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BRONWEN HUGHES

“AND THIS IS
MY STORY”

*A Linguistic Analysis
of Migrant Discourse*

PAOLO 
LOFFREDO

Proprietà letteraria riservata

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paoloffredoeditore@gmail.com

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REFUGEES

They have no need of our help
So do not tell me
These haggard faces could belong to you or me
Should life have dealt a different hand
We need to see them for who they really are
Chancers and scroungers
Layabouts and loungers
With bombs up their sleeves
Cut-throats and thieves
They are not
Welcome here
We should make them
Go back to where they came from
They cannot
Share our food
Share our homes
Share our countries
Instead let us
Build a wall to keep them out
It is not okay to say
These are people just like us
A place should only belong to those who are born there
Do not be so stupid to think that
The world can be looked at another way

(now read from bottom to top)

BRIAN BILSTON
2016



INTRODUCTION

Linguistic research throughout the 20th and 21st centuries has been heralded and subsequently flanked by a series of ‘turns’ each accompanied by new research paradigms and methodologies. Whereas the linguistic turn of the 1970s brought about a shift of emphasis in the discourse of the social sciences, universally underlining the importance of language in human meaning-making, and the cultural turn of the 1990s emphasised the essentially constitutive nature of culture in human relations and identities, the mobility turn which emerged approximately two decades ago, highlights a general increase in human mobility now widely recognized to be a defining feature of present times.

On the one hand, mobility refers to the globalized cross-border physical or virtual movement of goods, ideas, knowledge, and people and in this case the term is accompanied by qualifiers such as ‘upward’, ‘international’, ‘vertical’, or ‘temporary’; on the other, mobility collocates with phrases such as ‘conflict-induced’ or ‘disaster-induced’ and in this case it is both dangerous and constrained.

We are therefore in the presence of two distinct categories: the kinetically privileged for whom mobility offers new opportunities, recreation or profit while serving to strengthen international relations and European bonds; it is here that we find the business travellers, holiday makers, wealthy retirees or Erasmus students. Indeed, the 2021-2027 Erasmus Proposal¹ claims that: “Erasmus + does not only allow participants to study and train abroad, it also helps to strengthen European identity and considerably improves employment opportunities. It gives participants the knowledge and skills to enrich their personal and professional lives”. And, at the other end of the spectrum, those who, as Ibrahim Awad (2015: 3) affirms, live out their lives in a “space of tension between threat and hope”, whose travels are dictated by circumstances beyond their control, who are more likely to cross the English Channel in the wheel hub of a truck rather than as a Eurostar

¹ Commission adopts proposal for the next Erasmus programme 2021-2027 (May 30, 2018). Available online at https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/news/commission-adopts-proposal-next-erasmus-programme-2021-2027_en (Last accessed: August 2019).

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Premier passenger, and who rely on networks of traffickers and border crossers as opposed to social media, airline routes, international agreements and legislative norms.

Every year millions of people are forced to leave their homes and relocate elsewhere. As a result of war, natural calamities, violence, famine or climatic change, ordinary people who have always seen themselves as workers, inhabitants, and just plain citizens become marginal beings bearing unwieldy labels such as: ‘labour migrants’, ‘family migrants’, ‘refugees’, ‘asylum seekers’, ‘climatic migrants’, ‘environmental migrants’, or ‘internally displaced migrants’.

Furthermore, from the retroactively uprooted scapegoats of the ‘Windrush generation’, to the victims of human trafficking and slavery, political and public hostility to migration has also progressively increased over the past 20 years.

If one inserts the search phrase ‘migration crisis’ into the Google search engine, approximately 90.000.000 results or web pages are offered up for consultation. A rapid perusal of the first twenty pages points to the fact that the so-called ‘crisis’ is observed and narrated mainly from a European viewpoint, with web page titles such as: “European refugee crisis explained”², “The refugee crisis, what Europe can learn from the past”³, or “What is the current state of the migration crisis in Europe?”⁴. Hence the observation and reporting of events appear to stem from an essentially Euro-centric standpoint. It is often more a question of ‘what are they doing to us?’ rather than ‘what is effectively happening, or being done, to them?’.

This etic standpoint also characterizes many of the studies, be they linguistic, sociological or historical which in recent years have centred upon the problem of enforced migration and have led to the progressive emergence of a ‘discourse of migration’.

Investigations of the term ‘discourse’ abound within the field of mainstream linguistics, and the opening pages of academic volumes often

² “European refugee crisis explained” (October 6, 2017). Available online at <https://www.unhcr.org/europe-emergency.html> (Last accessed: February 2019).

³ “The refugee crisis, what Europe can learn from the past” (October 5, 2015). Available online at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/refugee-crisis-what-europe-can-learn-past> (Last accessed: June 2018).

⁴ “What is the current state of the migration crisis in Europe” (June 15, 2018). Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/15/what-current-scale-migration-crisis-europe-future-outlook> (Last accessed: February 2019).

INTRODUCTION

provide a particular scholar's or scholarly current's understanding of the concept. Consensus has generally been reached around certain paradigmatic assumptions: that discourse concerns authentic language in use, above the level of the syntactic/lexical/grammatical building blocks that make up an utterance or a sentence, and serves to "capture what happens when these language forms are played out in different social, political and cultural arenas" (Simpson and Mayr 2010: 5); that discourse concerns extended pieces of text endowed with some form of internal organisation, coherence and cohesion; and that discourse is intrinsically bound to its context of occurrence and in a circular manner then goes on to shape systems of knowledge and belief, social relationships and social identities (Fairclough 1992). The discourse of migration has spawned new terminology hitherto unknown to the general public: terms such as 'externalization', 'interception' or 'border governance' in the legal field; 'eligibility determination interviews', or 'triage procedures' in the institutional ambit; 'polylinguaging' (Jorgensen 2008, Ag and Jorgensen 2013), 'plurilingualism' (Canagarajah 2009), 'metrolingualism' (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010) or 'transglossic language practices' (Sultana et al. 2015) in the field of sociolinguistics and ethnomethodology, and terms such as 'floods'⁵, 'swarms' or 'waves' in the media, frequently in an attempt at metaphorical delegitimization.

