



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 70/2016

Project manager: Hanna Sofia Rehnberg

Project title: Asylum narratives – on co-construction and recontextualisation

1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

Through our project we have contributed to developing knowledge in relation to three research questions: How is the asylum narrative co-constructed during the asylum interview? How do recontextualizing processes shape the emerging asylum narrative? How is the asylum seeker discursively positioned in and through the asylum narrative? Our study's main contribution consists in deconstructing the discourse emerging in and surrounding the asylum narrative, i.e. showing, on a microlevel, how the discourse is constructed and what the consequences are in terms of both legal certainty and identity construction.

In relation to our first research question (about the co-construction of the narrative), we have shown how metacommunication is used by all the asylum interview participants to structure and organize the emerging asylum narrative. Metacommunicative sequences are instances when the narrative is interrupted and the participants ask, give and take instructions on how the asylum seeker's story should be told. Most metacommunicative sequences in our data aim to direct the asylum seeker's story towards an institutional discourse, but there are also metacommunicative instances where the asylum seeker makes resistance to this dominant discourse. Further, we have shown how metacommunicative sequences not only structure the discourse but also, simultaneously, position the discourse participants. We have also examined the co-construction of the asylum narrative with a focus on the mutual impact of the interpreter-mediated communicative format and the parallel record keeping, and we have demonstrated how the passage from oral to written text—and back again—can involve sources of miscommunication when asylum stories are compiled, and that subsequent instances of miscommunication easily can slip attention.

The need to contextualize elements of the narrative (for example, by providing additional information about geographical places) is another aspect that contributes to the co-construction of the asylum narrative. Our analysis has shown that while contextualization work is necessary for establishing common ground and narrative credibility, it can also lead to miscommunication and fragmentation of the narrative.

The research questions on recontextualization and positioning have been explored in relation to each other (as well as in relation to co-construction, since the three aspects are interrelated). We have argued that the case officers in their role as recontextualising agents can position the applicants in more or less advantageous ways, depending on which guidelines they follow. A conclusion, potentially including practical implications, is that the Migration Agency's template is not fully in line with the EU recommendations, which to a larger degree takes into account how the applicants are positioned (i.e. which identities that are ascribed to them) when addressed by the case officers.

Further, we have examined the many ways that the narrative travels in different institutional contexts during the asylum determination process and some of the



recontextualizations, that is to say transformations, that take place in the process. We have shown that parts of the narrative get lost in the process of record keeping and can appear again when the public counsel revisits the record. Narrative recontextualizations follow a direction from oral, informal and fragmented narratives to written, legally and institutionally formal narratives.

To conclude, our studies have demonstrated and focused on the fact that the asylum narrative is not a static entity and that the asylum seeker does not have exclusive responsibility for its construction. On the contrary, asylum narratives are to a high extent situated and dynamic communicative entities, and they are co-constructed by all participants in the interview. In relation to this, we have shown that it is important for case officers, decision makers, public counsels and interpreters to be aware of the linguistic and discursive complexity of asylum interviews.

Finally, we have taken part in the international scientific dialogue on accessing sensitive research fields and working with vulnerable populations and we have argued for the importance of a constructive dialogue between public authorities and university researchers.

2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

- We have collected data from asylum interviews in the form of observations and recordings. This is internationally unique data, considering that in the last decade, recordings from asylum interviews seem to be completely out of access for researchers, with our material as an exception.
- We have conducted linguistic analysis of asylum interviews and thereby have been able to confirm, strengthen and develop results from the rather small number of other international linguistic studies on asylum interviews.
- We have contributed to the international research frontline on asylum interviews by adding knowledge from the Swedish context of the asylum determination process.
- We have added to the international ongoing scientific debate on access to sensitive research fields and research ethics when working with vulnerable populations.

We have been active in promoting collaboration between researchers in the fields of pragmatics, translation studies, sociolinguistics and social sciences with a focus on migration studies. We have achieved this by bringing together a team of international researchers in two research workshops and two research panels, which have further resulted in numerous international and interdisciplinary collaborations (amongst others a special issue in the Journal of International Migration and Integration).

3. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

Due to great difficulties with establishing access to the research field (Swedish Migration Agency) and collecting data, we had to widen our initial research plan and recruit participants not just from the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, we have data from two asylum seekers from counties of the former Soviet Union and research interviews with case officers, interpreters and public counsels with big experience from working with asylum seekers from this part of the world.



Our data, although limited in this specific regard, gave a glimpse of specific difficulties related to the task of interpreting and consequently, the task of the case workers taking written record, when non-standard varieties of languages like Russian and Ukrainian were spoken by asylum seekers from former republics of the Soviet Union. Obviously, the most serious consequences are those that can befall the asylum seekers if the specific language conditions are not taken into consideration.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

The unique and rich data that we now have in our disposal could advantageously be used to further explore the research questions that we initially asked in this project. There are also new aspects of these questions that have surfaced during the time we have been working with this material. More specifically, we would like to make a comparative study of asylum narratives in different contexts, in other words a study of the asylum narrative as a genre. Recontextualisation and positioning would be relevant aspects even here, with a focus on how the asylum seeker's story takes different forms in new contexts, as well as how the concept of agency is treated in different contexts.

Another important question that has come up as a result of the diversity of the participants that we managed to recruit in the study is how LGBTQ asylum-narratives are constructed in asylum interviews, and more specifically how sexuality and gender orientation are constructed in the institutional setting of asylum determination. Drawing on experiences from our observations, it is also motivated to take a closer look at the role of multilingualism and interpreting in LGBTQ asylum cases.

Finally, we would like to study the effects of training and education offered to interpreters, case officers and decision makers. For example, we would like to look closer at their training when it comes to interpreter-mediated communication and when it comes to knowledge about specific social, cultural and political phenomena, constituting sources to the conflicts that exist in and between countries and areas of the former Soviet union.



