PRETEXTUALITY AND PRETEXTUAL GAPS: ON DE/REFINING LINGUISTIC INEQUALITY

Katrijn Maryns & Jan Blommaert

Abstract

Drawing on the rich tradition of investigations into linguistic inequality, this paper seeks to define the phenomenon of pretextual gaps, i.e. socially anchored and often invisible differences between what is expected in communication and what people can bring and deploy in communication. Pretextual gaps refer to conditions on sayability, differential distribution of access to these conditions, and social evaluations attached to such differences. We shall investigate pretextual gaps in three sets of data, all of them instances of experiential narration: Asylum seekers' narratives, hand-written life histories from Shaba, Congo, and narratives of suffering produced during the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. We will attempt to demonstrate how a fine-grained discourse analysis focused on linguistic resources and models of deployment can refine existing views on linguistic inequality.

Keywords: Narrative, Literacy, Inequality, Belgium, Congo, South Africa.

1. Introduction

Since Bernstein introduced the distinction between restricted and elaborated code, linguistic inequality has been on the sociolinguistic agenda. In fact, much of the development of sociolinguistics in the 1960s and the 1970s can be read as an attempt at addressing issues of inequality. It certainly figures prominently in the work of for instance Dell Hymes (e.g. 1980), John Gumperz (e.g. 1982) and William Labov (e.g. 1972). In a different way, Joshua Fishman approached language as a resource for development (e.g. Fishman 1968). Observations about dynamics of (dis)enfranchisement have been the starting point of lots of sociolinguistic investigations, micro as well as macro, and all over
the world. The long pedigree the topic had in sociolinguistics was recently sketched by Hymes (1996) and two collections by Charles Briggs (1996, 1997) brought home the potential of a new, anthropologically-informed discourse analysis for addressing issues of linguistic inequality.

It is in this development that we set this paper. The study of linguistic inequality can and should take stock of two major developments in language studies. One is the interactional paradigm, developed in ethnographically-inspired branches of sociolinguistics, pragmatics and anthropological linguistics. In this interactional paradigm, close attention is paid to details of the interactional structure of language-in-context, in such a way as to unearth the collaborative, contextually situated and praxeological nature of understanding in social life. The work of John Gumperz (esp. 1982) has been seminal in the breakthrough of this paradigm, and the way in which he managed to relate details of speech to social lifeworlds and real life-chances has demonstrated the capacity of interactionally-inspired approaches to reveal often overlooked aspects of social inequality. The second development is the tendency in many branches of discourse analysis to let itself be informed by recent developments in social theory, thus seeking a firmer theoretical grounding for socially-sensitive analyses of language. Sociolinguistic scholars such as Gal (e.g. 1989), Heller (1999), Rampton (1995) and Woolard (1989) produced analyses in which Bourdieu, Gramsci, Giddens and others featured prominently. And in the field of discourse analysis, scholars such as Fairclough (1992) and Wodak (1995) developed a program for critical discourse analysis, explicitly drawing on social theory and raising linguistic inequality and asymmetry to the level of priorities in discourse analysis. In all these developments, explicit appeals were launched for a better integration of (recent) social theory and linguistic analysis.

Sharing these preoccupations, we shall argue for a view of linguistic inequality based on the notions of pretextuality – preconditions for communication that influence communicative behaviour – and pretextual gaps – differences in such preconditions between participants in communication. Drawing on (and reformulating) earlier and ongoing research, we will attempt to demonstrate how pretextual gaps organise forms of linguistic inequality across three different types of data: Narratives of escape produced by African asylum seekers in Belgium, grassroots autobiographic writing from Shaba, Congo, and narratives of suffering produced by Apartheid victims during the televised hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. All these data are instances of experiential narration, but each time produced in different formats, using different channels and genres. We intend to illustrate various aspects of the ways in which pretextuality operates in communication, thus offering suggestions for a more refined approach to linguistic inequality based on detailed text-scrutiny and a sensitivity to the importance of preconditions as well as conditions for communicating (channel, setting, purpose etc.). Before engaging the discussion of the data, we will define and discuss our key notions in the next section.

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2 For a panoramic discussion see Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000.
2. Pretextuality and pretextual gaps

Despite the numerous attempts in the past to ‘write over’ diversity in human interaction, scholars such as Dell Hymes (1996), John Gumperz (1982), Pierre Bourdieu (1991) and Michael Silverstein (1998) have challenged the idea of social and linguistic uniformity by rejecting the assumption of uniformity of linguistic resources as a precondition for successful communication: “From one standpoint the history of human society can be seen as a history of diversity of language - diversity of languages as such, diversity as to their media, structures, and functions and of diversity as a problem” (Hymes 1996: 59). This does not imply, however, that all communication is unproblematic. After all, participants in human interaction do not have the capacity to read the interlocutor's mind, nor predict what interlocutors expect or want to communicate. Diversity inherent in human interaction inevitably involves diversity in what people consider meaningful and in what they can bring and deploy in communication. It is not until one recognises this reality of diversity in human interaction that the notion of pretextuality starts to make sense.  

The notion of pretextuality can be defined in terms of socially preconditioned meaning assessments, textuality resources and entextualisation potential. It belongs to the sphere of largely ‘invisible’ features of language in society, on a par with such notions as ‘intertextuality’, where visible ‘traces’ can be discerned but are ruled by larger patterns of intertextuality such as traditions and genres. But whereas intertextuality emphasises the intrinsic historicity of every fact of language, pretextuality emphasises the intrinsic political-economic dimension of every language fact: Every language fact comes with a history of (ab)use (intertextuality), as well as with a history of social or sociocultural evaluation and assessment (pretextuality).

