (1996) similarly argues that perceived communicativeness or co-operativeness is linked to conversational competence, i.e. the observation of interactional norms and adherence to “normal” conversational expectations. However, all interlocutors have frames of reference that dictate the limits of linguistically appropriate behaviour in specific discourse settings (Linde, 2001). As work using Interactional Sociolinguistic methods in cross-cultural interactions has shown (Gumperz, 1999; Gumperz et al., 1984), frames of reference relating to communicativeness and co-operativeness are culturally and contextually fluid rather than universally held. In fact, Interactional Sociolinguistics asserts that “communicative resources are [not necessarily] shared between speakers” (Gumperz, 1999, p.458). By identifying the global inferences in conversational interactions, such as mutual rights and obligations, and local inferences, including the conversational expectations at each speech turn, Interactional Sociolinguistic analysis determines whether particular reactions are influenced by linguistic knowledge, cultural knowledge or lack of expected knowledge and proficiency.

My own ethnographic observation of asylum interviews has demonstrated that communicative goals are not shared between caseworkers and asylum seekers. Caseworkers require informative (quantity maxim) but brief (manner maxim) responses from applicants, that convey the truth (quality maxim) and “conform to the specifications of asylum law” (relevance maxim) (Kjelsvik, 2014, p.112). Meanwhile, asylum seekers want their stories to be heard and accepted in a respectful and empathetic environment. Caseworkers may interpret the narrative content of applicants’ responses as violations of the relation and quantity maxims if they are “more informative than is required” (Grice, 1975, p.45). Equally, the details of their responses may be perceived as untruthful, thereby flouting the maxim of quality. If asylum seekers’ forms of expression (the ways in which they tell stories and verbalise their thoughts) are shaped by traditional cultural practices, they may appear obscure, ambiguous and disorderly in an institutional setting.

Due to the unequal balance of power in the asylum interview, the caseworker’s agenda shapes the elicitation, recording and scrutinisation of asylum applications, and consideration of applicants’ expectations appears to be minimal. One participant recognised and described his experience of conflicting expectations as follows:

I thought it was funny […] that someone opens an office to listen to people who are coming from distressed situations like that, then you […] get into a mode of being suspicious of – like the only thing they are looking for is a flaw.

(Elijah, Zimbabwe)

Elijah’s perception of the asylum process as a vehicle for primarily listening to distressed and traumatised people demonstrates the disparity between the needs and expectations of applicants and caseworkers, and their clashing communicative goals. Above all, the asylum interview is a means of processing information to serve a bureaucratic purpose. However, Elijah’s awareness of a mode of suspicion within UKVI suggests that the process is interrogative and that caseworkers are searching for flaws in the evidence or utterances that appear to flout the quality maxim (Grice, 1975). The investigative nature of the asylum process, demonstrated in its length and level of questioning, is perceived by Elijah as the search for a “flaw”. The sceptical approach he encounters does not reflect the liberality of policy
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documents on interview conduct which state that only “a low level of proof” is required to accept a claim (Home Office, 2015b, p.11).

Overall, the conflict caused by clashing communicative goals in the asylum process “revolve[s] around storytelling rights” (Maryns and Blommaert, 2002a, p.28). Institutional control impinges upon applicants’ rights to speak for themselves without prompting or coercing. The institution may have a preference for specific traditions of form and content, status varieties and media, and seek to impose these preferences upon interview responses. The restriction of speaking rights (e.g. limiting narrative content, genre and timing) in the asylum process was identified as a source of conflict for several participants in the present study. Firstly, Emmanuel (DRC) remarked that “the lady who was asking me questions, she was not allowing me to say my problem”, suggesting through his use of negation that this caseworker was maintaining tight control over the information she wanted to hear. If only the responses elicited by questions are documented, then the accounts do not comprehensively document or represent the speakers’ experiences; rather, they are shaped to fit the prescribed structure and aims of the institution. Munashe (Zimbabwe) made two comments on the topic of speaking rights in her interview. Firstly, she used reported speech to act out how the interviewer had limited her contributions: “You don’t […] say what you haven’t been asked. You only reply what you have been asked”. The caseworker’s language as reported by Munashe attempts to make her a passive participant in the interview: she is not permitted to speak (“say”), but only to “reply”. At another point in the interview, Munashe added:

I wasn’t asked questions that go more deep into my story. […] It’s me who went through the suffering. It’s not anyone else who went through the suffering, it’s me. I know how much I suffered.

Here, she expresses the sense of injustice she feels about another person constructing and judging her story. The repetitive use of first-person pronouns (“I”, “my”, “me”), and especially the possessive “my story”, reinforces that she was the experiencer and remains the owner of the narrative, so only she knows what really happened. Her use of negation also draws attention to the lack of questions delving deeper into her story, suggesting that the caseworker was only interested in obtaining a superficial account.

A further quotation from Elonga’s (DRC) interview demonstrates that the institution’s control over asylum seekers’ speech is inhibiting their self-expression and sense of narrative ownership:

they didn’t allow me to speak what I have to say. They were pushing me to say what they wanted me to say, for them to have words to refuse me with, and whenever I was trying to express my problem, they didn’t want even to hear.

Elonga’s use of personal pronouns to contrast between the third-person (“they”, “them”) and first-person (“I”, “me”) portrays the opposition between the institution and the claimant. Equally, using third-person pronouns to describe the caseworker and the broader institution allows Elonga to distance himself from them. Like Elijah and Munashe, Elonga also uses negation to draw attention to the restrictions that the caseworker put upon him: “didn’t allow me”, “didn’t want even to hear”. Clearly, he felt that he was not given a chance to express himself or his problems. In fact, he even implies that the caseworker was manipulating him into saying things that would jeopardise his credibility. All of the above examples from the data demonstrate asylum seekers’ first-hand experience of the institution’s monopoly of
control in the interview. Their comments also communicate the effect that this behaviour had upon them, reinforcing their sense of victimhood by usurping their right to narrate their own stories. The narrative mode in itself is also a cause of further conflict (see Section 28.4.2).

