

The role of evaluation in telling and reading the “real-life stories” of asylum seekers

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Abstract

In the UK asylum process, asylum seekers are denied the right to tell their story in their own words as the “substantive interview” limits the applicants’ freedom to construct an authentic experiential narrative in their own words. Thus, the institutional report often fails to reflect the applicant’s experiences and feelings (Maryns and Blommaert, 2002). As institutional reports are primary evidence for credibility judgments in the asylum process, the authentic representation of an applicant’s story is often a matter of life and death. This paper argues that the absence of evaluation in institutional reports not only inhibits the speaker from producing experiential narratives, but also constrains a reader’s ability to empathise with the speaker, who may appear to be flouting culturally defined perceptions of cooperativeness and coherence.

The collected data from semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers will be presented as “real-life stories” in reading group discussions. The uniqueness of each text will provide a stimulus for examining the function of evaluation as a resource for identification and empathy, allowing readers access to the cognitive world of the narrator. The stories and readers’ responses to them will be analysed using the appraisal model for evaluation in texts (Martin and White, 2005) and contextualised further by integrating aspects of Text World Theory (Werth, 1999) and Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1999). Preliminary analyses have indicated that a higher proportion of evaluative language in narratives invokes positive evaluation from readers, demonstrating an increased capacity for empathetic responses.

Keywords: narrative, reader response, appraisal theory, asylum seekers

1. Introduction

This presentation considers the importance of the discourse-world in the entextualisation and understanding of narratives within the asylum process. I begin by contextualising the asylum process in the UK and the processes of text creation therein, then consider how ignorance of cultural, linguistic and experiential contexts influences the recording and subsequent interpretations of asylum seekers' stories. The outline of my research questions and methodology follow, framing the subsequent analysis of several responses from recent reading group discussions. Through the analysis, I identify the ways in which readers used language to occupy a variety of positions in relation to the storytellers. To close, I offer suggestions of the next steps in the research process and comment upon possible causes of the opinions presented by readers.

2. Text creation in the asylum process

The success of an application for refugee status depends upon an asylum seeker's ability to prove that their story reflects the United Nations' definition of a refugee, that is that they have a 'well-founded fear of persecution' in their home country (UNHCR, 2011: 14). In the UK, the asylum process falls within the remit of the Home Office, and caseworkers can grant refugee status if the evidence given by applicants fits their interpretation of this definition. Asylum seekers attend two institutional interviews: the preliminary screening, where the key issues of the claim are recorded, and the subsequent substantive interview, in which these key issues are examined, or some might say, interrogated, in greater detail to assess their authenticity before a decision is made. Home Office policy guidelines on conducting interviews provide caseworkers with a minimalist approach to the amount of detail they require; they should 'gather enough evidence to be able to properly consider and determine the claim' but contributions beyond this are considered unnecessary (Home Office, 2015a: 4).

In asylum interviews, discourse world participants experience a clash of expectations and intentions: asylum seekers want to tell their stories, and case workers have to write concise reports. For example, Maryns (2006) and Gómez Díez (2011) found that officials in the Belgian asylum process dismissed contextualising and emotive aspects of asylum seekers' responses; narrative was fashioned into a report. Though the report mode shares some features of the narrative mode, such as 'referential uniqueness...and past temporality' (Fleischman, 1990: 103), narratives respond to the 'So what?' question, as well as the 'What happened?' question (cf. Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Labov suggests that evaluation is necessary for developing internal theories of causality, and argues that texts without evaluation 'lack structural definition' (1967: 38); so, it is difficult to engage with a

report and the speaker behind it, and easier to question its internal coherence, legitimising suggestions of speaker inauthenticity.

In Werth's Text World Theory model (1999: 48), 'Common Ground' (CG) is an essential component of the discourse world, yet the asylum interview is not a conversation of equals with shared intentions, cultural and linguistic knowledge, which are all key aspects of CG (see Fig 1. below). The interviewer controls what is sayable and relevant to the written record, and these interviews are not audio-recorded, unless a reasoned request is made in advance — rather, the caseworker transcribes the interviewee's responses simultaneously, increasing the possibility of inaccuracy in representations.

