

## REVIEW

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## RESENSIE

Maryns, Katrijn. 2006. *The Asylum Seeker: Language in the Belgium Asylum Procedure*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing. pp. 375.

Asylum procedures are common throughout the world as people find themselves forced to leave their war-torn countries. Katrijn Maryns's research into the Belgium asylum procedure should be of particular interest in South African applied linguists as an increasing number of refugees enter our country.

The first paragraph of the introduction given an illustration of the kind of misinterpretation which can occur when an asylum seeker attempts to present his or her story to an official.

*I: you just ran away ... .. uhum ... .. and what happened to . you ran away ... so wereto .*

*AS: one man ... .. one man .. carry me . help me ...*

*I: Karimi*

*AS: yes*

*I: it was a man or a woman ... ..*

*AS: man ... ..*

(I = interviewer; AS=Asylum seeker)

In the public official's report, the statement is:

*"A man named Karimi helped me".*

In a situation where decisions relate directly to consistency in the information (names, dates, places) as a marker of credibility, what could seem to be inconsistency at a later point could be used to refuse to grant asylum.

A key factor in these interviews is the fact that the only record of the interview is what is reported in the public official's written record. The interviews are neither video- or audiotaped, and many refugees have no documentation to support their case. Far reaching decisions are therefore made on very limited grounds.

Maryns explores a number of questions about a procedure which provides only the evidence for crucial decisions. These are: how the interaction between applicants and public officials proceeds; how the interaction forms the discursive input into long and complicated trajectories, and third, how the outcome of their discursive processes affects the assessment of asylum applications (p. 3). The discursive medium ironically becomes the chief obstacle of successful exchange of information. At the heart of the investigation is a crucial issue: 'do asylum seekers get sufficient opportunity to have their voice heard, or is the re-entextualized version of their account that matters in the end?' (p. 1).

The book has four chapters. All but the last, which synthesises and discusses the findings, are data based. In the first chapter, Maryns explores the main features of the stages of the investigation which make up the asylum procedure.

Katrijn Maryns reveals the complex problems that underlie the asylum procedure. Not the least of these is that the people involved do not necessarily even understand each other

In her conclusion, she notes:

The decontextualizing effects of textuality have been located in three closely interrelated dimensions of discursive practice: code, mode and view. First, it has been argued that the required monolingual standard a priori rules out the possibility to perform; second, the requirement of a consistent, factual 'record' has been shown to suppress important contextualization work and third, the remapping of experiential views over professional ones pointed in the direction of a deconstruction and homogenization of identities.

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The data have shown that what applicants say during their interviews is very often not made into a *sayable* because it does not match the institutionally inscribed codes, modes and views. The procedure may start from a suggestion of linguistic and narrative choice ('you can tell me your story'), 'in what language do you want to do the interview?', yet in the end, choices are made on behalf of the applicants who in this way lose control over the reconstruction of their case.

The data in the second chapter are concerned with linguistic ideological issues. Maryns focuses on language choice, translation practices and parameters that qualify the relation between the speaker, language and identity.

I found this chapter particularly illuminating. On page 215, Maryns deftly demonstrates how the official fails to see the connection between the applicant's difficulty in expressing herself (leading to the official's difficulty in understanding) and her seeming vagueness are directly connected. The applicant simply does not have the repertoire in English to express herself successfully in this particular situation. The official misreads the situation, blaming the applicant for not being willing to perform better:

She has made little effort to speak English. It was a difficult interview to follow. She was much too vague. She clearly has not concrete notion of asylum. (*Maryns's translation*)

Her analysis of translation practices highlights the challenges of translating and interpreting in a situation where code mixing and shifting are common. This challenges are exacerbated here by the 'emotionally charged and intertextually dense experiences' (p. 250) being recounted.

Maryns also shows the way in which the applicants are disadvantaged by having an inadequate interpreter. The interpreting process is filtered by the interpreter i.e. 'conditioned by the interpreter's uptake and their on-line selection of relevant information, without there being any control by the other parties concerned (the applicant, the official/judge or the lawyer) (p.251).

Chapter 3 explores co-narration and rehearsed narratives. Her rich description shows that displacement and deterritorialization result in diverging conceptions of narrative and appropriateness. The elementary accounts given by the asylum seekers ironically make officials suspect that the narratives are rehearsed. This strongly affects interpretation. Maryns is able to show that what seem to be identical cases, are not as transparent and predictable as the officials thought them to be. However, she also shows that the officials' prejudice affects the way they treat the cases: 'not only does it inform their narrative co-production – adding "standard" elements to the account – but it also keeps the applicants from supporting and substantiating their case'. It is also true that asylum seekers do not feel that their personal experiences are sayable in an institutional context and therefore they prefer to use a constructed story. Sadly for them, they are unable to tell a consistent story and so are refused asylum.

In the final chapter, Katryn Meryns explores the implications of limited linguistic resources and a lack of correspondence between the varieties used for communication of very complex and contextually dense narratives. In the context of asylum seeking in Belgium, applicants have 'very little control over the ways in which their utterances are abstracted from discursive settings, circulated between professional knowledge structures and then inserted into new discursive settings ... what counts in the end is the way in which these utterances are entextualized in bureaucratic artefacts, a process involving a multi-party construction of the account' (p. 340).

The book would repay close study. In my view, a range of wide language practitioners will find it illuminating. The findings do not only represent an important contribution to fairer asylum procedures. There are many instances of cross or inter-cultural communication where greater insight into the processes would enhance 'sense-making'. Without doubt, though, those involved in interpreting or translating in the legal system in South Africa could gain a great deal with concomitant benefits for those giving evidence or facing trial.

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