### 28.4.2 Discourse modes

The communicative conflicts arising between interviewers and applicants are further exacerbated through preferences for different discourse modes in the institutional setting (Smith, 2003). Smith identifies five modes that classify discourse; they are differentiated on the basis of textual progression (i.e. narrative or in relation to speech time), subjectivity and surface structure presentation (topic and comment, focus and background): Narrative, Report, Description, Argument and Information. This section focuses on the distinctiveness of the former two modes, Narrative and Report, and the implications for processing asylum applications. Caseworkers tend to favour writing in the Report mode because they need to make expedient decisions. The Report mode has some linguistic features in common with Narrative mode, such as “referential uniqueness […] and past temporality” (Fleischman, 1990, p.103). However, in the Narrative mode, advancement occurs chronologically, rather than in relation to speech time (Smith, 2003). In Labov and Waletzky’s (1967) narrative typology, the evaluation is also a distinctive aspect of the Narrative mode. Overall, Labovian narratives contain several key structural elements:

1. orientation – setting the scene by introducing people, places and times
2. complication – a series of events that cause complication
3. evaluation – the implicit and explicit use of evaluative markers such as statements of feeling, intensifiers, repetitions and judgements.
4. resolution – the narrative sequence that follows, or coincides with, the evaluation
5. coda – a functional device that shifts the perspective back to the present

Of particular importance in distinguishing Narratives from Reports is the evaluative element. Unlike Reports, Narratives respond to the “What happened?” question and the “So what?” question (cf. Labov, 1972), conveying the overall purpose of the Narrative as well as the feelings and opinions of the narrator. Reports contain referential information, but they do not explicitly convey its importance or impact on individuals due to the absence of evaluative language (Fleischman, 1990, Vincent and Perrin, 2001). As a result, texts in the Report mode may be less engaging, memorable or moving than texts in Narrative mode because the relevance or emotiveness of the information is not conveyed through explicit evaluation. Research on the Belgian asylum process (Gómez Díez, 2011, Maryns, 2006) suggests that interviewers dismissed language that could be classified as evaluative, such as contextual information and opinions or perceptions given in asylum seekers’ responses. As a result, evaluative content did not feature in case reports and interview documents. This suggests that contributions that may have been expressed in the Narrative mode were recorded in the Report mode (Smith, 2003). However, evaluation is a necessary structural means of defining internal theories of causality, as well as evoking emotion (Labov and Waletzky, 1967). If the Narrative mode is a means of constructing and understanding personal experience (in spoken texts), perhaps its rhetorical power to evoke empathy is perceived to undermine institutional control and objectivity. Stronger connections between the applicant and the caseworker makes it a less desirable discourse mode upon which to base institutional decisions. The institution may also be concerned about expediency, as the documentation
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of texts in the Narrative mode would be more time-consuming. However, the benefits of objectivity in interview reports may need to be questioned if they inhibit accounts of asylum seekers’ actions, feelings and motivations from being represented coherently.

28.4.3 Issues of medium

As with communicative goals and discourse modes, institutional value judgements about the linguistic medium, either written or oral, are potential sources of prejudice in the asylum interview. In western societies, the written word is perceived to be superior to spoken varieties due to processes of grammatical standardisation, elaboration and editing (see Goody, 1987). However, the transformation of speech events to written accounts eclipses many aspects of the original discourse context, including the frames of reference shared between the speaker and audience, without which the nuances of communicative intent are inevitably lost. For example, Hymes (1996, p.50) points out that “Much of what is needed for assessment of orientations is accessible only in persons, not in transcripts”. In the asylum process, the act of entextualisation can diminish or misrepresent the speaker’s original intentions, making it difficult to correctly interpret personal motivations – especially if the interview focuses on the reporting of facts and details rather than important nuances that give context to the facts, but which are conveyed through feelings, emotions and opinions.

While some emotional features can be conveyed through written text, high proportions of emotion and feeling are conveyed through oral features, like tone and voice quality. These features become inaccessible through entextualisation. Also, differences in oral forms of expression between languages and cultures may place some applicants at a greater disadvantage, as “the oral styles of speakers of some ethnic backgrounds are more readily transferable to written modes than those of others” (Gumperz et al., 1984, p.10). The responses emerging from substantive interviews are posited as verbatim accounts of the applicants’ own words, though we have seen from forensic linguistic research that “verbatim” legal statements are not always faithful to the speakers’ intentions (cf. Coulthard, 2000, Gibbons, 1996, Shuy, 1998, Stygall, 2009). When the statement undergoes an entextualisation process, distinctly oral linguistic, paralinguistic and contextual cues are removed, which may have enhanced the coherence or credibility of the original spoken text. When schematised using the Text World Theory model (Werth, 1999), the entextualisation process from interview to report creates a “split discourse world” (Gavins, 2007, p.26) (see Figure 28.1).

Figure 28.1 The discourse world of the original interview captured through written report, creating a split discourse world
As the caseworker reads through the report at a later point from the original discussion, the knowledge, beliefs and perceptions of the asylum seeker and the caseworker in the moment of the interview are no longer accessible. Though “Common Ground” (CG) is an essential feature of the discourse world in Text World Theory (Werth, 1999, p.48), it is not automatically established, particularly in cross-cultural settings. Any CG that was established in the original discourse world may also be lost through entextualisation. Prosodic cues and gestures are also removed, which may inhibit the interpretation and understanding of the text as it was understood in the original discourse setting. As a result, the caseworker relies on his or her own memories, knowledge, intentions and imagination in shaping their perceptions of the text (and the asylum seeker).