Speaker pretextuality can thus be conceptualised in terms of a package of socially preconditioned knowledge articulated in speakers’ personal ‘baggage’ and assessments of what is meaningful in the interaction combined with his/her capacity to anticipate what is required and hence will be recognised as meaningful in the ongoing text trajectory. All of this in turn requires sufficient control over the resources needed to give shape to the message and all of which involves language-ideological aspects. The speaker has to be able to anticipate what is replicable (or ‘iterable’, to use Derrida’s term) in the interaction, both

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3 Dell Hymes (1996) challenges the idea of social, cultural and linguistic uniformity and he emphasises the need to go beyond “a liberal humanism which merely recognises the abstract potentiality of languages, toward a humanism which can deal with concrete situations, with inequalities that obtain and can help to transform them through knowledge of the ways in which language is organised as a human problem and resource” (Hymes 1996: 60). Moreover, Hymes regrets (1996: 57):

“to differ from so many colleagues on this issue, but if linguistic work is to make its contribution to solution of human problems, it is necessary not to blink realities. How could languages be other than different, if languages have any role in human life? (...) There is a truth in the thesis of potentiality and a truth in the thesis of equivalent adaptation across communities, but both truths fall short of contemporary reality, where languages are not found unmolested, as it were, one to a community, each working out its destiny autonomously.”

For comparable views, see Gumperz (1982: 7) and Silverstein (1996: 284).
in terms of meaning potential of the discourse and resources available in order to construct utterances that may become meaningful in the further text trajectory. This implies a development against the background of a semiotic economy in which every aspect of communication is subject to social evaluations and assessments – every difference in communication is a difference in socially perceived ‘value’ and leads to positive or negative evaluations.

It is a well-known fact that every speaker mobilises various forms of pre-existing knowledge in communication: Linguistic, generic, metapragmatic, schematic etc. knowledge. Pretextuality addresses the connections between such pre-existing knowledges and patterns of availability and accessibility of such knowledges. Therefore, rather than being conceptualised merely as a synthesis of existing notions related to ‘pre-knowledge’, the concept refers to how, both in terms of resources available and presentation of the events, traces of elements transferred from other discursive contexts reflect conditions of transferability.

The above described diversity of and in languages - diversity as to their media and channels, structures, and functions - inevitably turns this anticipation process into a highly complex enterprise. Therefore, due to the complex social and discursive relationships within and between speech communities, many forms of interaction can be characterised by pretextual gaps: Different conditions on sayability and interpretability cause the meanings to be produced or sought to fall in the gap between what is recognised and what can be produced. Pretextual gaps refer to conditions on sayability, differential distribution of access to these conditions, and social evaluations attached to such differences. Successful communication requires from the participants not merely the capacity to anticipate what comes up to the interlocutor’s expectations in order to constitute meaning potential, but also the capacity to convey these meanings by means of resources that are language-ideologically marked in terms of code, medium, channel, mode of narration, etc. Given these complex conditions on sayability and interpretability, it appears to be more realistic to take diversity and discrepancy rather than natural correspondence and transparency as defaults in cross-communication.

In order to substantiate this point, we shall investigate pretextual gaps in three types of data, all of which share the following features:

(a) The discourse involves instances of personal experiential narration: Speakers have to provide contextually dense accounts of events containing emotive, affective and epistemic aspects in ways that may have serious consequences for their personal lives.

(b) The discourse can be characterised by a tension between what is recognised and what can be produced in communication, developing against a background in which this dynamics is subject to social evaluation. The speaker has to fall back on the resources s/he has at his/her disposal to realise an expected genre in terms of channel, code, linguistic/narrative mode, etc. At this point in our discussion the notion of ‘genre’ is used in the broadest Bakhtinian sense as a mode of communication connected to a specific social sphere.

(c) As the ambition of perfect correspondence is unrealistic, the produced discourse
inevitably goes through an entextualisation process, the outcome of which entails a reformulation of the produced discourse into filtered texts (cf. Silverstein & Urban 1996).

In each of the cases we will show how, on top of the sheer complexity of events and contexts that need to be conveyed, the resources by means of which this has to be done are highly language-ideologically marked. We are dealing with different speech communities with different expectations as to code, channel, etc. and “the linguistic resources of speech communities differ in what can be done with them” (Hymes 1996: 57).

In each of the three types of interaction, speakers are supposed to realise personal narrative in a particular genre, a genre which in terms of channel, code and linguistic-narrative mode “belongs to” or is controlled by a formal institutional semiotic centre: Standard codes, literacy requirements and a coherent, consistent and chronological linguistic-narrative style. In other words, speakers need a certain flexibility in order to live up to the requirements set up by the context in which they have to function: “Every speech community is to some degree caught up in a changing relationship with a larger context, in which opportunities for the meaningful use of traditionally fostered abilities may be declining, and novel opportunities (or requirements) may be impinging - for which members have not been prepared” (Hymes 1996: 58). This tension between personal and formal institutional semiotic centres performed in each of the three types of data, evidences important pretextual gaps between what is recognised and what is or can be produced.

If we now return to our initial statement, ignoring linguistic diversity may risk to mask the social origins of inequality. As Gumperz puts it (Gumperz 1982: 6-7):

“Language differences play an important, positive role in signalling information as well as in creating and maintaining the subtle boundaries of power, status, role and occupational specialisation that make up the fabric of our social life. Assumptions about value differences associated with these boundaries in fact form the very basis for the indirect communicative strategies employed in key gatekeeping encounters ...”

