

The Migration Oxford Podcast

When words decide at Europe's borders: how language shapes rescue and responsibility

Transcript

Rob McNeil

Hello and welcome to the Migration Oxford podcast. Today we're taking a slightly unusual route insofar as you've just got me, Rob McNeil, rather than our usual co-host Jackie Broadhead, and we're going to be talking about a subject which is very close to my heart, which is the use of language in migration debates and to what extent it makes a difference. So today I'm going to be talking to Peter Walsh, Bianca Benvenuti and Sam Pawdale, So guys, if you could please start by introducing yourselves. Bianca, perhaps we could start with you.

Bianca Benvenuti

Hello, my name is Bianca Benvenuti. I've been working for the past decade on migration, humanitarian action and advocacy. with several different civil society and humanitarian organizations. Currently, I am Director of Advocacy and Operational Communication at SOS Mediterranean, an NGO working in the Central Mediterranean Sea to search and rescue people in distress. I'm very much looking forward to our discussion.

Rob McNeil

Thank you. And Sam, over to you.

Sam Pordale

Hello, my name is Sam Podell. I came to UK in 2022 as an asylum seeker and received scholarship to study at the University of Warwick. And I've been working as a research assistant and with charities helping asylum seekers to get to higher education and also looking forward to our discussions today.

Rob McNeil

Thank you very much. And finally, my old colleague and comrade in arms, Peter Walsh, could you introduce yourself?

Dr. Peter Walsh

Yes, my name is Doctor Peter Walsh. I'm a senior researcher at the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, where I lead our work on asylum and unauthorised migration.

Rob McNeil

Okay, so let's start with the most basic question, which is, I mean, how does the language used to talk about migration actually influence policy and decision making in both the Mediterranean and the English Channel? And Bianca, if I could start with you, but then obviously I'd be interested to hear from all three of you about this.

Bianca Benvenuti

Yes, I think I can maybe start from my personal experience of the past decade working in humanitarian advocacy. Particularly in the central Mediterranean Sea, I've seen firsthand how narratives have directly affected political decisions and at the same time supported that. So in this sense, language doesn't only reflect policy, but it actually shapes it. So again, in the context of the central Mediterranean Sea, language has shaped the boundaries of what is considered politically possible and politically acceptable. In the past 10 years, over 20,000 people have died in the central Mediterranean, which is now regarded as one of the... deadliest migratory route in the entire world. And this decade has been characterized by systematic policies of non-assistance by states, criminalization of migration and humanitarian actors, increased administrative hurdles to stop civil engagement in the central Mediterranean Sea, and also cooperation with third countries, most notably Tunisia and Libya, to the purpose of facilitating returns of people in places that are not safe for them. So the way in which this has all been justified is also through narratives that rely on forms of, let's say, racialized dehumanization, reducing certain number of people to illegal migrants, flows and numbers. So in this way, people have been stripped of their individuality and their humanity. And then these policies have been sold, let's say, and it has become easier for the general public to justify something that normally would be politically and morally unacceptable. I think something also striking in the context where I work has been the consistent use of humanitarian language by state actors. So the same deterrence policy that causes suffering and death in the central Mediterranean Sea are justified using humanitarian language. So saying that we need to prevent people from departing so that they don't die at sea. So using the language of protecting lives actually to justify deterrence policies.

Rob McNeil

Right. Okay. I mean, this is super interesting, but I'm going to I'm going to I want to move over to Peter quickly, actually, if you don't mind, because Peter, this is you and I spend a lot of time writing about these issues in various different ways and having to find ways

and formulations to talk about this kind of stuff. How do you feel about the whether or not language is the issue here?

