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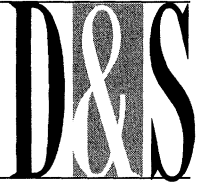
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Investigating narrative inequality: African asylum seekers' stories in Belgium

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ABSTRACT. This article addresses narrative inequality in the Belgian asylum procedure by means of a complex of preconditions for communication, noticeable in recorded interviews with African asylum seekers in Belgium. The author first examines the issue of linguistic–communicative resources: the 'broken' varieties of European languages in which asylum seekers tell their stories. Next, the structure and functions of a particular type of densely contextualizing sub-narrative, called 'home narratives' are explored, with special emphasis on their role as localizing discourse. Finally, the role of narratives in the asylum procedure is discussed, and the contrast in contextualizing directions between asylum seekers' narratives and text trajectories in the procedure is highlighted.

KEY WORDS: *asylum seekers, Belgium, contextualization, inequality, institutional discourse, narrative*

1. Introduction

In a remarkable paper, Dell Hymes and Courtney Cazden investigated 'the possibility that one form of inequality of opportunity in our society has to do with rights to use narrative, with whose narratives are admitted to have cognitive function' (Hymes and Cazden, 1980: 126).[1] On the basis of observations on speaking rights in university classes they concluded that the use of particular ways of narrating focused upon the expression of emotions and personal experience and voiced in an 'anecdotal' mode was easily dismissed, while other narrative modes in which academic voicing and emotional detachment were more prominent were clearly privileged. Thus, 'contributions to class discussions based on narratives of personal experience did not get the floor' (1980: 127) and 'the truth of the matter would be that only the "anecdotes" of some would count' (1980: 131). The rights to use particular narrative modes are unevenly

distributed, and this pattern of distribution disenfranchises those who have to rely on 'disqualified' narrative modes for conducting their business in society.

My aim in this article is to document and discuss autobiographical stories told by African asylum seekers in Belgium. I will try to highlight aspects of the structure and functions of narratives in an attempt to show how they represent crucial communicative resources for asylum seekers. Without recourse to the long and detailed narratives about home, escape and travelling, asylum seekers cannot make their motives and causes for seeking asylum fully understood. In highlighting these aspects, I display a concern for narrative–textual shape inspired by authors such as Hymes (1981, 1996, 1998) and Haviland (1996, 1997), as well as one for narrative–textual dynamics inspired by what has come to be known as a 'natural histories of discourse' approach (Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Briggs, 1997; Gal and Woolard, 1995; Silverstein and Urban, 1996) emphasizing entextualization practices (de- and recontextualization practices) as crucial ingredients of 'interpreting' and 'understanding' text. These approaches to text will be set within a wider project that bears affinities to that of critical discourse analysis and can be summarized as investigating language-as-social-process in order to gain a more precise insight in power relations (see, e.g. Wodak, 1995).

The problem I wish to address through an analysis of these stories is that of narrative inequality in the context of asylum applications in Belgium. The asylum procedure involves a complex set of discursive practices and language ideologies that are, in practice, being used as criteria for 'truth', 'trustworthiness', coherence' and 'consistency'. Such discursive practices require access to communicative resources that are often far beyond the reach of African asylum seekers not only linguistically but also narratively and stylistically.

Like so many bureaucratic procedures, the asylum application procedure used to be 'blackboxed'. Hence, direct evidence of the official procedure interviews is not (yet) available,[2] and I have been forced to use the research tactic employed by, for example, Labov in his *Logic of Nonstandard English* (1970) (as well as, e.g. by Hymes reanalysing Labov's data in Hymes, 1996: chapter 8); I have also had to use 'second best' data and look at preconditions for talk in these data. The asylum seekers' narratives undoubtedly illustrate the way in which communicative resources are mobilized for 'making sense' of the asylum seekers' case; at the same time, they suggest at least the possibility of narrative inequality when measured against the norms and expectations inscribed in the discursive patterns of the asylum application procedure.

The lack of attention to the crucial functions of densely contextualized (and contextualizing) narratives is partly due to the particular treatment of text in bureaucratic procedures, particularly the shaping of textual trajectories in which 'original' stories are continuously reformed and reformulated. Hence it illustrates the fact 'that talk is often structured vis-à-vis mediated relationships it bears to objects and texts that are dispersed in time and space' (Briggs, 1997: 454–5) – in this case, vis-à-vis preconceived criteria of textuality and narrative appropriateness that are inscribed in practices of noting, summarizing and reading

narratives, making 'files', interviewing and interrogating, translating and so forth (together with their products: specific texts formats and individual texts) within administrative procedures, themselves part of a huge text tradition such as that of Belgian law and bureaucracy. I argue that this process of (re)structuring talk into institutionally sanctioned text involves a dynamic of entextualization that is based on power asymmetries. This process also involves the problematic of the availability and accessibility of linguistic–communicative resources – an often overlooked 'context' of talk, but one that will be given prominence in this article (see also Blommaert, 2001).

Narrative inequality assumes a variety of shapes and has a multitude of dimensions. Three dimensions will be discussed in some detail here: (i) the accessibility and availability of linguistic–communicative resources; (ii) particular contextualization demands; and (iii) the ways in which texts are shifted through the procedure. In my discussion, I focus on preconditions for discourse: the sort of 'material' for communication that asylum seekers have access to and what it means to be confronted with a bureaucratic system in which particular 'materials' are expected and required.

In the next section, I briefly provide some background on the situation of asylum seekers in Belgium and on the fieldwork project in which the data discussed here were gathered. In section 3, I turn to the issue of communicative resources and discuss some of the features of language competence observable in the talk of the asylum seekers. Section 4 presents a discussion of the particular type of sub-narrative that I call 'home narratives'. Home narratives are often long and sometimes anecdotal stories on the situation in the refugees' home societies, involving usually very detailed information on local events, the crisis from which refugees fled and so on. Home narratives are contextualizing accounts, and the particular contextualization trajectories they follow require close inspection. In section 5, I try to situate the home narratives in the discursive patterns that occur during the asylum application procedure.

2. Asylum seekers in Belgium

The data discussed here were gathered during a fieldwork project in which more than 40 African asylum seekers were interviewed, most of them being illegal or in limbo, their asylum application either being undecided or having been rejected.[3] The interviews were open interviews in which asylum seekers were invited to tell the story of their escape, their reasons for escape, their experiences with the Belgian asylum procedure and with life as an asylum seeker in Belgium. The interviews were conducted in French, English and (in a small number of cases) Dutch. Dutch was the mother tongue of the interviewers; thus in most cases the interviewers and the interviewees had to rely on a language other than their native language to do the interview, and as a rule non-native varieties of those languages were being used.

The interviews were obviously very different from the ones taken in the official

application procedure. The main difference was, however, not the open
format of our interviews. The official interview also contains important 'open'
slots. These open interview parts obviously offer a lot of material for detailed
scrutiny and cross-questioning by the officials, and so become a threat rather
than an opportunity for asylum seekers. Another shared feature between our
interviews and the ones held in the procedure was the use of non-native lan-
guages as a lingua franca in the interview, implications of which will be discussed
in section 3 of this article. The main difference was probably the key in which
the interviews were put: ours were obviously inconsequential (though some
subjects either suspected or hoped that the interview they did with us would
have some benefit), and overall they were held in a friendly and sympathetic
atmosphere.

In Belgium as elsewhere in Europe, asylum seeking has become a topic of
heated political debate in recent years. The last decade has witnessed a rapid
increase of asylum applications. This, combined with the increased complexity of
the cases – many asylum seekers do not offer a 'typical' motive for seeking
asylum, as we shall see further – has led to bottlenecks in the administrations in
charge of asylum regulations. In the past, it took years to reach a decision on
some applications. In the meantime, applicants lived in the country in appalling
conditions of poverty and marginalization (pushing them into the crudest sys-
tems of labour exploitation, including prostitution); often the administrative
treatment was reduced to a very superficial inspection of the application in
attempts to speed up the procedure and reduce the backlog of applications. The
infrastructure for hosting asylum seekers rapidly (and chronically) proved to be
grossly inadequate and violence became a constant ingredient of the treatment of
asylum applicants by the police force. This flooding of the administrative appar-
atus went hand in hand with negative stereotyping of asylum and asylum seek-
ers (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998: chapter 8), associating asylum seekers
with crime and qualifying most of them as 'adventurers' who sought asylum
exclusively for economic purposes (in popular parlance: 'to take advantage of our
generosity').

In September 1998, a young Nigerian woman called Sémira Adamu died
during her forced repatriation. Her asylum application, based on the argument
that she would be forced to marry an old and violent man in Nigeria, had been
rejected. She was put on a plane for Togo and seated between two policemen;
when she started to shout, the police officers put a small pillow over her mouth.
Sémira Adamu went into a coma and died. Her violent death caused a public
outcry both among asylum seekers and among the public at large. Asylum seek-
ers came out of hiding and demonstrated, occupying churches and schools. A
number of organizations were formed for the improvement of the living con-
ditions and the chances of asylum for asylum seekers, and the government
ordered a public inquiry into the procedures of repatriation of rejected applicants.
For a brief period, asylum was a priority on the political agenda, and the negative
stereotyping of asylum was transformed into a public image of victimhood. In the

spring of 1999, the protests gradually faded and the issue of asylum seekers resumed its previous shape and course.

As shown later, the asylum procedure relies heavily on an investigation of applicants' stories. On their arrival in Belgium, they are interviewed about the causes and motives for fleeing their country and seeking asylum. The general format applied in this procedure is that of a criminal investigation. Well over 90 percent of the applications are turned down, often – as we shall see – on very doubtful grounds. Politically, the 'control' of immigration (i.e. the *reduction* of the number of effective immigrants) combined with a policy of 'humane repatriation' of rejected applicants is a generally accepted doctrine. The new phenomenon of massive asylum seeking is rarely seen as an issue in its own right, rather it is associated with the more general issue of immigration and immigrant policies in Belgium, and it is usually presented as a further complication of an already thorny issue of 'integration'/assimilation of foreigners into the local cultural, linguistic and social communities.

The discursive patterns by means of which these political categories are being constructed and situated in the larger frame of reference of Belgian political society are beyond the scope of this article (see Blommaert, 1997; Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998); suffice it to state here that the issue of asylum seekers is obviously one in which rhetorical accomplishments and discursive constructions of reality are crucial. The politics of asylum in Belgium is a politics of represen-tation in which discursively constructed and disseminated gross categories (e.g. 'political', hence 'legitimate' asylum seekers versus 'economic', hence 'illegiti-mate' asylum seekers) are crucial political instruments.

The historical situatedness of our data deserves some attention. The interviews we organized with asylum seekers were conducted between October/November 1998 and March/April 1999, i.e. during the brief period in which asylum seek-ers came out of hiding and were eager to tell their stories to all those interested, and during which there was some positive media and political attention for these stories. This accounts for the fact that we could collect data at all. During these few months, asylum seekers became visible and their stories became publicly accessible. Second, it explains the nature of their stories: they are apologetic and argumentative, using a discursive space shaped by the Sémira Adamu crisis, in which new views of asylum seeking, motives and experiences could be articu-lated. For a brief period, asylum seekers had a legitimate voice, and their case was taken up by many opinion makers and politicians.

