

Co-constructing credibility: Interactional negotiations of truth in asylum interviews

Zoe Nikolaidou, Södertörn University

Abstract

Asylum interviews are high-stakes communicative events where asylum seekers must narrate their reasons for seeking protection in ways deemed credible by institutional actors. Drawing on narrative theory that understands storytelling as situated social practice (De Fina, 2021; Georgakopoulou, 2007), this talk examines how asylum narratives are co-constructed between asylum seekers, case officers, interpreters, and legal representatives. Central to this co-construction is the continuous negotiation of credibility—what counts as believable, relevant, and institutionally legible knowledge. Such judgments are interactionally accomplished, emerging at the intersection of narrative form, linguistic performance, and institutional expectations of coherence and realism (e.g. Karrebæk, Kirilova & Ghandchi, 2024; Holland, 2018).

The talk is based on a linguistic ethnographic study comprising observations and recordings of eight interpreter-mediated asylum interviews in Sweden, the written documentation generated in these cases, and research interviews with all asylum interview participants.

I present findings from two interconnected analytical strands. First, I examine how participants use metacommunication to navigate the tension between institutional and experiential discourses, revealing the moment-by-moment (re)production of asymmetrical power relations but also unexpected sites of resistance. Second, I analyze how spatial references function as narrative resources under institutional constraints, demonstrating how culturally-embedded place references become contested sites of credibility assessment.

The second part of the talk addresses methodological challenges. Working with interpreter-mediated interviews raises analytical questions about how to study interaction without full access to all languages involved. Rather than treating this as a limitation, I draw on van Hest and Jacobs' (2022) notion of *spaces of linguistic non-understanding* to conceptualize these moments as analytically productive. Negotiating access with the Swedish Migration Agency proved similarly revealing: a protracted, opaque process that echoed the barriers faced by asylum seekers. These challenges expose the same power dynamics that structure the asylum process, making methodological persistence both necessary and ethically imperative.

References

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