Dr. Peter Walsh

Well, it's certainly central. I mean, in the UK context with which I'm most familiar to Terrence has really become one of the consistent themes across successive governments over many years in UK asylum policy. And it's an interesting language because the language of deterrence, it has a clear challenge to be addressed. That's an authorised arrival. So that's the problem to be solved. It does imply that it's the government who is best placed to solve that issue and how. by increasingly restrictive reception and removal policies, which may serve, by the way, some not so latent symbolic functions looking tough on the issue. I mean, we saw this with the Rwanda scheme, I think most notably, which proposed to remove all people who arrived without authorisation across the channel to a country they had no connection with. And it continues to this day under a different government with Denmark inspired restrictions to the asylum system. So the end of permanent residence for refugees, temporary protection, a 20 year route to settlement. But for me, what's really interesting is what the available evidence suggests about the deterrent effect of asylum restrictions, which studies tend to show that it's fairly small. And we have a fairly clear idea as to why. policy has been found to be not the most important factor influencing changes in the number of people claiming asylum in destination countries, global developments, conflict, civil or ethnic tensions, regime change. They are much more important statistically. And then we also find, and I expect Sam might be able to speak to this, when we speak to prospective asylum seekers, they don't always have a detailed, accurate knowledge of what policies will face them in destination countries. They may have some information that is typically not especially accurate. It can be misleading. And then, of course, decisions about where and how to move depend not just on policy. You know, they depend on the presence of family members, members of the community in destination countries. So these are the factors that evidence shows are really important. And that suggests that the terror policies, at least historically, can only ever be expected to have a modest impact.

Rob McNeil

So what I'm understanding from that then is that you're saying that the language of deterrence is all well and good, but it doesn't necessarily actually bring about outcomes. What I suppose it does do is create a situation where certain people are formulated in public debate in certain ways. Now, Sam, as somebody who arrived in the UK as an asylum seeker, do you have a view about how the language in this debate has shaped how you were perceived or indeed whether or not you actually made certain decisions based on language?

Sam Pordale

Firstly, as Peter said, asylum seekers while they're travelling they don't usually have any idea what are the policies in the countries that they're moving around or the countries they want to go to because they're usually surviving and have no access to social media or to internet or telephone. But coming to the UK, I think after 2022 riots, the language on asylum seekers changed rapidly and it kind of felt as an asylum seen community that we are not human beings and the people that I work with in the hotels after 2023, they were more kind of reserved and started not coming to our lectures and we started teaching them English and it all felt like myself as well that it's all like an Afghanistan at the moment because I escaped Afghanistan to survive and it felt like what I'm going to do now after all this happening here. And the language that's been used on asylum seekers, it's more kind of dehumanizing. And the people who live in hotels, usually we get this information that they live on five-star hotels with iPhones and they're living this luxury life and politicians get on this wagon. It's changed completely on how they view themselves because they see the public as their enemy. and someone who's ready to kind of kill them, ready to kind of attack them if they do anything wrong. And this also affects their mental health and how they react.

Rob McNeil

This is really interesting stuff, but I just want to ask the question of like, Who benefits from the way that migration is framed or the way that we talk about international mobility? And who do you think carries the responsibility for structuring language in certain ways in these debates? Peter, can I start with you on this?

Dr. Peter Walsh

Certainly. I mean, the language of deterrence and its sibling enforcement, my sense is it does shift attention away from some of the structural factors driving these movements, the strong, powerful geopolitical push factors, for example, which crucially are largely beyond the control of destination countries. So it shifts attention away from those and onto actors like smugglers and actions that can be targeted. So this makes government policy appear responsive. even when the underlying core drivers remain unaddressed and beyond government control.

Rob McNeil

Fascinating. And Bianca, what about your position on this? How do you feel, who do you feel holds responsibility and who benefits?

Bianca Benvenuti

I think what we've been witnessing in the Central Mediterranean Sea is that the reframing on search and rescue has really helped to justify state withdrawal from their

duties. This is because once rescue is framed as a pull factor, then absence can be justified. So we are not present at sea to rescue people because if we are, we're going to encourage people to take the sea into the perilous journey. So again, if presence is believed to encourage or is presented as encouraging crossing, then absence becomes a policy. So I think what we've been witnessing in the past 10 years is that the one who has benefited the most from this reframing of sea rescue has been coastal state and in general the European Union in the way they have reframed and also radicalised the Terrence policies. they can be then presented in a way that is morally acceptable. On the other hand, in terms of also who has been impacted by this change in language, I think civil society organisations have been impacted heavily because the other side of the coin is that once these policies are considered acceptable, then those who are still active as independent actors then become a threat, not only because of our operational presence, but also because we bear witness to the realities of what happens at sea and to the realities of daily human rights violation. And I think this has justified the shrinking of operational space, administrative obstacles and active criminalization against search and rescue actors.

