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The Asylum Speaker is a most welcome and eye-opening sociolinguistic examination of language practices involved in the processes by which asylum seekers' claims to refugee status are heard and assessed. This book is the first in a new series on language and diversity titled Encounters being edited by Jan Blommaert, Marco Jacquemet and Ben Rampton for St Jerome Press. The result of Katrijn Maryns’ PhD work in Belgium, this cleverly titled book is the first monograph to examine language in the asylum process in any country. While this is an institutional context of growing importance in the 21st century, it is one which is fraught with linguistic, administrative and political complexity, and for which research access is by no means a straightforward matter. The data for this study was collected over an eight month period, during which Belgian immigration officials allowed Maryns to collect a corpus of data on 39 asylum seeker cases (a transparency not found in any other country to date). This data included at least one tape-recorded interview for each case (recorded by Maryns who was also allowed to be present for the interviews). Most of the cases involved asylum seekers from Sudan, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia and Nigeria.

The main focus of the book is on how asylum seekers 'manage or fail to make themselves understood' (p. 6) in the speech events during which they must...
justify their claims to asylum. The book is situated in a theoretical framework which combines ethnography and discourse analysis, to ‘relate [the] analysis to issues of mobility and performance’ (p. 6). Central to the analysis is the notion of ‘pretextual gaps’, defined as ‘pretextually-conditioned meaning assessments that diverge to such an extent that the meanings produced or sought fall in the gap between what is recognized and what can be produced’ (p. 7). These pretextual gaps are shown to pervade the asylum procedure, so that ‘important information may get lost or the produced forms may even be attributed unintended meanings’ (p. 7). Maryns shows us in vivid detail how asylum seekers have to present a credible oral performance of their story (often on repeated occasions), but that the pretextual gaps which exist mean that the officials who interview them, and the decision-makers who read the written reports of these interviews are often unable to understand the story. Thus, as the story of an asylum seeker makes its way through the bureaucratic process it is transformed in various ways, which can have a decisive affect on the outcome of the case.

Chapter 1 (‘Text trajectories’) takes us through the Belgian asylum procedure with the case of a man from the English-speaking part of Cameroon, starting with the initial investigation of admissibility phase, for which we read analysis of the bureaucratic interview, the resulting interviewer’s report, and the decision. The same case is then followed through the subsequent stages of appeal – which involved a four-and-a-half hour interview, followed by the resulting interviewer’s report, and the final decision. The 150-page micro-analysis of the trajectory of this single application comprises almost half of the book. In presenting and analysing 50 transcript extracts (some of which are quite lengthy) from the interviews and written reports, the micro-analysis of this case provides extremely valuable and previously unavailable detail of what happens in the process by which asylum seekers tell their stories to immigration officials, and the ‘filtering process’ through which these stories must pass. This filtering process infuses the resulting new versions of the asylum seeker’s story with the power to render the applicant ineligible for recognition as a refugee (following Briggs 1993: 408).

This is exactly what happens in this first case study in the book, with the decision to reject this applicant’s story because it appears to the decision-maker to be ‘extremely vague and general’ (p. 89). But Maryns’ careful analysis shows that it is the report prepared for the decision-maker by the interviewer that has these qualities. This report is ‘the result of a deeply layered process of de- and recontextualizations’ which have ‘stripped’ the asylum seeker’s account of exactly the ‘concrete facts’ found lacking by the decision-maker (p. 90). This process of de- and recontextualizations has focused on ‘a particular kind of detail’. The procedural priority on ‘institutional relevance (the demand for concrete verifiable facts, exact names, places, time indications) clashes with
‘experiential relevance (crucial experiences and events that mark [the asylum seeker’s] personal perception)’ (p. 90).