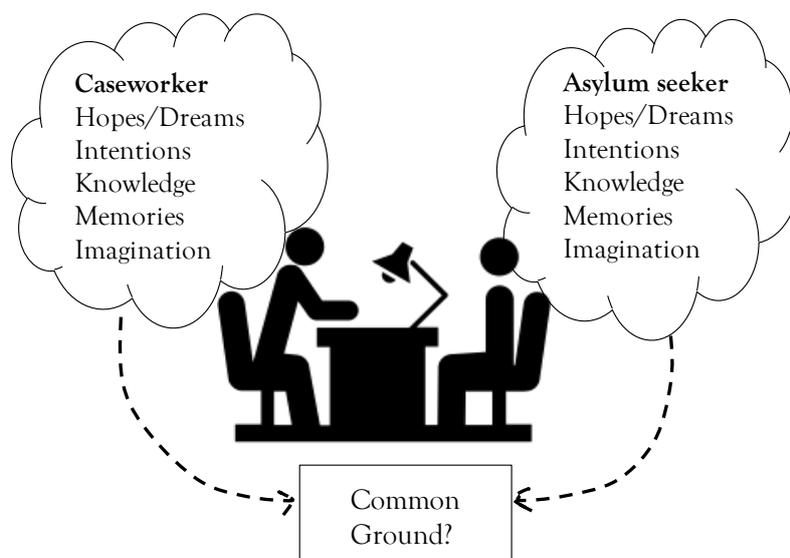


Fig. 1 The Discourse World of the Asylum Interview

Regardless, the evidence in the written record forms the basis of the decision that will be made. The entextualisation process from interview to report creates what Gavins calls a 'split discourse world' (2007: 26).

The situational context of the original discourse world is not accessible from the written record, and neither is the probable gap in shared and mutual knowledge (see Fig. 2 below). These are pressing issues, because the question caseworkers should ask when they read an interview report is whether the asylum seeker's story is possible when situated in the cultural, political, linguistic and religious landscape of their home country, which requires identification through self-projection. Jacquemet's (2009) study of asylum reports in Italy found that they are characteristically de-territorialised and devoid of cultural nuance; they are written from the univocal position of the interviewer and ignore the applicant's cultural frames of reference, preventing authentic understanding. As the language of the report meets the frame(s) of reference in the mind of the case worker, the

text worlds created are shaped by their prior experience and knowledge of previous cases, or the facts presented in government resources, such as in-country reports.

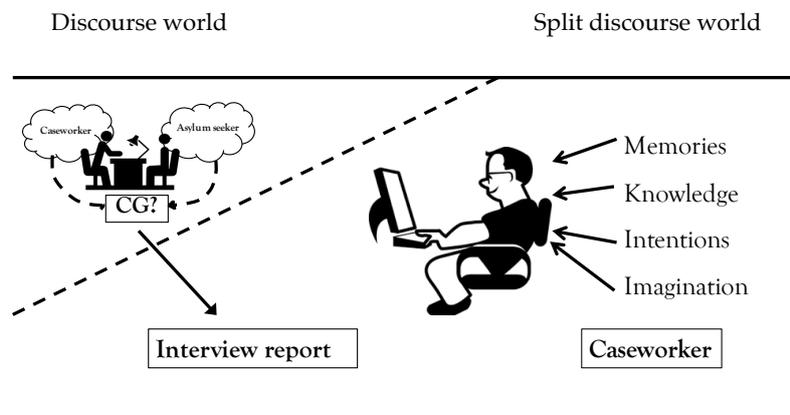


Fig. 2 The split discourse world emerges in the institutional report

Across Europe, institutions interpret asylum seekers' stories through the lens of their own cultural ideologies, reinforcing the inaccessibility of the original discourse-world in the process. In the UK, country of origin reports from sources like the BBC World Service and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are used to contextualise an asylum seeker's case. Yet, sources may be outdated and are certainly limited in the contextual detail they provide; applicants' experiences often involve localised issues that would not be recorded in country reports (Maryns and Blommaert, 2002). These sources of government-approved knowledge can equally undermine credibility. Caseworkers may be required to engage with events and contexts which lie outside of their own realms of experience and knowledge, but their ignorance of specific issues is not a valid reason for doubting the truthfulness of an asylum seeker's claim.