3. Resources

One of the characteristics of the administrative world we live in is the unchal-lenged and apparently unchallengeable assumption that bureaucratic and administrative clients would have complete control over the medium and com-municative skills in which bureaucratic and administrative procedures are being carried out. In Belgium (as undoubtedly elsewhere) administrative procedures

require highly developed literacy skills as well as (some degree of) access to a stan-
dardized variety of a language (in Belgium: Dutch, French or German). It should
be noted, in passing, that literacy requirements seem to increase in size and scope
the lower one gets into society. People on low incomes often have to go through a
mass of complex and very diverse paperwork in order to get social welfare ben-
efits, privileged access to social housing, medical treatment or education. Thus,
Jim Collins' comment that 'modern educational systems produce stratified litera-
cies: elites are socialized to an interpretive relation to texts, and nonelites to a sub-
missive relation to texts' (1995: 84) becomes pressingly relevant.

The first requirement, literacy, is taken for granted and is rooted in a socio-
cultural tradition in which generalized schooling provides (stratified patterns of)
literacy to *all* Belgian citizens. Being literate is a sociocultural given in Belgium.
The second requirement is more controversial and multilayered: the emphasis on
standard varieties is rooted in political–linguistic struggles of the past, discussion
of which would take us outside the scope of this article. Standard varieties of lan-
guages were used as emblems of national identity in many parts of the world; the
outcome of the struggle in Belgium gave rise to a highly complex and politically
very sensitive language legislation in which tolerance for other speech varieties
(nonstandard forms as well as foreign languages) is restricted. Thus, nonstandard
varieties are allowed in the domain of orality and non-official language use; as
soon as the bureaucratic and administrative arenas are being entered, the stan-
dard (written) variety of the language is imposed.

The fact is that the communicative requirements imposed on clients are con-
ditioned by historically contingent phenomena such as the social distribution of
communicative resources through, for instance, the education system, the mass
media and so forth. In more than one way, the requirements thus presuppose
membership of the society, or at least of social units with similar linguistic
economies and communicative sociologies. Assumptions of choice in pragmatic
theories (for instance in conversation analysis) are very often based on the
implicit acceptance of such membership, and tend to obscure significant inequal-
ities in the range of possible choices some people can control. Constraints on
choice, anchored in inequality of speech repertoires, are certainly crucial fea-
tures of our asylum seekers' data, and competence in the medium of narration is
one issue. It makes a significant difference whether the narrator uses a language
or language variety over which she or he has adequate control. Narrating in a
second, third or other foreign language may considerably reduce the set of
resources which speakers can select for structuring their story and thus for
'making their point'. As we shall see, this does not pre-empt the fact that they
make their point; it does however influence the way in which interlocutors per-
ceive their story and *get* the point.

In what follows, I first document some problems in language proficiency. After
that, I turn to what I call 'ethnocoherence': patterns of coherence that can be
discerned in such narratives, despite the sometimes considerable problems of
language proficiency.

3.1 PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Let us now take a closer look at some examples from the corpus. They illustrate the difficulties experienced by many speakers in expressing themselves in French, English or Dutch. More often than not, stories are told in hesitant styles packed with self-corrections and mid-sentence changes of tactic, footing or topic, less than adequate lexical selection, problems in verb inflection (e.g. tense and aspect marking), problems in selecting adequate pronouns, and so on. At the same time, the stories that are being told are topically and structurally quite complex, as we shall see in the next section. The problems with language proficiency considerably complicate matters.

Extract 1 illustrates the types of stories which result from the use of 'broken' French coupled with a detailed and complex home narrative. The interviewee, a man from Angola, is explaining an episode of Angolan history to the interviewer.[4]

Extract 1

> oui/l'autre président . . .(xxxxxx)/ on l'a empoisonné/ c'est le président Mobutu/ qui a mis le poison retardé/ il est parti au russe/ l'URSS/ pour traîter/ il a retourné/ il est mort/ mais on a abandonné son corps hein/ oui/ {{*Question: c'était un président de MPLA?*}} c'était le même mouvement MPLA/ dans le temps/ année septante-cinq/ quand il est mort on dit/ comme on ==il est marxisme/ on a pris on a choisi =on= on a fait faux testament/ cette testament c'était au temps du russe qui a fait ça/ comme toi tu =le= le président il est mort/ il a décidé Eduardo qui va me remplacer/ sans vote/ parce que il est toujours du même parti/ Eduardo il est d'origine angolais/ mais il est des Cap Verdiens/ parce que ce sont des anciens prisonniers/ et Portugais il a mis à l'île hein/ nous sommes à l'océan/ et on a mis une prison là-bas/ parce qu'il est venu pour commander l'indépendance/ c'était une petite ville =une petite= une petite village/ on a mis au pouvoir/ maintenant le président/ c'est on dit/ il dit que non/ tous les gens/ qui parlent Lingala/ les gens du Nord/ ce sont des gens plus malins/ plus intelligents/ par rapport au gens du Sud/ en Angola nous sommes quatre couleurs/ comme le Bré=le Brésil.

Translation:

> yes/the other president . . .(xxxxxx)/they have poisoned him/ it's president Mobutu/ who put the delayed poison/ he has left to Russian/ the USSR/ to treat/ he gave back/ he died/ but they have left his corpse, right/ yes/ {{*Question: it was a president of the MPLA?*}}/ it was the same movement MPLA/ in those days/ year seventy-five/ when he died they say/ like they=he is Marxism/ they took they chose=they=they have made false testament/ those testament it was in the time of Russian that has made it/ since you you=the=the president is dead/ he decided Eduardo who is going to replace me/ without vote/ because he is always of the same party/ Eduardo he is of Angolan origin/ but he is of the Cape Verdians/ because they are former prisoners/ and Portuguese has put on the island, right/ we are at the ocean/ and they have put a prison over there/ because he had come to command the independence/ it was a small town= a small=a small village/ they have put to power/ now the president/ that is what they say/ he said that no/ all the people/ who speak Lingala/ the people from the north/ they are more clever people/ more intelligent/ in relation to the people from the south/ in Angola we are four colours/ like Bra=Brazil

As demonstrated in the next section, a tremendous amount of information is squeezed into narrative passages such as this one. The point I wish to make here is that the narrative structure and the salience of what the man tells us are over-shadowed by the code in which he tells it: a variety of colloquial and informally acquired French in which grammatical, syntactic and lexical errors are frequent when measured against normative standard French. The sequence of events is not marked by the usual tense and aspect markers; nouns and adjectives are used as synonyms ("il est marxisme" instead of "il est marxiste"; "russe" instead of "Russie"); articles are deleted ("Portugais" instead of "le Portugais" or "les Portugais" and so on. The Angolan man is struggling with the code. Hence, con-textually crucial and sensitive episodes such as the one in which he describes the change of power in his country (crucial and sensitive because they form the basis of the reasons why he escaped from his country) are narrated as:

Extract 2

> dans le temps/ année septante-cinq/ quand il est mort on dit/ comme on ==il est marxisme/ on a pris on a choisi =on= on a fait faux testament/ cette testament c'était au temps du russe qui a fait ça/ comme toi tu =le= le président il est mort/ il a décidé Eduardo qui va me remplacer/ sans vote/ parce que il est toujours du même parti/

Such ways of narrating crucial and sensitive matters are offered to interviewers who are also non-native speakers of French. But there are various sorts and degrees of 'non-nativeness', having to do with what sort of variety has been acquired by the speakers, through which types of channels and means (formal–informal learning, spoken and/or written, which genres). In this case, the interviewers were Belgian–Flemish highly literate university students with a more or less developed competence in 'schoolbook French', i.e. a variety of the standard language rarely used in practice. Students such as the group of inter-viewers in this project do not have much exposure to French, and they actively use it only on relatively rare occasions. So the interaction situation is one in which one party uses – and I adopt Fergusionian terminology for the moment – a very 'low' variety of French and another a very 'high' variety, while both parties have difficulties with the production of spoken French and none of them is 'fluent'. The passage in Extract 2 therefore appears very confusing, rambling and incomprehensible to the Belgian interviewer.[5]

The asylum seekers often acquire their varieties of European languages in informal circumstances: outside school, through exposure to specific varieties of speech, with dialect and/or jargon influences. This, as well as the effect it has on the interaction with the interviewers, can be seen in Extract 3 where the same Angolan man (P) explains the sort of currency used in Angola:

Extract 3

> P: mais en Angola on mange les dollars/ nous avons les
> Q: on mange?
> P: oui on mange= =d=dollars/ au magasin on achète en dollars / à cause de (mon= au magasin on dit) c'est les magasins des français/ Elf

Translation:

> P: but in Angola we eat dollars/ we have the
> Q: we eat?
> P: Yes we eat==d'dollars/ in the shop we buy in dollars/ because (sho= in the shop they say) it's the shop of the French/ Elf

The interviewer Q interrupts P with a request for clarification on the phrase "*on mange les dollars*". The phrase "*manger*" followed by the name of a currency is a colloquial Congolese French expression meaning 'to use a specific currency'. Interestingly, P does not recognize Q's request for clarification as referring to "*manger*" but understands it as a request to clarify why *dollars* are being used as currency in Angola. So his answer elaborates on the fact that the shops are owned by the French petrol company Elf.[6]

The next example illustrates how expressing sometimes even quite simple concepts or experiences can become highly problematic because of the limitations imposed by the code in which the story has been told. A woman from Angola tells her experiences in a detention centre for asylum seekers. She tries to explain that there is a problem with *ventilation* in the centre; the whole fragment in Extract 4 is a struggle to find the right way to express 'ventilation'.

Extract 4

> il y en a des familles qui vivent ici/ des enfants/ mais.. Il n'y a pas des choses de vapore==pour vaporiser des cigarettes/parce que la cigarette là-bas ce n'est pas de==c'est de==de tabac/ les gens il va fumer du matin au soir/ il n'y a pas de fenêtres pour sortir euh/ enlév==entrer le vent==il n'y a pas/presque tout c'est fermé/ dans les toilettes c'est la même chose/ des fenêtres ça n'ouvre pas

Translation:

> there are families who live here/ children/ but . . . there are no things to vapore= to vaporize cigarettes/ because the cigarette there it is not the== it's = tobacco/ the people he smokes from morning till evening/ there are no windows to get out ehr/ take aw=get wind in=there are none/ almost everything is closed/ in the toilets it's the same/ the windows they don't open

Metapragmatic framing, speech act selection and other phenomena that belong to the sociocultural anchoring of language are also sources of communicative problems in our data. Often, the use of a common medium in interviews between native and non-native speakers triggers the assumption from the native speaker that the interlocutor not only shares the *linguistic* code, but also the *pragmatic and metapragmatic* codes. Giving metapragmatic instructions about the way in which the interview will be conducted (a common opening phase of research interviews) is one such locus of problems. The following fragment is taken from the start of an interview with R, a male refugee from the Ivory Coast. The tape starts running, and the interviewer B begins by giving some 'director's instructions' to R.