In sum, acknowledging diversity and the presence of pretextual gaps in human interaction serves as a precondition for acknowledging the power embedded in discursive relationships, its ensuing social inequality and the consequences this may have for the quality of any individual’s life in society.

In our first set of data, we shall see a clash between procedurally inscribed ‘centring’ expectations of narrative mode on the one hand, and particular contextualisation directions taken in the experiential narration of the asylum seeker on the other hand (section 3). In the second data set, literacy will appear to be a clumsy category term, obscuring the delicate but highly consequential play of resources involved in the construction of genres and leading to a conclusion that prima facie status-carrying channels such as literacy are not always nor necessarily enfranchising or empowering (section 4). In our third set of data we will follow up on Hymes’ remark above and show how historical and political macro-contexts can reverse established pretextualities and grant access to public and status-carrying voicing channels for people who have limited access to resources (section 5).
3. Narrating the inexpressible: Asylum seekers’ stories

A first set of data to be discussed here is a corpus of home narratives told by African asylum seekers in Belgium. Home narratives can be considered the most prototypical example of the particular contextualising directions observable in asylum seekers’ narratives. Home narratives are sub-narratives in which details of the applicant’s refugee experience are being sketched and documented (for an elaborate discussion see Blommaert 1999a). Although home narratives typically attempt to provide significant background information on people, places and events in the home country, asylum seekers are often not given the chance to tell these stories in the procedure: Due to time limitations, officials in the procedure expect unequivocal questions to be followed by unequivocal answers. Contextualising accounts tend to be considered a waste of time and are therefore kept out of the procedure.

The following example can provide some of the flavour of how short home narratives arise in applicant interventions but are easily suppressed by the officials. It is a fragment of a long interview in which an official at the CGVS (General Commissioner's Office for refugees and displaced persons) asks an asylum seeker who claims to come from Sierra Leone about who he is and where he comes from (data obtained by Katrijn Maryns). The interview is conducted in English, yet neither of the participants in the interaction speaks English as a mother tongue.

(1) I: When did you go to the centre for the last time. why didn't you go =why didn't you stay there to
(2) sleep ....
(3) AS: I would go to a friend hé
(4) I: And so why did you de =decide to go to =to somebody else to sleep
(5) AS: To go to my friend aaah just go there . and he ask me (xxxx) but he knows the problem for me I
(6) don't know what this is but (xxxx) so I don't know . I was confused
(7) I: Mm
(8) AS: Yeah
(9) I: But you =you were not
(10) AS: Yeah I was not .. uh ..... yeah there was problems in my head now . yeah there was problems
(11) I: But were there problems in the centre
(12) AS: Yeah the problem come from there
(13) I: What was the problem there
(14) AS: Aah . a small boy hé a de come .. to go start English and go to the school I don't have problem
(15) everyday I go to school (xx school) I had everything going fine . one day xx go call me to say me “Saka
(16) you can't go to school again” ... no . so I don't sabi (xx) people come to say “Saka you are no more urm
(17) urm urm student you can’t gogo school”. Yeah
(18) I: Because you’re too old
(19) AS: They suit you . yeah they say yeah
(20) I: Because of the test
(21) AS: Yeah the test . so I get out I say ah but . xxxx this =this thing what it will do what xxxx hén I
(22) don't know but this is the one who are my people telling my mother when she was living she tell me
(23) “this is it . you understand . so go through it” . and then they say . “I say boy you got to send away from
(24) (your room)” xxxx
(25) I: So they first said you had to live on your own
(26) AS: Yeah
(27) I: and then they said you can't live on your own
(28) AS: yeah
(29) I: and what did you do then
(30) AS: and they say I can live my own .. is the time now you get confused .. hén .. yeah I can live on my
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Even though the asylum seeker is forced to give short answers to the questions, a few times he elaborates on the subject in the form of a short home narrative. A tremendous amount of information is squeezed into these short narrative passages (line 5-6 and 10, lines 14-17, lines 21-24, 37-38 and 40). The narrative complexity and the contextual salience of what the man tries to convey is overshadowed by the medium in which he has to tell it: A variety of colloquial and informally acquired English in which grammatical, syntactic and lexical errors are frequent when measured against normative standard English. The sequence of events is not marked by the usual tense and aspect markers (line 15: “everyday I go to school”); no correlation between subject and predicator (line 10: “there was problems”), double negation (line 37: “we can’t do nothing”), code switching and code mixing between English and Krio (line 14: “a small boy hé a de come”), and so on. The applicant clearly is at pains trying to provide a more or less coherent narrative in English. Hence, contextually crucial and sensitive episodes such as the one in which he explains how confused he is (crucial and sensitive because this shows his dissatisfaction with his estimated age due to which he is not allowed in the educational system any more) are narrated as:

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Despite the asylum seeker’s attempts to provide an argumentation for his state of confusion, he is interrupted by the official with the request to stick to the point of the matter. The asylum seeker however explicitly points to the significance and necessity of this contextualising work (“yeah I’m telling you now”) in order to come to the point of what he wants to say. In a way, the fact that asylum seekers are often not given the chance to contextualise the facts can be framed in the larger discrepancies between what is expected in the procedure and what can actually be produced by asylum seekers: Whereas the
procedure expects consistency of answers to univocal questions, asylum seekers feel the need to substantiate their point through argumentations which are far from univocal and fixed and this explains why for the asylum seeker yes/no-answers simply do not work.

Moreover, such ways of narrating crucial and sensitive matters are offered to interviewers who are also non-native speakers of English. But let us keep in mind that 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).

