

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium.

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Investigating narrative inequality:
>Home narratives= of African asylum seekers in Belgium

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Abstract: Home narratives are particular sub-narratives found in stories told by African asylum seekers in Belgium, in which details of the situation in their home society, the conflict from which they fled, and their own position in that conflict are being sketched and documented. Despite the fact that they contain sometimes crucial elements for an understanding of their motives to apply for asylum, they are hardly ever taken into account in the asylum procedure. The story told by asylum seekers is molded into a text-ideology in which home narratives are seen as >noise=. In this paper, we first touch upon the issue of linguistic-communicative resources: the >broken= varieties of European languages in which asylum seekers tell their stories. Next, the structure and functions of home narratives are explored, with special emphasis on their role as contextualizing, localizing discourse. Finally, the role of such narratives in the asylum procedure is discussed, and the contrast in contextualizing directions between home narratives and text trajectories in the procedure is highlighted.

Keywords: narrative, contextualization, institutional discourse, inequality, asylum seekers, Belgium.

Investigating narrative inequality: >Home narratives= of African asylum seekers in Belgium

1. Introduction

In a remarkable paper, Dell Hymes and Courtney Cazden investigated the possibility that one form of inequality of opportunity in our society has to do with rights to use narrative, with whose narratives are admitted to have cognitive function (Hymes & Cazden 1980: 126).¹ On the basis of observations on speaking rights in university classes they concluded that the use of particular ways of narrating focused upon the expression of emotions and personal experience and voiced in an >anecdotal= mode was easily dismissed, while other narrative modes in which academic voicing and emotional detachment were more prominent were clearly privileged. Thus, contributions to class discussions based on narratives of personal experience >did not get the floor= (1980: 127) and A[t]he truth of the matter would be that only the >anecdotes= of some would count (1980: 131). The rights to use particular narrative modes are unevenly distributed, and this pattern of distribution disenfranchises those who have to rely on >disqualified= narrative modes for conducting their business in society.

My aim in this paper is to document and discuss a particular type of narratives which I found in stories told by African asylum seekers in Belgium. This type of narratives I called >home narratives= because they are often extended anecdotal stories on the situation in their home society, the details of the conflict from which they escaped, their own personal involvement in political upheavals that led to their (often forced) exile. I will try to highlight aspects of the structure and functions of home narratives in an attempt to show how they represent crucial communicative resources for asylum seekers. Without recourse to the long and detailed narratives about >home=, their motives and causes for seeking asylum cannot be made fully understood. In doing so I will display a concern for narrative-textual shape inspired by authors such as Hymes (1981, 1998) and Haviland (1996, 1997), as well as one for narrative-textual dynamics inspired by what has come to be known as a >natural histories of discourse= approach (Silverstein & Urban, eds. 1996; Bauman & Briggs 1990; Briggs 1997; Gal & Woolard, eds. 1995) emphasizing entextualization practices (de- and recontextualization practices) as crucial ingredients of >interpreting= and >understanding= text. These approaches to text will be set within a wider project that bears affinities to that of critical discourse analysis and can be summarized as investigating language-as-social-process in order to gain a more precise insight in power relations (see e.g. Wodak 1995).

The problem I wish to investigate through an analysis of home narratives is that of narrative inequality in the context of asylum applications in Belgium. The Belgian asylum procedure involves a complex set of discursive practices articulating language ideologies that

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. are being used as criteria for >truth=, >trustworthiness=, >coherence= and >consistency=. Such discursive practices require access to communicative resources that are often far beyond the reach of African asylum seekers linguistically but also narratively and stylistically. The home narratives provide clear illustrations of the way in which communicative resources are mobilized for >making sense= of the asylum seekers= case; at the same time, they provide clear illustrations of narrative inequality when measured against the norms and expectations inscribed in the discursive patterns of the asylum application procedure. The lack of attention to the crucial functions of home narratives is partly due to the particular treatment of text in bureaucratic procedures, more in particular the shaping of textual trajectories in which >original= stories are continuously reformed and reformulated. Hence it illustrates the fact that talk is often structured vis-à-vis mediated relationships it bears to objects and texts that are dispersed in time and space (Briggs 1997: 454-455), in this case vis-à-vis preconceived criteria of textuality and narrative appropriateness that are inscribed in practices of noting, summarizing and reading narratives, making >files=, interviewing and interrogating, translating and so forth (together with their products: specific texts formats and individual texts) within administrative procedures, themselves part of a huge text-tradition such as that of Belgian law and bureaucracy. I will argue that this process of (re)structuring talk into institutionally sanctioned text involves a dynamic of entextualization that is based on power asymmetries. I will also argue that it also involves a problematic of the availability and accessibility of linguistic-communicative resources C an often overlooked >context= of talk.

In the next section, I will briefly provide some background on the situation of asylum seekers in Belgium and on the fieldwork project in which the data discussed here were gathered. In section 3, I will turn to the issue of communicative resources and discuss some of the features of language competence observable in the talk of the asylum seekers. This section 3 is the backdrop against which we can engage the discussion of home narratives in section 4. In section 5 I will try to situate the home narratives in the discursive patterns that occur during the asylum application procedure.

2. Asylum seekers in Belgium

The data which I shall discuss were gathered during a fieldwork project in which more than 40 African asylum seekers were interviewed, most of them being illegal or in limbo, their asylum application either being undecided or having been rejected.² The interviews were open interviews in which asylum seekers were invited to tell the story of their escape, their reasons for escape, their experiences with the Belgian asylum procedure and with life as an asylum seeker in Belgium. The interviews were conducted in French, English and (in a small number of cases) Dutch. Dutch was the mother tongue of the interviewers; thus in most cases the interviewers and the interviewees had to rely on a language other than their native language to do the interview, and as a rule nonnative varieties of those languages were being used. This to some extent mirrors the speech situations that occur during formal administrative interviews in the context of the asylum application procedure; some of the implications will be discussed in section 3 of this paper.

Asylum seeking has become, in Belgium as elsewhere in Europe, a topic of heated political debate in

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. recent years. The last decade has witnessed a dramatic increase of asylum applications, leading to a current monthly average of approximately 1,500 applications per month. This rapid increase of asylum applications, combined with the increased complexity of the cases C many asylum seekers do not offer a >typical= motive for seeking asylum, as we shall see further C has led to bottlenecks in the administrations in charge of asylum regulations: in the past, it took years to reach a decision on some applications; in the meantime applicants resided in the country in appalling conditions of poverty and marginalization (pushing them into the crudest systems of labor exploitation, including prostitution); often the administrative treatment was reduced to a very superficial inspection of the application in attempts to speed up the procedure and reduce the backlog of applications; the infrastructure for hosting asylum seekers rapidly (and chronically) proved to be grossly inadequate; and violence became a constant ingredient of the treatment of asylum applicants by the police force. This flooding of the administrative apparatus went hand in hand with negative stereotyping of asylum and asylum seekers (Blommaert & Verschueren 1998, Ch. 8), associating asylum seekers with violence and crime and qualifying >most of them= as >adventurers= who sought asylum exclusively for economic purposes (in popular parlance: >to take advantage of our generosity=).

In September 1998, a young Nigerian girl called Sémira Adamu died during her forced repatriation. Her asylum application, based on the argument that she would be forced to marry an old and violent man in Nigeria, had been rejected. She was put on a plane for Togo and seated in between two police men; when she started to shout, the police officers put a small pillow over her mouth. Sémira Adamu lost consciousness, went into a coma and died. Her violent death caused a public outcry both among asylum seekers and among the public at large. Asylum seekers came out of hiding and demonstrated, occupying churches and schools. A number of organizations were formed for the improvement of the living conditions and the chances of asylum for asylum seekers, and the government ordered a public inquiry into the procedures of repatriation of rejected applicants. For a brief period, asylum was a priority on the political agenda, and the negative stereotyping of asylum was transformed into a public image of victimhood. In the Spring of 1999, the protests gradually faded and the issue of asylum seekers resumed its previous shape and course, now even more negatively perceived because of the rather massive influx of refugees from Kosovo and Albania.

As we shall see later, the asylum procedure relies heavily on an investigation of the story of applicants. Upon their arrival in the country, they are interviewed on the causes and motives for fleeing their country and seeking asylum in Belgium. The general frame applied in this procedure is that of a criminal investigation (the interview often becomes an interrogation). Well over 90% of the applications are turned down, often C as we shall see C on very doubtful grounds. Politically, the >control= of immigration (i.e. the *reduction* of the number of effective immigrants) combined with a policy of >humane repatriation= of rejected applicants is a generally accepted doctrine. The new phenomenon of massive asylum seeking is rarely seen as an issue in its own rights, rather it is associated to the more general issue of immigration and immigrant policies in Belgium, and it is usually presented as a further complication of an already thorny issue of >integration=/assimilation of foreigners into the local cultural, linguistic and social community (Blommaert 1997).

The discursive patterns by means of which these political categories are being constructed and situated in the larger frame of reference of Belgian political society are beyond the scope of this paper; suffice it to state here that the issue of asylum seekers is obviously one in which rhetorical accomplishments and discursive constructions of reality are crucial. The politics of asylum in Belgium is a politics of representation in which discursively constructed and disseminated gross categories (e.g. >Political=, hence >legitimate= asylum seekers versus

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. >economic=, hence >illegitimate= asylum seekers) are crucial political instruments.

The historical situatedness of our data deserves some attention. The interviews we organized with asylum seekers were conducted between October/November 1998 and March/April 1999, i.e. during the brief period in which asylum seekers came out of hiding and were eager to tell their stories to all those interested, and during which there was some positive media and political attention for these stories. This explains, first, that and how we could collect our data at all. During these few months, asylum seekers became visible and their stories became publicly accessible. Second, it explains the nature of their stories: they are apologetic and argumentative, using a discursive space shaped by the Sémira Adamu crisis, in which new and anti-dogmatic formulations of asylum seeking, motives and experiences could be articulated.

3. Resources

One of the characteristics of the administrative world we live in is the unchallenged and apparently unchallengeable assumption that bureaucratic and administrative clients would have complete control over the medium and communicative skills in which bureaucratic and administrative procedures are being carried out. In Belgium (as undoubtedly elsewhere) administrative procedures require highly developed literacy skills as well as (some degree of) access to a standardized variety of a language (in Belgium: Dutch, French or German). It can be noted, in passing, that literacy requirements seem to increase in size and scope the lower one gets into society. Low-income people often have to go through a mass of complex and very diverse paperwork in order to get social welfare benefits, privileged access to social housing, medical treatment or education. Thus, James Collins= comment that Amodern educational systems produce stratified literacies: elites are socialized to an interpretive relation to texts, and nonelites to a submissive relation to texts@ (1995: 84) becomes pressingly relevant.