The dangers of separating text from its discourse context are summed up as follows:

Text […] is the language at the heart of the discourse. That being so, it occupies a crucial place in the discourse process […] but by itself, without the information supplied by the rest of the discourse, it is a poor thing indeed. It is like a person deprived of all sensory contact with the world, a thing of enormous but unfulfilled potential: with disconnected meanings, uninterpretable, dysfunctional, an autistic creature.

(Werth, 1999, pp.149–50)

When the language of the report meets the frame(s) of reference in the mind of the caseworker in a split discourse-world context (Gavins, 2007), the textual content in the report is understood through the lens of the caseworker’s experience and knowledge. Therefore, the caseworker may generalise the overall account to reflect similar cases in case law and sources of supporting evidence, such as governmental in-country reports.

The situational context of the original discourse world is not accessible from the written record, and neither is the gap between interlocutors’ frames of reference. In most cases, caseworkers will not have real world experience to match the asylum seeker in front of them. In the absence of close identification with their experiences, building CG (Werth, 1999) by developing an awareness of the individual’s beliefs, knowledge and assumptions will help to ensure accurate inferencing and interpretation. To comprehend asylum seekers’ perspectives, caseworkers might attempt to situate interview reports in the cultural, political, linguistic and religious landscape of the home country. Interpreting with insight requires self-projection, and “the ease with which [a] reader-participant is able to follow the invited projection into the text-world will depend greatly on the extent to which that text-world corresponds with his or her real world” (Gavins, 2007, p.106). The asylum interview is clearly not a conversation of equals with shared intentions, but the lack of shared cultural and linguistic knowledge – key aspects of CG – adds to the sense of inequality. If they fail to establish CG, interlocutors talk at cross-purposes and misinterpret each other, as well as the content of the text worlds that emerge in the discourse.

Speech is harder to understand when the linguistic and cultural background of interlocutors is not shared, but producing a written report of that speech in English is also problematic. Using written records may expedite the process for pressurised institutions working with limited resources, but it renders important information inaccessible to illiterate and/or non-English speakers. Some asylum applicants do not have the ability to read and verify their own interview report without the assistance of an interpreter (see Blommaert, 2001, Jacquemet, 2009, Maryns, 2005, 2006). It appears, therefore, that institutional expediency comes at the cost of transparency and accessibility to the very people whose lives and futures are bound up in these documents. Proving that errors have been
made in interview documentation is difficult because the Home Office is only beginning to
make a practice of audio-recording interviews. Even though they are increasingly audio-
recorded, the interviews are not transcribed verbatim due to the laboriousness of the task
(Home Office, personal communication). The Home Office maintains that all interviews
are simultaneously transcribed by the interviewer and are verbatim accounts, an asser-
tion that induces some scepticism given the ethnographic evidence obtained in my own
work and previous research by Maryns (2006) and Jacquemet (2009). The implications of
entextualisation upon the interpretation of the original narrative are discussed further in
the following section.

28.4.4 Sociocultural features of asylum seekers’ narratives

Linguistic analyses of asylum reports in Belgium, the United Kingdom and the United States
(Barsky, 1994, Blommaert, 2001, Blommaert, 2009) suggest that these texts are character-
istically de-territorialised and devoid of cultural nuance, written from the univocal posi-
tion of the interviewer. Though the researchers mentioned discuss different jurisdictions,
the format of the asylum interview and text creation processes within it follow the same
organisational model. For example, through entextualisation processes, Blommaert (2001)
found that stories lost experiential, emotional and individual details, along with applicants’
personal connections to international conflicts or disasters in the Belgian asylum process.
When contextualising information was removed, the stories became less understandable and
credible. Thus, he concludes that the stories of asylum seekers contain too much contextual
“noise” to be captured on standardised forms, meaning that the asylum seeker’s narrative is
an unmanageable form in the UK asylum procedure. In his later work on asylum procedures
in the UK, Blommaert (2009, p.424) similarly argued that the Home Office failed to situate
an applicant’s narrative within the contexts of “crises […] displacements of populations
[and] historical realities” that he described in his asylum interview. In terms of medium,
Gómez Díez (2011, p.574) also found that the entextualisation process in Belgian asylum
procedures removed “the building blocks of oral narratives of personal experience”, includ-
ing evaluative devices, prosodic detail and contextualising information, removing theories
of causality from the texts recorded by officials.

Asylum procedures in western contexts are dependent on modernist frames of reference
and ideologies, such as the “nation-state”. Instead of developing postmodern intercultural
awareness or competence (see Blommaert, 2009; Jacquemet, 2009), modernist frames of
reference ascribe stable one-to-one relationships between languages and national spaces
(Maryns, 2005; ten Thije, 2008). They see languages as “fixed units of knowledge and
information” (Blommaert, 2009, p.421). Even when the details of asylum cases demon-
strate that their national contexts are far from stable, the institutional expectation is that
a speaker’s language and narrative should be proficient, coherent and reflective of their
supposed country of origin (cf. Maryns and Blommaert, 2002a). From an Interactional
Sociolinguistic perspective (Gumperz, 1999), the gap between linguistic resources and
expectations is the source of power asymmetries in the asylum process. The absence of pre-
conditioned knowledge of what is meaningful and required in asylum interviews seriously
disadvantages applicants (Maryns and Blommaert, 2002a). However, such asymmetries
are often undetectable to officials because of the pervasiveness of institutional ideolo-
gies (cf. Blommaert, 2001). Linguistic inequalities are exacerbated further because of
the caseworkers’ hermeneutic powers, defining credibility in terms of coherence, fluency,
clarity and logical progression. Institutions interpreting asylum seekers’ stories through
the lens of their own cultural ideologies are relying upon western conceptions of internal consistency and external validity in the assessment of credibility (cf. Gómez Díez, 2011, Maryns, 2006).