What turns out to be problematic about these home narratives is that despite the fact that they often contain crucial elements for the applicants to make their point, these stories often fail to meet procedural-discursive expectations in the Belgian asylum procedure. Pretextual gaps between what is recognised and what can be produced manifest themselves in three different aspects of discursive practice.

(1) The first aspect implies a contrast in contextualising directions between asylum seeker narration and procedural text trajectories. The long and complicated entextualisation processes covered by the asylum procedure imply a diversity in contextualising directions between refugee narration and procedural text trajectories. On the one hand, procedural pretextual contextualising directions fit into the original interviewing guidelines of UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees), some of its crucial elements being *(Interviewing applicants for refugee status* (1995: 58-59), the training module which is used in the procedure for instructing new interviewers (2000)):

**General rules for assessing credibility:**

**Basic approach**

Only conduct the credibility assessment after certain information is collected (i.e. after uncovering the story). Try to define the key points for assessing credibility in the application. Define and adapt the degree of precision and detail which can be required from the applicant. Use probing and focused questions. Do not take assertions at face value, and do not hesitate to repeat questions and follow-up on factual leads in the claim. Always remember to link your questions.

**Relevant factors in assessing credibility**

A related aspect for assessing the credibility of the person being interviewed is to examine the testimony for internal consistency (the coherence of the statement) and external consistency (agreement with known facts). You may also consider the fluency of the testimony (that is, the incidence of hesitation), as well as its clarity and detail. If both written and oral statements have been provided there should be global consistency between the statements. This means that not only should the sequence of events and supporting statements be logical and consistent, but there should be some linkage between the places, times, events, and other factors which form the basis of the claim.
In order for the interviewer to be in a position to fully assess the claim, it will have to be thoroughly documented. This includes noting the circumstantial evidence surrounding key events such as arrests, periods of detention, or reasons for flight from a country of origin. For example, you will want to ask the applicant a series of precise, probing questions concerning what he or she was doing just before being arrested, including details of where he or she was, with whom, what were the circumstances of the arrest, were there any witnesses, and so on? You will also want to establish a number of “dated” elements or facts. Providing precise dates should not be over-emphasised, as it is more important to establish general “time” indicators which can assist you, and the applicant, to place certain events into the overall sequence of the claim.

Documentary evidence

Other credibility indicators concern examination of documentary evidence. If the applicant has provided such evidence you should assess its relevance, its source and way of obtention, and whether the use of false documents has an impact on the credibility of the applicant. You should also compare documentary evidence for internal and external consistency. In some instances, you may obtain medical reports. Again, they should be assessed in relation to the statements of the applicant and the compatibility of the reports to the claim. (...)

What these guidelines and their ensuing text trajectories come down to is a suggestion of justice, embedded in the procedural discourse ideologies which derive their benefit from the just and equal – according to the institutional truth conceptions - treatment and recontextualisation of the asylum seeker’s narrative into coherent, consistent and hence, convincing arguments. This procedural ideology of language is ‘centring’: It organises and evaluates meaning on the basis of ‘textualist’ criteria for discourse, emphasising coherence, meaning transparency and logic (cf. Silverstein & Urban 1996; Bauman & Briggs 1990).

On the other hand the home narratives tend to be packed with contextualising accounts which concretise the asylum seeker's individualised location in his/her conception of the larger conflict. Contextualisation thus becomes a critical ingredient of storytelling: The subject's case depends on explaining the situatedness of individually contextualised experience in larger layers of context (war, poverty, escape). Yet, as our data illustrate, despite the fact that these home narratives often contain crucial elements in order to make their point, 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 (cf. Blommaert 1999a: 20). Yet, it is this contextualisation work that asylum seekers need in order to make themselves, their experiences and their political, economic and socio-cultural situation understood. It serves the function of enriching the institutional pretextualities, i.e. making explicit what the hearer needs to know in order to pick up correctly the individualised narrative meaning potential. Without recourse to the winding and detailed contextualising narratives the asylum seekers' grounds and reasons for seeking asylum cannot be made well understood.

The procedural discourse ideology and its ensuing suggestion of justice is based on
an illusion. Not only does it assume a capacity on the part of the asylum seeker to anticipate the institutional truth conception through the production of a coherent, objective and factual narrative, this suggestion of equality also obscures the numerous appropriation processes 'authentic' oral discourse has to pass through as well as the institutional re-entextualisations which are far beyond the asylum seeker's control.

(2) The second aspect of discursive practice implies a clash of local oral ideologies of language and literate culture. African asylum seekers' pretextuality often relies on oral performance and clashes with the literacy-oriented normativities of the Belgian institutions. According to Slembrouck (1995), “it is not only important to appreciate the subtle complexities of communication channels in particular instances, but to do so in view of the complete range of discursive, situational, institutional and societal realities with which these are tied up” (1995: 5). The institutional contexts in which asylum seekers' narratives are assessed strongly rely on:

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, 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. (Blommaert 1999a: 32)

The written word is considered the most reliable means of expressing 'truth' and its 'centring' rules of evidence emphasise textual consistency, objectivity, transparency and factuality, as we saw earlier. Yet, this linguistic-communicative ideology is highly culture-specific and clashes with the backgrounds of many African asylum seekers, who hail from societies with restricted access to literacy resources. Oral performance is the default mode of producing truth and reliability, and very often this is done without access to the sort of literate, memory-structuring 'archive' individuals keep in highly literate societies such as Belgium. Procedural pretextuality consequently implies that what happens on-line in oral performance is subordinate to what is put on record in a literate form. Summarising: Narratives are the asylum seekers' principal tools in order to justify their status as asylum seekers; these narratives are confronted with an ideology of factuality which dismisses crucial contextualisation cues embedded in oral performance and restructures the stories into consistent wholes on the basis of a centring language ideology. This confrontation causes the asylum seekers' principal tool to lose its significance and inscribes linguistic inequality in the whole of the procedure.

