9 Trustworthiness at stake

Trust and distrust in investigative interviews with Russian adolescent asylum-seekers in Sweden

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Introduction: trust and distrust in dialogical terms

Trust and distrust are intimately linked with interaction, communication and discourse, and ubiquitous in human life and existence. They are both premisses and outcomes of human communication (Hosking, in preparation). It is in interaction between people, or between individuals or groups and their environments, that trust and distrust are created, negotiated, sustained, confirmed or disconfirmed. It is in discourse that trust comes to life.

Trust and distrust are future-oriented, and as such, they are subject to uncertainties with regard to knowledge and beliefs about the future. Trust relates to, on the one hand, self's ability to judge other people and self's willingness to make him- or herself dependent on others. One's trust in others is reflexively related to these others' perceived affordances of trustworthiness. Trust is also often tied to emotion-laden evaluations (Barbalet, 2009) and the suspension of doubt (Møllerling, 2001); one wishes (or needs) to trust others, and therefore one will reserve (some of) one's doubts. Trust (and distrust) in institutions ultimately derive from trust or distrust in people and their minds. Hosking (in preparation) proposes that trust involves "the expectation, based on good but less than perfect evidence, that events will turn out in a way not harmful to me."

In a communicative encounter there are certain preconditions for trust and confidence between the parties A and B. One may think of these as trust in the communicative activity type (a) and in the person met (b). (a) A knows or understands (or at least assumes that he knows or understands) who B is, what B stands for, what B's tasks and intentions are, etc. The same holds for B in relation to A. (b) A trusts that B as a person is not hostile to A's interests and needs, and that B is enacting his/her activity role properly, that is, B is faithful to and competent in his/her task. A assumes that B does not have a hidden agenda that is potentially harmful to A. And vice versa.

Trust and distrust are always interdependent, and they have a contextual and interactional basis. In other words, they must be theorised dialogically, i.e. in relation to contexts and interactions (Gillespie, 2008, Chapter 8 in the present volume; Marková et al., 2008; Marková, Introduction in the present volume; Linell, 2009). While trust has been considerably theorised in recent decades (Luhmann, 1979, and Gambetta, 1990, among many others), there is still relatively little attention paid to the relations between trust and distrust, on the one hand, and language and communication, on the other.

The study of trust and distrust as displayed in situated interaction

This chapter will analyse a communicative activity type that is bound to be replete with reasons for and indications of distrust of the other. The data are drawn from interviews by Swedish migration authority administrators with Russian children and adolescents seeking asylum in Sweden. It is a situation in which a great deal is at stake. It concerns the implementation of a rather ambiguous immigration policy, and the micro-politics of the interaction highlights mutual distrust between participants, even though distrust builds upon some level of trust as well.

Trust and trustworthiness are not a completely new topic in discourse analysis. Specifically, there is a vast literature on credibility, and on reliability of stories vs. trustworthiness of persons in the psychology of testimony and theory of interviewing (Trankell, 1972; Undertisch, 1989; Cederborg & Lamb, 2006; Cederborg & Gumpert, 2010). However, the major part of this literature treats reliability and trustworthiness as properties inherent in or stably assignable to texts and people.

By contrast, an empirical, 'dialogical' approach would show that these matters are largely dynamic and negotiable in interactions and across contexts. Despite our point that trust and distrust evolve in and through interaction, there are in fact only very few dialogical studies of how they are expressed and accomplished in actual discourse. There seem to be several reasons for this. One is surely that trust is an implicit and elusive notion. It is largely tacit; when we trust others or the surrounding circumstances, we tend to do so without thematising it. Indeed, when we do bring it up in discourse, it tends to be because trust is lacking or because it can no longer be taken for granted.

Accordingly, distrust is somewhat easier to pin down empirically than trust. A similar argument has been made with regard to misunderstandings in discourse, as compared to understanding (Linell, 1995). Although distrust too is often difficult to identify in discourse, there are mainly two ways of spotting it: misalignments and thematisation of trust/distrust.

With regard to the first point, misalignments and uncomfortable moments in discourse are characterised by perturbations of well-attuned interaction and smooth delivery, such as hitches, lapses, interruptions, restarts, and delayed responses. In addition, if the other party, B, displays something that could indicate double-dealing (equivocation and inconsistencies of expression or content, signs of ambivalence, uncertainty and hesitations, uncomfortable moments, etc.) and if this occurs frequently, it may be a reason for A to distrust B. This often results in A's reciprocally expressing mistrust through misalignment, and these perturbations may of
course become reasons for B to distrust A as well. As a consequence, trust and distrust are typically products of interaction and mutual attunements (or the lack thereof).

Secondly, explicit thematicisations of distrust and miscommunication are of course in themselves expressions of distrust, at least as long as something personal is at stake in the encounter. There is also an intrinsic connection between misalignment and distrust topicalisation. It appears that in discourse there is often a characteristic progression of “mistrust sequences”. Jönsson and Linell (1996), in a study of police interrogations, identified a pattern of escalation starting from expressions of uncertainty, for example repeated requests for confirmation or clarification of claims made by the other, over various counter-arguments and exhortations to the other to tell the truth, to explicit expressions of disbelief and even accusations of lying. Such mistrust sequences are common in asymmetrical situations. We will see such phenomena in asylum interviews too. In more symmetrical exchanges, there are more mutual accusations (Aronsson, 1987); at the same time, if mutual accusations develop, the exchange will become more symmetrical (see in particular excerpt 2, towards the end). Once you have experienced distrust in yourself, you are likely to respond with distrust in the other.

Unaccompanied children in the Swedish asylum process

In the late 1980s unaccompanied minors became recognised as a special group of asylum-seekers in Sweden. The numbers, origins (e.g. first languages) and characteristics of the children have varied greatly ever since, depending on such factors as prevailing military and ethnic conflicts, as well as political or economic changes. Young people have arrived in Sweden purportedly by themselves, without any accompanying adults, friends or relatives, or relatives, and in reality, they have usually been illegally and secretly transported into the country, at the price of high fees paid to smugglers. In seeking asylum, these children and adolescents often appeal to humanitarian factors. They often claim that they have no social networks where they come from. Many have had, or claim they have had, experiences of harassment, discrimination, abuse, criminality and other traumatic events, even war (Keselman, 2009).