Extract 5

B: Ik denk dat het gemakkelijkst zou zijn als je begint/ met hoe dat je naar hier bent gekomen ehr
R: =met vliegtuig
B: ja/ waarom wa=waarom je naar hier gekomen bent/ ehr/ en hoe je hier geraakt bent/ dat jij gewoon/ we gaa=we gaan niet veel vragen stellen/ 't is wat/ dat jij gewoon praat/ wat praat
R: ja
B: zeggen wat je..
R: =ja het is heel moeilijk om te zeggen (...)

Translation:

B: I think that it would be easiest if you start/with how you got here ehr
R: =by plane
B: yes/ why wh=why you came here/ ehr/ and how you got here/ that you just/ we won=we won't be asking many questions/ it's what/ that you just/ talk a bit
R: yes
B: say what you..
R: =yes it's very hard to say (...)

B's intention is to provide some metapragmatic instructions for the interview. But mentioning one topic of inquiry "how you got here" in line (1) triggers a response from R ("by plane", line 2). R had interpreted line 1 as a question, not as part of a set of preliminary instructions. B repairs the mistake in line 3–4, R acknowledges this in line 5, and B hands the floor to R in line 6. Two problems can be identified with respect to R's misinterpretation of B's statement in line 1. First, the interview was in Dutch, B's mother tongue. Dutch, for R, is a new, foreign language which he masters admirably but not completely. The original utterance in line 1, spoken by B, was "*hoe dat je naar hier bent gekomen*" ("how-that-you-to-here-have-come"), in which the vernacular Dutch '*hoe*' ('how') is meant to stand for *the total set of circumstances* of R's coming to Belgium. It is not uncommon in varieties of Dutch to ask "how [Dutch *hoe*] did you get here" with the intention of learning the *reasons* for one's being there. But R, a non-native speaker of Dutch, only picks up the 'typical' *instrumental* meaning of '*hoe*' ('how'), and answers that he came here "*met vliegtuig*" ("with-plane"). B's repair in line 3 consists of differentiating and specifying the precise semantic directions of his questions – 'how' as well as 'why'. So part of the mistake is based on differential competence in Dutch, more precisely, it is based on R's lack of familiarity with the semantic and pragmatic nuances of colloquial Dutch.

Second, there is also a mistake in *speech act interpretation*. R fails to pick up the *declarative* nature of B's utterance in line 1, and interprets it instead as a *question* to which he has to reply. In all likelihood, R interprets the circumspect formulation "I think that it would be easiest if you start/with how you got here" as an indirect, deferent question, rather than as the neutral declarative statement intended by B. Both problems have to do with the intercultural nature of the communicative event. The prima facie sharedness of the medium – R has an admirable knowledge of Dutch – can trigger an illusion that not only the lexical

and grammatical aspects of the language but also the complete set of sociocultural, pragmatic and metapragmatic aspects are shared by the participants. This is not usually the case. In this fragment we see that differential competence in a language can be hardly noticeable, as it can lie in aspects of language that are less clearly visible than, for example, wrong lexical choices or grammatical (e.g. gender, article or inflectional) errors.

3.2 ETHNOCOHERENCE

The various difficulties with competence in the medium of the talk, reviewed so far, all suggest that stories are told in 'simple' varieties of languages. But this does not mean that such stories are 'simple', nor that narrators fail to bring about significant degrees of narrative structure or coherence in their stories. Even though the language may be simple and plain, and despite 'errors' in the language, stories can be narratively complex and display obvious patterns of coherence. But coherence seems to emerge in peculiar (*ethno*) ways, since speakers have no access to the full potential of grammar and syntax of the languages they have to use.

Let me illustrate this with an example from our data. The fragment is taken from the beginning of an interview with Habiba, a Somali woman. H is Habiba; A and B are interviewers.

Extract 6

H:	I'm from *Somalia and my name is Habiba Mohammed and I=I have *five childrens and I coming here before the children are coming=when I was euh when I=I'm arrive in Belgium I was *alone\
A:	ah\
H:	yeah\in sake of the war=the war of Somalia\
A:	uhuh\
H:	And. I w=I'm. Twen=*thirty five years old\
A:	uhuh\
H:	and euh I was working in Somalia ICRC International red Cross
A:	that's
H:	ICRC *Red Cross\
A:	ah OK OK jaja
B + H:	[acknowledge]
H:	and I was euh office assistant\
A:	ja
H:	yeah. So Somalia is starting war *nineteen ninety one
A:	uhuh\
H:	so until ninety one to ninety five I was in Somalia
A:	uhuh\
H:	and [baby starts crying] wa [laughs] and I have *four children at that time and euhm.. My husband comes from euh *north Somalia
A:	uhuh
H:	and I *south Somalia is fighting north at=at south is fighting\
A:	uhuh
H:	so my=my husband and my children have no. *safety for their lives
A:	uhuh

Habiba clearly has difficulties speaking English. Her statements contain Dutch

calques such as "in sake" (from Dutch *"in zake"*, i.e. 'concerning', erratic plural marking ("childrens") and verb inflection ('and I coming here') and so on. But let us re-transcribe Habiba's narrative, deleting the interviewer's backchannelling interventions as well as the clarifying insertion sequence (on 'ICRC', two turns). These backchannelling interventions are important, because they support the structuring of Habiba's narrative; but by deleting them we arrive at a number of narrative statements:

Extract 7

1. I'm from *Somalia and my name is Habiba Mohammed and I=I have *five childrens and I coming here before the children are coming=when I was euh when I=I'm arrive in Belgium I was *alone\
2. yeah\in sake of the war=the war of Somalia\
3. and. I w=I'm. Twen=*thirty five years old\
4. and euh I was working in Somalia ICRC International red Cross
5. and I was euh office assistant\
6. So Somalia is starting war *nineteen ninety one
7. so until ninety one to ninety five I was in Somalia
8. and wa= and I have *four children at that time and euhm.. My husband comes from euh *north Somalia
9. and I *south Somalia is fighting north at=at south is fighting\
10. so my=my husband and my children have no. *safety for their lives

There is a considerable degree of narrative structure and coherence in this fragment, despite the 'broken' English in which it is made. First, Habiba brings new information in each of her statements. The statements do not overlap; each of them introduces a new element in the story. Also, there is a clear break in this sequence of narrative statements. Although each of the statements adds new information, Habiba marks a thematic break between statement 5 and 6. Statements 1–5 all refer to Habiba herself, they identify her (name, age, country of origin, profession); statements 6–10 are about '[the war in] Somalia' and provide background to the reasons why she came to Belgium. The break between both thematic parts is marked by cohesive devices: "and" in the first part, "so" (and "and") in the second. The use of these particles creates a complex pattern of information in the story:

Extract 8

PART I
1. I'm from *Somalia
2. **and** my name is Habiba Mohammed
3. **and** I=I have *five childrens
4. **and** I coming here before the children are coming
    {clarification}=when I was euh when I=I'm arrive in Belgium I was *alone\
    yeah\in sake of the war=the war of Somalia\
6. **and**. I w=I'm. Twen=*thirty five years old\
7. **and** euh I was working in Somalia ICRC International red Cross
8. **and** I was euh office assistant\

PART II
1. **So** Somalia is starting war *nineteen ninety one

2. **so** until ninety one to ninety five I was in Somalia
3. **and** wa= and I have *four children at that time
4. **and** euhm.. My husband comes from euh *north Somalia
5. **and** I *south Somalia is fighting north at=at south is fighting\
6. **so** my=my husband and my children have no. *safety for their lives

We can go a bit further. In part II, two levels can be distinguished. Not all the statements in part II are equally relevant. Statements 1, 2 and 6 are 'main' statements, setting important argumentative and narrative frames. Statement 1 introduces the general historical frame of the war in Somalia; statement 2 places Habiba in that historical frame, and statement 6 draws a general conclusion from this general sketch of Habiba's family's situation in the war. Statements 3, 4 and 5 elaborate on statement 2: they clarify and specify statement 2, Habiba (and her family) living in Somalia during the war years. Thus we arrive at the following structure for part II:

Extract 9
PART II
1. **So** Somalia is starting war *nineteen ninety one
2. **so** until ninety one to ninety five I was in Somalia
3.   **and** wa= and I have *four children at that time
4.   **and** euhm.. My husband comes from euh *north Somalia
5.   **and** I *south Somalia is fighting north at=at south is fighting\
6. **so** my=my husband and my children have no. *safety for their lives

The main statements are marked by "so" the subordinate ones by "and". The structure is crystal clear, and Habiba accomplishes it by means of only two cohesive markers: "and" and "so".

The narrative patterns we find in stories such as that of Habiba not only contain a wealth of information, structured into patterns that reflect relevance and affect – Goffmanian footing – they often also contain intricate argumentative patterns in which theses are formulated, refuted, demonstrated by means of evidence and so on. Emphasis, logical or associative sequences, cause–effect relations, argument elaboration patterns are all marked by speakers. In order to make their point, speakers draw upon complex sets of related arguments, illustrations, conclusions, deductions and so forth.

Let us take a look at another example. The following fragment is taken from an interview with an Angolese couple P (husband) and D (wife); the Belgian interviewer is GM. The interview was in French. The following fragment occurs as part of an exchange on the role of the media in the Sémira Adamu case. The Angolese couple had been interviewed by local TV reporters, and GM asks whether they believe that this media exposure would have a beneficial effect on their asylum applications. The answer is negative: the authorities publicly claim that they would adopt a more flexible attitude towards asylum seekers; yet as soon as the latter present themselves to the authorities, the answer they get is that "they will have to follow the procedures". The Angolese woman elaborates this further:

Extract 10

1	4:	à la télé on dit/ *ooh noon / on peut pas donner tous lees personnes après cinq ans
2		les==on a fait euh dix ans/ les choses comme çà / on va regarder les procédures / mais le
3		premier jour on dit à la télé / ooh noon / on va *donner les gens qu'on a fait cinq ans dans
4		notre pays/ parce qu'il y a eu des enfants qui étu=étudient ici depuis longtemps/ on a fait
5		*six ans==*cinq ans et les enfants ils vont à l'école==c'est le bourgemestre de Bruxelles
6		qui a dit comme ça==
7	GM:	==hmm=
8	D:	=ouais/ les enfants sont *integrés chez nous depuis longtemps==il part à l'école/ mais
9		maintenant je pense qu'on va les donner les ==pour donner les enfants==là à ses parents/
10		*mais après quelques jours on a dit/ OOH NOOON on va euh==suivre les procédures
11		[hits hands on legs] MAIS *COMMENT ON PEUT SUIVRE LES PROCEDURES?
12		[annoyed] depuis moi je suis ici en Belgique/ je suis sans papiers/ tu mé suis?/ sans
13		papiers/ ici/ exemple/ pas pour moi pour le moment/ il vient ici comme un==a une femme
14		ici dans le journal==hier==on=a=lu/ sans papiers/ venue ici/ il a trois enfants==cinq
15		enfants ici en Belgique/ sept ans==six ans sans papiers/ alors/ à ce moment-là vous disez/
16		faut suivre les procédures/ la femme là/ depuis l'été vous avez eu les procé=les papiers/
17		vous avez jeté les papiers dé la femme/ on sait pas qu'est=q procédure/ *quelle procédure
18		on peut suivre?/ pour la femme/ c'est *ça les problèmes/ les *Belges peut pas donner les
19		gens un papier comme ça/ ils pensent qu'on donne/ *aah tous les gens ils restent dans
20		notre pays/ mais euh==*SI LONGTEMPS ils part dans le pays des gens pour rester là/ à
21		*Portugal il y a des Belges==on a *fait quelque chose là-bas