Chapter 2 (‘Linguistic diversity’) examines language ideological issues related to language choice in the interviews, the role of interpreters, and the use of language analysis in the determination of national origin. While the Belgian asylum procedure gives applicants the chance to choose the language of interview, it does not recognise pidgins and creoles as ‘languages in their own right’. Thus, speakers of such language varieties as West African Krio are interviewed in English, without an interpreter. In a typical interaction at the beginning of an interview, a Sierra Leonean asylum seeker (who had not been to school) says about English: *I no sabi* (West Africa Krio meaning *I don’t understand*). The interviewer’s response is … *we have all the time. so you don’t have to worry … ok … just we’ll take it slow*. (p. 201). Unsurprisingly, the interview which follows is fraught with dysfluencies, repairs, repeated questions, and misunderstandings. But not accepting that there was a linguistic problem caused by the language choice effectively forced on the applicant, the official concluded that she ‘made little effort to speak English … She was also much too vague’ (p. 215). This interviewer’s blaming of the applicant for the vagueness of her account is echoed in the decision-maker’s rejection of the application, where ‘vagueness’ of the applicant’s story again seems to be the major factor. Maryns sees in such cases that language choice (here, the interviewer’s choice of English as the interview language) acts as a filter on entextualisation. The applicant has to present her story for assessment against the criteria for refugee status, but this entextualisation of her experiences is filtered through the language choice made by the interviewer. Similarly, in other cases, interpretation and translation act as filters on entextualisation, particularly when the interpreter becomes an active participant in the interview (and here the book adds to the work of work of Berk-Seligson, e.g. 2002). This section also shows the role of the pervasive ‘one speaker—one language’ ideology in interpreted interviews which are beset with problems and misunderstandings.

The section of the ‘linguistic diversity’ chapter which examines the use of language analysis in the determination of the national origin of asylum seekers is based on Maryns (2004), published in this journal. It focuses on two cases in which asylum seekers’ claims to national origin were investigated during interviews with an immigration official. In the first of these, the 17-year old applicant was rejected on the basis of an oral translation test. Initially this test required the applicant to give the Krio equivalent for English words, but when this proved too complicated, the interviewer switched, asking for the English equivalent of Krio words. The lengthy interview transcript shows the problematic nature of both types of translation test, which takes no account of such relevant issues as speech accommodation, code-switching and ‘bivalency’ (the use of words that
could simultaneously belong to both codes) (p. 257). Further, as Maryns argues, this test can only investigate the applicant’s ability to translate isolated words from one language variety into another. It is unfortunate that this discussion of language analysis in the determination of the national origin of asylum seekers makes no reference to most of other work in this area, such as the other 2004 papers in the special section of issue 11(ii) of this journal devoted to this topic. It is also disappointing that Maryns’ reference to the Simo Boda, Wolf and Peter (1999) article makes no mention of the problems which have been raised in relation to some of its claims (see Eades and Arends 2004).

Chapter 3 (‘Rehearsed narratives’) examines three cases of ‘young African girls’, raising important questions about the effects of co-narration by the interviewer and the immigration official’s assumption that these girls had prepared their stories together (see below for my question about the term ‘girls’). Leaving aside the possibility that these three applicants actually had been through similar experiences, which might account for some similarities in their stories, Maryns examines the role of the interviewer in the co-production of the narratives. Her careful analysis shows that a major factor shaping each of these applicants’ stories told in the interview, is the questions of the interviewer, which can involve adding ‘standard’ elements to the interviewee’s account (p. 268). This is made particularly easy in cases where the interviewee’s answers are short and hampered by lack of fluency in English. This chapter ends with Maryns’ damning conclusion that the current asylum procedure does not distinguish between those applicants who fulfil the UN convention criteria of refugees and those who do not. But rather, it ‘tends to accept good story-tellers only’ (p. 314). Her argument is that the ‘victims of this system are the asylum seekers whose authentic narrative does make sense but who simply do not get the chance to tell their story’ (p. 314).