In the beginning, asylum-seekers in Sweden, including children and adolescents, were interviewed only by the police. From 1992, representatives of the Swedish Migration Board also became involved, and this board became solely legally responsible for the handling of asylum cases from 2000. Today, when somebody, for example one of the separated minors in our data, has applied for asylum, his or her case is examined by caseworkers who are representatives of the Swedish Migration Board. Usually, there is first a screening interview, in which the applicant’s circumstances are overviewed. This is followed by one or several in-depth interviews, so-called investigative interviews (Swedish official label: utredningsamtal), in which the applicant’s reasons for asylum are critically examined. According to governmental regulations, the oral interviews are important in assessing the child’s situation, including the psychological aspects; written documentation must not be sufficient in itself. Consequently, the interviews are critical events in the asylum-seeking process. For the adolescents the stakes may be quite high. And mutual trust is always at stake.

The asylum interview as a complex communicative activity type

The in-depth asylum interview is a social situation fraught with ambiguities, uncertainties, and reasons for distrust in the other, and this applies to both participating parties. The participants’ discrepant assumptions of “what’s going on here” (Goffman, 1974), that is, their situation definitions or framings of expectations, relate to many premises and circumstances that may incite either party to raise doubts in the other and in the whole activity. This will be empirically substantiated and discussed respectively in the following two sections. However, we will discuss some ‘premises and circumstances’ now, to aid the reader’s understanding.

Analyses of the actual interactions in the asylum interviews will confirm the view that this communicative activity type exhibits a high density of mutual distrust (see below). Many circumstances contribute to misalignments and misunderstandings; for example, inconsistencies between story versions, the discrepant sociocultural and economic realities of mainstream Swedes and Russian asylum-seekers, different interpretations of the same utterances, and many others. In this section, we shall begin an overall analysis of the investigative interview as a communicative activity type, which means that we will analyse this social situation or encounter in terms of its framing (Linell, 2009, p. 201ff), exploring especially the premises for trust and distrust. The analysis of the present section too is based on the actual interactions, exemplified here by excerpts 1–3, but also on written documentation about the present asylum procedures in Sweden and on ethnographic background information. The main source is the data from the actual discourse (see Keselman, 2009).

It is hardly obvious how to implement laws and international conventions concerning refugees and others in need of protection. According to the 1951 UN Convention (Article 1) (UNHCR, 1992), a refugee is any person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country [...].” Sweden has added gender and sexual disposition as grounds for refugee status (Abrahã, 2008, p. 9). But somebody can also be granted asylum for some additional reasons: “particularly distressing circumstances such as the applicant’s state of health, adaptation to life in Sweden and the applicant’s situation in the country of origin may in exceptional cases lead to a residence permit being granted if none of the grounds of protection are applicable” (SFS, 2005: Aliens Act, Ch. 5, sect. 6). The latter grounds are what are sometimes referred to as ‘humanitarian reasons’.

Not surprisingly, it amounts to a complex task for all parties involved to implement these principles in actual practice (Abrahã, 2008; Juhlin, 2003; Nilsson, 2007). This surfaces particularly in the discussion of excerpt 3 (see below). Indeed, the literature on the actual treatment of asylum applicants in different countries
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Some of these were not authorised (in the cases used here, this applies to excerpt 3). Sometimes, additional persons were present in the interviews (lawyer, trustee (Sw. god man), decision-maker).

The excerpts below come from three in-depth interviews named after their main characters, Russian minors with the following fictive names: ‘Misha’, ‘Anton’ and ‘Kolja’. Of course, all analyses were made on the Swedish and Russian data, but here, due to space restrictions, excerpts 1 and 2 will be given only in English translations. The originals in Swedish and Russian will be given only in excerpt 3, in which accuracy of translation is topicalised. We use bold italics for our English translations of Swedish contributions, and plain italics for English translations of Russian contributions. In order not to encumber the excerpts too much, we have omitted most of the interpreters’ renditions in excerpts 1 and 2, except for some passages where we think that renditions are not so closely matched to originals and might therefore interfere with the parties’ mutual alignment and possibly lead to miscommunication.

Our first excerpt comes from an interview with Misha, who was 17 at the time of this interview and had been smuggled from Russia to Sweden. He speaks with a Ukrainian accent. The first part of the excerpt concerns a case of theft in Sweden, the second part his discrepant stories about how he was brought to Sweden.

1. I’m wondering why you provide different stories (Case 16: ‘Misha’). (A = applicant (Misha, 17), C = female caseworker, about 50, I = male interpreter, about 50)