Rob McNeil

Do you think that there's a battle over how migration is talked about and who do you think is shaping that conversation and why do you think that matters?

Bianca Benvenuti

Yeah, I think absolutely there is a battle on how migration is talked about because as we've discussed until now, the words we used have influenced or are influenced the way in which people and the general public understand migration and then who they empathize with and which policies then they are willing to accept. I believe that humanitarian organizations play a role, let's say. I'm not sure a big one, because of course, in terms of resources and reach, we are very limited compared to governments or mainstream media. But in all of the humanitarian I've been working with and also specifically with SOS Mediterranee, bearing witness and testifying to what we see during our operation is one of the key pillars of our activities. So for this reason, I feel humanitarian organisations feel the responsibility of using precise and evidence-based language. I find extremely encouraging that more and more people with lived experience, and we have some with us today, are reclaiming their own voices into shaping the conversation. Of course, it's also, I think, our responsibility as humanitarians and also as academician to create the space or to help opening the space for people to be able to bring their own voices.

Rob McNeil

Bianca, I don't want to ambush you with this question, but I want to ask about the role of advocacy organizations such as your own in polarizing the debate and potentially

even driving people towards thinking about some of the very restrictive policies that you are trying to challenge. In particular, I want to just highlight something which was produced by an organization called the Identitarian Movement in a 2017 analysis of their Defend Europe campaign, which was actually designed to try to prevent people from participating in search and rescue exercises. And in that they say Defend Europe has received an enormous amount of media coverage. While almost all were hostile and several were lying, this is obviously their perspective on this. These articles and TV reports brought our action to the minds of millions of people. It is this media impact which allowed our political success. Only 2 months ago many NGO ships were cruising near the Libyan coasts like taxis waiting for their customers. Right now, the 20th of August, there's only one left. I mean, this is a far right organisation that's basically claiming that organisations like yours have drawn attention to their work. Do you think that that's true?

Bianca Benvenuti

Well, I think this is a very, very complex subject, but maybe just to give some thoughts on it. And starting from, well, What humanitarian organizations are faced with and challenged with in the let's say contemporary context is that it's more and more challenging to navigating humanitarian principles and principles that has guided humanitarian positioning in the past. Maybe I could just bring it down to the relation between humanitarianism and politics, which is what we see more and more, especially in migration context in Europe. Like if you are part of a humanitarian organization, probably in the European context, probably in the past 10 years, you have interrogated yourself onto how much political supposed to be, or are we not humanitarians? Maybe we should not participate in the humanitarian debate. So these are subjects that we think about and we do reflect on how we have also played a role into radicalizing and polarizing the debate on migration. So I understand that there is also this part on how we influence the debate, but I think it's a little bit background noise, you know, not to look at the core of the matter. And the core of the matter is that we have people escaping countries that are in conflict, natural disaster, where there are no socio-economical possibility and they are seeking for protection. And often they are met with deterrence policy that at sea or the situation and exclusion once they arrive into destination countries.

Rob McNeil

Fantastic. Thank you. So, Peter, if I can just come to you. I mean, this question about the battle over how migration is talked about, I mean, do you have a view about who's shaping that conversation and why it matters?

Dr. Peter Walsh

I do. I mean, in one basic sense, all of us shape that conversation. But there are some voices, I think, that enjoy an outsized influence. The media, the government. I mean, you spoke about the battle. I mean, there's one particular phrase, word over which a battle has been long fought, and it's the use of the term illegal migrant. Certain politicians, typically to the right of the political spectrum, right-leaning media outlets, the right-wing press, are more likely to describe people crossing the channel as illegal migrants, some even as invaders with the connotations that that comes with. And then you have, on the other side of the battle, human rights organizations, refugee charities, that say, and have long argued, a person can't be illegal. What you're doing is seeking to delegitimise rights bearing individuals who have a right under international law to have their claim processed by the UK as a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention. but instead you're presenting them as illegal migrants, lawbreakers, people breaking the law in an attempt to delegitimise them. And I see on social media and I see it in the right-wing press and I hear it from reform politicians, they are fairly consistent in describing people in hotels, cross-channel migrants as illegal immigrants.