The first requirement, literacy, is taken for granted and rooted in a sociocultural tradition in which generalized schooling provides (stratified patterns of) literacy to *all* Belgian citizens. Being literate is a sociocultural given in Belgium. The second requirement is more controversial and multilayered: the emphasis on standard varieties is rooted in political-linguistic struggles of the past, discussion of which would take us too far. Standard varieties of languages were used as emblems of national identity in many parts of the world; the outcome of the struggle in Belgium gave rise to a highly complex and politically very sensitive language legislation in which tolerance for other speech varieties (nonstandard forms as well as foreign languages) is restricted. Thus, nonstandard varieties are allowed in the domain of orality and non-official language use; as soon as the bureaucratic and administrative arenas are being entered, the standard (written) variety of the language is imposed.

The fact is that the communicative requirements imposed on clients are conditioned by historically contingent phenomena such as the social distribution of communicative resources through, for instance, the education system, the mass media and so forth. In more than one way, the requirements thus presuppose membership of the society, or at least of societies (or social classes) with similar linguistic economies and communicative sociologies. Assumptions of choice in pragmatic theories (for instance in conversation analysis) are very often based on the implicit acceptance of such membership, and tend to obscure significant inequalities in the range of possible choices some people can control. Constraints on choice, anchored in inequality in speech repertoires, are certainly crucial features of our asylum seekers= data, and competence in the medium of narration is one issue. It does make a difference whether the narrator uses a language or language variety in which s/he is at ease

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. and of which s/he has good control. Narrating in a second, third or other foreign language may considerably reduce the set of resources from which speakers can choose for structuring their story and thus for >making their point=. As we shall see, this does not pre-empt the fact that they make their point; it does however influence the way in which interlocutors perceive their story and *get* the point.

Let us now take a closer look at some examples from the corpus. They illustrate the difficulties experienced by many speakers with expressing themselves in French, English or Dutch. More often than not, stories are told in hesitant styles full of self-corrections and mid-sentence changes of tactic or topic, less than adequate lexical selection, problems in verb inflection (e.g. tense and aspect marking), problems in selecting adequate pronouns, and so forth. At the same time, the stories that are being told are topically and structurally quite complex, as we shall see in the next section. The problems with language proficiency considerably complicate matters.

Example (1) illustrates the sort of stories that results from the use of >broken= French coupled with a detailed and complex home narrative. The interviewee, a man from Angola, is telling a piece of Angolan history to the interviewer.³

- (1) oui/l=autre président...(xxxxxx)/ on l=a empoisonné/ c=est le président Mobutu/ qui a mis le poison retardé/ il est parti au russe / l=URSS/ pour traîter/ il a retourné/ il est mort/ mais on a abandonné son corps hein/ oui/ { *Question: c=était un président de MPLA?* } c=était le même mouvement MPLA/ dans le temps / année septante-cinq/ quand il est mort on dit/ comme on ==il est marxisme/ on a pris on a choisi =on= on a fait faux testament/ cette testament c=était au temps du russe qui a fait ça/ comme toi tu =le= le président il est mort/ il a décidé Eduardo qui va me remplacer/ sans vote/ parce que il est toujours du même parti/ Eduardo il est d=origine angolais/ mais il est des Cap Verdiens/ parce que ce sont des anciens prisonniers/ et Portugais il a mis à l=île hein/ nous sommes à l=océan/ et on a mis une prison là-bas/ parce qu=il est venu pour commander l=indépendance/ c=était une petite ville =une petite= une petite village/ on a mis au pouvoir/ maintenant le président/ c=est on dit/ il dit que non/ tous les gens/ qui parlent Lingala/ les gens du Nord/ ce sont des gens plus malins/ plus intelligents/ par rapport au gens du Sud/ en Angola nous sommes quatre couleurs/ comme le Bré=le Brésil.

[yes/the other president...(xxxxxx)/they have poisoned him/ it=s president Mobutu/ who put the delayed poison/ he has left to Russian/ the USSR/ to treat/ he gave back/ he died/ but they have left his corpse, right/ yes/ *Question: it was a president of the MPLA?* / it was the same movement MPLA/ in those days/ year seventy-five/ when he died they say/ like they=he is Marxism/ they took they chose=they=they have made false testament/ those testament it was in the time of Russian that has made it/ since you you=the=the president is dead/ he decided Eduardo who is going to replace me/ without vote/ because he is always of the same party/ Eduardo he is of Angolan origin/ but he is of the Cape Verdians/ because they are former prisoners/ and Portuguese has put on the island, right/ we are at the ocean/ and they have put a prison over there/ because he had come to command the independence/ it was a small town= a small=a small village/ they have put to power/ now the president/ that is what they say/ he said that no/ all the people/ who speak Lingala/ the people from the north/ they are more clever people/ more intelligent/ in relation to the people from the south/ in Angola we are four colors/ like Bra=Brazil]

As we shall see later, a tremendous amount of information is squeezed into narrative passages such as this one. The point here, however, is that the narrative complexity and the contextual salience of what the man tells us is overshadowed by the medium in which he has to tell it: a variety of colloquial and informally acquired French in which grammatical, syntactic and lexical errors are frequent when measured against normative standard French. The

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. sequence of events is not marked by the usual tense and aspect markers; nouns and adjectives are used as synonyms (Ail est marxisme@ instead of Ail est marxiste@; Arusse@ instead of ARussie@); articles are deleted (APortugais@ instead of Ale Portugais@ or Ales Portugais@) and so on. The Angolan man clearly is at pains trying to provide a more or less coherent narrative in French. Hence, contextually crucial and sensitive episodes such as the one in which he describes the change of power in his country (crucial and sensitive because they form the basis of the reasons why he escaped from his country) are narrated as:

- (2) dans le temps / année septante-cinq/ quand il est mort on dit/ comme on ==il est marxisme/ on a pris on a choisi =on= on a fait faux testament/ cette testament c=était au temps du russe qui a fait ça/ comme toi tu =le= le président il est mort/ il a décidé Eduardo qui va me remplacer/ sans vote/ parce que il est toujours du même parti/

Such ways of narrating crucial and sensitive matters are offered to interviewers who are also nonnative speakers of French. But there are various sorts and degrees of >nonnativeness=, having to do with what sort of variety has been acquired by the speakers, through which types of channels and means (formal-informal learning, spoken and/or written, which genres). In this case, the interviewers were Belgian-Flemish highly literate university students with a more or less developed competence in >schoolbook French=, i.e. a variety of the standard language rarely used in practice. Students such as the group of interviewers in this project do not have much exposure to French, and they actively use it only on relatively rare occasions. So the interaction situation is one in which one party uses C and I adopt Fergusonian terminology for the moment C a very >Low= variety of French and another a very >High= variety, while both parties have difficulties in the production of spoken French and none of them is >fluent=. The passage in (2) therefore appears very confusing, rambling and incomprehensible to the Belgian interviewer.

The asylum seekers often acquire their varieties of European languages in informal circumstances: outside school, through exposure to specific varieties of speech, with dialect and/or jargon influences. This, as well as the effect it has on the interaction with the interviewers, can be seen in (3), where the same Angolan man (P) explains the sort of currency used in Angola:

- (3) P: mais en Angola on mange les dollars/ nous avons les
 Q: on mange?
 P: oui on mange= =d=dollars/ au magasin on achète en dollars / à cause de (mon= au magasin on dit)
 c=est les magasins des français/ elf

[P: but in Angola we eat dollars/ we have the

Q: we eat?

P: Yes we eat==d=dollars/ in the shop we buy in dollars/ because (sho= in the shop they say) it=s the shop of the French/ Elf]

Q the interviewer interrupts P with a request for clarification on the phrase Aon mange les dollars@. The phrase Amanger@ followed by the name of a currency (or a generic term for >money=) means >to use a specific type of money= in colloquial Congolese French. Interestingly, P does not recognize Q=s request for clarification as referring to Amanger@ but understands it as a request to clarify why *dollars* are being used as currency in Angola.

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. So his answer elaborates on the fact that the shops are owned by the French petrol company Elf.⁴

The next example illustrates how expressing sometimes even quite simple concepts or experiences can become highly problematic because of the limitations imposed by the medium in which the story has been told. A woman from Angola tells her experiences in a closed asylum seekers= center. She tries to explain that there is a problem with *ventilation* in the center; the whole fragment in (4) is a struggle to find the right way to express >ventilation=.

(4) il y en a des familles qui vivent ici/ des enfants/ mais .. Il n=y a pas des choses de vapore==pour vaporiser des cigarettes/parce que la cigarette là-bas ce n=est pas de==c=est de==de tabac/ les gens il va fumer du matin au soir/ il n=y a pas de fenêtres pour sortir euh/ enlév==entrer le vent==il n=y a pas/presque tout c=est fermé/ dans les toilettes c=est la même chose/ des fenêtres ça n=ouvre pas

[there are families who live here/ children/ but ... there are no things to vapore= to vaporize cigarettes/ because the cigarette there it is not the== it=s = tobacco/ the people he smokes from morning till evening/ there are no windows to get out ehr/ take aw=get wind in=there are none/ almost everything is closed/ in the toilets it=s the same/ the windows they don=t open]

Metapragmatic framing, speech act selection and other phenomena that belong to the sociocultural anchoring of language are also sources of communicative problems in our data. Often, the use of a common medium in native-nonnative speaker interviews triggers the assumption from the native speaker that the interlocutor not only shares the *linguistic* code, but also the *pragmatic and metapragmatic* codes. Giving metapragmatic instructions about the way in which the interview will be conducted (a common opening phase of research interviews) is one such source of problems. The following fragment is taken from the start of an interview with R, a male refugee from the Ivory Coast. The tape starts running, and B the interviewer begins by giving some >director=s instructions= to R. R speaks Dutch and the interview is conducted in Dutch; but given our emphasis on pragmatic patterns in the discussion of this example I shall concentrate on the English translation in (5).