| 1. C: | anyway on the 22nd of February you are in Stockholm |
| 2. I: | ((Russian rendition)) |
| 3. A: | yes |
| 4. C: | then you enter Systembolaget i.e. the state liquor store and pinch a bottle of alcohol |
| 5. I: | because then you went to the wine (. ) dealer Systembolaget and stole such (. ) a bottle of alcohol |
| 6. C: | mm... an ‘that’s no good you know |
| 7. I: | ((Russian rendition)) |
| 10. A: | I know |
| 11. I: | I know |
| ((about 10 contributions omitted)) |
| 21. C: | you know, you ought to know of course that one can not just walk in and pick up something in a store and then walk out |
| 22. I: | ((Russian rendition)) |
| 23. A: | I wanted to buy it |
| 24. I: | ((Swedish rendition)) |
| 25. A: | they didn’t sell it to me |
| 26. I: | ((Swedish rendition)) |
27. C: no, one has to be at least twenty years old twenty-one
28. I: (Russian rendition)
29. A: well I know, they’ve already told me about this law
30. I: (Swedish rendition)
31. C: yeah, if one is not allowed to buy, does one simply pinch it then, or –?
32. I: (Russian rendition)
33. A: well, I yes I needed to take “that bottle of vodka”
34. I: (Swedish rendition)
35. C: that’s no good you see, not at all
36. I: (Russian rendition)
37. C: what were you going to do with this alcohol then?
38. I: but why was it necessary to take that alcohol?
39. A: well, we have such a habit in Russia, not habit but well (.) if one meets with a girl one must sit down and drink
40. I: (Swedish rendition)
41. C: mm
42. I: that’s usual
43. C: m-hm
44. C: what’s crazy in all this that’s that you are saying somewhat different things now and then, (.) to the police you tell that you would have this for dabbing some rash you had got on your arms
45. I: (Russian rendition)
46. A: “remedy”
47. I: yeah, as medicine, yes
48. C: yes why are you saying that?
49. I: why did you say that?
50. A: but they asked me where I stopped over in Stockholm and I didn’t want to tell them that I stayed with her therefore…
51. I: (Swedish rendition)
52. A: (overlapping) what girl it is, where she lives
53. I: had I told them that I stay with a chick they would have asked like what kind of chick it was and much more
54. C: but you are it is like this on the whole that’s why I’m asking you too where you are in Stockholm, once you are here and you have no parents who look after you so to speak and then one wants to know what you are up to whereabouts you are and so on
55. I: (Russian rendition)
56. C: it’s not just because you are Russian, I mean should one of my own kids turn up in Stockholm then they would ask them too what are you doing here then if they end up in the same situation
57. I: (Russian rendition)
58. A: yes I understand
59. I: =((Swedish rendition))
60. C: yes (.) I mean it’s it’s the idea of caring for you, it’s not about y’know running other persons in in Sweden
61. I: this is about your own good not because I mean they are asking this that they want to cause somebody else problems
62. C: mm (.) to me you say like this that daddy disappears (.) in November (.) in Russia
63. I: (Russian rendition)
64. C: to the police then you are saying that it was your daddy who organised the trip
65. I: (Swedish rendition)
66. A: listen, they told there in the first interview that what you tell here that you should not tell anybody, I, first of all I didn’t tell them anything, she asked me for what reason did you come here, I said: am I obliged to tell you that? no, I did not tell them anything at all I didn’t tell them for what reason I, why
67. I: (Swedish rendition)
68. C: no, I see
69. A: you are asking why I arrived, the police are asking why I arrived, the staff are asking why I arrived and all are saying that we will not tell anybody, only that we know it
70. I: (Swedish rendition)
71. C: mm yeah but it is obvious that we want to know why you are here in this country
72. I: (Russian rendition)
73. C: that’s not that strange, is it
74. I: (Russian rendition)
75. C: should I turn up in Russia then I would also be questioned about why I was there
76. I: (Russian rendition)
77. A: (a few turns of simultaneous talk by all three have been omitted here) it’s your job but quite simply out of curiosity do I or am I obliged to tell everybody
78. I: I understand that this is your job (C: yes) but if one asks like out of pure curiosity I mean am I obliged to tell why I came
79. C: it’s clear that you are obliged to tell in front of why you are here
80. I: well in any case you are obliged to tell me
81. A: (tell) you that I know
82. I: (more simultaneous talk)
83. A: but other persons. (in Russian:) but whom are you thinking of? with the police, I went to the doctor and the doctor is asking me and tomorrow I will go and buy bread and the cashier will ask me but why did you come here
Nonetheless, Misha eventually provides at least partial explanations of why he had to give different stories to different addresses.

At the same time, Misha seems to have grounds for distrust in the authorities. He points out that he has been told that he does not have to tell everybody about his background (66, 88), and yet it turns out that he is obliged to tell the police as well as the migration authority (79, 89). Another confusing point for him is that professionals are said to abide by rules of confidentiality (66), and yet the police have told the migration authority what he has told them. The caseworker claims that her interest in Misha’s doings is based on caring for his best interests (54, 56, 60); in this sequence, Misha does not get any opportunity to respond because of the caseworker’s sudden change of topic (62), but he comes back to his perspective of private integrity later (77, made somewhat more explicit in the translation: 78).

At times, the communication is somewhat confounded by the influence of the interpreter’s renditions. For example, whereas in contribution 77 he asks if he is obliged to tell “everybody”, this word is not translated in 78, which means that the caseworker answers (in 79) on the premise that the question is just about the migration authority. (In this case, however, the potential misunderstanding is cleared up later.)

Towards the end of the excerpt we find a rather close-knit mistrust sequence of the kind described earlier (p. 158). Misha has given divergent accounts of his journey to Sweden, and the caseworker makes a summary of the upshot (99). Later, she seeks confirmation of the claim that there is really a mistake in the police report (125). When Misha says that this is possible (127), she first attests to her disbelief (129), thus suggesting that Misha is mistaken (or lying). The sequence ends up with the caseworker making the explicit meta-comment that the whole encounter is “a little bit about trust” (133).

Misha’s application for asylum was not approved in the decision following the interview cited here.

Even though the excerpts from “Misha” contain clear instances of distrust, the following episodes from “Anton” are probably even more explicit, and in part comparatively extreme. Anton, aged 16, was brought (smuggled) from Russia, and he is already convinced that he will be sent back (see contribution 1). One factor is that he has been involved in criminality in Sweden, stealing various goods, something which is topicalised in the following excerpts.

2. WE HAVE TRIED ALL MEANS (Case 2: ‘Anton’) (A = applicant (Anton, 16), C = female case asylum officer, around 40, D = female decision-maker, around 40, I = male interpreter, around 40; Anton has been interviewed several times before, and this excerpt occurs well into the present interview. Contribution 1 is actually a ‘formulation’ by the decision-maker after a lengthy sequence)

1. D: so the reason why you (sg.) behave as you do is that you are fully convinced that you will have to go home and you want to bring the money home so that you can solve the problems in P. (A’s home town)
I had nothing to wear, the social welfare did not allot anything. [I went around in a jacket]

I pinched pretty many chewing gums then [and sold them and then I bought this]

I heard that jacket then for the money

In other words, you were not run in that time, you have pinched things when you have not been run in

That means they did not catch you, did they?