(3) The third aspect of discursive practice implies an apparently unchallengeable assumption on the part of the official institutions that clients of administrative procedures in a democratic 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, and that all bureaucratic clients have access to standardised, status-carrying or enfranchising varieties of language. Literacy requirements seem to increase in size and scope the lower one gets into society. Yet, even though these requirements already turn out to be problematic for low-income people in Belgium, the issue is further complicated for immigrants and asylum seekers as also in their case similar
linguistic and communicative requirements control the procedure, ignoring existing inequalities in speech repertoires. Moreover, as mentioned above, asylum seekers often have to express themselves in non-native varieties of language (often varieties of European linguae francae), which in many of the cases impedes upon the set of resources speakers can draw upon for giving shape to their narrative and hence for making themselves understood. Therefore, as the asylum seekers do not have access to the institutionally required linguistic, narrative but also stylistic resources, many crucial parts of the stories do not meet the institutional relevance conditions. As the asylum seekers do not succeed in formulating their story in the institutionally inscribed way, the narrative runs through a refocalisation process which - due to an orientation towards new deictic centres - defies the original contextualising work.

Re-entextualisation processes involve a re-orientation of the narrative's original spatial and temporal deixis - conveyed through contextualisation cues - towards new deictic centres. The asylum seeker's story is relocated in the spatial and temporal context of the standard, factual and linear bureaucratic procedure. This transformation has considerable implications for the narrative: The refocalising into abstract and impersonal categories implies that the truth conditions of objectivity, transparency, coherence, consistency, linearity, detail and exactness of facts can in fact be conceptualised as relevance or truth conditions for the narrative to move on in the text trajectory, viz. chronological aspects of the escape narrative, detailed information about time, places, itinerary, etc. It is from these detailed space/time-frames that the official institutions derive patterns of 'plausibility' and 'likelihood', the latter of which can only be done away with through available documentary evidence.

The entextualisation processes in the asylum procedure give rise to text trajectories which are in fact co-narrations of the asylum seeker's situation: Asylum seekers' narratives are told to officials, who transform them into institutional, deeply modified written reports. In this way, asylum seekers become overhearers of their own experiential narratives. Even though initially the asylum seeker has the opportunity to tell his/her story, the fact that the institutionally re-entextualised version is all that matters in the end, causes the asylum seeker's rights to recount their version of what happened to be diminished considerably. The meaning produced by asylum seekers disappears in a pretextual gap.

Differential control over narrative content, genre, timing and recipiency is central to the constitution of social hierarchies. Narrating personal experience is inextricably related to external circumstances, including others' expectations and evaluations, in this case institutional assessment. Therefore, narrative practices reflect and establish power relations in a wide range of domestic and community institutions.

4. Realising a written genre: Grassroots writing from the Congo

A second set of data to be discussed here is a collection of three hand-written versions of a life history, written by a man from Shaba, Congo (Blommaert 1996, 1999b, 2001). The direction we will take here is again that of patterns of distribution of resources and the way in which these patterns enable people to fulfil generic expectations, or fail to do so.

Some background on the data may be necessary. Between 1993 and 1998, Jan Blommaert obtained three longish hand-written documents from a Belgian lady. The texts
had been sent to her, and they were three versions of the life history of the lady's former houseboy, Julien (a pseudonym). They had been written in Shaba Swahili (the local lingua franca) and in French. The texts were 'grassroots literacy' documents: They displayed a very limited control over literacy skills (especially at a very basic level) and documented a laborious writing process which required lots of time, preparation and the mobilization of a writing infrastructure: Julien had to travel to a city such as Lubumbashi to be able to write and send a letter and to wait for a reply (for a detailed discussion and illustrations, see Blommaert 1999b).

There were striking differences between the three versions. Whereas the first version was rather short, the second and third ones were full-blown highly structured narrative texts, containing chapters and chapter titles. Whereas the first version was written completely in Shaba Swahili, the second and third versions also contained a shift from Swahili to French in the final parts of the texts. This language shift was also a thematic and generic shift: The Swahili parts of the texts contained the autobiographic narrative proper, while the French parts of the texts were a 'letter' to the Belgian lady (a kind of envoy to the addressee). Table 1 summarises the main features of the three versions.

The three versions also displayed differences in 'remembering', though not in a linear-cumulative way. There was an increase in explicit chronological anchoring in the versions, expressed in the use of dates. The first version contained 14 dates, the second one 28 and the third one no less than 43. At the same time, the overall chronology of the third version was 'scrambled', with out-of-sequence episodes breaking the linearity of the chronological unfolding of events in the story. This contrasted with the second version, which was generally speaking chronologically linear. The first version was anecdotal and contained important gaps in the chronology. So despite the increase in chronological

Table 1: main features of the three versions

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>First version</th>
<th>Second version</th>
<th>Third version</th>
</tr>
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<td><strong>page length</strong></td>
<td>9 pages</td>
<td>17 pages</td>
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<td><strong>number of lines</strong></td>
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<td>Shaba Swahili 1-14 French 14-17</td>
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<td>Récits Maisha yangu</td>
<td>Ukarasa wa pili (2e partie) [Récits]</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>chapter titles</strong></td>
<td>p. 5 onwards</td>
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accuracy, the third version did not display chronological linearity and could not be said to be the most harmonious or finished one in terms of ordering the sequence of events in the story. Also, the way in which particular episodes were narrated did not show a development into a 'final version' in the third text. Details narrated in the first and second version were not incorporated into the third version, and vice versa. A full picture of the episode could be assembled from juxtaposing the three versions; the third one, despite its overall tightness in structure and chronological accuracy, was definitely not the one that contained the most precise accounts of events (for a detailed discussion, see Blommaert 2001). The process of 'remembering' appears to proceed while writing, and this writing process in turn appears to start anew each time again. Julien does not possess copies of his previous versions, and his search for a final account of his life is done by means of very limited literacy resources.

