

Moving on from the COST Migration and Asylum Roundtable:

New Speakers and Brexit

The discussions at the Roundtable were fascinating and this is also a thank you to all those who attended and participated actively in the discussions. I originally intended to write a summary on the Roundtable and a call for further discussions on the participation from COST members on constructing a co-ordinated response to migration and asylum issues. In ordinary circumstances I would give a socio-legal argument, and discuss how the intersection of positive law, language and social realities places refugees on the social margins. However, recent events have made me view our discussions in a slightly different light.

Brexit has left many (on both sides) unable to fathom how it happened, in shock and uncertainty. In the run up to the referendum and since migration and asylum have been reoccurring themes of the Brexit debate. From discussions of migration controls, to grimmer racist undertones and the murder of Jo Cox, Labour MP and long-time refugee campaigner. Fear and anger has dominated the discussion of migration in the mainstream. What does any of this have to do with New Speakers and socio-linguistics? Or to rephrase slightly, what can socio-linguists say on this issue? Among the number of conceptual issues raised in the Roundtable, one of the most interesting was the resonance of the New Speaker label and the issues it has raised. The question asked was how the new speaker concept resonates within linguistics, or other disciplines and in the practical world of policy and law.

During the Roundtable the question old versus new speaker was also raised, along with the question of whether this labelling would distract from addressing the needs of refugees. Labels as we discussed at the Roundtable are tricky. Labelling refugees as New Speakers might yet be another level of differentiated, even stigmatisation when viewed from outside socio-linguistics in the media or in policy or legal matters. Does the mean the discussions and issues the New Speaker concept raises do not resonate with other fields? Can the issues that New Speakers change the debates surrounding Migration and Asylum? And finally, does addressing New Speaker issues actually give refugees and asylum seekers what they need? These were challenging questions raised during the Roundtable (not something I can hope to adequately address in a blog post).

What is it refugees and asylum seekers actually want? Housing, employment, access to health care... I would argue simply a life as any other citizen. In terms of service delivery, perhaps COST New Speakers can address some of these needs; supporting language education, for example, or providing translation support. It's easy to become stuck in these hierarchy of needs, focus on service delivery and miss the potential for changing the discourses surrounding migration and asylum. Whilst the term itself may not resonate as intended, the New Speaker concept has led to interesting discussions related to legitimacy, authenticity and power. As well as a wide range of implications at the level from daily interaction to policy.

The Brexit campaign used discourse and perceptions of language ability to take things one step further. Stories of racism have splashed across the news these past few months. With Nigel Farage's 'Breaking point' poster that depicted a faceless sea of impoverished looking refugees, to rise in hate crimes since the referendum, it's easy to see why many blame the Leave campaign for the 'sudden' spurge in racism. The problem is, it's not so sudden. It was there all along. Having another accent, or speaking another language in public (especially if you live outside of London) has always been viewed with suspicion.

On a deeply personal note; I remember as a young child living in communities where my family were ‘the’ only ethnic minority. One day I was suddenly moved to a special needs class, because the teachers assumed I couldn’t speak English ‘properly’ and that I ought to relearn how to read – giving me ‘Run Spot Run’ as homework. This was because I’d been heard speaking Punjabi with my brother. (For any interested, I didn’t do my homework, I was busy reading Tolkien at home). I was born British with another colour. There is the manner in which English language ability legitimises one ‘right’ to exist within a certain community space. And, how it valorises one’s connection and ability to communicate within a community. Yet for me in the UK, language and race always went together.

For refugees the ramifications are much more serious than homework. Frontex (in)famously known for patrolling the borders of European states, has used interpreters to assign nationalities to those attempting to illegally cross the border. There has been significant evidence to show that these short interviews have led to substantial mistakes – impacting individual claims to asylum, or whether they will be detained. In this case, perceived speech patterns and accents are interpreted through race, leading to legal consequences.

It would be simplistic to only speak of race and language in regards to Brexit. The perceptions of language ability also need to account of the history and political economy of Britain and the localised contexts of disenfranchised communities. There are communities in Britain which have been deprived, wrung out and left to dry by the recessions and austerity measures. The poverty and lack of access to services they face is very real. This has created not only a hotbed of resentment, but the specific conditions through which language ability has been perceived. For the local communities that voted in this reference the question was not really about race or even the EU, which they viewed as distant. It was a voice for much needed social change; austerity and the recognition that no, we haven’t been ‘in it’ together. This hasn’t been as much about migration controls and quotas, as much as lack of access to services and the instinct to protect limited resources. This is also not about migrants’ actual language ability as much as fear of those who appear different fed by consecutive governments and media. For more than 30 years, a political elite has refocused the disenchantment and disenfranchisement of disaffected communities through an immigration discourse. The perception of language ability, shaped by social and political discourses, has impacted community relations and the lived realities migrants and refugees face.

Brexit has left many in shock and unable to fathom how it happened. Though perhaps, it shouldn’t have.