If caseworkers lack understanding of broader social, political and religious issues in the region from which an asylum seeker has come, then they use country of origin reports (COI) alongside asylum interview reports to inform their interpretations. These reports are usually obtained from the BBC World Service, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and occasionally from country of origin experts or anthropologists (see Good, 2004a, 2004b, 2006). Caseworkers see these sources as authoritative over and above the personal experiences of applicants (Maryns and Blommaert, 2002b). COI reports tend to provide brief information on specific linguistic demographics and do not identify the political and historical factors affecting people at a more localised level. Credibility comes into question when asylum seekers’ narratives convey details of long-standing or recent conflicts that are not mentioned in these COI reports (Maryns and Blommaert, 2002a, 2002b).

When discussing the difficulties that he faced in the asylum process, Jaidayal (Sri Lanka) explained that out-of-date COI guidance caused his initial application and appeal to be refused. He sought asylum in 2012.

they were using the (1.2) Sri Lankan […] country guidance from (0.7) before two thousand and nine (1.2) which means that (0.4) this country guidance was (0.3) out of date (0.3) two thousand and nine was the end of the war (0.6) and there was another story after the end of the war […] there’s still people Sri Lankan Tamils living in Sri Lanka (0.2) since nowadays you know (0.6) under a different pressure.

In his substantive interview, the caseworker encouraged Jaidayal to consider relocation to other parts of Sri Lanka and suggested several areas where he would have experienced greater persecution from the Sinhalese majority than in his home town. Reliance upon old reports made Jaidayal’s claim appear unfounded, but when his case was re-examined at the judicial review level, the decisions were overturned precisely because the country guidance had been inaccurate, which Jaidayal had maintained from the beginning.

Another aspect of an asylum seeker’s experience that could impinge upon their capability to provide a coherent narrative is a history of trauma (Herlihy and Turner, 2007a, 2007b, 2009). Understanding the impact of past traumatic events on memory and recall is of vital importance to assessing asylum claims, especially performance in interviews (cf. Jeffries, 2016). Poor interview practice can further impede or undermine the memory and recall of a traumatised individual (Herlihy and Turner, 2009). Recounting events in a “clear, linear manner” (Barsky, 1994, p.14) may aid the expediency of the administrative processes, but it does not reflect the nature of autobiographical recall. Memory is innately iterative and cyclical, particularly in the aftermath of traumatic incidents, and caseworkers should remember this when questioning applicants (see Herlihy and Turner, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, Jeffries, 2016). Moreover, recalling traumatic episodes can exacerbate memory loss instead of bringing clarity, and lead to re-traumatisation (Brockmeier, 2009, Herlihy and Turner, 2007a). Traumatic memory loss is a paradoxical problem for asylum seekers, as the inability of the most vulnerable to recall places, dates, events and names drastically undermines their institutional credibility and the right to the protection they desperately need. While Elonga (DRC) was in danger in his home country because he was the child of a Hutu-Tutsi marriage, he described the long-term effect that the asylum interview was having upon his personal wellbeing:
I don’t refuse to do the interview (1.3) but (1.5) that interview (0.3) killed me (0.5) because remind me all my bad experience (1.5) and since then (0.6) I start to feel that (0.3) trauma coming life to me (2.4) whatever I experienced (0.8) several years back ago (1.2) since that interview (0.3) I feel (0.9) struggling (0.7) coping (0.3) with those moment (0.3) which are (0.6) coming back into my mind (1.0) day (0.4) and night.

The tense shifts in his language indicate that the experiences of Elonga’s past were recalled through the interview process, and after the interview ended he was left with the ongoing trauma of coping with the memories. He was angry about the impact that the interview had on him and the treatment he received from the interviewer. He was willing to follow the expected procedure and had opened himself up to the trauma again, only to receive a refusal in return. He also had little support to deal with the effects of the asylum process on his mental wellbeing.

Evidently, substantive interviews are not counselling sessions, and caseworkers are not psychologically trained to provide psycho-social support to asylum seekers. In fact, the essential qualifications for UKVI caseworkers are two A2 Levels (A–C) and five GCSEs (A–C) (UK Visas and Immigration, 2017). Caseworkers then undergo five weeks of training and six months of on-the-job mentoring. Whether the necessary qualifications and training are equal to the responsibilities of such a position is a question for serious reflection. If caseworkers possess a relatively narrow knowledge-base, it will reinforce their dependence upon routine procedures at the expense of individuals’ needs and discourage them from adapting to the cultural background of applicants. For example, the literature suggests that differences between cultural and religious calendars often cause difficulty; the effect these differences may have on an applicant’s ability to accurately recall dates are not always recognised, though the policy guidelines note that the benefit of the doubt should be given for minor discrepancies when general credibility has been established (Home Office 2015b, pp.15–18). However, Jaidayal mentioned that minor inconsistencies in the dates he reported were mentioned in his initial refusal letter:

I understand why you have to tell the date but (0.6) at the same time (1.1) to be honest […] I don’t remember any date (0.3) and I have to memorise all the dates […] if I did make any […] mistake on the second interview (0.3) on dates (0.7) in that kind of (0.2) em (0.3) when she wrote that report that she kind of mentioned that I made mistake on the dates I was like (0.2) ‘Really, on dates?’ (0.3) like I have (0.5) threatening for my life and […] pointing out that you know I’m wrong because aw you’re mistaken in one date.