Translation:

1	D	on the telly they say/ *ooh nooo / we cannot give all the people after five years the==they
2		have done ehr ten years/ the things like that / they are going to look at the procedures / but
3		the first day they say on the telly / oooh nooo / we will *give the people that has done five
4		years in our country / 'cause there have been children who stu=studied here since long /
5		they have done *six years==*five years and the children go to school== it's the mayor of
6		Brussels who says like that==
7	GM:	==mhm==
8	D:	=yeah/ they children they have integrated here since long=he leaves for school but now I
9		think that they'll give them the=to give to the children=there to their parents/ *but after a
10		few days they said/ oohh nooo we will ehr=follow the procedures [hits hands on legs]
11		BUT *HOW CAN WE FOLLOW THE PROCEDURES? [annoyed] *since I arrived here
12		in Belgium I've got no papers/ do you follow me?/ no papers/ here/ example/ not for me
13		for the moment/ there comes here like a=there's a woman here in the
14		newspaper=yesterday=we have read/ people without documents/came here/ he's got three
15		children==five children here in Belgium/ seven years=six years without documents/ so/ at
16		that moment you say/ got to follow the procedures/ that woman there/ since the summer
17		you have e=u the proce=the documents/ you have thrown away that woman's documents/
18		we don't know what's=wh=procedure/ *what procedure one can follow/ for the woman?
19		That is the problems/ the *Belgians cannot give to the people th=documents just like that/
20		they think that they give/ *aaahh all these people stay in our country/ but eh=*so long
21		they leaves to countries of the people to stay there/ in *Portugal there are Belgians=they
		have done something there

The Angolese woman tries to make a crucial point in understanding her con-
dition and experiences as a refugee: the gap between what Belgians believe hap-
pens to refugees, and what really happens to them in Belgium. She makes
this point in 'broken' French, part of the features of which do not appear in
the English translation (e.g. ambiguous 3rd person "on", meaning "they" as
well as "us" and impersonal "one"). However, more interesting is the elaborate

argumentative structure of D's talk. Prompted by GM's suggestion that TV exposure would create a more favourable climate for asylum seekers to obtain their documents (i.e. to be 'regularized' and given legal residence permits) she argues that this is not the case. She describes what happened. First, largely in reported speech ("ooh noo", performance marked by lengthened vowels) she describes how the Mayor of Brussels declared on TV that people with children who go to school in Belgium and who have been in the country for a number years would be regularized (lines 1–6). Next she describes how the Belgian authorities shifted their position a couple of days later, again using reported speech (line 10). She then states her own position: "but how can we follow the procedures?", and starts elaborating on that theme using an anecdote picked up from the newspaper. This then leads to a conclusion and a coda, in which the situation of asylum seekers in Belgium is compared to the freedom with which Belgians settle elsewhere in the world.

Despite her 'broken' French, D constructs a clear pattern of arguments, schematically represented as follows. Note also how the central motif of the argument, the issue of how to follow procedures, is marked by parallelisms (indicated by arrows ⇐):

Extract 11

1. Background
They will give the [documents] to the children to their parents
because they have been integrated here (says the Mayor of Brussels)

2. Point of departure:
[BUT] afterwards they say that we have to follow the procedures   ⇐

3. Refutation
    3.1. Core
    But how can we follow the procedures?   ⇐

    3.2. Elaboration
    1. Ever since I arrived here, I lived without documents
    2. Anecdote: <u>Report</u>
            yesterday we have read in the newspaper
            A woman with no documents and 3/5 children
            No documents for 7/6 years

            <u>Comment</u>
            And then they say that you have to follow the procedure   ⇐
            [BUT] you have thrown away that woman's documents
                We don't know what procedure to follow   ⇐

4. Conclusion and coda
That is the problem
    The Belgians cannot give documents just like that [i.e. they *don't* give papers just like that, procedures must be followed, and this is problematic]
    [BUT] Belgians believe that everyone just stays in their country
    [WHILE] Belgians themselves can be found all over the world (Portugal)

We see a well-organized narrative pattern emerge over and beyond difficulties in handling the linguistic code. The core of the argument is clearly marked, and the refutation is accomplished by means of comparison of D's situation with that of someone else (the anecdote) and leads to a convincing point: staying in Belgium is not as simple as Belgians tend to believe it is; in fact, Belgians have an easier time when they decide to go and live abroad.

Stories told in 'simple' language are not necessarily 'simple' stories. But they may be stories that are open to all sorts of misinterpretation by interlocutors who, often, have a different (yet equally limited) competence in the medium in which the interview is done. It requires some effort to detect coherence in the stories told in 'broken' varieties of Dutch, English or French, because coherence and structure have to be sought at levels of linguistic structuring not easily penetrable to non-specialists and difficult to pick up while the story is told.[7] We will turn to such forms of structuring in section 4. But before that, we have to refer back to what we said at the beginning of this section: in our society, administrative procedures and the rights that are dependent of their 'correct' fulfilment require and assume the sharedness of linguistic and communicative resources. The fact of the matter is that these resources often lack from the repertoire of the asylum seekers interviewed by us. Consequently, issues of resources are crucial elements in the forms of narrative inequality investigated here. Inequalities in speech repertoires condition narrative inequalities and thus inequalities in the allocation of social rights.

4. Home narratives

4.1 A CONTEXTUAL ACCOUNT

One feature in many interviews is the way in which interviewees attempt to provide detailed contextual accounts of their lives, local circumstances, politics and conflicts in their home society formulated in the shape of sub-narratives of the larger narrative. We call such contextual accounts 'home narratives'. Often these narratives are triggered by an awareness that the story cannot be fully understood unless other people know some details about the society they come from, the particular events that caused their flight, and so on. Such exposés can be highly complicated. They can disturb an expected pattern of sequential event narrating ('first this, then that') and give a muddled impression (see Ochs and Capps, 1996, for a general survey of features of similar narratives). The details given by interviewees can also backfire: details are open to scrutiny and one inaccuracy, inconsistency or contradiction in the story can be enough to disqualify asylum seekers, as will be shown in section 5.

The following fragment is taken from an interview with R, a male refugee from the Ivory Coast. The interview was in Dutch. At one point, the interviewers (B and T) ask "What were the precise reasons why you came here?". What follows is a long contextualizing narrative, placed between two general framing statements which are given in bold.

Extract 12

```
 1  R:     (sighs) ja/voor/alle mensen is het moeilijk de politiek van Ivoorkust/ te begrijpen/
 2          want/ er wordt nooit iets over gesproken/ maar bij ons is er/ is er nog het leger van
 3          Frankrijk aanwezig/ onze/ euh onze luchthaven is de basis van het Franse leger/en die
 4          mensen zijn toch daar/ en we=we hebben geen recht om zelf ons=onze regering te te te
 5          kiezen/ ja die mensen worden door Frankrijk genoemd/maar wij=wij zijn geen kolonie
 6          meer/ sedert achtendertig jaar zijn wij/ euh/hebben wij onze onafhankelijkheid gekregen/
 7          maar tot nu toe worden onze ministers altijd door Frankrijk gekozen/.../ ons land ligt/ in
 8          het midden van West-Afrika/ en dat is een strategische positie/
 9  B, T:  ja ja
10  R:     wij=wij zijn niet rijk/ en / OK/ acht jaar geleden/ probeerden wij politieke par=partijen op
11         te richten en zo/ maar de regering zelf heeft achtendertig partijen opgericht/ terwijl dat het
12         moeilijke is om/ euh/ gekozen te worden of een land te le=te leiden/ als je geen lid van de
13         partij bent/ dan hebben zij=hebben wij andere / euh/ toestemming van partijen te creëren
14         gekre=gekregen/ en daarnaast/ of bovendien heeft de regering zelf achtendertig partijen
15         gecreëerd/ naast de =plus de=deuh monopartisme zo
16  B:     ja
17  R:     de monopartisme die bestaat sedert zestig tot negentig/ dertig jaar/ en ja/ zij hebben zelf
18         dertig=ja achtendertig partijen gecreëerd/ de mensen die niet voor de regering werken/ ik
19         bedoel/ in/ euh/ de=de privé/ het privéwerk is heel weinig/ dan werkt al=iedereen
20         voor=voor de staat/ en als/ ja de mensen die voor de staat werken/ zijn zoals deuh/
21         gevangenis/ zij zijn zoals gevangen/ want je/ je=je bent altijd bang/ jouw werk te
22         verliezen/ misschien in jouw familie met jouw neven en nichten en zo zijn jullie
23         misschien ongeveer honderd mensen en je bent alleen als persoon die werkt/ dat/ ja/ al die
24         andere mensen zijn/ die=die zijn arm en/ die rekenen allemaal op jou/ dan moet je jouw
25         werk houden anders wordt iemand van jouw familie gekocht/ om te gebruikt te worden
26         tegen je/ ja zo'n dingen/ ja zo'n kleine dingen/ en wij// ja/ ja daar is onze=onze president
27         van onze partij [wijst naar foto in de huiskamer] wij hebben ook=wij proberen ons hier te
28         organiseren in België in Nederland in Frankrijk/ de=de grote groep bevindt zich in
29         Frankrijk in Italië in Duitsland ook in andere landen/ in Nederland/ de mensen van
30         Nederland komen bij ons/ overmorgen hebben wij onze/ ja grote vergadering in
31         Brussel/.../ dat is het dan/ ja deuh reden was dat in vijf=vijf en negentig moesten wij/ een
32         verkiezing doen/ en in vierendertig/ euh vier en negentig moest een lijst van alle bewoners
33         gedaan worden/ maar de mensen die=die/ euh die=die/deden/ als die bij u komen en die
34         weten dat je een=een lid van de oppositie bent/ dan wordt je=jouw name=euh jouw naam
35         niet ingeschreven/ en als jouw naam niet ingeschreven wordt kan je niet stemmen/ en die
36         hebben zo gedaan/ ja wij hebben geprobeerd/ die lijst terug te vinden/ja/ ja een andere te
37         maken/
38  B, T:  ja
39  R:     maar dat was illegaal
40  B:     ja
41  R:     ja/ dan worden wij vervolgd/ en zo ben ik moeten vluchten
```