Yes [(Russian, da, i.e. (here:) ‘no’)]

Yes exactly, I don’t be so stupid as to lie about easily checked-up things

[(Russian rendition)]

We will of course we won’t run you in of course

We will not expose you, you see

Please check if I

Yes, you are welcome to check, if you wish

But again if I am asking you a simple question like if you have stolen more things than you were run in for then say yes I did it like

[(Russian rendition)]

It’s easier to speak the truth than by lying

That is easier to speak the truth than –

Once I stole as I said chewing gums these [10 pieces]

(I8 contributions omitted; A insists that he bought his quilted jacket after selling stolen goods. D objects that he could have received an allowance from the social welfare)

Okay let’s say that she (i.e. the social welfare officer) is sitting at my place and I give her 800 kronor and tell her to dress up from top to top from bottom to top

Okay okay

Shoes underpants [jeans mittens jacket cap]

Okay

800 per month?

Per month?

80 kronor 376

(7 contributions omitted; they establish that the monthly allowance is not for clothes)

But for clothes they allotted me once when I had just arrived 600 kronor and these 600 kronor, for everybody 800 but for me 600

I only once received such an allowance for clothes, that is when I arrived (B: mm) others received 700 800 but I only got 600

But you have perhaps not applied for an extra allowance for clothes

(x)

What did you say?

(2.0)

But it is not so damned smart to be stealing (xx)
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82. I: it's not reasonable to steal
83. A: mm
84. D: mm (0.5) "okay", but after all it is as Maria ((the caseworker)) says you must speak the truth on those points that we can easily check up because otherwise it will just become crap out of everything, then we have no possibility to assess your case properly. I cannot believe ANYTHING of what you have told us
85. I: (xx) you must speak the truth especially such information that is very easy to check up or else we will then ON THE WHOLE then we can not believe anything (xx)
86. A: yes please let them check up
87. I: but check check then
88. C: I will check it
89. D: but we will check but when you like sit here lying when I ask you a simple question, how on earth can I believe in all the other things you say which are more difficult
90. I: mm, if you on a simply question yes on a simple question you answer that well you lie to a simple question, then how can I believe you later on from where do they know that on a simple question or on the whole from where do they know that I am lying?
91. A: what how can you know if I on simple questions if I answer with a lie on simple questions, how can you know that?
92. D: it just now occurred to me () it's bloody easy
93. I: I just now -- it was easy we just talked about it
94. A: what are they're talking about? they're talked about what?
95. A: what do you (sg.) mean then?
96. D: but when I asked if you had pinched something more then you say no and yet you have just told us that you have things left that you have pinched
97. D: ((3 contributions omitted; A says that he has admitted the theft))

101. A: I could on the whole avoid talking, that's a personal thing
102. D: you can then just as well tell us who you were together with in the centre last Friday
103. A: because it is not their life at all
104. I: I could (refrain from answering) it's after all your business
105. D: ((shouting)) no, actually it isn't, no but it is NOT
106. A: ((xx)) if one could sit like that evaluating a person, like she evaluates me from the other side, well let's assume that I too will evaluate her, I know that she too is lying, that she is lying when she says that everybody wants to help me
107. I: easy like this to judge other people from the side, so I can also start saying to you that you are lying and such like, what do you mean helping and such like

((Simultaneous talk))

123. I: ((Swedish rendition))
124. D: ((Simultaneous with I's ongoing rendition)) but it's clear that we believe
125. C: ((laughs)) Anton*
126. D: that's NOT what we want
127. I: no we of course don't want that
128. C: Anton [look at me]
129. A: how can I know what they want, ((xx)) for one
130. C: [be silent, silent!]
132. C: yes already they didn't want to do anything
133. I: I don't know, one year I damn it don't know what you want
134. C: well, damn it we don't know either if now we must start to use such rude language
135. I: but that we don't know either, that is
136. C: it's like this, Anton, we have tried all means, we have been sitting together in loads of conversations you and I and we are trying all the time to find ways to come to in some way to make clear the reason why you are here and how we can help you, if there is any --
137. I: we have already been busy for a whole year with this question, that is the reason why are here and in the same year we are trying to help you
138. D: and it is like this when these police reports come in all the time about the fact that you have been out walking as you call it
139. C: when all the time these reports from the police come that you have been walking there downtown
140. A: mm
141. C: and you are sitting here telling me that it will not happen again and then I bring up that you have disappeared during nights and then you say that it will not happen again and then [reports come in all the time]
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140. I: You are saying that there won't be more there won't be any more, then you show up there in the nights you say that there won't be any more of it and then again the same

141. A: (xx)

142. C: do you understand then

143. A: that I must sit at home like a dog on a leash

144. I: must I be leashed like a dog at home or what?

145. C: Anton, <now you are being foolish>

146. I: now this is of course stupid.

147. C: <you know very well that I and Svetlana*> have told you several times that there is nobody who says that you must sit at home leashed like a dog

148. I: but you know very well that Svetlana and I we told (xx) you that it is not necessary to sit at home leashed like a dog

149. C: then first of all we don't have dogs on leashes indoors if we are going to discuss that matter

150. I: with us (i.e. in our country) dogs are not leashed at home

This long excerpt begins with a rather classic mistrust sequence (contributions 5ff.), with requests for confirmation (7, 10, 12), expressions of doubt or disbelief (5, 7), counter-arguments implying that things could not have happened the way the boy claims (33), and then reminders of the importance of truth and trust (43, 51) and explicit disclosures of distrust (cf. also later: 84, 89, 113). The interviewee’s admonitions to the boy to look her in the eyes (30; later: 128) are obvious signs of distrust. Accusations of the other’s not telling the truth are explicit expressions of distrust. Here, there are mutual accusations of lying (89, 106), so we can speak of mutual distrust.

After the first mistrust sequence(s), we witness a further escalation with emotional arousal (in both parties) and even a verbal fight of a sort that one might not have expected in an institutional interview. This includes shouting, overlapping talk, rude language (131–132), metacommunicative comments on the other’s conduct (145), and various exaggerations, such as Anton’s claim that he has not received any help at all for the whole year (129), or his suggestions that the interviewers might want to use a lie detector (118, not shown here) or have him tied up like a leashed dog (143).