Unlike the other asylum seekers interviewed, the threat to Jaidayal occurred after he had left his home country; he was in Northern Ireland on a youth exchange programme. As a Tamil, he was used to being mistreated and maligned by the Sinhalese, and when he left Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese government became suspicious and believed he intended to inform western governments of systematic abuses against the Tamils. Jaidayal had to apply for asylum because it was unsafe for him to return home, but unlike many other asylum seekers he did not have a list of dates that he could recall, substantiating the events linked to his claim. He indicates above that he decided to create and memorise a list of dates to meet the expectations of the institution. When he made a mistake on one of the dates in his second interview, the caseworker noted it in his initial refusal letter. By representing his thoughts at the time, Jaidayal demonstrates his perceptions of the idiosyncrasies in the system: the threat to his
life is diminished by his inaccurate recall of one date. Indeed, the fact that forgetting even highly significant dates, names and places is a relatively normal feature of everyday life does not appear to be taken into consideration (Brockmeier, 2009). Asylum seekers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) could find it impossible to remember details with clarity, which is a further important reason to challenge the assumption that small discrepancies undermine an individual’s credibility (see Herlihy and Turner, 2007a, 2007b, Maryns, 2005). Credibility may be further undermined by the presence of and dependence on interpreters in the asylum interview.

28.4.5 Conflicts arising from the use of interpreters

A fifth issue which arose from interviews with several of the asylum seekers related to the involvement of interpreters in asylum interviews. In the research interviews, Jaidayal mentioned that he had an interpreter for the substantive asylum interview. Meanwhile, Amal pointed out that the Somali community did not feel that the government translators were trustworthy. The other participants did not mention the use of interpreters. The Home Office sees interpretation as the solution to communicative problems arising in asylum interviews. However, the presence and involvement of interpreters further complicates the discourse world dynamics and undermines the integrity of applicants’ narratives. Interpreters can recast or alter speakers’ stories by their own volition, because of cultural restrictions (cf. Owiti, 2016, where court interpreters replaced taboo words with euphemisms) or simply due to time pressures. The believability of a story may be affected by the speech style and the (lack of) suprasegmental speech features that demarcate the applicant’s attitudes and emotions. Errors made by interpreters may go unacknowledged, causing the caseworker to blame the asylum seeker for the confusion (cf. ten Thije, 2008). Despite these issues, institutions continue to rely upon interpreters because, in their absence, the linguistic barrier between applicants and caseworkers would make an applicant’s story entirely inaccessible. However, interpreters need to be selected with care and insight on a case-by-case basis, in relation to their competence and linguistic knowledge (cf. Owiti, 2016; ten Thije, 2008). In Northern Ireland, for example, the community of asylum seekers and interpreters is comparatively small, meaning that it is possible for an applicant and interpreter to be previously acquainted. This may seem like an advantage, but the presence of another member of the home culture as an interpreter, such as a child interpreter (as in Smith, 2009) or a familiar community member, may prevent interviewees from discussing particularly sensitive or traumatic experiences in order to save face. The absence of these taboo subjects from the discussion, such as experiences of sexual violence, could undermine the validity and success of the asylum claim. Ensuring that same-sex interpreters and caseworkers are present may alleviate some of the anxiety caused by recalling these experiences, and for some applicants this may be a cultural requirement. However, the Home Office is not always able to meet these specific requests.

Amal (Somalia) identified a lack of trust between asylum seekers and interpreters provided by the government. In fact, she reported that she often acted as an interpreter for the women and children in her community in other, less stressful, settings, such as medical appointments and parent-teacher meetings. A skilled interpreter should accurately convey all and only the details they hear when they translate speech. However, this is not always the case and interpreters can cause trouble on occasion. For example, Jaidayal had an interpreter in his interview on the advice of his solicitor, even though he had a good understanding of English. The interpreter communicated via phone, and it became apparent that they were speaking different dialects of the Tamil language, which Jaidayal explains in detail.
the interpreter didn’t understand me because he is from India (0.5) he’s an Indian Tamil […] in South India they speak Tamil as well but (0.3) totally different accent and different dialect (0.5) so (0.2) it’s because we were influenced by Sinhalese and Portuguese and (0.9) Dutch (0.4) and (0.4) South Indians were (0.2) influenced by (0.4) different other language from India and French (0.8) s- some of the word they say (0.2) I have no clue some of the words I say they have no clue (0.7) so that’s what happened […] he decided to say that you know I’m speaking a different language and then (0.5) I s- suddenly started to speak in English saying you know (0.2) ‘I can speak English […] if you don’t understanding me […] I’m not making any point here […] I can see that she’s writing everything down and (0.6) I’m not speaking any other language I’m speaking my own (0.2) language’ (0.2) […] but the interpreter wanted to cover himself […] ‘well he’s speaking a different language’ and em he just blamed (0.2) like that (0.6) if there’s somebody who didn’t know the language English you know they probably accept whatever he said but (0.5) I he- I totally heard what he said.

Towards the end of this quote, Jaidayal makes the point that his knowledge of English was very helpful, as he was aware of what the interpreter was saying. If he had not known what the interpreter was saying, it could have jeopardised the integrity of his case. Moreover, the interpreter was primarily interested in protecting himself from allegations of incompetence, so by suggesting that Jaidayal was not speaking Tamil, he could have caused the caseworker to order a language analysis for determination of origin (LADO) test, which seeks to prove or disprove an asylum seeker’s purported nationality based on their linguistic profile.