Rob McNeil

So I think, Sam, it would be very interesting to get your perspective on this as well. and raises the question of whether or not we should have started this conversation about language with this very specific, challenging term, the word illegal. Sam, what do you think about, what do you think are the consequences of describing people seeking protection as illegal?

Sam Pordale

Firstly, what came to my mind is that it gives a lot of control to the smugglers when they interact with asylum seekers. I know people that were forced to work and for five pound a day because they thought if they ask the authorities for help, they will get into trouble because they are as asylum seekers born, they're an illegal migrant. And this language gives more control to people who are abusing asylum seekers for work. And every time I had this conversation with them that no, you should ask for help, that five pound a day is you shouldn't be able to go through all this. But they're like, no, I'm an illegal migrant and that's what they view me as and they're not going to help me. And yeah, this gives more control to people to abuse people seeking safety and it also makes people who are seeking safety to not feel that they can't ask for help. And I think this is the most important part that goes unnoticed. And a lot of them will get hurt while they're working as well and they can't ask for help. One person that I know broke his hand for five pounds and he couldn't ask for help because he was afraid to ask for help from authorities.

Rob McNeil

And Bianca, just on this point, I mean, obviously, There is profound concern from states about ideas that they cannot control their borders and that if they don't have the ability to restrict access to their countries, that that's going to lead to, again, I mean, this the rise of nationalism and even more aggressive responses. So they put in place, they put in place policies which mean that it's not legally permitted to cross borders in certain ways. Now, how do you think people should talk about people seeking protection, if not to you, if not who are crossing borders without authorization in a way which is not going to create this shift towards far right narratives?

Bianca Benvenuti

Well, I think first of all, we need to be reminded that there are very, very little legal avenues to enter in Europe and seek asylum. So I think the concept of Paris border was entrenched into the way the member states or in, I mean, in a geographical sense, Europe have interpreted asylum law because people need to come in somehow. So I think the debate should always go back into try and understand how can we reinforce legal avenues into seeking asylum and protection. Then coming back onto the point of what is the impact of describing people as illegal. I believe I've made mention to this before, but this has a very big impact on how the general public perceive people and on this increased dehumanization and how then migrants and asylum seekers crossing are reduced to numbers and statistics and then it becomes politically easier to sell deterrence policies.

Rob McNeil

Okay, so I'd like to just ask a final question. Is it really the language that's the challenge here or is it just a fundamental structural problem in the world that we can't get past? Peter, your thoughts on this. Can we mitigate those structural problems by talking about things differently?

Dr. Peter Walsh

I think language will only go so far. The material conditions of existence and the big inequalities in those. We understand that these drive migration. Important to recognise, of course, that most asylum seekers are not headed for Europe. Most remain in countries outside neighbouring their countries of origin. These material conditions are important in explaining these migratory trends. Language, I think, works alongside this and has some significance insofar as it influences policies of reception in countries of destination. And perhaps here we could take our cue from some of the refugee and migration charities who argue that yes, okay, we have these material conditions of inequality, but at the same time important to remember that we are dealing at the end of the day with people, many of whom who have fled awful conditions and conditions of persecution. And as people, they are due a certain respect in the register in which we discuss them in public debate.

Rob McNeil

And on that note, I'd just like to say thank you very much to Sam Pordale, Bianca Benvenuti and Peter Walsh for a fascinating conversation. That's been really, really interesting. Thank you so much.

Bianca Benvenuti

Thank you.

Dr. Peter Walsh

Thanks for having us.

Rob McNeil

Wow, what a thought-provoking conversation. And it brings to my mind the fact that The way that we talk about migration is inevitably incredibly important from a policymaking point of view, but it's also incredibly challenging to manage because how we frame this concept, how we discuss it, the words that we use, they are highly politicized, highly political. And so efforts to try and manage this kind of thing are inevitably going to be somewhat subjective and may even end up doing more harm than good in some situations. But If we don't try to incorporate humanity and decency into the way that we talk about the issue of migration, it's hard to escape the concept that we're going to just end up in a downward spiral and I don't think anybody really wants that. And on that note, you've been listening to the Migration Oxford podcast. I'm Rob McNeill. Thanks A lot.