For our purpose here, the way in which Julien tries to match generic expectations by means of this limited set of literacy resources deserves closer attention. We have mentioned the increase in structure in the three versions: Julien starts dividing his narrative into chapters headed by chapter titles, and the second and third versions are captioned by a meta-narrative label: 'Récits - maisha yangu' ('stories - my life') in the second version and 'ukuraswa wa pili (2° partie)' ('second chapter (2° partie)'). Even more interesting is the fact that the three versions are all written in a monoglot way: The first version is in 'pure', unmixed Shaba Swahili, the second and third one contain, as mentioned earlier, a shift from Shaba Swahili to French. But the shift is a genre-break and both the Shaba Swahili and the French parts are internally monolingual, they contain only indirect traces of code-switching. This is remarkable given the fact that Shaba Swahili, as a spoken code, is characterised by profuse code-switching between Swahili and French (de Rooij 1996). So the monoglot realisation of text represents most probably a conscious effort at making a particular sort of text, not just any text. And if coupled with the text-structural features (chapters and captions) we see that Julien attempts to realise a particular genre: 'Récits' ('stories').

'Recits' is probably an ad-hoc category term used by Julien. It is not mentioned in Fabian's classic text on genres in Shaba popular culture (Fabian 1974 (1991)), and so it probably stands for what it tells us: A 'story'. But the 'recits' assume a particular shape in practice: They are serious, elaborate stories made for a specific purpose, communicating one's life to a foreign sponsor, the Belgian lady. And from what we see in the texts, such a text needs to be monoglot, structured in chapters, detailed and chronologically accurate. The three versions Julien wrote are three attempts at arriving at such a genre. The 'life' Julien tries to tell to the Belgian lady is a life moulded in the narrative and stylistic conventions of a literacy complex - of written literature.

But this is a complex over which Julien has only limited control. He has images and perceptions of such literary conventions, but the skills he can mobilise in his attempts at realising it bear the traces of the particular sociology of communication we investigate here. Despite the monoglot realisation of the texts, both the Shaba Swahili and the French parts of the texts are littered with errors. Julien clearly has no knowledge of a standard orthography for Shaba Swahili. In fact, there is no official standard for this variety, which in itself testifies to the relative marginality of a variety such as Shaba Swahili in a literacy-dominated global communicative market. Let us have a closer look at two small samples, (1) of Shaba Swahili, (2) of French. We maintain the line organisation of the hand-written
Afterwards on 27-9-1969 I got a job, with Miss and Mister Degrave-Aerts. At that time I was twenty three years old (23 ans). The work was good, and the salary at that time, so that I was lucky to have a good life.

Cette lumière ça n’a pas illuminé que moi qui a été votre boy, la production aidera les vieux et les jeunes gens, surtout les jours de Fêtes des Mariages et des deuils. Déjà une bonne somme d’argent qui étaient destine à moi, c’étaient tombé dans les mains d’autres pauvres et la Malle des Habits aux missionnaires, cela ne vous a pas choquer mais vous me parliez que Heureusement c’étaient tombé dans les mains d’autres pauvres.

You have saved me and prevented me from being a thief.

For as far as the Shaba Swahili parts of the texts go, Julien has difficulties with segmentation and consequently with hyphenation in writing. The term ‘ma wili’ consists of a word stem ‘wili’ preceded by a plural prefix ‘ma’, and in Swahili orthography both segments should be realised as one word ‘mawili’. Julien also mixes longhand and capitals, as in ‘NiKApata KAZi’. Corrections or insertions of grammatical morphemes, as in ‘Ni³kuwa na miaka MAKUMi ma wili na TATU (23 ans) Kazi ikawa muzuri, na malipo wakati, ile nili kuwa mbalaka nilikuwa naishi muzu ri,

This light has not only illuminated me, who used to be your boy, the production will help the old and the young people, especially on public holidays, weddings and funerals. Already a good amount of money which was destined for me, it fell in the hands of other poor people and the suitcase with clothes for the missionaries, this has not shocked you but you told me that fortunately it had fallen in the hands of the poor people.

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of the inflected copula sound identical in spoken French (‘était’ – ‘étaient’) and the gender difference of the complements ‘destiné’ – ‘destinée’ and ‘tombé’ – ‘tombée’ is also inaudible in spoken language. The two orthographic errors committed by Julien in this fragment suggest that he produces a written realisation of a spoken variety: When read aloud, the French texts sound more or less appropriate; when written down, a number of errors appear.

Literate varieties of both languages, Shaba Swahili and French, appear to be absent from Julien's repertoire of linguistic-communicative resources. At the same time, there are outspoken images and perceptions of genre conventions which transpire from the way in which he divides his narratives into chapters and attempts to apply a monoglot frame for the texts. So Julien attempts to realise a written genre despite enormous gaps in the resources required to do so. This obviously has an impact on the narratives proper: Just like with the asylum seekers' narratives, Julien's life histories are not easily read or understood. Recapitulating earlier remarks, the sequentiality of events is problematic, the orthographic and stylistic difficulties posed by the texts required decoding rather than reading, the monoglot make-up clearly imposed restrictions on the fluency with which Julien narrated his life, and above all, the sheer fact of having to write the story led to a torduous, complex and sometimes seemingly incoherent narrative.

