

The Transformation of Experience in Asylum Narratives

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I examine interpreted monologic narratives told by asylum seekers during UK asylum applications, attending to issues of reportability, credibility and evaluation. The narratives occur first in interviews and are then transformed and entextualized by bureaucrats (Blommaert 2005) in letters refusing asylum applications. Though interviews are carried out via interpreters and hand-recorded in English, asylum seekers are held responsible for the transformed versions of their contents. Narratives focus on events supporting claims of persecution, and typically involve brutality, violence, oppression and/or victimisation. Such narratives are highly reportable in Labov's (2013) terms, justifying automatic reassignment of speaker role to tellers even in highly structured bureaucratic interviews (Sarangi & Slembrouck 1996). However, not only is reportability inversely correlated with credibility in general, but credibility is crucial to the success of asylum applications: finding that asylum seeker accounts lack credibility is the most common reason for refusal. In the process of condensation and reformulation that produces refusal letters, I show how in the bureaucratic version events are omitted, actors are stripped of or assigned agency, and details are mistaken, invented or deleted – ironically, since “lacks detail” is a standard criticism of asylum speakers' accounts and a contributing factor in assessment of credibility. At the same time narrative-internal evaluation by tellers may be discounted, bureaucratic accounts often add elaborate external evaluation. Thus even when narrative performance is allowed and narrative form is significantly preserved (not always the case), institutional relevance trumps experiential (Maryns 2006), pretextuality disenfranchises the speaker, and the asylum seeker's voice is lost.

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