

Oppositions in the narrative accounts of migrants in the UK during Covid-19.

Migrants often appear suspended between two (or more) different realities as the signs of their previous life are faded or disguised, while those of the new life have not yet become visible (van Gennep 1960: 59). This liminal suspension before a 'before' and an 'after', a 'there' and 'here' often materialises in the reflections on their migration experience. The study tests this hypothesis by investigating a half a million word corpus of over 40 interviews with migrants from a variety of countries who were assisted by a UK government scheme during Covid-19. The interviews contain narrative texts that allow us to understand the participants' perception of reality and their experience.

Supported by an ESRC/UKRI fund of the University of Portsmouth, with the University of Sussex and the charity St Mungo's, the study draws on the semiotic and linguistic literature on polarity (Greimas 2015; Murphy 2002, Jeffries 2010) and discourse and semantic investigations on opposition in narratives (Andrews 2002, Gabriel 2016, Sandberg & Andersen 2019). Through a corpus assisted approach, in the interviewees' narrative accounts (De Fina 2009), we trace the binary oppositions reflecting the speakers' cognitive processes at micro and macro levels from the semantic, syntactic, lexical and thematic plane to the spatial-temporal axis.

(And I fled my country because of what is happening **and I came here** to witness something like this again/ (4-6 ngram search with 'here')/My life in Romania **before I came here** was good./ I destroyed my life in my country and I came **here** because I am not facing a fear there, definitely not, because I was in a good condition in my home/Nigeria, I think...**before I came here**, Nigeria was okay, it was okay before I came here . </s><s> I came here when my husband was beating me./My life in Romania before I came here was good. (4-6 ngram with 'before')

Oppositional constructions can be realised by comparatives, superlatives and implicitly by implicature (I do not break any laws. I pay my taxes and insurance.) These binaries, however, do not exclude the presence of a gradient or the integration of divergent perspectives (Charteris-Black 2006).

The investigation contributes to narrative research in the context of migration. However, on the grounds that language reflects its users' experiential world and the hypothesis that as a consequence, their mind set operates along binary lines, this linguistic study moves toward building a socio-cognitive theory of the migrant persona.

Key words: narrative, interviews, migration, polarity, mind set

References

Andrews, M. 2002 "Introduction: Counter-narratives and the power to oppose." In *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life* Oxford, OUP.

Charteris-Black, J., 2006. Britain as a container: Immigration metaphors in the 2005 election campaign. *Discourse & Society*, 17(5): 563-581.

De Fina, A. 2009. Narratives in interview The case of accounts: For an interactional approach to narrative genres *Narrative Inquiry* 19(2):233-258.

Greimas, A.J., 2015. *Sémantique structurale: recherche de méthode*. Presses universitaires de France.

Jeffries, L. 2010 *Opposition in Discourse*. London, Continuum.

Murphy, L. 2003 *Semantic Relations and the Lexicon*. Cambridge, CUP.

Sandberg, S. and Andersen, J.C. eds. 2019. Opposing violent extremism through counternarratives: Four forms of narrative resistance. In J. Fleetwood et al. eds *The Emerald Handbook of Narrative Criminology* (pp. 445-466). Bingley, Emerald Publishing Limited.

Van Gennep, A. 1960 *The Rites of Passage*. London, Routledge.