Trust involves the mutual taking of perspectives. But the parties here speak out of quite different rationalities and frames of reference. For example, Anton sketches the harsh economic everyday reality of his, in which (he claims) he has to steal things and sell them in order to get money enough to buy winter clothing (contributions 62ff.). He thinks that his interrogators sit in their offices evaluating him without understanding him (106). The investigator, on her side, of course endorses a judicial perspective; one cannot commit offences and then tell lies about the matter.

Other tensions include the interviewee’s assurance that the authorities are not trying to “run him in” (45) or that they have been trying to help him (134), when he seems to think the opposite (129). If there is a tension between critical scrutiny and help, it is seen by Anton, at least in this episode, as reduced to exclusively (unjustified) critical scrutiny. In “Misha”, excerpt 1, we saw more of an understanding on the part of the applicant of both sides (cf. 1: line 77).

Anton’s application for asylum was not approved in the first instance. However, he was later, in a second round, granted residence permit.

As we pointed out earlier, most of the interpreters’ renditions have been reasonably adequate, considering the difficult circumstances, and we have therefore omitted many of them. However, renditions could sometimes have contributed to misalignments between the primary parties. For example, in “Anton”, the applicant often uses the pronoun ‘they’, a rather common practice in interviews mediated by an interpreter. But ‘they’ is sometimes ambiguous, as in 2: 122; does it refer to Swedish authorities in general, or to the investigators of the Migration Board? The interpreter, however, translates with ‘you’ (123), which makes Anton’s contribution into a more direct accusation. Note that this was the beginning of the verbal fight that we commented upon above. Similar oscillations between ‘they’ and ‘you’ occur, for example, in 2: 86–87 and 94–96. The latter sequence involves a source of a possible misunderstanding, which, however, was evaded and ignored. In “Misha”, the interpreter’s rendition in contribution 38 partly changed the meaning of the original (37), and the rendition of 52 involves an addition.

Our data corpus as a whole contains quite a few cases where inaccurate translations did cause local misunderstandings. Our third excerpt will exemplify this.

3. ONLY YOUR WORDS (Case 9: ‘Kolja’) (Kolja, 15, was smuggled from Kazakhstan, where he had lived at a children’s home; C = female caseworker, around 40, I = female interpreter, around 40)

1. C: mm. (?) men de kan ju va lönt å se om de här me Tyskland till exempel, (?) ä a:e
   “mm. (?) but it could be worth looking at this with Germany for example, (?) and well –”

2. I: Неужели проверить есть ли у тебя основание быть немецким гражданином
   “it is necessary to check if you have (any) basis for being a German citizen”

3. C: om de finns nåt . . .
   “if there is anything –”

4. A: Может быть (?) в Германию меня отправят?
   “perhaps (?) they will send me to Germany”

5. I: kan ni skicka mej till Tyskland?
   “can you send me to Germany?”

6. C: man man man får ju se eventuellt ja menar om de e så att du skulle va medborgare i Tyskland till exempel
   “but one has to find out possibly I mean if it is like that that you would be a citizen of Germany for example”

7. I: Если у тебя есть право быть немецким гражданином
   “if you have a right to be a German citizen”
8. C: så har du inga skäl att få ett uppehållstillstånd i Sverige
"then you have no reasons to get a residence permit in Sweden"

9. I: В таком случае у тебя нет никаких оснований для того чтобы иметь вид на жительство в Швеции
"in such a case you have no basis for getting a residence permit in Sweden"

10. C: me automatik
"automatically"

11. I: авто-автоматически
"auto-automatically"

12. C: mm asså de finns ju väldit många omständigheter i ditt ärende
"mm well there are y'know a great deal of circumstances in your case"

13. I: На сегодняшний день я ничего не тебе могу точно сказать очень много вопросов ответов и условий и обстоятельств
"today I cannot tell you anything exactly, there are very many questions answers and conditions and circumstances"

14. C: mm. man kan ju inte säga precis att du e ett enkelt ärende
"mm, you know one can not precisely claim that you are a simple case"

15. I: >&heller; (silent laughter))

16. I: У тебя очень сложное дело понимаешь?
"you have a complicated cause, do you understand"

17. C: eftersom de e så många olika faktorer
"because there are so many different factors"

18. I: потому что много разных факторов разных обстоятельств у тебя и ничего проверить нельзя...
"because with you there are many different factors different circumstances and it's impossible to check anything"

19. A: Почему [нельзя]?
"why is it impossible?"

20. I: [только твои слова]
"only your words"

21. A: Почему нельзя проверить?
"why is it impossible to check?"

22. I: tryg du inte på mej?
"don't you believe me?"

23. C: jo visst men ja menar du har ju vandrat runt
"yes I do but I mean you have been wandering around"

"no, check"

25. C: å flyttat å-
"and moving and"

26. I: du kan du kan kontrollera mina uppgifter
"you can you can check my information"

27. C: jo men ja menar just (.) att du vet inte vilket land ens du du e medborgare
"yes but I rather mean (.) that you don't know which country even you you are a citizen"

28. I: Ты очень мало знаешь о себе ты не знаешь например гражданством какой страны ты являешься
"you know very little about yourself and you don't know for example which country you are a citizen"

In this stretch of interpreted discourse, the interpreter's renditions involve almost systematically deviations from the originals, sometimes in terms of plain content, sometimes in terms of nuances (which can, however, be potentially important). For example, in contribution 1, the caseworker says that "it could be worth looking at" which the interpreter translates as "it is necessary to check". When Kolja wonders if "they will send me to Germany" (4), the translation sounds like a proposal or an indirect request: "can you send me to Germany". The main topic in the ensuing episode is about the many unclear circumstances (Kolja has no identification papers, has travelled through several countries (Ukraine, Moldova, Germany), etc.). However, when the caseworker formulates this (12), the interpreter inserts the claim that she, the caseworker, cannot tell Kolja anything about the outcome. This is a reasonable conclusion, which is hearsay as an answer to Kolja's question if he might be sent to Germany (4). In 18, the interpreter adds another piece of her own: "and it's impossible to check anything". This was not said by the caseworker, but it leads Kolja to ask "why [it is] impossible" (19). This makes the interpreter direct the question to the caseworker, as it were on Kolja's part, "don't you believe me?" (22). Kolja, who evidently knows some Swedish, detects the misinterpretation (24). The interpreter makes a suggestion, again on Kolja's behalf ("you can check my information") (26), which has no direct and explicit source in Kolja's own contributions (apart from 21, 24). In the meantime, the caseworker is talking about a partly different issue, that little is known about Kolja's background (23, 27). As a result, whereas the caseworker talks about the case in terms of unclear circumstances, the interpreter sounds more as if the episode for her revolves around Kolja's trustworthiness or the impossibility to deliver a decision.