(5)
B I think that it would be easiest if you start/with how you got here ehr
R =by plane
B yes/ why wh=why you came here/ ehr/ and how you got here/ that you just/ we won=we won=t be asking many questions/ it=s what/ that you just/ talk a bit
R yes
B say what you..
R =yes it=s very hard to say (...)

B=s intention is to provide some metapragmatic instructions for the interview. But mentioning one topic of inquiry (Ahow you got here@ in line 1) triggers a response from R (Aby plane@, line 2). R had interpreted line 1 as a question, not as part of a set of preliminary instructions. B repairs the mistake in line 3-4, R acknowledges this in line 5, and B hands the floor to R in line 6. Two problems can be identified with respect to R=s misinterpretation of B=s statement in line 1. First, The interview was in Dutch, B=s mother tongue. Dutch, for R, is a new, foreign language which he masters admirably but not completely. The original utterance in line 1, spoken by B, was Ahow

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. dat je naar hier bent gekomen@ (>how-that-you-to-here-have-come=), in which the Aho@ (>how=) is meant to stand for the total set of circumstances of R=s coming to Belgium. It is not uncommon in colloquial Dutch to ask Ahow [Dutch hoe] did you get here@ with the intention of learning the reasons for one=s being there (thus an appropriate answer could be e.g. AWell, I had to be in the neighborhood, so I decided to stop by@). But R, a non-native speaker of Dutch, only picks up the >typical= instrumental meaning of Aho@ (>how=), and answers C appropriately C that he came here A met vliegtuig@ (>with-plane=). B=s repair in line 3 consists in differentiating and specifying the precise semantic directions of his questions C Ahow@ as well as Awhy@. So part of the mistake is based on differential competence in Dutch, more precisely, it is based on R=s lack of familiarity with the semantic and pragmatic nuances of colloquial Dutch.

Second, there is also a mistake in *speech act interpretation*. R fails to pick up the *declarative* nature of B=s utterance in line 1, and interprets it instead as a *question* to which he has to reply. In all likelihood, R interprets the circumspect formulation AI think that it would be easiest if you start/with how you got here@ as an indirect, deferent question, rather than as the neutral declarative statement intended by B. Both problems have to do with the intercultural nature of the communicative event. The prima facie sharedness of the medium C R has an admirable knowledge of Dutch C can trigger an illusion that together with the lexical and grammatical aspects of the language also the complete set of sociocultural, pragmatic and metapragmatic aspects are shared by the participants. This is usually not true. In this fragment we see that differential competence in a language can be hardly noticeable, as it can lie in aspects of language that are less clearly visible than e.g. wrong lexical choices or grammatical (e.g. gender, article or inflectional) errors.

The various difficulties with competence in the medium of the talk, reviewed so far, all suggest that stories are told in >simple= varieties of languages. But this does not mean that such stories are >simple=, nor that narrators fail to bring about significant degrees of narrative structure in their stories. Even though the language may be simple and plain, and despite massive amounts of >errors= in the language, stories can be narratively complex and well executed. Let me illustrate this with an example from our data. The fragment is taken from the beginning of an interview with Habiba, a Somali woman. H is Habiba; A and B are interviewers, the interview was done in English.

(6)

H: I=m from *Somalia and my name is Habiba Mohammed and I=I have *five childrens and I coming here before the children are coming=when I was euh when I=I=m arrive in Belgium I was *alone\

A: ah\

H: yeah\in sake of the war=the war of Somalia\

A: uhuh\

H: And. I w=I=m. Twen=*thirty five years old\

A: uhuh\

H: and euh I was working in Somalia ICRC International red Cross

A: that=s

H: ICRC *Red Cross\

A: ah OK OK jaja

B + H: [acknowledge]

H: and I was euh office assistant\

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A: ja

H: yeah. So Somalia is starting war *nineteen ninety one

A: uhuh\

H: so until ninety one to ninety five I was in Somalia

A: uhuh\

H: and [baby starts crying] wa [laughs] and I have *four children at that time and euhm.. My husband comes from euh *north Somalia

A: uhuh

H: and I *south Somalia is fighting north at=at south is fighting\

A: uhuh

H: so my=my husband and my children have no. *safety for their lives

A: uhuh

Habiba clearly has difficulties speaking English. Her statements contain Dutch calques such as >in sake= (line 4, from Dutch >in zake= [i.e. >concerning=]), erratic plural marking (>childrens=, line 1) and verb inflection (>and I coming here=, line 1), and so on. But let us re-transcribe Habiba=s narrative, deleting the interviewer=s backchanneling interventions as well as the clarification request in lines 9-12. These backchanneling interventions are important, because they support the structuring of Habiba=s narrative; but by deleting them we arrive at a number of narrative statements:

- (7)
1. I=m from *Somalia and my name is Habiba Mohammed and I=I have *five childrens and I coming here before the children are coming=when I was euh when I=I=m arrive in Belgium I was *alone\
 2. yeah\in sake of the war=the war of Somalia\
 3. and. I w=I=m. Twen=*thirty five years old\
 4. and euh I was working in Somalia ICRC International red Cross
 5. and I was euh office assistant\
 6. So Somalia is starting war *nineteen ninety one
 7. so until ninety one to ninety five I was in Somalia
 8. and wa= and I have *four children at that time and euhm.. My husband comes from euh *north Somalia
 9. and I *south Somalia is fighting north at=at south is fighting\
 10. so my=my husband and my children have no. *safety for their lives

There is a considerable degree of narrative structure in this fragment, despite the >broken= English in which it is made. First, Habiba succeeds in bring in new information in each of her statements. The statements do not overlap; each of them introduces a new element in the story. Also, there is a clear break in this sequence of narrative statements. Although each of the statements adds new information, Habiba marks a thematic break between statement 5 and 6. Statements 1-5 all refer to Habiba herself, they identify her (name, age, country of origin, profession); statements 6-10 are about >[the war in] Somalia= and provide background to the reasons why she came to Belgium. The break between both thematic parts is marked by cohesive devices: >and= in the first part, >so= (and >and=) in the second. The use of these particles creates a complex pattern of information in the story:

(8) PART I

1. I=m from *Somalia

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. exposure would have a beneficial effect on their asylum applications. The answer is negative: the authorities publicly claim that they would adopt a more flexible attitude towards asylum seekers; yet as soon as the latter present themselves to the authorities, the answer they get is that they will have to follow the procedures. The Angolese woman elaborates this further:

(10)

4: à la télé on dit/ *ooh noon / on peut pas donner tous les personnes après cinq ans les==on a fait euh dix ans/ les choses comme ça / on va regarder les procédures / mais le premier jour on dit à la télé / ooh noon / on va *donner les gens qu'on a fait cinq ans dans notre pays/ parce qu'il y a eu des enfants qui étu=étudient ici depuis longtemps/ on a fait *six ans==*cinq ans et les enfants ils vont à l'école==c'est le bourgmestre de Bruxelles qui a dit comme ça==

GM: ==hmm=

D: =ouais/ les enfants sont *intégrés chez nous depuis longtemps==il part à l'école/ mais maintenant je pense qu'on va les donner les ==pour donner les enfants==là à ses parents/ *mais après quelques jours on a dit/ OOH NOOON on va euh==suivre les procédures [hits hands on legs] MAIS *COMMENT ON PEUT SUIVRE LES PROCEDURES? [annoyed] depuis moi je suis ici en Belgique/ je suis sans papiers/ tu mé suis?/ sans papiers/ ici/ exemple/ pas pour moi pour le moment/ il vient ici comme un==a une femme ici dans le journal==hier==on=alu/ sans papiers/ venue ici/ il a trois enfants==cinq enfants ici en Belgique/ sept ans==six ans sans papiers/ alors/ à ce moment-là vous disez/ faut suivre les procédures/ la femme là/ depuis l'été vous avez eu les procé=les papiers/ vous avez jeté les papiers de la femme/ on sait pas qu'est-ce que c'est/ *quelle procédure on peut suivre?/ pour la femme/ c'est *ça les problèmes/ les *Belges peut pas donner les gens un papier comme ça/ ils pensent qu'on donne/ *aah tous les gens ils restent dans notre pays/ mais euh==*SI LONGTEMPS ils part dans le pays des gens pour rester là/ à *Portugal il y a des Belges==on a *fait quelque chose là-bas

Translation:

4: on the telly they say/ *ooh nooo / we cannot give all the people after five years the==they have done eh ten years/ the things like that / they are going to look at the procedures / but the first day they say on the telly / oohh nooo / we will *give the people that has done five years in our country / >cause there have been children who stu=studied here since long / they have done *six years==*five years and the children go to school== it's the mayor of Brussels who says like that==

GM: ==mh m==

D: =yeah/ they children they have integrated here since long=he leaves for school but now I think that they=ll give them the=to give to the children=there to their parents/ *but after a few days they said/ oohh nooo we will eh=follow the procedures [hits hands on legs] BUT *HOW CAN WE FOLLOW THE PROCEDURES? [annoyed] *since I arrived here in Belgium I=ve got no papers/ do you follow me?/ no papers/ here/ example/ not for me for the moment/ there comes here like a=there=s a woman here in the newspaper=yesterday=we have read/ people without documents/came here/ he=s got three children==five children here in Belgium/ seven years=six years without documents/ so/ at that moment you say/ got to follow the procedures/ that woman there/ since the summer you have e=u the proce=the documents/ you have thrown away that woman=s documents/ we don=t know what=s=wh=procedure/ *what procedure one can follow/ for the woman? That is the problems/ the *Belgians cannot give to the people th=documents just like that/ they think that they give/ *aaahh all these people stay in our country/ but eh=*so long they leaves to countries of the people to stay there/ in *Portugal there are Belgians=they have done something

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there

The Angolese woman tries to make a point here, and a crucial point in understanding her condition and experiences as a refugee: the gap between what Belgians believe happens to refugees, and what really happens to them in Belgium. She makes this point in very broken French, part of the features of which do not appear in the English translation (e.g. ambiguous 3rd person >on=, meaning >they= as well as >us= and impersonal >one=). But just as what we saw before in the case of Habiba, the difficulties D has with expressing herself in grammatically correct French tend to obscure the elaborate argumentative structure of D=s talk. Prompted by GM=s suggestion that TV exposure would create a more favorable climate for asylum seekers to obtain their documents (i.e. to be >regularized= and given legal residence permits) she argues that this is not the case. She describes what happened. First, largely in quoted direct speech (Aoooh noo@) she describes how the Mayor of Brussels declared on TV that people with children who go to school in Belgium and who have been in the country for years would be regularized. This is done in lines 1-6. Next she describes how the Belgian authorities shift their position a couple of days later, again using quoted direct speech (line 10). She then states her own position: Abut how can we follow the procedures?@, and then starts elaborating on that theme, using an anecdote picked up from the newspaper, of a woman who had been here for years and lived here with her children. This then leads to a conclusion and a coda, in which the situation of asylum seekers in Belgium is compared to the freedom with which Belgians settle elsewhere in the world. Despite her >broken= French, D constructs a clear pattern of arguments, schematically represented as follows. Note also how the central motif of the argument, the issue of how to follow procedures, is marked by parallelisms (indicated by arrows Z):

(11) **1. Background:**

They will give the [documents] to the children to their parents
because they have been integrated here (says the Mayor of Brussels)

2. Point of departure:

[BUT] afterwards they say that we have to follow the procedures

Z

3. Refutation

3.1. Core

But how can we follow the procedures?