Translation:

```
 1  R:     (sighs) yeah/for *everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast
 2          because/ it is never discussed/ but over there we still have the *French army/ ehr ehr our
 3          airport is a French army base/ and these people are there anyway and we=we=we have no
 4          right to choose our=our own government/ yes these people are appointed by France/ but
 5          we are *not a colony anymore...since thirty-eight years we ehr have obtained our
 6          independence/ but until now our ministers have always been appointed by France...our
 7/8        country is in the center of West-Africa/ and that is a strategic position
 9  B, T:  =yes yes
10  R:     yes/so...yes there is=we are not rich/ and/ okay/ eight years ago we tried to create political
11         par=parties and so but the government itself has created *thirty-eight parties/
```

12		while this is the difficult thing to ehr get elected or to lead a country.. If you are not a
13		member of a party/ *then they=we obtained different ehr permission to create parties/ and
14		apart from that or on *top of that the government has created thirty eight parties/ apart
15		from the=*plus the thehh monopartism like that
16	B:	yes
17	R:	yes the monopartism exists since sixty/ till ninety/ thirty years/ and yes they have
18		themselves created thirty=thirty-eight parties/ the people who *don't work for the
19		government/ I mean/ in ehr..the=the private the private sector is very small/ everyone
20		already works for=for the government/ and if.. yes the people who work for the
21		government they are like ehr the prison/ they are like imprisoned/ because you..you=you
22		are always afraid of losing your job/ maybe in your family with your nephews and nieces
23		and so maybe you are about one hundred people and you are the only one who has a job/
24		that/ yes/ all these other people are/ they=they are poor and they all count on you / then
25		you have to keep your job *if not *someone from your family will be bought to be used
26		against you/ yes things like that..small things like that/ and we...yes [sighs] yes there is
27		our president of our party [points to a picture on the wall] / we also have=we also try to
28		get organized here in Belgium in Holland in France/ the=the large group is in France in
29		Italy in Germany also in other countries..in Holland/ the people from Holland will come
30		here the day after tomorrow we have our/ yes large meeting in Brussels...that's it...yes
31		thehh reason was that in nine=ninety five/ we had to do an election/ and in thirty
32		four=ninety four a list of all the *inhabitants had to be made/ but the people who did that
33		when they came to you and they know that you are a=a member of the opposition/ then
34		your name=ehr your name would not be written down/ and if your name is not written
35/36		down you can't vote/ and that's what they did/ yes we tried to find that list/ yes and make
37		another one
38	B, T:	yes
39	R:	but that was illegal
40	B:	yes
41	R:	if it/ yes/ then we are prosecuted/ **and so I had to escape**/

Almost 40 lines of monologue separate the question as to why R had to escape from the Ivory Coast and R's conclusion to the answer "And so I had to escape". In this monologue, he tries to capture some of the basic political mechanisms and problems of his home country: French neocolonialism (lines 2–7), monopartism and the difficult transition to multipartism (lines 10–15), political clientelism (lines 17–265), the opposition movement in the diaspora (lines 28–32), and the direct cause of his flight: protest against the manipulation of the elections (lines 32–41). This fragment is again followed by a very detailed account of the political and institutional customs of the Ivory Coast blended with accounts of events leading to R's flight.

4.2 PATTERNS AND STRUCTURES
The man from the Ivory Coast starts by saying "for *everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast", indicating the need to provide such detailed information on life in the Ivory Coast: a precise understanding of why he escaped from his country would be impossible for people who hardly know anything about life and politics in his country (cf. "because/ it is never discussed").

If we look a bit closer into the narrative structure of this fragment, we see the following patterns emerge. First, the narrative can be divided into episodes marked by particular narrative patterns:

Extract 13

1. for *everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast
      because.. it is never discussed

2. But over here we still have the French army
      ehr ehr our airport is a French army base
      and these people are there anyway

3. and we=we=we have no right to choose our=our own government
      yes these people are appointed by France
      but we are *not a colony anymore...
            since thirty-eight years we ehr have obtained our independence
      but until now our ministers have always been appointed by France...
      {reason} our country is in the center of West-Africa
            and that is a strategic position

4. {preceded by reply from B, T} yes/so...yes there is=we are not rich/ and..

5. okay..eight years ago we tried to create political par=parties and so

6. [louder] but the government itself has created *thirty-eight parties
      6.1. while this is the difficult thing to ehr get elected or to lead a country..
            If you are not a member of a party/ *then they=we obtained different ehr
            permission to create parties/
            and apart from that or on *top of that the government has created thirty eight
            parties/
                  apart from the=*plus the thehh monopartism you see?
      6.2. yes the monopartism exists since sixty/ till ninety/ thirty years/
      6.3. and yes they have themselves created thirty=thirty-eight parties/
      6.4. the people who *don't work for the government/
            I mean/ in ehr..the=the private the private sector is very small/
                  everyone already works for=for the government/
            and if.. yes the people who work for the government they are like ehr the prison/
            they are like imprisoned/
                  because you..you=you are always afraid of losing your job/
                        -maybe in your family with your nephews and nieces and so
                        maybe you are about one hundred people
                        -and you are the only one who has a job
                              that/ yes/ all these other people are/ they=they are poor
                              and they all count on you /
                        -then you have to keep your job
                        -*if not *someone from your family will be bought to be used
                        against you/
                  yes things like that..small things like that/

7. and we...yes [sighs]
                  yes there is our president of our party
      we also have=we also try to get organized here in Belgium in Holland in France/
                  the=the large group is in France in Italy in Germany
                  also in other countries..in Holland/
                        the people from Holland will come here the day after tomorrow
                        we have our/ yes large meeting in Brussels...

8. that's it...yes thehh reason was that
    8.1. in nine=ninety five/ we had to do an election/
    and in thirty four=ninety four a list of all the *inhabitants had to be made/
    8.2. but the people who did that
    when they came to you and they know that you are a=a member of the opposition/
    then your name=ehr your name would not be written down/
    and if your name is not written down you can't vote/
    and that's what they did/
    8.3. yes we tried to find that list/ yes
    and make another one
    8.4. but that was illegal

9. if it/ yes/ then we are prosecuted/
    and so I had to escape/

We can identify nine narrative episodes marked prosodically or by means of markers such as "but" or "and". The most complex episode is episode 6, subdivided into at least four sub-episodes. If we reorganize this narrative pattern so as to structure it into an argumentative 'answer'-pattern to the question, we see the following (paraphrases are given between accolades):

Extract 14

Why did you escape from the Ivory Coast?
Point of departure
1. For everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast

General reason: neocolonialism
2. We still have the French army
3. And we have no right to choose our own government
    {reasons:} we are in the centre of West-Africa
4.   {that is why the French are there, because} we are not rich

Specific reason: membership of political opposition party
5. Eight years ago we tried to create political parties
6.   {this is problematical, because} the government itself has created 38 parties
    {the government manipulates the democratization process: monopartyism plus 38 bogus parties}
    {iron grip of the régime on society} you are always afraid of losing your job
7.   {our party also exists in Europe}
8. The {immediate} reason was {election fraud}
    {the régime tried to commit fraud in voter registration}
    {we tried to counterfeit our own voter registration list}
    but that was illegal

Conclusion
9. Then we are prosecuted and so I had to escape

This home narrative plays a crucial role in 'making sense' for the asylum seeker. The immediate cause of his problems is one issue, the wider context of neocolonialism and an oppressive one-party regime is another. This man broke the law of the Ivory Coast in trying to counterfeit a voter registration list; but the

justification for this act is the wider political context that makes clear that the Ivory Coast is not a democracy, that the laws are dictatorial, and that he and his friends broke that dictatorial law in their struggle for democracy. His asylum application in Belgium was jeopardized on grounds that he broke the law in his home country; his home narrative is an attempt to explain the justified nature of his asylum application. In sum: his home narrative is not a side-track, it is right on track.

4.3 CONTEXTUALIZING ACCOUNTS

Let us go somewhat deeper into the explanatory and argumentative functions of these home narratives. R, in the fragment above, starts his monologue with a deep sigh and a reflection on the ignorance of Belgian people about the intricate realities of the politics of the Ivory Coast. In other interviews, we saw such home narratives framed in terms of absence of attention from the 'international public opinion' – 'everyone should know this' (a phenomenon also noted by Malkki, 1995 among Hutu refugees in Tanzania). In either case, the accurate contextualization of personal experiences in terms of local political, economic, social and cultural terms appears to be a crucial explanatory strategy for attaining understanding.

Text-structurally, home narratives are often framed by utterances situating them in relation to a particular argument or explanandum: preceded by framing statements such as "you must know that . . .", "you see, in my country . . .", "people here don't know that..." and so on, and followed by statements connecting the home narrative to a particular argument such as "that is why . . .", "and so . . .". So one of their functions is to provide a particular epistemic format: a metapragmatically framed 'aside' in which crucial referential and indexical 'fillings' are given of terms, concepts and features of the story.

This epistemic format is shaped by means of contextualizing discourses of time and place. The refugee experience is an experience of displacement (similar to the one described for native American groups by Collins, 1998) seen as crucial in understanding the work of identity of such groups in light of changing living conditions, political allegiances, economic practices and physical migrations. Stories from such groups thus display a complex interplay of physical space (e.g. place names), social space (e.g. sociocultural values or ethical codes associated to certain places) and narrative space (discursive articulations through indexical links in a narrative), in which migrant, minority or other social identities are being shaped (cf. Collins, 1998: ch. 6). Malkki (1995) demonstrated how physical displacement – part of the *condition humaine* of refugees – gives rise to forms of remembering that include spatial as well as temporal trajectories of leaving, being transported, settling, staying and returning, all of which become characteristic of the exile identity of the Hutu refugees she investigated (see also Maryns and Blommaert, 2001). In our data, too, displacement becomes a matter of identity, and (re)telling the story of escape and exile as well as the story of dealing with Belgian authorities gives rise to narratives that provide the core of the work of

self-identification as a refugee: the autobiography of refugees takes the shape of *trajectory* telling. Temporal and spatial elements are used in constructing 'refugeeness', as this identity relies on the fact of having left one place, travelled across parts of the globe and settled in another place. Surely, the increasing structuration of narratives into 'fully formed narratives' testifies to the gradual and discursive practice-based construction of such refugee identities.

In the home narrative in Extract 12, three places are articulated together with three time frames. Three different time frames are used to qualify features or events associated to either Belgium or the Ivory Coast: the present (incorporating the act of telling), the past and a timeless, permanent state of affairs. The timeless and the past frames are used to qualify the Ivory Coast; the present is used to qualify Belgium. We can summarize these in the following schema:

Time	*Place*
Present	HERE: Belgium ● systemic observations: people don't understand politics in the Ivory Coast ● political activism in exile
Past (i) Long (38 years) (ii) short (8 years, critical moment 1995)	THERE: Ivory Coast ● monopartism, dictatorship ● political activism, election incident
Timeless	THERE: Ivory Coast ● systemic observations: neocolonialism, strategic location, poverty, clientelism

Richard Bauman (1986, quoted in Briggs, 1997) defines narrative as 'a representation of a segment of social life in such a way as to create a series of sequentially ordered events'. In the home narrative discussed here, the *temporal* sequence of events from past to present which would constitute a 'typical' narrative is 'broken' by a number of systemic observations with respect to the general political and social situation in the Ivory Coast, narrated in a factual timeless present tense. Thus, in response to the question "why did you escape from the Ivory Coast?", the man from the Ivory Coast presents us with a classic narrative in the sense of Bauman's definition, the chronological unfolding of events of which is, however, 'scrambled' temporally. We get a sequence of narrative episodes in which the time frame shifts between present, past and timeless states. If we place the narrative units identified and numbered in Extracts 13 and 14 above in a schema based on the three time frames (and keeping in mind the connection between time frames and places), the sequential-temporal ordering in the narrative appears in the table below (numbers refer to the episodes).