Kolja belongs to the minority of applicants who were granted asylum. Why this was the outcome is not something which we can account for here. But the excerpt shows how the aspect of interpreting between languages can introduce an extra complicating condition into an already troublesome communicative situation type. In the case of asylum interviews, this is not an exceptional feature. On the contrary, they are regularly conducted through interpreters, and in our data corpus, some of whom were not authorised (Keselman et al., 2010).

Discussion

We will use our concluding discussion to do two things. First, we will summarise how trust and distrust surface in the asylum interviews studied. These findings are based on the whole study (discourse analysis and ethnography), but most of the points have been illustrated in the examples given. We shall then close the chapter by briefly considering some methodological issues in the study of trust and distrust in discourse. These two parts thus connect back to the previous sections.
The asylum interview as a complex communicative activity type

We have seen that the investigative asylum interview is both hybridized and replete with discrepant interests and perspectives. What we find is hardly the whole story. We shall now summarise a number of additional difficulties. We will organise them into seven points.

First, the migration authorities and their representatives have partly divided tasks in additional ways to those mentioned above. We noted before that they have the responsibility for handling each individual case according to laws and regulations, and (current) government policies, and they should explore humanitarian reasons, and approve of them if they are convincing. At the same time, they must critically scrutinise the applicants’ representations, in order to turn down illegitimate applications. According to Sweden’s Aliens Act (SFS, 2005), the best interests of the child may not in general override the Swedish society’s need for restricted immigration. Accordingly, there may even be a tacit understanding that as many applications as possible should be declined for various political reasons, such as that of limiting the number of immigrants who are granted residence permits.

For these reasons one might talk about two phases of the administrative process, namely, eliciting and listening to the applicant’s story, as told by him/her under the guidance of the interviewer, and the critical examination of the story, somewhat as in police interrogations (Jönsson & Linell, 1991). The latter task is foregrounded in the in-depth interview (as exemplified in our excerpts), which can make this encounter stand out as confusingly different from the prior screening interview. The critical examination aspect is superordinate, however, since the initial story-telling too is motivated by the need to take a decision (‘diagnosing’ and categorizing the case) in the second phase. The officials’ questions and the uptake may well be understood by applicants in ways that are not intended; for example, applicants may feel that they are not being helped out despite the caseworker’s assurances to the contrary. Incidentally, this shows that Hosking’s general characterisation of ‘trusting’ as believing that events will not end up as negative or ‘harmful’ for oneself (Hosking, in preparation) will have to be further specified in context. As we have seen, the Russian adolescents sometimes doubt the benevolence of caseworkers (e.g. excerpt 2: contributions 106, 122, 129), even if the former also understand that the latter have to do their job of checking information and stories (e.g. excerpt 1: 77). It may also be confusing that caseworkers, following official policies, both have to stress the need for integration in the Swedish society (e.g. going to school, abiding by the laws) and indulge in reparation counselling, by arguing that the child could after all find an acceptable life back home. From the applicant’s point of view, one could wonder why it is so important to go to school and develop social relations in Sweden if there are good reasons to assume that one will be sent home in any case (e.g. excerpt 2: 1, 122).

Second, there are – from the perspective of the applicants at least – additional perceived uncertainties or non-transparencies in the decision-making processes; who has actually the right to make decisions? According to the rulebook, the caseworkers have no formal authority in their capacity as interviewers, and are not authorised to promise anything during the interview (except in very simple cases). However, in practice, they naturally exercise influence over the subsequent decisions, informally and through their written reports. A particularly confusing circumstance is that some interviewers have in fact several functions in relation to the minors; while most caseworkers may be just asylum case officers (with no right to decide), others may also be decision-makers, and some are also responsible for the care of the applicant and his or her reception during the stay in Sweden (reception officer; Sw.: mottagningshandläggare). Irrespective of these varying responsibilities, which are presumably partly opaque to the applicants, they all carry out similar asylum interviews. In excerpt 3 the caseworker emphasises the complexity of the applicant’s case (e.g. 12, 14, 17), and that she cannot predict the outcome. The applicant, by contrast, gets entangled in a discourse about his credibility (18–28).

Third, there are several tensions in applicants’ accounts, between their willingness to disclose information and the wish to withhold other sorts of information. Asylum-seekers are supposed to report any facts that might inform decisions about their eligibility for asylum, and they are required to produce documents and evidence in support of their claims. However, in practice many lack valid identification documents. This is a double-edged circumstance. Paperlessness is often the case when someone has been smuggled illegally into the country, but if, accordingly, that person is unwilling to disclose who he or she is, this may raise suspicions of fabricated information-giving. Some applicants may want to conceal or deny functioning family relations, or otherwise decide on social circumstances back in Russia (or other former Soviet republics). In addition, they often report poverty, being victims of criminality, or abuse by peers (and elders, such as teachers), harassments and persecutions due to membership of ethnic minorities, etc. (of which only the last-mentioned are undisputably legitimate grounds for asylum). Applicants’ accounts may end up featuring some recurrent, conventionalised ingredients, and ambiguities and inconsistencies; some applicants seem to have learnt what kinds of ‘stories’ to tell (Keitel, 2009). One can even speak about shared social representations and collective memories within the collectivity of Russian applicants (Wertsch and Batashvili, Chapter 2 in the present volume). Keitel et al. (2010) show that interpreters sometimes intervene to comment on and even correct applicants’ answers and stories, something which may render the latter susceptible to accusations of lying.