5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Peer-reviewed journal articles

Rehnberg, Hanna Sofia (under review). Positioning of applicants in asylum interviews: Case officers as recontextualizing agents.

Wadensjö, Cecilia, Rehnberg, Hanna Sofia & Nikolaidou, Zoe (2022). Managing a discourse of reporting: The complex composing of an asylum narrative. *Multilingua*. <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/multi-2022-0017/html> (Open access)

Rehnberg, Hanna Sofia (2022). Asylintervjun som genre: Berättande, dilemman och symbolik. [The asylum interview as a genre: Narrating, dilemmas and ritualism.] *ASLA 28: Rapport från ASLA-symposiet 23–24 april 2020*, Göteborg. S. 172–195. <https://hdl.handle.net/2077/72025> (Open access)

Nikolaidou, Zoe, Hanna Sofia Rehnberg & Cecilia Wadensjö (2022). “Do I have to say exactly word by word?": The discursive (re)construction and negotiation of asymmetrical relations in asylum interviews. *Journal of Migration and Integration*. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12134-022-00945-2> (Open access)

Wadensjö, Cecilia, Hanna Sofia Rehnberg & Zoe Nikolaidou (2021a). Från tolkad interaktion till enspråkig text: Om en asylberättelses framväxt. [From interpreter-mediated interaction to monolingual text: On the emergence of an asylum narrative.] *HumaNetten* 46. S. 100–115. <https://open.lnu.se/index.php/hn/article/view/2884/2472> (Open access)

Reports

Wadensjö, Cecilia, Hanna Sofia Rehnberg & Zoe Nikolaidou (2021b). *Tolkfunktionen i asylprocessen*. [The function of interpreting in the asylum process.] (Kunskapsöversikt 2021:4.) Stockholm: Delegationen för migrationsstudier (Delmi). <https://www.delmi.se/publikationer/kunskapsöversikt-2021-4-tolkfunktionen-i-asylprocessen/> (Open access)

Working papers

Nikolaidou, Zoe, Hanna Sofia Rehnberg & Cecilia Wadensjö, 2019. Negotiating access with public authorities in research on asylum. *Working papers in urban language and literacies*, paper 262. (Red. Ben Rampton.) London: Centre for Language, Discourse and Communication, King's College. https://wpull.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WP262_Nikolaidou_Rehnberg_and_Wadensjo_2.pdf

Popular science articles

Rehnberg, Hanna Sofia, Cecilia Wadensjö & Zoe Nikolaidou, 2020. Stor skillnad i tolkars kompetens vid asylintervjuer. [Asylum interpreters vary a lot in competence.] *Artikel 14* 2–4/2020. S. 28–33. Open access via Diva: <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1528433/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Rehnberg, Hanna Sofia, Zoe Nikolaidou & Cecilia Wadensjö, 2020: ”Asylintervjuer borde alltid spelas in”. [”Asylum interviews ought to be recorded”.] *Artikel 14* 1/2020. S. 12–19. Open access via Diva: <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1456536/FULLTEXT02.pdf>



Planned peer-review journal articles

An article about the discursive construction of sexuality and gender orientation in the institutional setting of asylum interviews.

An article presenting a contrastive analysis of politeness strategies used by case officers in the introduction of the asylum interview.

An article focusing on the role of language and communication in asylum interviews as experienced by the professionals and asylum seekers participating in our research interview study (conducted in addition to our observations of asylum interviews).

Scientific conferences (the five most important)

Organization and participation in the 18th IMISCOE annual conference. *Co-construction and reification of narratives during asylum determination procedures*. IMISCOE (International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion in Europe), Luxembourg, 7–9 July 2021 [online].

Participation in Sociolinguistics Symposium 23. *The fragmented narrative: Metacommunicative statements in asylum interviews*. University of Hongkong, 7–10 June 2021 [online].

Participation in the 4th International Conference on the Sociolinguistics of Immigration. *Co-construction and recontextualization of narrative accounts in the context of asylum interviews*. University of Turin, Italy, 27–28 May 2021 [online].

Participation in Exploring Ethnography, Language and Communication (EELC) 8. *The fragmented narrative: Co-construction of asylum narratives in interpreter-mediated asylum interviews*. Oslo, Norway, 24–25 September 2020 [online].

Keynote speech in ASLA-symposium 2020 (Association Suédoise de Linguistique Appliquée, *Myndigheten som grindvakt, forskarens dilemman och forskningens roll i samhället*. [Public authorities as gatekeepers, the researcher's dilemmas, and the role of research in society.] Göteborg, 23–24 april 2020 [online].

Research workshops

Organization of and participation in the international workshop Asylum Encounters – Bridging Different Perspectives on Language, Asymmetries and Identities. Stockholm University, Sweden, 29–30 October 2020.

Organization of and participation in the international workshop Text and talk in interaction in the asylum process. Södertörn University, Huddinge, Sweden, 10–11 October 2019.

Participation in the research workshop Asylum determinations in times of suspicion – credibility, evidence, procedure. Stockholm University, Sweden, 9 April 2019.



Presentations and educational seminars outside the research community

Planned educational seminar with experienced judges from the Swedish Migration Court of Appeal as participants, Stockholm, Sweden, 9 November 2022.

Presentation of the research report *Tolkfunktionen i asylprocessen* [The function of interpreting in the asylum process] (Wadensjö, Rehnberg & Nikolaidou, 2021b) at a webinar organized by The Migration Studies Delegation, Stockholm, Sweden, 20 May 2021 [online].

Research presentation at a meeting organized by RFSL Newcomers, Stockholm, Sweden, 29 May 2019.