The starting point of the narrative is the here-and-now: an observation of the ignorance of the Belgians about the predicament of the people in the Ivory Coast, considerably complicating life for Ivory Coast refugees in Belgium. Next, a timeless time frame is introduced in which general contextualizing 'facts' are being

Present (here)	Past (there)	Timeless (there)
1		
		2
		3
		4
	5	
	6	
		6.1
	6.2	
	6.3	
		6.4
7		
	8	
	9>　<9	

offered, linguistically articulated in factual and declarative expressions without concrete temporal anchoring (episodes 2, 3, 4). Once this timeless, general context has been sketched, a more concrete and temporally sequentialized account of events starts (episodes 5, 6, 6.2, 6.3, 8) interrupted twice by a timeless contextualizing comment (6.1, 6.4) and once by an episode connecting the events in the Ivory Coast to the present in exile (7). The narrative concludes with a statement (9) that can both be seen as a closure of the sequential account of events and as an anchoring of the whole preceding story into the present situation of exile and asylum seeking in Belgium. It can, of course, also be seen as the point at which both aspects intersect and become one: the present situation of being a refugee.

This pattern of temporal and spatial deixis is both a generic and an epistemic–argumentative matter. It is generic in the sense that it constitutes the genre of home narratives: nonlinear references to here/there and now/then/always make up the considerable complexity of such stories, the trajectory telling. It is at the same time epistemic–argumentative in the sense that it is directed at a hearer (and at overhearers) who needs to be instructed about these issues. This other-directedness of home narratives makes them fulfil the contextualizing functions they have in the story at large: they provide settings, scenes, referential domains and indexicalities that need to be adopted by the hearer.

In this move, there appears to be an acute awareness of the categories and interpretive resources of the hearer: the assumption used in telling home narratives is that (i) Belgian hearers *do not know* this; (ii) consequently their view of the situation in the home country is *wrong* and prejudges a correct interpretation of the causes and motives for the asylum application; and (iii) hence, the Belgian hearers *need to know* a series of things, so as to modify their categories and interpretive resources in treating the story of the asylum seeker. Home narratives are based upon a perception of *false or inaccurate contextualization* of situations and events in the countries of origin – wars, political conflicts, poverty – and are aimed at recontextualizing or 'recentering' them (Bauman and Briggs, 1990).

The recentering is a process of localizing the conflicts, events and upheavals: instead of broad, abstract and impersonal ('decentered') categories of war, conflict, crisis, poverty and so on, concrete and highly personal, 'local' indexicalities are offered: 'this is not *the* war in Angola; this is *my* war in Angola'. And the centering and localizing is performed by means of stories that blend personal chronological trajectories – autobiographies – with general framing statements on how life was and is over there and what people need to know in order to correctly understand the autobiographical narrative.

5. Narratives, dense contextualizations and the asylum procedure

5.1 ASYLUM PROCEDURE AND NARRATIVES

We now move back to the comments we made at the outset of this article. In the Belgian asylum procedure, the asylum seekers' stories assume a central and critical role. The basis on which applications are being examined and sanctioned is the textual set of statements taken from the asylum seekers, in which they announce their desire to seek asylum in Belgium and provide reasons and motives for that desire. Inconsistencies in the stories are a major cause for refusing refugee status to asylum seekers. As will be shown later, inconsistencies, ranging from contradictions between two versions of the story over not remembering names, places or dates, and superficial or incomplete knowledge of things assumed to be known to people from one country (e.g. the name of the president, names of towns and cities, etc.) can all serve as cause for refusal. Strangely enough in a legal system backed by sophisticated high-tech and advanced forensic sciences, this kind of legal procedure relies heavily on narrative analysis.

This narrative analysis is, of course, performed in ways that can only be qualified as impressionistic. We have old and time-tested rules of evidence used to investigate statements made by people living in a highly literate environment, whose memories are supported by a (sometimes massive) literate 'archive' (diaries, notebooks, newspaper clippings, photographs, all kinds of small documentary souvenirs of events in one's life, see Radley, 1990), and whose statements are produced and interpreted in an interactional setting in which the interlocutors share the same linguistic resources and communicative skills (see the discussion in section 3 above). These rules of evidence stress textual consistency, linearity, logic, rationality and factuality; they require considerable attention to details; they rely on written language as the basic and most lasting format of declaring 'truth'; in short, they are highly culture- and society-specific and reflect local ideologies of language, literacy and communication. These rules of evidence are applied to statements made by people for whom few of these formats of language and communication can be taken for granted. Hence, what happens in the institutional processing of asylum seekers' stories is often a battle with unequal arms, and the confrontation of different narrative conventions creates a huge problem of justice and fairness.[8]

Attention to asylum seekers' storytelling conventions is scant. Yet their central

position in the asylum procedure makes them into an important topic of research, both analytically and politically. The salience of looking at the way in which asylum seekers' stories are being told can perhaps be briefly illustrated with reference to the Sémira Adamu case. When her death was announced in the media, one of the striking ingredients of many statements was the abundant reference to 'her story'. It was said that, indeed, forced marriage could be sufficient grounds for asylum, but that in her case 'her story did not fit'. The official verdict announcing the refusal of asylum argued:

> The story of the applicant is not precise on many counts. Thus, she could not specify the family name of a childhood friend with whom she stayed. She also failed to specify the date on which she was supposed to have escaped from Lagos. (My translation, Dutch original from *De Morgen*, 3 October 1998)

Other references to how Sémira Adamu interacted with people – again, matters of style – include a statement by the Catholic pastor of Brussels Airport, a man who met Sémira Adamu occasionally. To him as well, Sémira Adamu was not quite trustworthy:

> In the [asylum] Centre nobody believed her. I don't know the real story either. I rely on my intuition. Sometimes, when you asked her something, she just stood up and walked away. Or she started to sing. I once asked her why she had travelled so many thousands of kilometers to escape from a sixty-five year old man. 'Is Africa not big enough', I asked her. She didn't answer that question. (My translation, Dutch original from *De Morgen*, 3 October 1998)

Again, a lack of credibility seems to be tied up with the way in which Sémira Adamu communicated. Even sympathetic voices refer to peculiarities in communicative style. Lise Thiry, a former socialist senator who acted as foster parent for Sémira Adamu, qualified her as follows:

> Apart from that, Sémira sometimes seemed British rather than African to me. She didn't have the outspokenness and extroversion some of these [African] women have. (My translation, Dutch original from *De Morgen*, 3 October 1998)

Communicative style (including narrative style) is always a source for character assessment and character attribution. In a field as sensitive as asylum regulations, where officials' decisions may imply the difference between life or death, relative well-being or poverty, safety or danger, some attention to what actually happens in interaction may not just be desirable, but simply imperative.

5.2 TEXTUAL TRAJECTORIES

Let us begin with a brief survey of the interactional processes that constitute the core of the asylum application processes. A first observation is that in the totality of the procedure, direct interaction between asylum seekers and officials is restricted to a number of well defined occasions, viz. interviews on the asylum seeker's story. Soon after their arrival in the country, asylum seekers are interviewed by officials, sometimes (but by no means always) assisted by interpreters. The topic of the interview is their motivation to seek asylum in Belgium: why did

they leave their country, how, when? What reasons do they offer for assuming that their lives or life chances are endangered in their country of origin? Who are they, where do they come from? Who assisted them in their exodus? And so on. The story is noted by the official and has the status of an affidavit. From that moment onwards, it is the source and reference text for all other steps in the procedure. The asylum seeker is admitted in the country, and his or her application for asylum is being processed by the authorities. In the process, various other interviews can take place.

Apart from interviews, there are hardly any occasions in which asylum seekers themselves speak. Most of the communication on the case is written and legalistic and hence treated on behalf of the asylum seeker by lawyers, welfare workers or members of NGOs specialized in asylum affairs. So what we have is a handful of events during which the applicant directly produces oral narrative discourse. In between these moments we have tremendous text-production *on* that narrative resulting in written summaries, notes, translations questions and replies written by lawyers or welfare workers, court rulings in which fragments of the narrative are being quoted and interpreted, and so on. It is an instance of the 'circulation of discourse' (Briggs, 1997: 538 ff.) that characterizes legal and forensic procedures as well as those of welfare work and bureaucracy (see Sarangi and Slembrouck, 1996). These patterns of circulation are biased by inequalities in *techniques* of discourse representation; recontextualizations and re-entextualizations of the narratives in specific ('official' and authoritative) generic formats are usually privileged forms of discursive practice reserved to specific professional groups such as lawyers, administrators, 'experts' and bureaucrats.

This textual complex, in which an oral 'original' narrative is the input for a long series of generically differentiated replications of that original is characterized by an ideology of 'fixed text' (Blommaert, 1997; Collins, 1996; Urban, 1996), in which the difference between the 'original' and its 'copies' are assumed to be minimal (hence in which it is assumed that every translation, summary, quotation, reading of the story is correct and accurate) because 'procedurally correct' text (i.e. text produced or collected according to standard procedures) is supposed to be a transparent, unambiguous set of signs. The story of the asylum seeker is remoulded, remodelled and re-narrated time and time again, and so becomes a *text trajectory* with various phases and instances of transformation. At the same time, the story is treated as a *singular* text, and responsibility for that text (and thus for all re-entextualizations in the text trajectory) is attributed to the asylum seeker. The asylum seeker is constructed as the responsible author for the whole intertextuality complex, despite the enormous differences in text-structure and text-modality, the genre and the code, the social spaces in which versions are being produced and used, and the power and authority attributed to different versions of the text. Commenting on similar phenomena, Briggs (1997: 540) observes that in such cases, the question seems to be 'one of a fundamental asymmetry in the power to determine how utterances can circulate between contexts,

epistemologies, and institutions, the way that narratives can be structured, and what sorts of legal effects can accrue to particular discursive relations'.

The result of this text trajectory is a *suggestion* of justice based on text-ideologies emphasizing the 'correct treatment' of the asylum seeker's narrative into notes, summaries, translations and so forth, but obscuring a variety of forms of appropriation of discourse and of shifting it into domains of authoritative re-entextualizations that are far beyond the control of the asylum seeker. So when the letter to Sémira Adamu speaks of 'the story of the applicant', what is referred to is the total textual trajectory of the narrative.