LADO is a form of linguistic analysis by a “language expert”; the LADO process usually involves a thirty-minute phone call between a “specialist analyst” and an asylum seeker, after which the analyst will confirm or deny whether the applicant is being truthful about their nationality. Questions have been raised by a variety of scholars about the methodological rigour of the tests, accuracy rates and the qualifications of analysts, but as private companies conduct LADO analyses, they are often unwilling and unlikely to release data for public scrutiny (Cambier-Langeveld, 2011, Campbell, 2012, Corcoran, 2004, Fraser, 2009, 2011, Maryns, 2005, McNamara, 2012, ten Thije, 2008, Verrips, 2010, Kim Wilson, personal communication). The literature suggests that dialect mismatches as in Jaidayal’s interview are also common in LADO. Though this is not a viable area to probe further in the present research, it demonstrates one facet of the ignorance shown towards linguistic variation and change within the asylum process. Linguistic and cultural awareness is pertinent to assessment of asylum seekers’ linguistic repertoires, as they often have complex migration paths during which long-term contact with several other languages can influence their first language (Blommaert, 2009). When Blommaert (2009) explored an African asylum seeker’s linguistic profile, the narrative evidence given by the applicant, which documented his migration history, contextualised and supported the speech patterns he had acquired in language contact situations. Blommaert’s (2009) narrative analysis enables him to affirm the credibility of the asylum seeker’s reported country of origin and challenge the disbelief expressed by the institutional process.

28.4.6 A culture of disbelief?

The final site of conflict discussed in this chapter relates to a broader, underlying stance that has been identified as a feature of the UK asylum process: a culture of disbelief. If UK Visas and Immigration adopts a disbelieving stance towards asylum seekers, then this affects how
caseworkers interact with each asylum case, the questions they ask, their tone and the ways in which asylum seekers’ applications are judged. All six participants interviewed in the present research acknowledged that they were subjected to interrogation and recognised that asylum caseworkers were sceptical in the interview setting. The outcome of a case is evidence-based and depends upon the validity of the “material facts” elicited in the substantive interview. As mentioned above, the policy guidelines suggest that “The level of proof needed to establish the material facts is relatively low […] because of what is potentially at stake – the individual’s life or liberty” (Home Office, 2015b, p.11). However, my interviewees did not believe that the burden of proof was low, or that caseworkers demonstrated concern for their lives or their freedom. The following responses convey the pervasiveness of disbelief (or unwillingness to believe) in UKVI interrogations and decision letters:

they just say you are lying […] To believe you I don’t know what you can do, and that I’m asking myself every day.

(Kulomba, DRC)

she was like “No, I hardly believed on you that” […] “It’s because you’re not believing in it. I can’t, you know, take you from there to show ‘This is what happened’ or was like time-travelling or something.”

(Jaidayal, Sri Lanka)

Kulomba (DRC) was the most despondent participant I encountered; in the comment above, he presents himself as powerless in the face of a collective “they” who simply disregard him by calling him a liar. His exasperation is evident; he has told the truth and it has not been believed, providing him with no obvious way forward. The denial of his credibility has a daily impact on Kulomba’s life, as he suggests that he fruitlessly continues to ruminate on how he could convince them that he is telling the truth. Jaidayal’s comments suggest that the interviewer needs to make a cognitive effort to self-project, or “time travel”, into his unfamiliar world to accept and believe his account. Caseworkers are often asked to imagine events and contexts that lie outside of their own realms of experience or knowledge. The point that Jaidayal makes is that the unbelief of the caseworker is not something that he has the power to change. Even if he truthfully conveys what happened, he cannot control the reactions of listeners or force them to believe him. The power to fully convince is beyond an asylum seeker’s control and requires the caseworker to read objectively and impartially, rather than combatively.

28.5 Redressing linguistic inequalities

Given the breadth and depth of linguistic issues raised in Section 28.4, this section identifies possible solutions to the conflicts faced by asylum seekers in the asylum process. In Section 28.5.1, several benefits of narrative ownership are considered, such as improved institutional accuracy and individual catharsis. Section 28.5.2 draws upon the design of the present methodology, suggesting alternative means of narrative elicitation that are less interrogative. The importance of multiple forms of documentation is discussed in Section 28.5.3, in order to ensure institutional transparency and accuracy. Finally, Section 28.5.4 contemplates the importance of identifying, acknowledging and redressing the historical weaknesses of decision-making in the asylum process. Again, each topic is supported by evidence from the asylum seekers’ interview responses and the broader literature.
28.5.1 Restoring narrative ownership

From the data collected for this chapter, it is apparent that the asylum seekers interviewed experienced extreme ecological deprivation in the interview setting, which Hymes (1996, p.51) describes as an absence of the required “network of relations between orientations, contents, and contexts”. The asylum seekers struggled to share traumatic experiences in response to interrogative questions because they sensed that they were being undermined, that caseworkers were not genuinely listening and, ultimately, that they did not care. When you have fled your country and lost everything, your story is one of the only things you still have ownership of, so when your rights to tell it are taken away, it can challenge the remaining foundations of your identity. Representing lives through institutional reports, transcriptions, summary statements and generic labels such as “illegal immigrant”, “economic migrant” or “failed asylum seeker” undermines the complexity of the individual persons at the root of these accounts. Also, creating distance between the asylum seeker and their experience through entextualisation makes the rejection of other human beings less morally troubling (cf. Maryns, 2006). The institution’s refusal to allow applicants to construct their own narrative suggests that unmediated self-expression is not considered legitimate, even though the interview report reflects their lived experiences. The benefits of eliciting fuller and less restrictive narratives from asylum seekers pertain to applicants and caseworkers: the former may achieve the catharsis that they desire rather than conflict, and the latter may be better informed and thus make more accurate initial decisions.