Fourth, there are of course differences in the cultural background, between the non-democratic society of Russia (and the former Soviet Union) and a Western democracy. Applicants have reasons for lack of confidence in authorities in general, and particularly in the Soviet or Russian police (and other authorities). They may also detect apparent discrepancies between the agendas of different Swedish authorities, such as the police and the office of the Migration Board. The issue of confidentiality is complex, and in applicants’ perspectives, there sometimes seem to be contradictions between rhetoric and practice that do not inspire confidence (excerpt 1: 66, 69, 77, 83).

Fifth, the interactions are mediated by dialogue (community) interpreters. Interpreters in general, and particularly in this kind of situation, intervene on some points; they do more than just translate. For example, in and through their
renditions interpreters may provide extra information with no counterpart in the primary parties’ originals (or, conversely, they may omit aspects of originals) (Wadensjö, 1998). And there is the unavoidable question: on whose side is the interpreter? Misunderstandings are often collectively generated in the interactions, often via the interpreters. Interpreters do of course sometimes contribute to clarification and the resolving of misunderstandings, but there is also empirical evidence that side-sequences initiated by them (sequences with interpreter interventions and communication with only one of the primary parties) may sustain or even aggravate miscommunication and uncertainties (Keselman et al., 2010). In our empirical data, several interpreters were not authorised community interpreters, and they committed a substantial number of translation errors (excerpt 3), some of which could potentially result in undesirable misunderstandings.

Sixth, one may argue that the age difference between the interviewee and the other participants in the kind of asylum interviews at hand is an additional complicating factor. The applicants are minors, who are sometimes admonished or given lessons (excerpt 2: 139–150). Compared to other children who come into contact with society’s authorities, the asylum-seekers are multiply handicapped. Some applicants lack the kind of education that representatives of the welfare state may easily take for granted; for example, some of the minors went to school only irregularly, and a few of them may still be more or less illiterate. Their opportunities to participate fully in the asylum procedures are limited. And yet, the demands on them often imply that they are expected to act — in some respects — as fully accountable persons, i.e. just like adult applicants (Keselman, 2009).

Seventh, we note once again that one of the objectives for the interviewees is to assess precisely the trustworthiness and credibility of applicants. If they conduct their interviews in ways that stress the activity of testing applicants’ reliability, this in itself may be taken as a sign of distrust on their part. And reciprocally, together with the other factors already mentioned, this may make applicants distrust interviewers. Despite parties’ frequent insistence that they are themselves trustworthy, there are reasons for mutual distrust.9

In the asylum interviews we can witness a clash of several background ‘symbolic systems’ (Hosking, Chapter 1 in the present volume), including international law and human rights, criminal law, immigration policies, and social welfare. Parties have to defend themselves and will easily fall into the trap of distrust. But there is of course no total distrust. Some sort of ‘basic trust’ (Marková et al., 2008) is present; this may include adherence to basic social norms, such as normal language use, and rational rules of interaction, e.g. that the other’s contributions are designed to be locally relevant. There is some common understanding of the communicative activity type, and hence a kind of predictive trust; given what has been said and done, you can roughly predict what the responses to your contributions might be (even though you may not like these responses). That the applicant in ‘Anton’ admits a few minor offences may indicate some level of trust, and in ‘Kolja’ there is a fairly trustful communication, despite the cases of misalignment. Moreover, some pieces of common trust must be in place for distrust to develop.

It is tempting to regard the separated children as socially handicapped, almost by definition. But that would amount to a static view. Rather, as we hope to have demonstrated, they are becoming (more) handicapped in certain contexts (cf. Mehan et al., 1986), and the asylum interview is arguably such a handicapping situation. At the same time, our dialogical account, especially the analysis of the framing of the communicative activity type involved, with parties who are partly opposed stakeholders, shows that the interactional processes enhancing or even creating trust, distrust, lack of trustworthiness and social handicaps are interdependent with premisses of the situation type.

Can trust be systematically studied in discourse?

Let us first recall that the caseworkers are charged with the task of assessing applicants’ trustworthiness on the basis of their oral interviews (Granhag et al., 2005). Trust and trustworthiness are therefore in the forefront of their awareness. But in actual practice, they have of course access to a considerable amount of other kinds of documentation than the interaction in the interviews. For us as discourse analysts, the question is partly different: can we actually use the discourse as such to identify signs of trust and distrust between the parties? The backdrop for a study like ours is the apparent contradiction between the following two assertions: on the one hand, we claim that trust and distrust come to life precisely in discourse and interaction, and on the other hand, we propose that trust can hardly ever be directly studied in actual discourse, because it is such an elusive, implicit and largely tacit phenomenon. It is arguable, though, that at least distrust can be empirically studied in discourse, and we have argued that asylum interviews are a particularly salient case.

Two sides of trust and distrust have been highlighted here: formal aspects and content aspects. On the formal side, we have pointed to misalignments in interactions as indexes of mutual distrust. We have pointed to a characteristic sequential organisation of escalating expressions of lack of trust in terms of so-called mistrust sequences. As far as content is concerned, we have pointed to the importance assigned by participants to discrepancies and inconsistencies in the other’s discourse. Formal and pragmatic conditions contribute to situations in which trust and distrust are explicitly topicalised in discourse. This is regularly an indication of doubt in the other’s sincerity or trustworthiness.

We have used fairly long excerpts in this article. The main reason for this is that trust and distrust are phenomena that emerge over time, as evidence is accumulated. This is not to deny that more local actions are at play too, and we have seen some examples of this. Indeed, many local contributions by several parties add up to attitudes of trust or suspicions leading to distrust. Nor is the use of excerpts from conversations to deny that the relations of trust and distrust have often evolved over time, in previous encounters and outside of actual encounters, in moments of reflection or in conversations with others. The role of ‘third parties’, for example, through gossiping events, is considerable in the domain of trust and distrust (Marková et al., 2008). Trust and distrust in people usually have long-term import, implications and effects. While both interpersonal and intergroup trust and distrust may have a long life of its
and downs, and build upon several encounters between individuals and/or institutions, it is possible that distrust may emerge relatively quickly in a situation of crisis.