Z

3.2. Elaboration

1. Ever since I arrived here, I lived without documents

2. Anecdote:

Report

yesterday we have read in the newspaper

A woman with no documents and 3/5 children

No documents for 7/6 years

Comment

And then they say that you have to follow the procedure

[BUT] you have thrown away that woman=s documents

Z

We don=t know what procedure to follow

Z

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4. Conclusion and coda

That is the problem

The Belgians cannot give documents just like that [i.e. they *don't* give papers just like that, procedures must be followed, and this is problematic]

[BUT] Belgians believe that everyone just stays in their country

[WHILE] Belgians themselves can be found all over the world (Portugal)

Just like in Habiba=s case, we see a well-organized narrative pattern emerge over and beyond difficulties in handling the medium of narration. The core of the argument is clearly marked, and the refutation is accomplished by means of comparison of D=s situation with that of someone else (the anecdote) and leads to a convincing point: staying in Belgium is not as simple as Belgians tend to believe it is; in fact, Belgians have an easier time when they decide to go and live abroad.

Stories told in >simple= language are not necessarily >simple= stories. But they may be stories that are hardly >understandable= and open to all sorts of misinterpretation by interlocutors who, often, have a different (yet equally limited) competence in the medium in which the interview is done. It takes a massive effort to detect coherence and structure in the stories told in >broken= varieties of Dutch, English or French, because coherence and structure have to be sought at levels of linguistic structuring not easily penetrable to nonspecialists, and difficult to pick up on-line while the story is told.⁵ To such forms of structuring we will turn in section 4. But before that, we have to refer back to what we said at the beginning of this section: in our society, administrative procedures and the rights that are dependent of their >correct= fulfillment, require and assume the sharedness of linguistic and communicative resources. The fact of the matter is that these resources often lack from the repertoire of the asylum seekers interviewed by us. Consequently, issues of resources are crucial elements in the forms of narrative inequality investigated here. Inequalities in speech repertoires condition narrative inequalities and hence inequalities in the allocation of social rights.

4. Home narratives

4.1. A contextual account

One feature in many interviews is the way in which interviewees attempt to provide detailed contextual accounts on life, circumstances, politics and conflicts in their >home= society formulated in the shape of sub-narratives of the larger narrative. We will call such contextual accounts >home narratives=. Often these narratives are triggered by an awareness that the story of the asylum application cannot be fully understood unless other people know some details about the society they come from, the particular events that caused their flight, and so on. Such exposés can be highly complicated. They can disturb an expected pattern of sequential event narrating (>first this, then that=) and give a muddled impression. The details given by interviewees can also backfire: details are open to scrutiny and one inaccuracy, inconsistency or contradiction in the story can be enough to disqualify asylum seekers, as we will see in section 5.

Yet, for the asylum seekers such details can be essential in explaining their situation and their experiences. The following fragment is taken from an interview with a male refugee (R) from the Ivory Coast. The interview was in Dutch. At one point, the interviewers (B and T) ask Awhat were the precise reasons why you came here?@. What

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follows is a long contextualizing narrative, placed between two general framing statements which I will give in bold.

(12)

R: (zucht) **ja/voor/alle mensen is het moeilijk de politiek van Ivoorkust/ te begrijpen/** want/ er wordt nooit iets over gesproken/ maar bij ons is er/ is er nog het leger van Frankrijk aanwezig/ onze/ euh onze luchthaven is de basis van het Franse leger/en die mensen zijn toch daar/ en we=we hebben geen recht om zelf ons=onze regering te te te kiezen/ ja die mensen worden door Frankrijk genoemd/maar wij=wij zijn geen kolonie meer/ sedert achtendertig jaar zijn wij/ euh/hebben wij onze onafhankelijkheid gekregen/ maar tot nu toe worden onze ministers altijd door Frankrijk gekozen/.../ ons land ligt/ in het midden van West-Afrika/ en dat is een strategische positie/

20: ja ja

18: wij=wij zijn niet rijk/ en / OK/ acht jaar geleden/ probeerden wij politieke par=partijen op te richten en zo/ maar de regering zelf heeft achtendertig partijen opgericht/ terwijl dat het moeilijke is om/ euh/ gekozen te worden of een land te le=te leiden/ als je geen lid van de partij bent/ dan hebben zij=hebben wij andere / euh/ toestemming van partijen te creëren gekre=gekregen/ en daarnaast/ of bovendien heeft de regering zelf achtendertig partijen gecreëerd/ naast de =plus de=deuh monopartisme zo

20: ja

18: de monopartisme die bestaat sedert zestig tot negentig/ dertig jaar/ en ja/ zij hebben zelf dertig=ja achtendertig partijen gecreëerd/ de mensen die niet voor de regering werken/ ik bedoel/ in/ euh/ de=de privé/ het privéwerk is heel weinig/ dan werkt al=iedereen voor=voor de staat/ en als/ ja de mensen die voor de staat werken/ zijn zoals deuh/ gevangenis/ zij zijn zoals gevangen/ want je/ je=je bent altijd bang/ jouw werk te verliezen/ misschien in jouw familie met jouw neven en nichten en zo zijn jullie misschien ongeveer honderd mensen en je bent alleen als persoon die werkt/ dat/ ja/ al die andere mensen zijn/ die=die zijn arm en/ die rekenen allemaal op jou/ dan moet je jouw werk houden anders wordt iemand van jouw familie gekocht/ om te gebruikt te worden tegen je/ ja zo=n dingen/ ja zo=n kleine dingen/ en wij// ja/ ja daar is onze=onze president van onze partij [wijst naar foto in de huiskamer] wij hebben ook=wij proberen ons hier te organiseren in België in Nederland in Frankrijk/ de=de grote groep bevindt zich in Frankrijk in Italië in Duitsland ook in andere landen/ in Nederland/ de mensen van Nederland komen bij ons/ overmorgen hebben wij onze/ ja grote vergadering in Brussel/.../ dat is het dan/ ja deuh reden was dat in vijf=vijf en negentig moesten wij/ een verkiezing doen/ en in vierendertig/ euh vier en negentig moest een lijst van alle bewoners gedaan worden/ maar de mensen die=die/ euh die=die/deden/ als die bij u komen en die weten dat je een=een lid van de oppositie bent/ dan wordt je=jouw name=euh jouw naam niet ingeschreven/ en als jouw naam niet ingeschreven wordt kan je niet stemmen/ en die hebben zo gedaan/ ja wij hebben geprobeerd/ die lijst terug te vinden/ja/ ja een andere te maken/

2: ja

18: maar dat was illegaal

2: ja

18: ja/ dan worden wij vervolgd/ **en zo ben ik moeten vluchten**

Translation:

[R (sighs) **yeah/for *everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast because/ it is never discussed/** but over there we still have the *French army/ ehr ehr our airport is a French army base/ and these people are there anyway and we=we=we have no right to choose our=our own government/ yes these people are appointed by France/ but we are *not a colony anymore...since thirty-eight years we ehr

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have obtained our independence/ but until now our ministers have always been appointed by France...our country is in the center of West-Africa/ and that is a strategic position

T =yes yes

R yes/so...yes there is=we are not rich/ and..okay..eight years ago we tried to create political par=parties and so [louder] but the government itself has created *thirty-eight parties/ while this is the difficult thing to ehr get elected or to lead a country.. If you are not a member of a party/ *then they=we obtained different ehr permission to create parties/ and apart from that or on *top of that the government has created thirty eight parties/ apart from the=*plus the thehh monopartism like that

T yes

R yes the monopartism exists since sixty/ till ninety/ thirty years/ and yes they have themselves created thirty=thirty-eight parties/ the people who *don=t work for the government/ I mean/ in ehr..the=the private the private sector is very small/ everyone already works for=for the government/ and if.. yes the people who work for the government they are like ehr the prison/ they are like imprisoned/ because you..you=you are always afraid of losing your job/ maybe in your family with your nephews and nieces and so maybe you are about one hundred people and you are the only one who has a job/ that/ yes/ all these other people are/ they=they are poor and they all count on you / then you have to keep your job *if not *someone from your family will be bought to be used against you/ yes things like that..small things like that/ and we...yes [sighs] yes there is our president of our party [points to a picture on the wall] / we also have=we also try to get organized here in Belgium in Holland in France/ the=the large group is in France in Italy in Germany also in other countries..in Holland/ the people from Holland will come here the day after tomorrow we have our/ yes large meeting in Brussels...that=s it...yes thehh reason was that in nine=ninety five/ we had to do an election/ and in thirty four=ninety four a list of all the *inhabitants had to be made/ but the people who did that when they came to you and they know that you are a=a member of the opposition/ then your name=ehr your name would not be written down/ and if your name is not written down you can=t vote/ and that=s what they did/ yes we tried to find that list/ yes and make another one

B yes

R but that was illegal

B yes

R if it/ yes/ then we are prosecuted/ **and so I had to escape/**

Almost forty lines of monologue separate the question as to why R had to escape from the Ivory Coast and R=s conclusion to the answer *Aand so I had to escape@*. In this monologue, he tries to capture some of the basic political mechanisms and problems of his home country: French neocolonialism (lines 2-7), monopartism and the difficult transition to multipartism (lines 9-14), political clientelism (lines 16-24), the opposition movement in the diaspora (lines 25-29), and the direct cause of his flight: protest against the manipulation of the elections (lines 29-38). This fragment is again followed by a very detailed account of Ivoirian political and institutional customs blended with accounts of events leading to R=s flight.