3. Methodology

Due to the pragmatically problematic nature of current practices, and particularly the rate of applications granted on appeal, 39% in 2015/16 according to Gov.UK (Home Office, 2016), it is clear that alternative methods of eliciting and presenting asylum seekers' stories should be considered. The motivations for change are twofold: 1) to permit more accurate and informed decisions, and 2) to show asylum seekers that their lives matter. My own research began with a desire to simply listen to the life stories of asylum seekers living in Belfast, before and after their arrival in the UK. As the process continued, the following research questions presented themselves:

- How does the entextualisation of asylum seekers' stories affect our ability to understand and engage with them as "real people" with complex feelings, motivations and intentions?
- How does (a lack of) shared knowledge influence readers' interpretations of and responses to asylum seekers' narratives?
- Is it possible for readers to empathise with culturally, linguistically, perceptually and experientially alien narratives?

In order to explore these questions, I needed stimulus texts to use in reading group discussions. The fact that elements of the subject matter were situationally familiar to the readers was important in helping them to engage in some way with unfamiliar narrators. Though they lacked shared experience, they occupied a shared space through living in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I interviewed 6 people who had been through the asylum process in Northern Ireland and used open questions which typically elicited lengthy narratives. I transcribed these interviews and then produced narrative versions of two transcriptions, altering participants' responses as little as possible in the process. *Elijah's Story* and *Amal's Story* were used as discussion texts in four Libraries Northern Ireland adult reading groups. These reading groups meet monthly in local libraries to discuss a book which they decide upon at the previous meeting. As the libraries are government-funded, readers do not have to purchase books and come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. The main distinguishing factor between the groups was their geographic location; there were two urban reading groups in South and West Belfast, and two rural reading groups in Mid Down (Down is a county on the east coast) and South Down.

The data collected from reading groups provided a range of reactions to the stories. As I was a facilitator in the reading group discussions, I was able to experience the intensity of their feeling; I have to admit I was shocked at the vitriolic nature of some comments. I also noticed that when respondents had inaccurately processed sections of the narratives, it led to particularly harsh evaluations. Nevertheless, once they shared these negative perceptions with others in the group, it led them to question the authenticity of the speaker too. In fact, a male group member commented that in his first reading he perhaps wasn't cynical *enough*, but before I examine specific responses, I will outline some details from *Amal's Story*.

3.1 *Amal's Story*

Joan; to the bottom and (0.6) you know what's the right story and (0.7) what a job!
 [I mean it must be horrendous!

Lisa; [*Uhuh*, yes it must be.
 And how do you believe that they're all telling you (0.5) the truth as we=
 Joy; =Exactly.

Lisa; Like I thought there was a lot of inconsistencies, you know like when when
 you read this.

As you can see, Lisa and Joan are particularly negative in their assessment of Amal's credibility. Joan begins by admitting that as she thought "like" an immigration official, she could only describe the job as "horrendous". Lisa agrees and use of the present tense and second person pronoun 'you', projects us into the mind of a caseworker, and the questions they would have as they listened to asylum seekers. At an earlier point in the conversation, Joy commented that she perceived Amal as negative and ungrateful, and consequently unworthy of government support, so it is unsurprising that she agrees with her interlocutors in this exchange. The negative assessments stem from their perception of Amal as inauthentic, suggesting that the "culture of disbelief" is prevalent in wider society as well as in government, and has inhibited them from taking her story at face value. As Lisa mentions "a lot of inconsistencies" but does not provide textual evidence to support her claim, it appears that her negative assessment of the narrative composition is influenced by differences in personal values and motivations highlighted elsewhere in the conversation. Therefore, cultural clashes prevent Lisa and the other readers from understanding Amal's actions and, as a consequence, from accepting her words as truthful. If they refuse to accept her words as valid, it is impossible for them to enter into the text worlds of her narrative with anything other than judgment.

4.2 *Inaccessibility of the narrator*

In the Mid-Down reading group, readers sought to further understand the story and mediate any details that they were unsure of; as a result, I answered a few clarifying questions about the original context of our conversation and procedures in the asylum process. Consequently, they were less dependant upon their own inferences and prior knowledge from sources like the media, but one reader acknowledged that she still sensed a fictional quality to *Amal's Story*.