28.5.2 Alternative methods of narrative elicitation

Though it could be argued that the expressions of participants in the current research are only one side of the story, I have sought to mediate the stance of the government through the references to asylum policies throughout the chapter. Equally, legal embargoes upon case notes and Home Office documents due to data protection means that access to actual interview records and correspondence from the Home Office is virtually impossible. My attempts to speak to caseworkers, to understand their perspectives on the job, the training they receive and the institutional demands that they face were denied several times. However, as suspicion towards asylum seekers is manifested in broader societal narratives, both in the media and in the Home Office, I suggest that a similar interrogation of the asylum procedure is a beneficial exercise. I do appreciate that the experiences of the participants I interviewed may reflect localised issues, but the literature suggests that linguistic and ideological conflicts of this kind occur in many countries where similar processes are in place.

An examination of caseworkers’ inconsistent elicitation methods in the Belgian asylum process and the entextualised narratives produced (Gómez Díez, 2011) demonstrated that simultaneous interviews, where speakers were simply asked to share their experiences in their own words, were less likely to be institutionalised and genericised. In comparison, mediated narrative elicitation using specific lines of questioning led to a pattern of institutionalised discourses, in which stories were not recorded verbatim and only details relating to persecution were chronologically and descriptively documented. Considering earlier discussions on the role of evaluation in developing causal links, it is unsurprising that Gómez Díez (2011) concludes by suggesting that narrative simultaneity is a better approach. As it stands, caseworker-mediated interviews continue to be the standard institutional practice in Belgium, which demonstrates the discouraging lack of response to research on asylum interviews. I have shown, from the literature and the perceptions of participants, that quite
often the pragmatic demands and narrative inequalities in the asylum interview undermine asylum seekers’ control over their life stories. Though they are permitted to share aspects of their story, the institution effectively maintains control over the representation of their identity in the documentation and decision-making process. Their refusal to allow applicants to construct their own narrative suggests that the story told in their own words is not legitimate, even though it is the best reflection of each asylum seeker’s lived experiences.

Barsky (1994, p.7) argues that speaker equality is difficult to achieve in refugee hearings, given that power structures governing the decision-making institutions consistently favour “persons most able to express themselves in a clear and articulate fashion, persons who show appropriate respect to authority, and so forth”. However, these institutions could take steps to redress the imbalance by giving asylum seekers storytelling rights. Caseworkers could learn much from adopting perspectives from Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1999, Hymes, 1996), developing intercultural communicative techniques such as establishing speaking rights, goals and aims at the outset of the speech event. Interview techniques from oral history and reminiscence exercises may be useful alternatives to interrogative styles, which are “reductionist in orientation” (Shuy, 1998, p.46). For example, oral storytelling does not require the establishment of linear temporal trajectories in an interview but allows speakers to mirror the complex interrelations of memory and time. These modes of telling also encourage analysts to “reach beyond mere narrative analysis” in the traditional chronological sense (Brockmeier, 2009, p.130). Undoubtedly the current question-and-answer model permits efficient elicitation and decision-making in institutional settings, but the resulting decisions may be based on decontextualised and misunderstood evidence. We must take care that economic and political expediency do not eclipse our obligations to respect and protect asylum seekers. Nevertheless, without solid proof that existing practices are detrimental to the expedient collection of best evidence, it is unlikely that changes will be implemented.

28.5.3 Multiple forms of documentation

A problematic element of the current approach is that the asylum-seeking applicant is responsible for the accuracy of the interview record; in fact, if reporting or interpreting errors become the substance of appeals, claimants may be required to explain why they signed the declaration (even though signing does not affirm the accuracy of the transcript) (Henderson and Pickup, 2015, Home Office, 2015a). The present research has sought to redress these inequalities by implementing a semi-structured approach to interviewing that restores applicants’ self-representational rights. I opted for a bottom-up approach and simply listened to the life stories of asylum seekers while exploring the communicative difficulties they experienced in the asylum process. By encouraging conversational narrative, the research sought to demonstrate the efficacy of questioning styles other than the interrogative. Each interview was audio-recorded, and I subsequently orthographically transcribed the recordings so that participants were assured of my complete attention while they were speaking. Hesitations, pauses, false starts and repetitions were documented in the transcription, but phonological information (such as accent and intonation patterns) were not. The impact of participation upon the asylum seekers is worthy of some reflection. Almost all participants were ready and willing to share their experiences with an interested party who would listen with minimal interruption or judgment. However, two of the participants were newer arrivals to Belfast and the decision to retell their stories to an unfamiliar researcher caused them greater anxiety. For example, while one participant did not refuse to participate
in the research, she was concerned that the Home Office would find out, and that it could affect the outcome of her appeal. Her distress was deeply concerning – for example, she threatened that her lawyer would sue me if research involvement damaged her case – but it demonstrated the severe paranoia affecting many people waiting on asylum decisions.

Even when good practice is observed, and narrative ownership belongs firmly to the narrator, written accounts should not be accepted as accurate representations of spoken narratives. Distinctly oral features, prosody and gestures influencing semantic interpretations of the text are unable to be captured in written accounts (Gumperz et al., 1984, p.3). If adequate replication does not occur, applicants should not be held responsible for institutional errors that will damage their credibility. It requires skill to provide accurate simultaneous representations of speech-to-text, especially in inter-ethnic settings, as unfamiliar speaking styles are more difficult to accurately transfer to the written medium than others (Goody, 1987). The effect of textual medium upon case outcomes, such as oral versus written, requires further scrutiny. A comparison of recorded interviews and summary documents would be useful to examine any alterations to responses in the entextualisation process, but access to such material is impossible due to governmental and legal restrictions. In my own research, however, I ran a comparative study of readers’ responses to written and oral versions of asylum seekers’ stories. The preliminary findings from the fieldwork suggest that hearing oral accounts produces more positive and empathetic responses from listeners than reading written versions. Developing a larger research project around interview techniques in the asylum process and the impact of entextualisation might provoke a change in direction on an institutional level. It would be beneficial for the Home Office to audio-record all interviews as standard practice, as this enhances transparency and perhaps reduces the pressure on caseworkers, who currently question, listen and transcribe simultaneously.