5.3 A CONTEST OF CONTEXTS

To illustrate this, let us have a look at two re-entextualizations of the story of an Angolese asylum seeker. The interview we did with him and his wife took four hours; the story of his situation in Angola and of his escape to Belgium took more than one hour, and well over 1500 lines of transcript. As always, it is a very complex story replete with home narratives bearing the characteristics discussed in the previous section. The man applied twice for asylum, and twice his application was rejected. These rejections were announced to the applicant in two official letters, partly standard and partly filled in with specific data on the application. In these documents, we find instances of re-entextualization of the man's story. I give fragments from the two texts of the letters (my translation, originals in Dutch and French, respectively):

Extract 15

> "The concerned was interrogated on November 23, 1993 at the Commissariat-General [for Refugees and Stateless Persons], in the presence of [name], his attorney.
>
> He claimed to be a 'political informant' of the MPLA. On October 18, 1992 however, he passed on information to UNITA. At the UNITA office, however, he met with Major [name], who works for the MPLA. Two days later, Major [name] had the concerned arrested. Fearing that the concerned would give the Major away at the trial, [name of the Major] helped the concerned to escape. The concerned fled to [locality] where a priest arranged for his departure from Angola. The concerned came, together with his wife [name and register number] and three children, through Zaïre and by plane, to Belgium. They arrived on May 19, 1993.
>
> It has to be noted that the concerned remains very vague at certain points. Thus he is unable to provide details about the precise content of his job as 'political informant'. Furthermore the account of his escape lacks credibility. Thus it is unlikely that the concerned could steal military clothes and weapons without being noticed and that he could consequently climb over the prison wall.
>
> It is also unlikely that the concerned and his wife could pass the passport control at Zaventem [i.e. Brussels Airport] bearing a passport lacking their names and their pictures.
>
> Furthermore, the itinerary of the concerned is impossible to verify due to a lack of travel documents (the concerned sent back the passports).
>
> The statements of the concerned contain contradictions when compared to his wife's account. Thus he declares that the passports which they received from the

priest [name] were already completely in order at the time they left Angola. His wife claims that they still had to apply for visa in Zaïre."

Extract 16

"The concerned, of Angolese nationality, has declared being a member of UNITA ('Union Nationale pour l'Indépendance Totale de l'Angola'). He has forwarded a first application for asylum in Belgium on May 25, 1993. His application has been refused by the Commissariat-General on December 15, 1993. After an illegal stay in Belgium of three years, he has forwarded a second application for asylum on November 20, 1996, on the basis of some documents from Angola which he had received. In two faxes (of July 26, 1996 and September 4, 1996), one of his neighbors (calling himself '[name]') informed him that a certain '[name]', a friend of the concerned who was repatriated to Angola by the Belgian State, had been killed by soldiers. Prior to that, the latter had asked [name of the 'friend'] about the whereabouts of the concerned. From that moment onwards, the house of the concerned is supposed to be occupied [in French: *serait occupée*] by soldiers. In a letter of March 15, 1994, people are supposed to have already informed him [in French: *on lui aurait déjà communiqué*] that the priest named '[name]', who had helped him leave Angola, had disappeared. Apart from that, he has offered a communiqué from UNITA (of October 23, 1996) as well as his MPLA ('Mouvement Populaire pour la Libération de l'Angola') veteran's ID."

Let us now take a closer look at these two examples. They are generically germane and are sequential; Extract 16 obviously adds to Extract 15. Three different types of discourse can be distinguished in the texts:

(a) reported elements from the asylum seekers' narrative in the shape of 'factual' summaries of the applicant's narrative
(b) procedural statements referring to the applicant's status, the administrative actions taken in his respect and by him, and the sorts of evidence offered
(c) explicit metapragmatic statements and comments on the applicant's narrative.

Let us first bring the statements belonging to the first category (reported elements) together from both texts:

Extract 17

-He claimed to be a 'political informant' of the MPLA. On October 18, 1992 however, he passed on information to UNITA. At the UNITA office, however, he met with Major [name], who works for the MPLA. Two days later, Major [name] had the concerned arrested. Fearing that the concerned would give the Major away at the trial, [name of the Major] helped the concerned to escape. The concerned fled to [locality] where a priest arranged for his departure from Angola. The concerned came, together with his wife [name and register number] and three children, through Zaïre and by plane, to Belgium. They arrived on May 19, 1993.
-In two faxes (of July 26, 1996 and September 4, 1996), one of his neighbors (calling himself '[name]') informed him that a certain '[name]', a friend of the concerned who was repatriated to Angola by the Belgian State, had been killed by soldiers. Prior to that, the latter had asked [name of the 'friend'] about the whereabouts of the concerned. From that moment onwards, the house of the concerned is supposed to be occupied [in French: *serait occupée*] by soldiers. In a letter of March 15, 1994, people

are supposed to have already informed him [in French: *on lui aurait déjà communiqué*] that the priest named '[name]', who had helped him leave Angola, had disappeared.

Obviously, what we have here are extremely concise and highly selective 'summaries' of the story, organized chronologically and marked by tense-aspect markers in the verbs as well as by explicit chronological markers (e.g. "on October 18, 1992", "two days later", "July 26, 1996" and "September 4, 1996"). The account is not exclusively 'replicating' but contains significant amounts of evaluative modal qualifications (especially in Extract 16), indicating doubts about the factual truthfulness of parts of the narrative (e.g. the quotes surrounding the names mentioned by the applicant, the potentialist verbs "*serait occupée*", "*aurait communiqué*"). These summaries reflect the portions of the applicant's narrative deemed 'substantial' to his asylum application and qualified, in one discursive move, in terms of truthfulness and plausibility from the perspective of the procedure. Importantly, this selection of text portions involves text-rewriting and text-structuring practices, and shifts the epistemic centre from the asylum seeker to the administrator processing the application.

The second category (procedural statements) includes statements such as "The concerned was interrogated on November 23, 1993 at the Commissariat-General [for Refugees and Stateless Persons], in the presence of [name], his attorney" and "He has forwarded a first application for asylum in Belgium on May 25, 1993. His application has been refused by the Commissariat-General on December 15, 1993. After an illegal stay in Belgium of three years, he has forwarded a second application for asylum on November 20, 1996, on the basis of some documents from Angola which he had received". It also contains references to evidence offered: "two faxes", "a letter", "a communiqué from UNITA" and "his MPLA veteran's ID". This second category is broadly contextualizing much in the sense that home narratives contextualize the story of the applicant. References to the location of these facts and claims in the procedure re-centre the narrative: the facts and claims offered by the applicant have to 'fit' a procedural context, a context of sequences of activities, criteria of relevance, and criteria of 'testing' the truth of stories. The third category directly connects to this: here we find explicit expressions of doubt such as (explicit metapragmatic statements in italics):

Extract 18

"It has to be noted that the concerned *remains very vague* at certain points. Thus he is *unable to provide details* about the precise content of his job as 'political informant'. Furthermore the account of his escape *lacks credibility*. Thus *it is unlikely* that the concerned could steal military clothes and weapons without being noticed and that he could consequently climb over the prison wall.

It is also unlikely that the concerned and his wife could pass the passport control at Zaventem [i.e. Brussels Airport] bearing a passport lacking their names and their pictures.

Furthermore, the itinerary of the concerned *is impossible to verify* due to a lack of travel documents (the concerned sent back the passports).

The statements of the concerned *contain contradictions* when compared to his wife's

account. Thus he declares that the passports which they received from the priest [name] were already completely in order at the time they left Angola. His wife claims that they still had to apply for visa in Zaïre."

The qualifications pertain to elements from the narrative not included in the 'summary' given elsewhere in the texts. The emphasis is on two things: general common-sense plausibility and documentary evidence. Certain arguments are qualified as unlikely on the basis of a general perception of what is possible and what is not (e.g. the unnoticed theft of military uniforms and weapons, the fact that another double-agent, the Major, would both arrest him and help him escape). There is no evidence offered of the *impossibility* of these facts, they just *seem* unlikely. Other elements revolve around the presence and absence of documentary evidence: the faxes, the letter, the veteran's ID, and "the itinerary of the concerned is impossible to verify due to a lack of travel documents (the concerned sent back the passports)".

The pattern of entextualization becomes clear now: what we have here is a complete refocalization of the narrative towards new deictic centres. The story of the applicant is relocated in another space and time-frame: that of the administrative procedure and its pace, that of its standard categories, criteria and textual formats (chronological–sequential and documentary). Whereas the home narratives were shown to have a localizing function – personalizing the story and anchoring it in particular spatial and temporal deictic frames – the highly modified versions of the story we find in the letters from the authorities show a completely different contextualization of the story: away from the local, away from the experiential, the affective, the emotional, the individual positioning of people in conflicts, towards generalizable categories and space-time frames. There is an official version of the conflict (e.g. the war in Angola), used not only in asylum procedures but also in international trade, development cooperation, foreign policy, and so on.[9] In that version, the experiential contextualizations of places, social roles, parties in the conflict and so forth, so prominent in home narratives, are replaced by a rather rigid pattern providing general categorizations (e.g. 'In country X, human rights are consistently violated', 'country Y is a democracy', 'in country Z there is a peace agreement between the warring parties, hence the situation has been stabilized' – the latter is the case for Angola) as well as more or less fixed attributes for roles in the conflict (the good, the bad, 'official' parties versus 'unofficial' parties, the State, the army, civil society etc.). There is a general recentering of the biography of the asylum seeker: the procedurally relevant biography of the applicant is that portion of his or her life that can be rewritten in the shape of a travelogue, starting with (an) event(s) that prompt his or her escape from the country of origin, the process of escape and travel itself including details of time, duration, medium and itinerary, and his or her arrival in Belgium, all portions of which can be documented by means of place descriptions and time frames.

From this grid, deductive patterns of 'plausibility' and 'likelihood' are derived;

whenever there is doubt, documentary evidence is required to remove the implausibility. In the extract given here, one of the crucial elements was the fact that the applicant had told how he had been arrested by an UNITA Major, who was in fact a double-agent just like him; that same Major had consequently helped him escape from prison. In terms of general plausibility within this contextual frame, it is 'unlikely' that the person who arrested the applicant would be the same as the one who organized his escape, the more since there was no documentary evidence supporting the Major's role as a double-agent. Similarly, the absence of documentary evidence of the itinerary of the applicant makes that crucial part of his story "impossible to verify" and hence unlikely or unreliable.