The point is this: Julien's stylistic efforts reveal a pretextual gap, in the sense that genre expectations are not matched by the resources Julien can mobilise for the realization of the genre. His life histories look literate, in fact they are not, at least not in the sense commonly attached to 'literacy'. They come from a shady zone in between literacy and illiteracy – a zone which is probably enormous in scale and scope, covering many of the written practices performed by sub-elite people in the third world and indeed world-wide. As soon as people with restricted literacy skills, such as Julien, meet literacy requirements, the pretextual gap will be activated and chances are that their writing will be judged inappropriate, inadmissible or simply meaningless.

5. Getting enfranchised: The TRC hearings

The third data we shall discuss is a fragment from a testimony given by a lady during a televised hearing of the South-African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The purpose in this section is to draw attention to another level at which pretextuality can be discussed: The macro-historical and macro-social level. History creates but may also reverse or amend the socially established preconditions for making oneself heard and understood, and this macro-level of context needs to be kept in mind whenever we face issues of linguistic inequality.

The particular piece of data we shall discuss here is taken from the official transcript of the hearing, archived on the website of the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, http://www.truth.org: UWC Hearing – Day 1 – Monday 5 August 1996. Case Nr. CT/00222, http://www.truth.za). The lady in question is Maureen Cupido, the mother of a boy who got accidentally shot during riots in the Cape Town area in August 1985. Maureen Cupido was a ‘coloured’ woman living in the townships in the Cape area. What follows is the ‘core’ story produced by Maureen Cupido – the witness’ account of the events of August 1985. This fragment was preceded by a number of introductory questions and
followed by some questions for clarification, to which we shall return later. We have adopted the version from the official transcript, but in view of the discussion below we have inserted numbers indicating narrative episodes, and we have underscored a number of utterances.

(5) Well I was sitting, and me and my husband was sitting waiting for Clive to come home. Because that's the day that Boesak and Tutu had the march in Cape Town. (2) Clive came home early - eleven o'clock the morning and then he told me this march is going to have a lot of trouble. Little knowing that he is going to be killed (3) and then he went to this friend and he sat - he first then have supper and then he went to his friend, and that was early hours, early. (4) And then we - we wait for Clive to come home, because my husband never sits, wait for his children, I am the only one. (5) And then suddenly I just fell asleep and then I stood up and I went to my bedroom and as I went to my bedroom to get onto my bed, I heard the shots, because before the shots, (my heart) gave three - three thumps, I just -my heart just went you know. (6) And then I asked God if it's my child, take him away, I don't want him to be paralysed. Little knowing it was my child. (7) And just after the shots, this children running to our house and all they said, Ms Cupido is Clive here. I told them no. (8) But they didn't want to say anything, they just asked and I - I couldn't go, it was say past eleven (9) and then my husband and my daughter, they took the car and they went out with the car to the hospital. Because apparently they didn't come tell us our son was shot, no-one came to tell us. They came to fetch the body already, but now my husband went straight to the hospital, Tygerberg. (10) Apparently when he came there, he and my daughter - so when they saw him, so he asked one of the porters if here - a body came in here, they didn't want to answer him. But he said he could of smelled the death, he could of smelled the death when he passed that certain ambulance. (11) And then they pushed the ambulance through the door and then the nurses came out and they all barricaded the ambulance so that this people in the car couldn't see which - who is in the ambulance. (12) But my husband recognised my son's hair, because he's got - he had lovely black hair, he just saw the hair. (13) And apparently when he went inside, this Lawrence Davids was sitting there, he was so shocked to see my husband and he asked what happened. And my husband didn't answer him. (14) And it's only afterwards when the body went into the hospital that they said, the next morning they said he was dead. (15) So we had to go to Salt River Mortuary to identify my husband - my son's body. (16) That's all.

Mrs. Cupido's narrative is a 'subaltern' narrative, produced by someone who appears to be far from an 'ideal' speaker. The transcript was verbatim, and it contains traces of spoken working-class varieties of South African English, underscored in the fragment above. The transcriber, for instance, writes 'this' in “this chaps, this children” and “this people in the car”, where probably a phonetic realisation of /diːs/ ('these') would have been heard on tape. Similarly, the transcriber wrote ‘of’ in “he could of smelled the death”, where a colloquial realisation of ‘have’ as /əf/ would be heard on tape. Mrs Cupido commits grammatical errors such as “me and my husband was sitting” and “this children running to our house” or “the day that Boesak and Tutu”. The latter example probably shows a substratum influence from varieties of Afrikaans, where the use of a construction containing ‘dat’ would be acceptable. Mrs. Cupido also uses a number of awkward constructions and expressions, such as “eleven o'clock the morning”, “that certain ambulance”, “they pushed the ambulance through the door” and “they all barricaded the ambulance”. The phrase “this people in the car” is referentially opaque and the function of the demonstrative in “this Lawrence Davids was sitting there” is also unclear. Finally, Mrs. Cupido uses two stock expressions that seem to be borrowed from another, more formal, Standard English register: “Little knowing” and ‘apparently’ in utterances such as “And apparently when he went inside, this Lawrence Davids was sitting there”. This phenomenon of 'cross-register transfer' has been
noted in other African English sources as well and it indexes subaltern class as well as non-native competence (two things that often go hand in hand) (Blommaert 1998).