28.5.4 Acknowledging and redressing institutional weaknesses

For border agencies to implement change, they must acknowledge that the asylum process is not fit for its primary purpose: to provide support and sanctuary to people fleeing persecution. The discrepancies between policy and practice in the UK asylum process, as demonstrated through the evidence given by participants, strengthens the case for further investigating the transparency and objectivity of current behaviours, procedures and decision-making criteria. Applicants rarely possess the linguistic ability and cultural awareness needed to seamlessly convey their message in substantive interviews; institutions need to work harder to understand the “intricacies in structure and effect […] in oral storytelling” and to make applicants feel they are being heard and respected, rather than ignored or judged (Maryns and Blommaert, 2006, p.178). For conversational narration to become a viable alternative to institutional interrogation, it must be accepted that current practices are undermining the collection of best evidence, adversely impacting the health of applicants and unnecessarily afflicting the public purse by the protraction of individual cases. Semi-structured interviewing and compulsory audio-recording would ensure respect for individual voices, due diligence and the possibility of institutional accountability. These approaches provide avenues for conflict transformation within the institution; moreover, the implementation of an ideological shift away from a culture of disbelief meted out in the abandonment of interrogative practices, would do much to put applicants at ease.

Finally, caseworker training would benefit from the creation of culture-specific interview frameworks, in consultation with specialist anthropological linguists (Gumperz, 1999; Hymes, 1996). By putting applicants at ease and establishing the conversational goals of the
interview prior to questioning, caseworkers would give asylum seekers a better foundation upon which to retell their stories and manage their expectations of the interview. Establishing interactional expectations with applicants at the outset (such as mutual rights, obligations, timing, etc.) would reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings and communicative breakdowns, perhaps creating a smoother interview process. Amassing basic knowledge of applicants’ cultural norms through preparatory work before interview would develop Common Ground (Werth, 1999) and improve the accuracy of inferencing at the turn-by-turn level and in the split discourse-world of decision-making. Learning simple interactional tools such as these may make caseworkers feel more equipped and knowledgeable, while also supporting the effective running of the process and the broader institution. These small changes could improve the accuracy of initial decisions, while also diminishing some of the distress and trauma experienced by claimants.

28.6 Concluding remarks

In closing, it is troubling to observe the current “culture of disbelief” in government policy and some media reports seeping into wider society. With the rise of terrorist attacks across Europe, refugees and asylum seekers are often feared, distrusted and perceived as possible terrorists (see Christys, 2016, Culbertson, 2015, Dearden, 2016, Hall, 2016, Huggler, 2016, Safdar, 2016). The asylum process alone re-traumatises and ostracises people as they must relive painful experiences that are often misunderstood and/or disbelieved. It also silences people by controlling the representation and interpretation of their story. The treatment they receive at the hands of immigration services would not be tolerated by most British citizens. Therefore, I have several suggestions for redressing the inequalities and inaccuracies identified in this chapter. Firstly, for asylum granting institutions to implement change, they need to recognise that the asylum process, as it stands, is not fit for its main purpose, which is ultimately to provide support and sanctuary to vulnerable people fleeing persecution. Also, if the Home Office intends to continue depending on COI reports in decision-making processes, then detailed, up-to-date reports from a variety of reliable sources ought to be available to caseworkers. Access to such information could potentially increase the accuracy of initial decisions and provide much needed contextual information and insights into the applicant’s home culture (Blommaert, 2009, Good, 2006). Finally, while I believe that reading asylum seekers’ narratives in their own words enhances understanding, it is a process that demands willingness to identify with and immerse oneself in the experiences of the other. Identification requires suspension of disbelief and development of CG, so that interlocutors can accurately comprehend culturally and linguistically unfamiliar phenomena as they arise in the discourse. As “the individual’s life or liberty” (Home Office, 2015b, p.11) is potentially in the hands of one reader, the caseworker, understanding the world of the storyteller and being willing and able to empathise could not hold more importance than it does in the context of the asylum interview at this historical moment. By allowing asylum seekers to form narratives in their own words, the UK asylum process can begin to facilitate understanding and empathy, humanising and individualising the statistics and images of masses.

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Notes

1 In 2014 there were 9,363 appeals lodged: 2,885 were approved, 4,843 were refused, 370 were withdrawn and 1,265 outcomes were unknown. In 2015, there were 8,949 appeals lodged: 995 were approved, 1,475 were refused, 136 were withdrawn and 6,343 outcomes were unknown. The proportion of unknown outcomes demonstrates that the system is struggling to keep abreast of decisions (see Hawkins, 2017, p.9, table 1).

2 Conceptual structures enabling interlocutors to construct mental representations from textual cues and make necessary inferences. Some frames are innate, whilst others are learned through experiences and cultural contexts (Fillmore, 1985).

3 The exact number of asylum seekers present in Northern Ireland is not known, as the Home Office does not release isolated statistics for the region (UKVI, personal communication).

4 Jeffries’ (2016) work on war tribunals similarly found that victims of rape did not find the experience of testifying as cathartic as they had hoped.

References


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c.co.uk/news/world/europe/isis-fighters-virtually-impossible-to-detect-as-group-continues-to-use-fake-passports-to-exploit


Conflicts in the UK asylum process