5.4 NOISE AND INEQUALITY

The recontextualizing moves made through the text-trajectories are, as noted by Briggs above, connected to deep power differences: they involve differential control over contextualization procedures, and they involve differential access to skills used for reformulating, ordering, structuring discourse in such a way as to build a 'convincing' argument. The complex indexicalities of the stories as well as their general localizing–contextualizing functions basically do not fit well with the textual and narrative preoccupations of the asylum procedure. Hence, the particular format of narrating imposed during the procedure is sensed to incapacitate asylum seekers and prejudice their attempts at making sense of 'their' conflict – the basis of 'their' asylum application. A Congolese woman succinctly expresses the textual and contextual difficulties experienced during the interrogations that create the 'basic' version of the narrative:

Extract 19

> Mais ils sont trop durs là-bas parce que.. Tu peux raconter je sais pas/ tu peux raconter quelque chose.. Et la prochaine fois quand tu viens quand tu oublies un seul chose c'est fini tu as=tu es rejettée/ alors euh personne ne peut raconter deux fois la même hist=même histoire exactement/ il y a toujours de petits détails qu'on ne dit pas ou bien qu'on a=qu'on ajoute après/ mais eux ils ne tiennent pas compte de ça/ dés que tu ajoutes quelque chose ils disent ah la fois passée tu n'a pas dit ça alors c'est fini on te rejette/ il faut aussi comprendre les gens c'est.. On=on n'arrive jamais à=à=à raconter une histoire de la même façon deux fois/ ça non

Translation:

> But they are too hard there because... You can tell I don't know what/ you can tell something.. And the next time when you come you forget just one thing it's over you are=you have been rejected/ well ehm nobody can tell twice the same sto=same story exactly/ there are always small details one doesn't say or else one a=one adds afterwards/ but they don't take that into account/ as soon as you add something they say ah the last time you didn't say that then it's over they reject you/ one also has to understand the people it's... One=one never manages to=to=to tell a story the same way twice/ that no.

Combined with the problem of resources discussed in section 3, asylum seekers' stories appear to contain too much 'noise' to be easily inserted in the asylum

procedure. They tell their story in non-native varieties of a language, sometimes to an interpreter who also has to use a non-native variety; this then is handed over to someone else, who translates and transforms it into an ordered and patterned written narrative, squeezed into the boxes of a standard form; consequently, this story is treated several times by still other people, who select from the story the parts that look 'truthful' and the ones that seem 'unlikely'. What is lost in the process is the narrative of place and time that is at the core of the stories: those parts of the story in which applicants bring international conflicts and phenomena such as war, famine, poverty into their own experiential space, relate personal motives to them, and offer this as arguments for obtaining asylum. As soon as this 'noise' has been cut off from the applicant's story, the chances of being understood, believed and supported are very slim.

This is why the densely contextualizing narratives discussed in the previous section become crucial and problematic in the asylum procedure. They are a necessary genre for asylum seekers, and at the same time an unmanageable (and a priori disqualified) genre in the procedure. They are salient because they are a realization of a genre that does not fit the genre. On the basis of what many asylum seekers can mobilize as linguistic and communicative resources, they are the upper limit of what they *can* do; and that does not correspond to what they *must* or *are supposed to* do.

6. Concluding remarks

Social structure percolates in and is indexed by the narrative conventions, ideologies and codes of the asylum procedure. I hope to have demonstrated that there is at least a potential mismatch between resources and expectations which is at the heart of the power asymmetry that characterizes encounters between asylum seekers and the state; it locates asylum seekers in a position of conflict vis-à-vis the procedure. But both the power asymmetry and the conflict are socially and culturally invisible because of two reasons, both of which have to do with the pervasiveness of ideologies.

The first reason is the widely shared ideology that clients of administrative procedures in a democratic society such as Belgium have control over the basic linguistic–communicative resources needed to participate fully in the procedures and so to obtain justice and the benefits they are entitled to. Thus, the problem of narrativity in the asylum procedure can be represented as a rather superficial, technical problem and suggested remedies can range from training programmes for interpreters to more support for asylum seekers from 'experts' such as lawyers. The point I have tried to make in this article is that we are confronted with a fundamental problem of inequality in 'access to the discursive resources that shape who can talk when, in what ways, and with what effects' (Briggs, 1996: 13), not one that can be captured, as Briggs rightly points out in metaphors such as 'negotiation', 'difference', or 'variation' which all suggest some degree of equality and sharedness and a facility of choice for the inferior party.

The second reason why the power asymmetries and conflicts are invisible is their embeddedness in administrative procedures that are normalized for members of the autochthonous middle class, and that are imbued with great prestige as the symbolic custodians of a sociopolitical system qualified as just, egalitarian and democratic. Every political crisis caused by incidents with asylum seekers resulted in a reaffirmation of the faith in 'our justice' and led to a tightening and increase of the sophistication of the administrative procedure: more people would be hired, they would be better trained, the procedure would be accelerated, handwritten documents would be replaced by computerized standard forms. The administrative text-making machinery was never questioned; on the contrary, it was strengthened and enlarged. Thus the capacity to shift narratives from one context to another and from one authoritative entextualization to another was increased, and with it the power asymmetry with regard to the production, treatment, ordering, and making sense of narratives. This belief in the just, egalitarian and democratic nature of the state and state procedures reminds us of a remark made long ago by Perry Anderson (1976–7) in his celebrated commentary on Gramsci: the assumption of equality in the face of democratic procedures and state institutions such as the law is at the core of capitalist ideology because it obscures fundamental inequalities in society. The state is assumed to represent everyone and to render service to everyone in the same way; at the same time, administrative procedures of the state privilege elite literacies and narrativities and so shape and perpetuate deep social inequalities (a process complicated by the introduction of new technologies in bureaucracy).

Along with the concrete case I have argued here, I hope to have offered arguments for two more general theoretical points, both of which are inspired by Briggs's (1997) highly relevant discussion of narrative and inequality in institutional contexts. First, issues of resources deserve far more attention than they have received so far in the study of language in society. Assumptions of sharedness, as stated previously, seem to determine much of what goes on in the critical analysis of discourse in western societies, whereas the highly layered and hierarchical systems of literacy and communicative skills that dominate our societies seem to dictate a more attentive stance towards phenomena such as accents, differential competence, difficulties in writing and so on. Before people can embark on discursive work captured under labels such as 'conversation', 'exchange' or 'negotiation', conditions of 'sayability', 'expressibility' and 'mobilizability' of resources need to have been met (see the remarks in Briggs, 1997: 538–40). Every conception of 'context' in discourse should include such conditions, because they are a tremendous influence on what happens in discourse and on what happens with discourse. Resources are contexts.

Second, I share Briggs's concern for the circulation of discourse as a crucial ingredient of identity-forming social and political practices in our societies. 'Cases' (administrative, legal, welfare, medical, educational and probably far more) are formed in the textual trajectories outlined in this article rather than in single instances of communication and single texts. We need to follow the process

of text-making-as-social-and-political-process; it is here that people and subjects are constructed, cases are judged and individual lives are being influenced. As soon as we enter worlds in which talk and written text are seen as replicas of one another (and in which someone else's notes of what I said can be offered to me as 'my' story), we enter a world of differential power relations, which needs to be scrutinized in great detail. Michel Foucault's (1975) image of subjects being transformed into knowable objects of clinical observation by means of a multi-layered complex of discursive and material practices is looming large. The apparently small shifts our stories undergo as soon as they enter institutional textmaking systems are instances of such practices of Foucauldian *savoir* in which social issues become individual yet standardized 'cases'. The fact that we tend not to be aware of these processes – and even attribute considerable prestige to the system in which they develop – is a crucial and unavoidable topic for critical studies of language and society.

NOTES

1. Hymes and Cazden's paper was originally published in 1978 in *Keystone Folklore* 22; it was reprinted as chapter 7 of Hymes (1980) and later reprinted again as chapter 5 of Hymes (1996). The paper is not really a joint product; individual sections are attributed to either Hymes or Cazden; for the purposes of this article, I consider it to be a collaborative writing product authored by Hymes and Cazden.
2. In late 2000, Katrijn Maryns obtained permission to record procedure interviews. Fieldwork is underway and genuine 'cases' will be available for research very soon. The first bits of data can be found in Maryns (2000) and Maryns and Blommaert (2000). On the basis of first fieldwork observations, nothing contradicts the patterns and mechanisms of discourse production and reception proposed in this paper.
3. The interviews were conducted by students of the 2nd and 4th year of African Studies at the Ghent University, as part of a course project supervised by the author. The length of the interviews varied from approximately half an hour to four hours. The interviews were recorded between November 1998 and April–May 1999, at the height of the so-called 'Sémira Adamu crisis'; see section 2.
4. I provide English translations, despite the fact that the 'broken' and hence very complicated forms of expressions can hardly be projected in another language in an equivalent way. I use a highly simplified set of transcription conventions in the presentation of the examples, namely:
   *   stress on the following syllable
   =   latching, rapid succession of turns, or self-correction
   /   intonationally marked phrase or sentence end
   ...   pause
   CAPS high pitch, loud
5. Katrijn Maryns (2000) presents some samples of interviewer–interviewee interactions in the asylum procedure. In the data reported here, there are instances where the Belgian interviewer is wrong-footed by the interviewee for reasons that have to do with proficiency in French or English. Interestingly, interviewers then display a tendency to move into a cross-questioning tactic, insisting on details and accuracy.
6. This was, in fact, the second time that P used the expression "*manger* + currency" in the interview. The first time, Q did not pick it up as problematic. Note in passing how this

phenomenon – a man from Angola using Congolese French colloquial expressions – offers us a glimpse of the migration history of the speaker. We can now suppose that the man, after having fled from Angola, has spent some time in the Congo before moving on to Europe. See Maryns (2000) for arguments and case analyses on the issue of identifying asylum seekers.

7. The emergence of structure in these narratives may be an effect of the repeated telling of the story, so that 'fully-formed narratives' are created. Dell Hymes, in correspondence about this analysis, remarks:

> It seems very likely that you have here what could in some cases be the early stages of 'fully formed' narratives of the sort I addressed in my own paper. That if those who tell them were in circumstances which led to them being told again and again, rehearsed, as it were, they might take on increasingly tight form ... It is extremely relevant to find ... that a contrast in initial elements, such as absence/presence of 'So' can be found to distinguish parts already at this stage. (See also Hymes, 1998.)

The point I wish to make in this part of the article is that such structuring not only occurs during very early phases of the narrative development of such stories, as Hymes points out, but that it also occurs despite a very restricted repertoire of linguistic resources.

8. Narrative inequalities based on differing narrative conventions and the differential distribution of communicative resources have been well documented with respect to courtroom discourse. I would like to mention just two cases. Marco Jacquemet (1992) emphasized the role of metapragmatic strategies in attorneys' courtroom tactics against Italian mafia-*pentiti*; the witnesses' communicative style was commented upon in attempts to discredit their credibility, and the normativity of 'correct' courtroom discourse was opposed to the *pentiti*'s use of the Neapolitan dialect. At a more general level, O'Barr and Conley (1996) distinguish between a professional and a lay ideology of law; the former can be characterized as 'rule-oriented', the latter as 'relational'. Both ideologies shape and make relevant differences in courtroom talk, and the failure to respect these differences by lay litigants 'may limit their access to justice' (O'Barr and Conley, 1996: 118). For reasons explained earlier, the discussion in this section is conjectural.

9. In a letter about this case from the Department of Immigration of the Ministry of the Interior, it is for instance said that 'the situation in his country [i.e. Angola] cannot be considered to be exceptional so as to vindicate a regularization on the basis of art, 9§3'. There are no fixed criteria for judging local situations to be 'normal' or 'abnormal', decisions on this point being the privilege of the Minister of the Interior.

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