4.2. *Patterns and structures*

Obviously, many would judge this to be a very complex and unclear answer to the question. It takes the man almost forty lines of narration before he can conclude *Aand so I had to escape@*. The Ivoirian man starts his answer by saying *Afor *everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast@*. Clearly, he feels the need to provide such detailed information on life in the Ivory Coast, because without that sort of background, a precise

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understanding of why he escaped from his country would be impossible for people who hardly know anything about
life and politics in his country (cf. Abecause/ it is never discussed@).

But if we look a bit closer into the narrative structure of this fragment, we see the following pattern
emerge. First, the narrative can be divided into episodes marked by particular narrative patterns:

(13)

1. for *everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast
because.. it is never discussed
2. But over here we still have the French army
ehr ehr our airport is a French army base
and these people are there anyway
3. and we=we=we have no right to choose our=our own government
yes these people are appointed by France
but we are *not a colony anymore...
since thirty-eight years we ehr have obtained our independence
but until now our ministers have always been appointed by France...
{reason} our country is in the center of West-Africa
and that is a strategic position
4. {preceded by reply from T} yes/so...yes there is=we are not rich/ and..
5. okay..eight years ago we tried to create political par=parties and so
6. [louder] but the government itself has created *thirty-eight parties
 - 6.1. while this is the difficult thing to ehr get elected or to lead a country..
If you are not a member of a party/ *then they=we obtained different ehr permission to create
parties/
and apart from that or on *top of that the government has created thirty eight parties/
apart from the=*plus the thehh monopartism you see?
 - 6.2. yes the monopartism exists since sixty/ till ninety/ thirty years/
 - 6.3. and yes they have themselves created thirty=thirty-eight parties/
 - 6.4. the people who *don=t work for the government/
I mean/ in ehr..the=the private the private sector is very small/
everyone already works for=for the government/
and if.. yes the people who work for the government they are like ehr the prison/ they are like
imprisoned/
because you..you=you are always afraid of losing your job/
-maybe in your family with your nephews and nieces and so
maybe you are about one hundred people
-and you are the only one who has a job
that/ yes/ all these other people are/ they=they are poor
and they all count on you /
-then you have to keep your job

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-*if not *someone from your family will be bought to be used against you/
yes things like that..small things like that/

7. and we...yes [sighs]

yes there is our president of our party
we also have=we also try to get organized here in Belgium in Holland in France/
the=the large group is in France in Italy in Germany
also in other countries..in Holland/
the people from Holland will come here the day after tomorrow
we have our/ yes large meeting in Brussels...

8. that =s it...yes thehh reason was that

8.1. in nine=ninety five/ we had to do an election/
and in thirty four=ninety four a list of all the *inhabitants had to be made/
8.2. but the people who did that
when they came to you and they know that you are a=a member of the opposition/
then your name=ehr your name would not be written down/
and if your name is not written down you can=t vote/
and that=s what they did/
8.3. yes we tried to find that list/ yes
and make another one
8.4. but that was illegal

9. if it/ yes/ then we are prosecuted/
and so I had to escape/

We can distinguish nine narrative episodes, each marked prosodically or by means of a marker such as >but= or >and=. The most complex episode is episode 6, subdivided into at least four sub-episodes. If we reorganize this narrative pattern so as to structure it into an argumentative >answer=-pattern to the question, we see the following (paraphrases are given between accolades):

(14)

Why did you escape from the Ivory Coast?

Point of departure

1. For everyone it is difficult to understand the politics of the Ivory Coast

General reason: neocolonialism

2. We still have the French army

3. And we have no right to choose our own government

{reasons:} we are in the center of West-Africa

4. {that is why the French are there, because} we are not rich

Specific reason: membership of political opposition party

5. Eight years ago we tried to create political parties

6. {this is problematical, because} the government itself has created 38 parties

{the government manipulates the democratization process: monopartyism plus 38 bogus parties}

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{iron grip of the régime on society} you are always afraid of losing your job

7. {our party also exists in Europe}

8. The {immediate} reason was {election fraud}
{the régime tried to commit fraud in voter registration}
{we tried to counterfeit our own voter registration list}
but that was illegal

Conclusion

9. Then we are prosecuted and so I had to escape

This home narrative plays a crucial role in >making sense= for the asylum seekers in the sense indicated above: without all these details, an adequate understanding of his story and of the motives for his asylum application would be impossible. For the Ivoirian man, the immediate cause of his problems is one issue, the wider context of neocolonialism and an oppressive one-party regime is another. The man broke the Ivoirian law in trying to counterfeit a voter registration list; but the justification for this act is the wider political context which makes clear that the Ivory Coast is not a democracy, that the laws are dictatorial, and that he and his friends broke that dictatorial law in their fight for democracy. His asylum application was jeopardized in Belgium on grounds that he broke the law in his home country; his home narrative is an attempt to explain the justified nature of his asylum application. In sum: his home narrative is not a side-track, it is right on track.

4.3. Contextualizing accounts

Let us go somewhat deeper into the explanatory and argumentative functions of these home narratives. R, in the fragment above, starts his monologue with a deep sigh and a reflection on the ignorance of Belgian people about Ivoirian politics. In other interviews, we saw such home narratives framed in terms of absence of attention from the >international public opinion= C >everyone should know this= (a phenomenon also noted by Malkki 1996 among Hutu refugees in Tanzania). In either case, the accurate contextualization of personal experiences in terms of local political, economic, social and cultural terms appears to be a crucial explanatory strategy to attain >understanding=. Text-structurally, home narratives are often clearly framed by utterances situating them in relation to a particular argument or explanandum: preceded by framing statements such as Ayou must know that...@, Ayou see, in my country...@, Apeople here don=t know that...@ and so on, and followed by statements connecting the home narrative to a particular argument such as Athat is why...@, Aand so...@. So one of their functions is to provide a particular epistemic format: a metapragmatically framed >aside= in which crucial referential and indexical >fillings= are given of terms, concepts and features of the story at large.

This epistemic format is shaped by means of contextualizing discourses of time and place. The refugee experience is an experience of displacement, not unlike the one described for native American groups by Collins (1998) and seen as crucial in understanding the work of identity of such groups in light of changing living conditions, political allegiances, economic practices and physical migrations. Stories from such groups thus display a complex interplay of physical space (e.g. place names), social space (e.g. sociocultural values or ethical codes associated to certain places) and narrative space (discursive articulations through indexical links in a narrative), in which migrant, minority or other social identities are being shaped (cf. Collins 1998: Ch. 6). Malkki (1996) furthermore demonstrated how physical displacement C part of the *condition humaine* of refugees C gives rise to

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. forms of remembering that include spatial as well as temporal trajectories of leaving, being transported, settling, staying and returning, all of which become characteristic of the exile identity of the Hutu refugees she investigated.

In our data too, displacement becomes a matter of identity, and (re)telling the story of escape and exile as well as the story of dealing with Belgian authorities gives rise to narratives that provide the core of the work of self-identification as a refugee: the autobiography of refugees takes the shape of *trajectory* telling. Temporal and spatial elements are used in constructing >refugeeness=, as this identity relies on the fact of having left one place, traveled across parts of the globe and settled in another place. Surely, the increasing structuration of narratives into >fully formed narratives= testifies to the gradual and discursive practice-based construction of such refugee identities.

In the example of the Ivoirian man, three places are articulated together with three time frames. Three different time frames are used to qualify features or events associated to either Belgium or the Ivory Coast: the present (incorporating the act of telling), the past and a timeless, permanent state of affairs. The timeless and the past frames are used to qualify the Ivory Coast; the present is used to qualify Belgium. We can summarize these in the following schema:

Time	Place
<p>present</p>	<p>HERE: Belgium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -systemic observations: people don=t understand politics in the Ivory Coast -political activism in exile
<p>past</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Long (38 years) ii) Short (8 years, critical moment 1995) 	<p>THERE: Ivory Coast</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -monopartism, dictatorship -political activism, election incident
<p>timeless</p>	<p>THERE: Ivory Coast</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -systemic observations: neocolonialism, strategic location, poverty, clientelism

Richard Bauman (1986, quoted in Briggs 1997) defines narrative as Aa representation of a segment of social life in such a way as to create a series of sequentially ordered events@. In the home narrative discussed here, the *temporal* sequence of events from past to present which would constitute a >typical= narrative is >broken= by a number of systemic observations with respect to the general political and social situation in the Ivory Coast, narrated in a factual timeless present tense. Thus, in response to the question >why did you escape from the Ivory Coast=, the Ivoirian man presents us with a classic >narrative= in the sense of Bauman=s definition, the chronological unfolding of events of which is, however, >scrambled= temporally. We get a sequence of narrative episodes in which the time frame shifts between present, past and timeless states. If we place the narrative units identified and numbered in (13) and (14) above in a schema based on the three time frames (and keeping in mind the connection between time frames and places), the sequential-temporal ordering in the narrative appears as follows (numbers refer to the episodes):

Present (here)	past (there)	timeless (there)
1		
		2
		3
		4
	5	
	6	
		6.1
	6.2	
	6.3	
		6.4
7		
	8	
9 >	< 9	

The starting point of the narrative is the here-and-now: an observation of the ignorance of the Belgians about the predicament of the Ivoirians, considerably complicating life for Ivoirian refugees in Belgium. Next, a timeless time frame is introduced in which general contextualizing >facts= are being offered, linguistically articulated in factual and declarative expressions without concrete temporal anchoring (episodes 2, 3, 4). Once this timeless, general context has been sketched, a more concrete and temporally sequentialized account of events starts (episodes 5, 6, 6.2, 6.3, 8) interrupted twice by a timeless contextualizing comment (6.1, 6.4) and once by an episode connecting the events in the Ivory Coast to the present in exile (7). The narrative concludes with a statement (9) that can both be seen as a closure of the sequential account of events and as an anchoring of the whole preceding story into the present situation of exile and asylum seeking in Belgium. It can, of course, also be seen as the point at which both aspects intersect and become one: the present situation of being a refugee.