So, if trust and distrust are phenomena with a more long-term extension than single conversations, one might question the method of using only selected sequences from single conversations. Can one really claim that these display the evolving processes of real trust and distrust? Here, we come across a methodological problem, which is well known in the study of understanding and learning too. It has been argued that one cannot ascertain the occurrence of understanding (except in the sense of immediate understanding for current purposes) and learning just by studying selected situated interactions (Lindwall, 2008); what we find there are opportunities for learning, rather than learning per se, which is a more long-term, transinstitutional process. Perhaps we should make a similar remark with regard to trust and distrust. A discourse-analytic study may detect moments, or opportunities, when distrust seems to surface. Whether these opportunities lead to long-term relations of distrust (or trust, for that matter) is a problem we cannot resolve on these situated discourse data. While short-term distrust may be indicated in discourse, long-term distrust is harder to determine. But we may still be beginning to understand some of the discursive mechanisms by which people develop their relations of trust and distrust in actual social life.\(^\text{10}\)

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Notes

1 Obviously, these could just as well be called ‘distrust sequences’. If any semantic distinction exists at all, it might be that ‘mistrust’ is taken to be slightly more implicit, while ‘distrust’ may be more assertive.

2 Moreover, Cederborg and Gumpert (2009, pp. 1–2) note that “[i]n Sweden it is the report’s reliability as evidence that should be valued when assessing the child’s credibility, even if the Supreme Court’s precedential cases do not always separate the difference between the reliability of a statement and the credibility of an individual”.

3 In fact, the set questions asked in today’s screening interviews are much the same as in about 1990, when the police carried out the corresponding interviews (Reveron & West, 1993).

4 We have used simplified transcriptions here. Note the following conventions: [square brackets, on two adjacent lines, one bracket right above the other, indicate the onset of simultaneous talk by two speakers;

5 The word “stories” appears in English in the original.

6 Caseworkers are committed to obeying rules of confidentiality, but this is a promise they can never maintain, since they have to exchange information with the police and social authorities when it comes to collecting data, e.g. regarding personal identity, necessary for the processing of the case (Nilsson, 2007).

7 There is no pronoun in Russian, and hence it is unclear if Anton has “him” or “us” in mind. The interpreter created this ambiguity in contribution 94, in using “we” despite the fact that the decision-maker only talked about herself (93). In his rendition (96), the interpreter avoids the ambiguity.

8 Svetlana is Anton’s trustee.

9 We will not review here the literature on (discourse analyses of) asylum hearings (but cf. Keselman, 2009). See in particular Pollabauer (2007) and Marinits (2007) (the latter analysing non-interpreter-mediated hearings with adult asylum-seekers).

10 As is often the case in discourse and interaction studies, the focus is more on the ‘how’ question than on the ‘what’ question. As a case in point, we cannot as observers be certain about exactly how much is actually at stake for the individual participants in “our” asylum interviews. For example, at the time of the interview cited in (2), Anton already knew that he would be expelled from Sweden. (And yet, he was later granted asylum in a second round.)

References


10 Confession as a communication genre

The logos and mythos of the Party

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The idea that humankind gradually abandons mythical and magical thinking and becomes more rational on its journey towards progress has been seductive for centuries. Much has been written about the dark ages and the dawn of science in ancient Greece, in the Roman Empire and in the Middle Ages; this scholarly literature shows that scientific thinking has gradually freed itself from preoccupations with irrational phenomena like astrology, magic, alchemy and mystery. But the progress was slow. Even scientists of the seventeenth century, like Johannes Kepler or Galileo Galilei, were involved in what, today, would be called irrational enterprises, for example astrology. Nevertheless, a historian John North commented about Kepler that had he not been drawn to astrology “he would very probably have failed to produce his planetary astronomy in the form we have it” (North, 2008, p. 345). Tycho Brahe and Isaac Newton were interested in alchemy. Keynes (1947, p. 27) remarked that “Newton was not the first of the age of reason. He was the last of the magicians […] the last great mind which looked out on the visible and intellectual world with the same eyes as those who began to build our intellectual inheritance rather less than 10,000 years ago.”

Nevertheless, since the end of the seventeenth century sciences have prided themselves as being based on knowledge which eradicates mystery. In contrast to Greek science, modern science “does not end in wonder but in expansion of wonder,” says Michael Foster (1957, p. 53) in his treatise on Mystery and Philosophy. Natural sciences have been developing their terminology in a univocal language and have based their methods on a limited number of laws and concepts. This has made them universally communicable in the scientific community (Campbell, 1920/2007, p. 10).

Yet the question mark in the title of the volume From Myth to Reason? (Buxton, 1999) indicates that the idea of the path from myths to logos has not been accepted without scepticism, whether in ancient Greece or in contemporary societies. Tracing the history of Greek philosophy, and referring to the contemporary preoccupation with rationality, Guthrie (1962, p. 2) warns that the danger begins when humans believe that they have left behind all mythical thinking and rely solely on scientific method based on observation and logical inference: “[t]he unconscious retention of inherited and irrational modes of thought, cloaked in the vocabulary of reason, then becomes an obstacle, rather than aid, to the pursuit of
The series Cultural Dynamics of Social Representation is dedicated to bringing the scholarly reader new ways of representing human lives in the contemporary social sciences. It is a part of a new direction — cultural psychology — that has emerged at the intersection of developmental, dynamic and social psychologies, anthropology, education, and sociology. It aims to provide cutting-edge examinations of global social processes, which for every country are becoming increasingly multi-cultural; the world is becoming one 'global village', with the corresponding need to know how different parts of that 'village' function. Therefore, social sciences need new ways of considering how to study human lives in their globalizing contexts. The focus of this series is the social representation of people, communities, and — last but not least — the social sciences themselves.

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