If we take a look at the overall architecture of the narrative, we notice a clear and transparent development of the sequence of events. Mrs. Cupido starts with sketching a setting (unit 1), and then develops a well-structured account of the unfolding of events. All the units in the narrative are factual, with the exception of unit 6 (“and then I asked God”) and the concluding metapragmatic statement “that’s all” (unit 16). But the structuring is done with minimal resources: Most of the marking of narrative units, events and moves in the narrative is done by means of the connective discourse marker ‘and’, alternated here and there with the contrastive ‘but’. The whole build-up of the narrative is simple and terse. Only one metaphorical emotive expression is used: “(My heart) gave three - three thumps, I just -my heart just went you know”, and once an emotive state is expressed in the shape of a prayer (unit 6).

Mrs. Cupido has limited linguistic-communicative resources in the sort of code expected in a televised interview. She also has limited resources when it comes to another aspect of the TRC hearings: The production of political statements. Mrs. Cupido produces no grand political message about the reform of the South African society. One of the routine ingredients of the public hearings was a question on what the TRC could do for the victims. Whereas some victims used that slot for formulating explicit political statements, Mrs. Cupido answers the question from a personalistic and local perspective:

(6) Commissioner Burton: What is it that you would like the Truth Commission to do?
Maureen Cupido: As you know Clive wasn't - I haven't got such brilliant children, but his whole aim was that he, he wanted to go and work, he was frustrated, he wanted to make his ten finished and then he told me, mommy you can't afford to sent me to a varsity, but I'll go and work and I'll do part-time, I'll do part-time varsity, so I am going to work to help you, you see. That was his aim, he just wanted to finish up his standard ten. And I mean I - I feel that the truth must come out, people should know that it wasn't my son that kept the policeman, it was Lawrence Davids, but seeing that it was a State of Emergency that's why his parents didn't want him to come and testify, so the truth must come out, it must come out, he must be - they must see to him and he must give a statement and - and Errol van Rensburg.

Of course, this statement reveals lots of political meanings. It indicates, for instance, how deep the hegemony of the Apartheid state was, when something that was later framed as a human rights violation could be perceived and experienced for years as a family and neighbourhood problem.

It also indicates a shift in pretextuality. The TRC was explicitly aimed at constructing voice. People who had no voice previously could now address the nation and make politically consequential statements; versions of history that were forbidden or remained unsaid now received a forum for public (and legitimate) expression. The shift in conditions on sayability is explicitly oriented to by Mrs. Cupido. At one point in the interview she tells how, years ago, she knew and told the facts of the incident. Then this sequence follows:

(7) Chair: Now do you know of anybody who specifically heard that?
Maureen Cupido: We know and we approached the people but the - the day of the Court case they didn't want to come forward. I can't blame the people because that time it was State of Emergency and I mean everybody was frightened to go to jail.
Mrs. Cupido's story was unsayable under Apartheid: Mrs Cupido was coloured and her son was killed during political riots. Furthermore she could not speak out, being a working class woman with no means of getting access to the media or to international public opinion channels. Mrs. Cupido was probably completely unknown prior to the TRC hearing.

So what we meet here is history changing conditions on sayability. The TRC exercise enfranchises people such as Mrs. Cupido, whose pretextualities previously did not qualify as a ‘voice’ in South Africa. The problems Mrs. Cupido displays in actually telling her story do not matter much: Pretextualities are deeply changed and suddenly, Mrs Cupido’s communicative repertoire is made adequate for formulating important, politically consequential public statements.

6. Refining linguistic inequality

Let us now summarise what we have seen in the three previous sections. In our discussion of asylum seekers’ narratives in the asylum procedure, we pointed towards the ways in which a centred bureaucratic language ideology causes orally produced and contextually dense narratives to be dismissed or disqualified as meaningful stories. In the case of the grassroots literacy autobiographies from Shaba, we noticed how status codes such as literacy can prove to be highly problematic for those who have some, but not much, access to it. Realising a literate genre proved to be a painstaking exercise often ending in a text which again can be dismissed or disqualified. Finally, in the case of the TRC hearings we saw how non-status-carrying codes and styles could nevertheless acquire considerable impact as public and politically consequential voices, if ‘deep’ changes in a society reverse the semiotic economies – permanently or temporarily – that controlled the evaluation of communication styles and enfranchise subaltern styles and codes.

All these cases revolve around storytelling rights – rights of which we know that they are unequally distributed in societies such as ours (Hymes 1996: Chapter 5). And we hope to have demonstrated how storytelling rights in practice involve pretextualities. Differences in the distribution of resources, differences in the evaluation of resources, and differences in the allocation of speaking rights go hand in hand. This means that linguistic inequality is often not so much a matter of explicitly stated rules or preferences, but rather a product of structural and conjunctural processes in societies. They are not so much ‘surface’ sociolinguistic or discourse analytic phenomena, but rather ‘deep’ phenomena with their own historicity. This historicity can be captured by terms such as ‘tradition’, provided that a concept such as ‘tradition’ would include traditions of form and content as well as traditions of evaluation, ranking and hierarchisation of communication forms. The fact that people present themselves in interaction with different pretextualities, and that the interaction may be conditioned by pretextual gaps in terms of control over resources, access to status varieties, channels and media – all of this is a historical matter.

Purely synchronic and operational analyses of linguistic inequality therefore risk overlooking the ‘deeper’ and very often invisible levels at which inequality operates. It often operates in the pre-textual phase in a literal way. It is there long before people embark on interactions and long before they deploy their communicative resources. In analysing power and its effects of inequality, context needs to include what is pre-inscribed in interactions.
References