This pattern of temporal and spatial deixis is both a generic and an epistemic-argumentative matter. It is generic in the sense that it constitutes the genre of home narratives: nonlinear references to here/there and now/then/always make up the considerable complexity of such stories. They make them into the winding and confused/confusing narratives they often are seen to be. It is at the same time epistemic/argumentative in the sense that it is directed at a hearer (and at overhearers) who need to be instructed about these issues. This other-

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. directedness of home narratives makes them fulfill the contextualizing functions they have in the story at large: they provide settings, scenes, referential domains and indexicalities that need to be adopted by the hearer. In this move, there appears to be an acute awareness of the categories and interpretive resources of the hearer: the assumption used in telling home narratives is that (i) Belgian hearers *do not know* this; (ii) consequently their view of the situation in the home country is *wrong* and prejudices a correct interpretation of the causes and motives for the asylum application; (iii) hence, the Belgian hearers *need to know* a series of things, so as to modify their categories and interpretive resources in treating the story of the asylum seeker. Home narratives are based upon a perception of *false contextualization* of situations and events in the countries of origin C wars, political conflicts, poverty C and are aimed at recontextualizing or >recentering= them (Bauman & Briggs 1990). The recentering is a process of localizing the conflicts, events and upheavals: instead of broad, abstract and impersonal (>decentered=) categories of war, conflict, crisis, poverty and so on, concrete and highly personal, >local= indexicalities are offered: >this is not *the war* in Angola; this is *my war* in Angola=. And the centering and localizing is performed by means of stories that blend personal chronological trajectories C autobiographies C with general framing statements on how life was and is over there and what people need to know in order to correctly understand the autobiographical narrative.

The analysis so far has probably not provided unique features of home narratives. Undoubtedly, analyses of other >centered= autobiographical narratives would show similar characteristics of shifting temporal and spatial reference and indexicality, other-directedness and argumentative (recontextualizing) bias. The significance of asylum seekers= home narratives, I believe, lies not exclusively in their structural and narrative features; rather it lies in their institutional dimension, in the fact that their generic features are crucial resources for the asylum seekers in the asylum procedure, and highly problematic resources at the same time. Their significance lies in the particular position they take in the asylum procedure.

5. Home narratives in the asylum procedure

5.1. Asylum procedure and narratives

We now have to move back to the comments we made at the outset of this paper. In the Belgian asylum procedure, the asylum seekers= stories assume a central and critical role. The basis on which applications are being examined and sanctioned is the textual set of statements taken from the asylum seeker, in which s/he announces his/her desire to seek asylum in Belgium and provides reasons and motives for that desire. Inconsistencies in the stories are a major cause for refusing refugee status to asylum seekers. As we will see below, big and small inconsistencies, ranging from contradictions between two versions of the story over not remembering names, places or dates, and superficial or incomplete knowledge of things assumed to be known to people from one country (e.g. the name of the president, names of towns and cities...) can all serve as cause for refusal. Strangely enough in a legal system backed by sophisticated high tech and advanced forensic sciences, this kind of legal procedure heavily relies on narrative analysis.

Narrative analysis, of course, performed in ways that can only be qualified as impressionistic. We have old and time-tested rules of evidence, used to investigate statements made by people living in a highly literate environment, whose memories are supported by a (sometimes massive) literate >archive= (diaries, notebooks,

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. newspaper clippings, photographs, all kinds of little documentary souvenirs of events in one's life), and whose statements are produced and interpreted in an interactional setting in which the interlocutors share the same linguistic resources and communicative skills (see the discussion in section 3 above). These rules of evidence stress textual consistency, linearity, logic, rationality and factuality; they require considerable attention to details; they rely on written language as the basic and most lasting format of declaring >truth=; in short, they are highly culture- and society-specific and reflect local ideologies of language, literacy and communication. These rules of evidence are applied without much ado to statements made by people of whom few of these cultural formats of language and communication can be taken for granted. Hence, what happens in the institutional processing of asylum seekers' stories is often a battle with unequal arms, and the confrontation of different narrative conventions creates a huge problem of justice and fairness.⁶

Attention to asylum seekers' storytelling conventions is scant. The stories themselves as well as the ways in which they are received by officials (notes, summaries, transcripts...) are effectively >blackboxed= and impossible to get first-hand. Yet their central position in the asylum procedure makes them into an important topic of research, both analytically and politically. The salience of looking at the way in which asylum seekers' stories are being told can perhaps be briefly illustrated with reference to the Sémira Adamu case. As mentioned in section 2 above, Sémira Adamu had applied for asylum on grounds that she wanted to avoid being married against her will to an older and violent man in Nigeria. Her application had been turned down, and she was going to be sent back to West-Africa. When her death was announced in the media, one of the striking ingredients of many statements was the abundant reference to >her story=. It was said that, indeed, forced marriage could be sufficient grounds for asylum, but that in her case >her story did not fit=. The official verdict announcing the refusal of asylum argued:

AThe story of the applicant is not precise on many counts. Thus, she could not specify the family name of a childhood friend with whom she stayed. She also failed to specify the date on which she was supposed to have escaped from Lagos@. (my translation, Dutch original, from *De Morgen*, 3/10/1998)

It is about style all the way. Other references to how Sémira Adamu interacted with people C again, matters of style C include a statement by the Catholic pastor of Brussels Airport, a man who met Sémira Adamu occasionally. To him as well, Sémira Adamu was not quite trustworthy:

AIn the [asylum] Center nobody believed her. I don't know the real story either. I rely on my intuition. Sometimes, when you asked her something, she just stood up and walked away. Or she started to sing. I once asked her why she had traveled so many thousands of kilometers to escape from a sixty-five year old man. Is Africa not big enough, I asked her. She didn't answer that question@. (my translation, Dutch original, from *De Morgen*, 3/10/1998)

Again, a lack of credibility seems to be tied up with the way in which Sémira Adamu communicated. Even sympathetic voices refer to peculiarities in communicative style. Lise Thiry, a former socialist senator who acted as foster parent for Sémira Adamu, qualified her as such:

AApart from that, Sémira sometimes seemed British rather than African to me. She didn't have

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. the outspokenness and extroversion some of these [African] women have@. (my translation, Dutch original, from *De Morgen*, 3/10/1998)

Communicative style (including narrative style) is always a source for character assessment and character attribution. In a field as sensitive as asylum regulations, where officials' decisions may imply the difference between life or death, relative well-being or poverty, safety or danger, some attention to what actually happens in interaction may not just be desirable, but simply imperative.

5.2. Textual trajectories

Let us begin with a brief survey of the interactional processes that constitute the core of the asylum application processes. A first observation is that in the totality of the procedure, direct interaction between asylum seekers and officials is rare and restricted to a number of well defined occasions, viz. interviews on the asylum seeker's story. Soon after their arrival in the country, asylum seekers are interviewed by officials, sometimes (but by no means always) assisted by interpreters. The topic of the interview is their motivation to seek asylum in Belgium: why did they leave their country, how, when? What reasons do they offer for assuming that their lives or life chances are endangered in their country of origin? Who are they, where do they come from? Who assisted them in their exodus? And so on. The story is noted by the official and has the status of an affidavit. From that moment onwards, it is the source and reference text for all other steps in the procedure. The asylum seeker is admitted in the country, and his/her application for asylum is being processed by the authorities. In the process, various other interviews can take place.

Apart from interviews, there are hardly any occasions in which asylum seekers themselves speak. Most of the communication on the case is written and legalistic and hence treated on behalf of the asylum seeker by lawyers, welfare workers or members of NGOs specialized in asylum affairs. So what we have is a handful of events during which the applicant directly produces oral narrative discourse. In between these moments we have tremendous text-production *on* that narrative resulting in written summaries, notes, translations questions and replies written by lawyers or welfare workers, court rulings in which fragments of the narrative are being quoted and interpreted, and so on. It is an instance of the Acirculation of discourse@ (Briggs 1997: 538ff.) that characterizes legal and forensic procedures as well as those of welfare work and bureaucracy (see Sarangi & Slembrouck 1996). These patterns of circulation are biased by inequalities in *techniques* of discourse representation; recontextualizations and re-entextualizations of the narratives in specific (>official= and authoritative) generic formats are usually privileged forms of discursive practice reserved to specific professional groups such as lawyers, administrators, >experts= and bureaucrats.

This textual complex, in which an oral >original= narrative is the input for a long series of generically differentiated replications of that original is characterized by an ideology of >fixed text= (Collins 1996;. Urban 1996; Blommaert 1997), in which the difference between the >original= and its >copies= are assumed to be minimal (hence in which it is assumed that every translation, summary, quotation, reading of the story is correct and accurate) because >procedurally correct= text (i.e. text produced or collected according to standard procedures) is supposed to be a transparent and unambiguous set of signs and symbols. The story of the asylum seeker is remolded, remodeled and re-narrated time and time again, and rather than a text it becomes a text trajectory with

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. various phases and instances of transformation. At the same time, the story is treated as a *singular* text, and responsibility for that text (and thus for all re-entextualizations in the text trajectory) is attributed to the asylum seeker. The asylum seeker is constructed as the responsible author of the whole intertextuality complex, despite the enormous differences in text-structure and text-modality, the genre and the code, the social spaces in which versions are being produced and used, and the power and authority attributed to different versions of the text. Commenting on similar phenomena, Briggs (1997: 540) observes that in such cases, the question seems to be one of a fundamental asymmetry in the power to determine how utterances can circulate between contexts, epistemologies, and institutions, the way that narratives can be structured, and what sorts of legal effects can accrue to particular discursive relations@.

The result of this text trajectory is a *suggestion* of justice, based on text-ideologies emphasizing the >correct treatment= of the asylum seeker=s narrative into notes, summaries, translations and so forth, but obscuring a variety of forms of appropriation of discourse and of shifting it into domains of authoritative re-entextualizations that are far beyond the control of the asylum seeker. So when the letter to Sémira Adamu speaks of Athe story of the applicant@, what is referred to is the total textual trajectory of the narrative.

5.3. A contest of contexts

To illustrate this, let us have a look at two re-entextualizations of the story of an Angolese asylum seeker. The interview we did with him and his wife took four hours; the story of his situation in Angola and of his escape to Belgium took more than one hour, and well over 1,500 lines of transcript. As always, it is a very complex story stuffed with home narratives bearing the characteristics discussed in the previous section. The man applied twice for asylum, and twice his application was rejected. These rejections were announced to the applicant in two official letters, partly standard and partly filled in with specific data on the application. In these documents, we find instances of re-entextualization of the man=s story. I shall give fragments from the two texts of the letters (my translation, originals in Dutch and French, respectively):

(13) AThe concerned was interrogated on November 23,1993 at the Commissariat-General [for Refugees and Stateless Persons], in the presence of [name], his attorney.