The fourth and final chapter (‘Discussion’) brings together the analysis and arguments from the three previous chapters to argue that performance is the asylum seeker’s principal tool for justifying their application. Their performance, however, is confronted with an idea of textuality which dismisses crucial contextualization work in interaction and restructures the accounts into depersonalized professional categories, in ways that are far beyond the asylum seeker’s control. This confrontation causes the asylum seeker’s principal tool to lose its significance. … The [Belgian asylum] 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 your 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 (p. 341–342).
Let me now briefly mention a few shortcomings of this book. Firstly, it would have been easier to read if it had been more carefully proofread by a first language speaker of English. A number of constructions are possibly typical of European Lingua Franca English, and it is arguably not appropriate to make a prescriptive (or subjective?) judgement about expressions such as ‘the case Mariama’ (cf. ‘The Mariama case’), or ‘one type of questions’ (cf. ‘one type of question’), ‘a decision to refusal’ (cf. ‘a decision to reject’?). But there are a number of other nonstandard usages which are confusing. A few examples are ‘I just want to question the applied method’ perhaps to mean ‘... the method applied’ (p. 91), unclear use of the verb ‘crosses’, perhaps to mean ‘contradicts’ (p. 157), and unclear use of the verb ‘bump in’, perhaps to mean ‘interrupt’ (p. 209). Similarly, discussion of the Gricean maxim of ‘mode’ (p. 55) is presumably intended to be the maxim which Grice terms ‘manner’. Some of the idiosyncratic expressions in the book are misleading, for example the expression ‘young girl’ (which should refer someone who is not yet an adult), seems to be used to refer at times to an immigration official (e.g. p. 232). So, its usage in relation to the three asylum seekers whose cases are dealt with in Chapter 3 leaves the reader unsure as to whether any or all of them are adults. There are some other expressions which do not make sense to me: e.g. the description of a particular appeal as ‘suspensive’ (p. 168), and the phrase ‘hunted style of questioning’ (p. 211).

Another disappointment for this reviewer was that the author does not develop or justify the theories from which her analysis derives or to which it contributes. Instead she refers readers to ‘Maryns (2004)’ for ‘an elaborate discussion’ of the theoretical framework which underpins the analysis (regrettably this reference is not found in the references list, but it appears to be the author’s PhD thesis. It is not the journal article cited above in this review as Maryns 2004). On the other hand, the choice to focus this book on the presentation and analysis of seven detailed case studies, with less attention to theoretical development, has the advantage of making it accessible to a wider audience beyond sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology.

Despite these criticisms, I highly recommend this book to any readers interested in narrative, institutional talk, linguistic diversity, entextualisation practices (the telling and retelling of stories), and the experiences of asylum seekers. It will have direct appeal to readers of this journal with an interest in the ways in which language works in the bureaucratic and legal processes involved in claiming asylum. While Maryns’ work is situated in the Belgian asylum seeker process, there are many features of this system which are shared with or similar to that in a number of other countries.

But beyond both these general and most specialised groups of readers, this book can lead to exciting connections for scholars and students of language in
bureaucratic and legal contexts. I highly recommend it to those who have an interest in how legal interviewing deals with the stories of interviewees. The extent to which interviewers’ questions control, shape and restrict interviewees’ stories has been a concern for more than two decades in studies of courtroom language, and more recently in studies of police interviews. The most detailed examination of the issue is in lawyer-client interviews, in the work of Trinch (e.g. 2003), who examines the affects of recontextualisation and transformation of oral client narratives into written affidavit reports. While dealing more with bureaucratic interviews (which nevertheless have important legal implications and consequences), Maryns’ work adds to Trinch’s examination of the transformation of oral narratives in gatekeeping interviews. Like Trinch’s work, Maryns’ book presents extended examples, enabling us to go beyond limited analysis of linguistic features, to a richly textured examination of the intertwining of language, power and ideology which pervade the whole process.

One of the most significant implications of Maryns’ work for researchers of language in the legal process is in the realization that we cannot accept explanations of lawyers’ control over clients’ and witnesses’ stories in terms of such legal constraints as courtroom rules of evidence. It is clearly part of wider institutional discourse practice, incorporating what Maryns describes as a ‘linguistic-communicative ideology according to which the written word and its ensuing criteria of textuality – consistency, clarity and detail … – are considered the most reliable means of expressing truth’ (p. 316).

References