Sadly, the discourse of migration is often a discourse on migration and authentic migrant discourse is often neglected, with those at the core of the issue occupying the object as opposed to the subject position. The aim of the present volume is to reposition such objects of discourse.

Research therefore focuses on a linguistic analysis of the travel chronicles of 30 migrants from nine different countries of origin presently residing in the Campania region of Italy. Five of the informants are women, the remaining twenty-five are men. The gender imbalance present in the corpus is inevitably linked to the difficulty in approaching women who are victims of human trafficking, forced prostitution and sexual slavery and although the numerical discrepancy does not allow for specific gender-based evaluations, as shall be illustrated, the contributions of the women in terms of self/other agency and appraisal are highly significant.

⁵ One example should suffice to render what has been a general trend in recent years: "“Millions of Africans’ will flood Europe unless it acts now, warns European chief, as Paris evacuates huge migrant camp” (July 7, 2017). Available online at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/07/millions-africans-will-flood-europe-unless-acts-now-warns-european/> (Last accessed: February 2018).

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By carrying out a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the migrants' use of pronominal, verbal and lexical structures in English, it has been possible to gain insight into how they evaluate their past and present circumstances and their future horizons of expectancy.

Two separate reasons led to the Campania region being selected as suitable terrain for this investigation: on the one hand from late 2016 to late 2018, the time span covered by the research, Campania was one of the Italian regions with the highest number of hospitality structures for asylum seekers, on the other, the lengthy process of building up friendship, trust and mutual respect, before proceeding with the interview procedure *per se*, meant that I had to operate within a radius that was accessible from my current place of residence and work.

The stories of these men and women were collected by means of non-directive interviews, and extensive details will be provided regarding the content, manner, place and time at which such interviews were conducted. The significant point to establish in this introductory phase, is that these interviews were not the sporadic result of brief, circumscribed encounters, but rather the fruit of well-grounded relationships that have been maintained up to today.

Although some of the informants had been in Italy for up to two years at the time of interview their knowledge of Italian was still rudimentary, due most probably to the fact that communication in the hospitality structures was consistently carried out in English. In the main, and on the basis of the 'cando' descriptors listed in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages⁶, I estimate that my interlocutors' English language competence was in most cases at B1 level, with a few very proficient C1 speakers. It must also be said that the interviews were carried out on a voluntary basis, so only those who felt comfortable narrating their stories in English came forth. A parallel investigation of the informants' discourse and the semantic primes underlying Natural Semantic Metalanguage theory (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002) further serves to grant credence to the authenticity of the migrants' words.

Chapter One sets the scene for the linguistic investigation carried out in the following chapters. Some background information is provided regarding

⁶ Council of Europe: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, companion volume with new descriptors (February 2018). Available online at <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989> (Last accessed: September 2019).

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the political, geographical and social origins of recent migration, the routes travelled by migrants wishing to land in Italy, and the Italian legislation and reception procedures. In the latter part of the chapter, a detailed account is given of the settings in which the interviews took place, of the candidates' personal profiles, current life circumstances and language proficiency, and of the interview procedure itself in terms of script, pre-interview procedure and analytical framework. In the final part of this first chapter, the methodological tools employed throughout the study are described, in order to introduce the work carried out in the following two chapters.

In Chapter Two, an investigation of the first person singular subject and object pronouns together with their accompanying verbal structures serves to provide an inside view of the processes of social orientation among the displaced individuals whose narrations make up the corpus, and contributes to an understanding of what the migratory process means to those directly involved. Despite the monological nature of their accounts the migrants manifest a need to seek out alignment with the interviewer by adopting a number of discursive devices and couching their chronicles in an interactional surround. Even when providing mere factual details as is customary in the introductory stage of a self-narration, the interviewees do so by fronting or contouring their statements with evaluative and agentive additions that index a desire to align themselves with their interlocutor in a dialogical, occasionally confrontational, manner. Whereas in the opening statements of their accounts, the informants often appear to be claiming superior epistemic stance and to be positioning the interviewer as a mere recipient of information, it is only when examining more extensive discursive patterns that the idea of 'mirrored evaluation' comes to the fore. Basically, what is posited throughout the chapter is that the informants' psycho-physical well-being hinges upon the expression of acceptance and positive appraisal by the host community; indeed when employing evaluative structures to self-appraise, the migrants systematically employ terms and phrases which allow them to pander to other-expectations. Besides seeking out such acceptance, at a deeper level they also engage with the wider generic discourse on migration which serves as a backdrop to their accounts.

In Chapter three, the Appraisal Framework (Martin & White 2005) is employed to perform a lexical analysis of the migratory accounts and to illustrate how the informants' "Feelings of Good" and "Feelings of Bad" follow a clear chronotopic pattern stretching from the time they left their homelands to the horizons of expectancy they hope to find in Italy. Rather than pinpointing the canonical terms 'happiness' and 'pain', focus is placed

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on a wider semantic field due to an awareness that language research is all too often carried out through an Anglo-centric prism, in which the terms adopted in different languages to describe happiness and pain are considered to be on a par with the English language equivalent.

The concluding remarks sum up the main research outcomes and outline the direction for possible future areas of exploration.