He claimed to be a >political informant= of the MPLA. On October 18, 1992 however, he passed on information to UNITA. At the UNITA office, however, he met with Major [name], who works for the MPLA. Two days later, Major [name] had the concerned arrested. Fearing that the concerned would give the Major away at the trial, [name of the major] helped the concerned to escape. The concerned fled to [locality] where a priest arranged for his departure from Angola. The concerned came, together with his wife [name and register number] and three children, through Zaïre and by plane, to Belgium. They arrived on May 19, 1993.

It has to be noted that the concerned remains very vague at certain points. Thus he is unable to provide details about the precise content of his job as >political informant=. Furthermore the account of his escape lacks credibility. Thus it is unlikely that the concerned could steal military clothes and weapons without being noticed and that he could consequently climb over the prison wall.

It is also unlikely that the concerned and his wife could pass the passport control at Zaventem [i.e. Brussels Airport] bearing a passport lacking their names and their pictures.

Furthermore, the itinerary of the concerned is impossible to verify due to a lack of travel documents (the concerned sent back the passports).

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The statements of the concerned contain contradictions when compared to his wife=s account.

Thus he declares that the passports which they received from the priest [name] were already completely in order at the time they left Angola. His wife claims that they still had to apply for visa in Zaire.@

- (14) AThe concerned, of Angolese nationality, has declared being a member of UNITA (>Union Nationale pour l=Indépendance Totale de l=Angola=). He has forwarded a first application for asylum in Belgium on May 25, 1993. His application has been refused by the Commissariat-General on December 15, 1993. After an illegal stay in Belgium of three years, he has forwarded a second application for asylum on November 20, 1996, on the basis of some documents from Angola which he had received. In two faxes (of July 26, 1996 and September 4, 1996), one of his neighbors (calling himself >[name]=) informed him that a certain >[name]=, a friend of the concerned who was repatriated to Angola by the Belgian State, had been killed by soldiers. Prior to that, the latter had asked [name of the >friend=] about the whereabouts of the concerned. From that moment onwards, the house of the concerned is supposed to be occupied [in French: *serait occupée*] by soldiers. In a letter of March 15, 1994, people are supposed to have already informed him [in French: *on lui aurait déjà communiqué*] that the priest named >[name]=, who had helped him leave Angola, had disappeared. Apart from that, he has offered a communiqué from UNITA (of October 23, 1996) as well as his MPLA (>Mouvement Populaire pour la Libération de l=Angola=) veteran=s ID.@

Let us now take a closer look at these two examples. They are generically germane and are sequential; (14) obviously adds to (13). Three different types of discourse can be distinguished in the texts:

- (a) reported elements from the asylum seekers= narrative in the shape of >factual= summaries of the applicant=s narrative
- (b) procedural statements referring to the applicant=s status, the administrative actions taken in his respect and by him, and the sorts of evidence offered
- (c) explicit metapragmatic statements and comments on the applicant=s narrative.

Let us first bring the statements belonging to the first category together from both texts:

- (15) -He claimed to be a >political informant= of the MPLA. On October 18, 1992 however, he passed on information to UNITA. At the UNITA office, however, he met with Major [name], who works for the MPLA. Two days later, Major [name] had the concerned arrested. Fearing that the concerned would give the Major away at the trial, [name of the major] helped the concerned to escape. The concerned fled to [locality] where a priest arranged for his departure from Angola. The concerned came, together with his wife [name and register number] and three children, through Zaire and by plane, to Belgium. They arrived on May 19, 1993.
- In two faxes (of July 26, 1996 and September 4, 1996), one of his neighbors (calling himself >[name]=) informed him that a certain >[name]=, a friend of the concerned who was repatriated to Angola by the Belgian State, had been killed by soldiers. Prior to that, the latter had asked [name of the >friend=] about the whereabouts of the concerned. From that moment onwards, the house of the concerned is supposed to be occupied [in French: *serait occupée*] by soldiers. In a letter of March 15, 1994, people are supposed to have already informed him [in French: *on lui aurait déjà communiqué*] that the priest named >[name]=, who had helped him leave Angola, had disappeared.

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. Obviously, what we have here are extremely concise and highly selective >summaries= of the narrative, organized chronologically and marked by tense-aspect markers in the verbs as well as by explicit chronological markers (e.g. Aon October 18, 1992", Atwo days later@, AJuly 26, 1996 and September 4, 1996"). The account is not exclusively >replicating= but contains significant amounts of evaluative modal qualifications (especially in (14)), indicating doubts about the factual truthfulness of parts of the narrative (e.g. the quotes surrounding the names mentioned by the applicant, the potentialis verbs Aserait occupée@, Aaurait communiqué@). These summaries reflect the portions of the applicant=s narrative deemed >substantial= to his asylum application and qualified, in one discursive move, in terms of truthfulness and plausibility from the perspective of the procedure. Importantly, this selection of text portions involves text-rewriting and text-structuring practices, and shifts the epistemic center from the asylum seeker to the administrator processing the application.

The second category (procedural statements) includes statements such as AThe concerned was interrogated on November 23, 1993 at the Commissariat-General [for Refugees and Stateless Persons], in the presence of [name], his attorney@ and AHe has forwarded a first application for asylum in Belgium on May 25, 1993. His application has been refused by the Commissariat-General on December 15, 1993. After an illegal stay in Belgium of three years, he has forwarded a second application for asylum on November 20, 1996, on the basis of some documents from Angola which he had received@. It also contains references to evidence offered: Atwo faxes@, Aa letter@, Aa communiqué from UNITA@ and Ahis MPLA veteran=s ID@. This second category is broadly contextualizing much in the sense that home narratives contextualize the story of the applicant. References to the location of these facts and claims in the procedure re-center the narrative: the facts and claims offered by the applicant have to >fit= a procedural context, a context of sequences of activities, criteria of relevance, and criteria of >testing= the truth of stories. The third category directly connects to this: here we find explicit expressions of doubt such as (I italicize the explicit metapragmatic statements):

- (16) AIt has to be noted that the concerned *remains very vague* at certain points. Thus he is *unable to provide details* about the precise content of his job as >political informant=. Furthermore the account of his escape *lacks credibility*. Thus *it is unlikely* that the concerned could steal military clothes and weapons without being noticed and that he could consequently climb over the prison wall. *It is also unlikely* that the concerned and his wife could pass the passport control at Zaventem [i.e. Brussels Airport] bearing a passport lacking their names and their pictures. Furthermore, the itinerary of the concerned *is impossible to verify* due to a lack of travel documents (the concerned sent back the passports). The statements of the concerned *contain contradictions* when compared to his wife=s account. Thus he declares that the passports which they received from the priest [name] were already completely in order at the time they left Angola. His wife claims that they still had to apply for visa in Zaïre.@

The qualifications pertain to elements from the narrative not included in the >summary= given elsewhere in the texts. The emphasis is on two things: general common-sense plausibility and documentary evidence. Certain arguments are qualified as >unlikely= on the basis of a general perception of what is possible and what is not (e.g. the unnoticed theft of military uniforms and weapons, the fact that another double-agent, the Major, would both arrest him and help him escape). There is no evidence offered of the *impossibility* of these facts, they just *seem* unlikely. Other elements revolve around the presence and absence of documentary evidence: the faxes, the letter, the

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. veteran=s ID, and Athe itinerary of the concerned is impossible to verify due to a lack of travel documents (the concerned sent back the passports)@.

The pattern of entextualization becomes clear now: what we have here is a complete refocalization of the narrative towards new deictic centers. The story of the applicant is relocated in another space and time-frame: that of the administrative procedure and its pace, that of its standard categories, criteria and textual formats (chronological-sequential and documentary). Whereas the home narratives were shown to have a localizing function -- personalizing the story and anchoring it in particular spatial and temporal deictic frames -- the highly modified versions of the story we find in the letters from the authorities show a completely different contextualization of the story: away from the local, away from the experiential, the affective, the emotional, the individual positioning of people in conflicts, towards generalizable categories and space-time frames. There is an official version of the conflict (e.g. the war in Angola), used not only in asylum procedures but also in international trade, development cooperation, foreign policy, and so on.⁷ In that version, the experiential contextualizations of places, social roles, parties in the conflict and so forth, so prominent in home narratives, are replaced by a rather rigid pattern providing general categorizations (e.g. >In country X, human rights are consistently violated=, >country Y is a democracy=, >in country Z there is a peace agreement between the warring parties, hence the situation has been stabilized= -- the latter is the case for Angola) as well as more or less fixed attributes for roles in the conflict (the good, the bad, >official= parties versus >unofficial= parties, the State, the army, civil society etc.). There is a general recentering of the biography of the asylum seeker: the procedurally relevant biography of the applicant is that portion of his/her life that can be rewritten in the shape of a travelogue, starting with (an) event(s) that occasion his/her escape from the country of origin, the process of escape and travel itself including details of time, duration, medium and itinerary, and his/her arrival in Belgium, all portions of which can be documented by means of place descriptions and time frames.

From this grid, deductive patterns of >plausibility= and >likelihood= are derived; whenever there is doubt, documentary evidence is required to remove the implausibility. In the example given here, one of the crucial elements was the fact that the applicant had told how he had been arrested by an UNITA major, who was in fact a double-agent just like him; that same major had consequently helped him escape from prison. In terms of general plausibility within this contextual frame, it is >unlikely= that the person who arrested the applicant would be the same as the one who organized his escape, the more since there was no documentary evidence supporting the major=s role as a double-agent. Similarly, the absence of documentary evidence of the itinerary of the applicant makes that crucial part of his story impossible to verify@ and hence unlikely or unreliable.