- Alice; it also is very hard you can (0.3) read this but it still appears (0.2) slightly fictional to me. [I'm not saying it's made up
- Annie; [Mm.
- Alice; but (0.4) unless I actually as you say were sitting across
- Annie; *Uhuh.*
- Alice; from her you'd find it hard (0.3) to believe that it isn't just a case study of "A N Other" mixed with "A N Other" (0.3)

Though Alice firmly states that she is not undermining the truthfulness of the account, she feels that she would more easily believe that it was real if she was speaking to the storyteller in the flesh. Her acknowledgement of the impact distance between speaker and reader has upon reception of the narrative supports the concerns I raised earlier (see Section 2.2). The fact that a reader picked up on the effects of perceived fictionality, in limiting her ability to engage with the real-life speaker behind the text suggests that entextualisation processes may also inhibit caseworkers from responding to the "real lives" behind generic institutional reports that they read on a daily basis. I have highlighted that the transformation of talk to text creates a degree of inaccessibility, an issue discussed in detail in van der Bom's (2015) Text World Theory analysis of interview transcripts, but inaccessibility becomes more expansive when coupled with a lack of shared cultural and experiential frames of reference.

4.3 Inaccessible perspectives

In the West Belfast reading group, a male respondent used negative propositions to increase the distance between himself and the storyteller; he highlighted the lack of common experience, culture, language and perception — all of which are realms of shared knowledge in Werth's discourse world. He says:

- Joe; I can't relate to any of these stories at all, from whatever quarter. (0.5) There's nothing like this in my experience at all. [...] So, (0.4) I can't even (0.4) make a judgment on it. It's just completely alien. (0.2) All these stories are. (0.3)
- Rachel; Yeah. (0.5)
- Joe; I have to try and understand it and all that sort of thing but it doesn't make it any, try and understand it but don't really.

- Rachel; *Mm.*
- Joe; But then I'm not black, I'm not from another continent, so
- Maeve; Yeah.
- Joe; I mean these people are looking at it in a different way, but I can't relate to it at all.

He says that he cannot understand, though he has to try; nevertheless, his persistent use of negation suggests an unwillingness to entertain the text worlds of the story and efforts to justify his difficulties with the task of comprehending the experiences therein. He believes he is unable to furnish the narrative with enough frame knowledge to produce a correct understanding; as a result, he acknowledges that he is unable to judge the stories. His response is honest and perhaps insightful, but in the context of the wider discussion it is surprising that he should feel unequipped to make any remarks as he had travelled and worked overseas in the past. Another group member noticed this and suggested that he would be most able to identify with the feelings expressed in the narrative. Nonetheless, the point he makes above is that because he does not see the world as the speaker does, he is unable to pass judgment upon their perceptions. That he acknowledges his limitations is positive, but allowing these gaps in knowledge to separate him from anyone who is black or from another continent is disconcerting to say the least. To limit our propensity for mutual understanding to people who look like and come from the same continent as us undermines the complexity of individual identities and places too much emphasis upon the role of shared cultural and linguistic knowledge in understanding. Shared perception is still possible through imagining their experiences and is a means of bridging the gap between narrator and reader.

4.4 Entertaining possible worlds

The final example from the final reading group in South Down proves this, as readers entertain possibilities through the creation of epistemic modal worlds in order to empathise with the storytellers:

- Diane; you do get impressions from the press and (0.4) TV [...] that these people are OK [...] everybody's looking after them. (1.4) Their stories (0.5) wasn't like that at all [...] you just (0.5) just feel so sorry that they're (0.9) landed into that situation because of what happened in their own country (0.3) you know, so

engagement. The next stage will involve analysis of the language used in the stimulus narratives themselves, permitting detailed consideration of the influence of text immanent features upon reader responses. Furthermore, I am interested in exploring the social dynamics of the various reading groups and particularly the influence of the perceived 'expert status' (Peplow, Swann, et al., 2016: 73-79) of certain readers upon the collaborative creation of interpretive text worlds in discussions.

In closing, it is important to clearly state that the present culture of disbelief in the UK government and the media is filtering into wider society, causing refugees and asylum seekers to be feared, distrusted and perceived as lesser beings than UK nationals. The treatment they receive at the hands of immigration services, for example, would not be tolerated by many British nationals. Though I believe that reading asylum seekers' narratives in their own words may enhance our understanding, it is a process that demands willingness to identify with and immerse oneself in the experiences of the other and suspend disbelief, if only for a brief moment. As 'the individual's life or liberty' 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 this context at this moment in time (Home Office, 2015b: 11).

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