5.4. Noise and inequality

The recontextualizing moves made through the text-trajectories are, as noted by Briggs above, connected to deep power differences, and they involve considerable skills used for reformulating, ordering, structuring discourse in such a way as to build a >convincing= argument. The long and winding deictics of home narratives as well as the general localizing-contextualizing functions they have basically do not fit well with the textual and narrative preoccupations of the asylum procedure. Hence, the particular format of narrating imposed during the procedure is sensed to incapacitate asylum seekers and prejudice their attempts at making sense of >their= conflict -- the basis of >their= asylum application. A Congolese woman succinctly expresses the textual and contextual difficulties

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. experienced during the interrogations that create the >basic= version of the narrative:

Mais ils sont trop durs là-bas parce que.. Tu peux raconter je sais pas/ tu peux raconter quelque chose.. Et la prochaine fois quand tu viens quand tu oublies un seul chose c=est fini tu as=tu es rejetée/ alors euh personne ne peut raconter deux fois la même hist=même histoire exactement/ il y a toujours de petits détails qu=on ne dit pas ou bien qu=on a=qu=on ajoute après/ mais eux ils ne tiennent pas compte de ça/ dés que tu ajoutes quelque chose ils disent ah la fois passée tu n=a pas dit ça alors c=est fini on te rejette/ il faut aussi comprendre les gens c=est.. On=on n=arrive jamais à=à=à raconter une histoire de la même façon deux fois/ ça non

[But they are too hard there because... You can tell I don=t know what/ you can tell something.. And the next time when you come you forget just one thing it=s over you are=you have been rejected/ well ehm nobody can tell twice the same sto=same story exactly/ there are always small details one doesn=t say or else one a=one adds afterwards/ but they don=t take that into account/ as soon as you add something they say ah the last time you didn=t say that then it=s over they reject you/ one also has to understand the people it=s... One=one never manages to=to=to tell a story the same way twice/ that no.]

Combined with the problem of resources discussed in section 3, asylum seekers= stories appear to contain too much >noise= to be easily insertable in the asylum procedure. They tell their story in nonnative varieties of a language, sometimes to an interpreter who also has to use a nonnative variety; this then is handed over to someone else, who translates and transforms it into an ordered and patterned written narrative, squeezed into the boxes of a standard form; consequently, this story is treated several times by still other people, who select from the story the parts that look >truthful= and the ones that seem >unlikely=. What is lost in the process is the narrative of place and time that is at the core of the stories: those parts of the story in which applicants bring international conflicts and phenomena such as war, famine, poverty into their own experiential space, relate personal motives to them, and offer this as arguments for obtaining asylum. As soon as this >noise= has been cut off from the applicant=s story, the chances of being understood, believed and supported are very slim.

This is why home narratives become crucial and problematic in the asylum procedure, and this is where they derive their specificity from: they are a necessary genre for asylum seekers, and at the same time an unmanageable (and a priori disqualified) genre in the procedure. They are salient because they are a realization of a genre that does not fit the genre. On the basis of what many asylum seekers can mobilize as linguistic and communicative resources, they are the upper limit of what they *can* do; and that does not correspond to what they *must* or *are supposed to* do.

6. Concluding remarks

Social structure percolates in and is indexed by the narrative conventions, ideologies and codes of the asylum procedure. The mismatch between resources and expectations is at the heart of the power asymmetry that characterizes encounters between asylum seekers and the State; it locates asylum seekers in a position of conflict vis-à-vis the procedure. But both the power asymmetry and the conflict are socially and culturally invisible because of two reasons, both of which have to do with the pervasiveness of ideologies.

The first reason is the widely shared ideology that clients of administrative procedures in a democratic

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. society such as Belgium have control over the basic linguistic-communicative resources needed to participate fully in the procedures and so to obtain justice and benefits they are entitled to. Thus, the problem of narrativity in the asylum procedure can be represented as a rather superficial, technical problem, and suggested remedies can range from training programs for interpreters to more support for asylum seekers from >experts= such as lawyers. The point I have tried to make in this paper is that we are confronted with a fundamental problem of inequality in Aaccess to the discursive resources that shape who can talk when, in what ways, and with what effects@ (Briggs 1996: 13), not one that can be captured, as Briggs rightly points out, in metaphors such as >negotiation=, >difference= or >variation= that all suggest some degree of equality and sharedness and a facility of choice for the inferior party.

The second reason why the power asymmetries and conflicts are invisible is their embeddedness in administrative procedures that are normalized for members of the autochthonous middle-class, and that are imbued with great prestige as the symbolic custodians of a sociopolitical system qualified as just, egalitarian and democratic. Every political crisis caused by incidents with asylum seekers resulted in a reaffirmation of the faith in >our justice= and led to a tightening and increase of the sophistication of the administrative procedure: more people would be hired, they would be better trained, the procedure would be accelerated, handwritten documents would be replaced by online standard forms. The administrative text-making machinery was never questioned, on the contrary: it was strengthened and enlarged. Thus the capacity to shift narratives from one context to another and from one authoritative entextualization to another was increased, and with it the power asymmetry with regard to the production, treatment, ordering, and making sense of narratives. This belief in the just, egalitarian and democratic nature of the State and State procedures can be related to a remark made long ago by Perry Anderson (1976-1977) in his celebrated commentary on Gramsci: the assumption of equality in the face of democratic procedures and State institutions such as the Law is at the core of capitalist ideology because it obscures fundamental inequalities in society. The State is assumed to represent everyone and to render service to everyone in the same way; at the same time, administrative procedures of the State privilege elite literacies and narrativities and so shape and perpetuate deep social inequalities (a process complicated by the introduction of new technologies in bureaucracy).

Along with the concrete case I have argued here, I hope to have offered arguments for two more general theoretical points, both of which are inspired by Briggs= (1997) highly relevant discussion of narrative and inequality in institutional contexts. First, issues of resources deserve far more attention than what they have received so far in the study of language in society. Assumptions of sharedness, as said before, seem to determine a lot of what goes on in the critical analysis of discourse in western societies, whereas the highly layered and hierarchical systems of literacy and communicative skills that dominate our societies seem to dictate a more attentive stance towards phenomena such as accents, differential competence, difficulties in writing and so on. Before people can embark on discursive work captured under labels such as >conversation=, >exchange= or >negotiation=, conditions of sayability, expressibility; mobilizability of resources need to have been met (see the remarks in Briggs 1997: 538-540). Every conception of >context= in discourse should include such conditions, because they are a tremendous influence on what happens in discourse and on what happens with discourse. Resources are contexts.

Second, I share Briggs= concern for the circulation of discourse as a crucial ingredient of identity-forming social and political practices in our societies. >Cases= (administrative, legal, welfare, medical, educational and probably far more) are formed in the textual trajectories I outlined above, and not in single instances of communication nor in single texts. We need to follow the process of text-making-as-social-and-political-process; it

Blommaert Jan, Investigating narrative inequality : home narratives of African asylum seekers in Belgium. is there that people are constructed, cases are judged and individual lives are being influenced. As soon as we enter worlds in which talk and written text are seen as replicas of one another (and in which someone else=s notes of what I said can be offered to me as >my= story), we enter a world of differential power relations, which needs to be scrutinized in great detail. Michel Foucault=s image of subjects being transformed into knowable objects of clinical observation by means of a multilayered complex of discursive and material practices is looming large (Foucault 1975). The apparently small shifts our stories undergo as soon as they enter institutional textmaking systems are instances of such practices of Foucaultian *savoir* in which social issues become individual yet standardized >cases=. The fact that we tend not to be aware of these processes and even attribute considerable prestige to the system in which they develop, is a crucial and unavoidable topic for critical studies of language and society.

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Notes.

1. Hymes and Cazden=s paper was originally published in 1978 in *Keystone Folklore* 22; it was reprinted as chapter 7 of Hymes (1980) and later reprinted again as chapter 5 of Hymes (1996). The paper is not really a joint product; individual sections are attributed to either Hymes or Cazden; for the purposes of this paper, I shall consider it to be a collaborative writing product authored by Hymes and Cazden.
2. The interviews were conducted by students of the 2nd and 4th year of African Studies at the University of Gent, as part of a course project supervised by me. The length of the interviews varied from approximately half an hour to four hours. The interviews were recorded between November 1998 and April-May 1999, at the height of the so-called >Sémira Adamu crisis=; see section 2.
3. I will provide English translations, despite the fact that the >broken= and hence very complicated forms of expressions can hardly be projected in another language in an equivalent way. I shall use a highly simplified set of transcription conventions in the presentation of the examples, namely:
 - * : stress on the following syllable
 - = : latching, rapid succession of turns, or self-correction
 - / : intonationally marked phrase or sentence end
 - ... : pause
 - CAPS: high pitch, loud
4. This was, in fact, the second time that P used the expression *Amanger* + currency@ in the interview. The first time, Q did not pick it up as problematic.
5. The emergence of structure in these narratives may be an effect of the repeated telling of the story, so that >fully-formed narratives= are created. Dell Hymes, in correspondence about this analysis, remarks: AIt seems very likely that you have here what could in some cases be the early stages of >fully formed= narratives of the sort I addressed in my own paper. That if those who tell them were in circumstances which led to them being told again and again, rehearsed, as it were, they might take on increasingly tight form (...). It is extremely relevant to find (...) that a contrast in initial elements, such as absence/presence of >So= can be found to distinguish parts already at this stage@. (See also Hymes 1998). The point I wish to make in this part of the paper is that such structuring not only occurs during very early phases of the narrative development of such stories, as Hymes points out, but that it also occurs despite a very restricted repertoire of linguistic resources.

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6. Narrative inequalities based on differing narrative conventions and the differential distribution of communicative resources has been well documented with respect to courtroom discourse. I shall mention just two cases. Marco Jacquemet (1992) emphasized the role of metapragmatic strategies in attorneys' courtroom tactics against Italian mafia-*pentiti*; the witnesses' communicative style was commented upon in attempts to discredit their credibility, and the normativity of 'correct' courtroom discourse was opposed to the *pentiti*'s use of the Neapolitan dialect. At a more general level, O'Barr & Conley (1996) distinguish between a professional and a lay ideology of law; the former can be characterized as 'rule-oriented', the latter as 'relational'. Both ideologies shape and make relevant differences in courtroom talk, and the failure to respect these differences by lay litigants may limit their access to justice' (O'Barr & Conley 1996: 118) 7. In a letter about this case from the Department of Foreigners' Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior, it is for instance said that 'the situation in his country [i.e. Angola] cannot be considered to be exceptional so as to vindicate a regularization on the basis of art. 9 ' 3". There are no fixed criteria for judging local situations to be 'normal' or 'abnormal', decisions on this point being the sole privilege of the Minister of the Interior.

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