Communication Practices in Asylum Seekers Reception Centres: from Information Precarity to Voluntary Return

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Abstract: This article focuses on the complex communication constructed between the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) and asylum seekers: what do they say to asylum seekers? Why and how? Beyond the message, it is the relation of communication (Wolton, 2018) between reception authorities and asylum seekers that is explored through the analysis of communication during the reception phase. As a consequence of the communication to asylum seekers’ being hardly visible (Van Neste-Gottignies & Mistiaen, 2018), they are found to experience “information precarity” (Wall, Otis Campbell & Janbek, 2015). Although the “invisibility” of reception discourses seems to prevail, there is an exception: communication regarding voluntary return programmes. This article aims specifically to deeply understand this communicational practice to asylum seekers: what does it contain? Beyond the content: what different forms does it take? Why is Fedasil communication on voluntary return to asylum seekers predominant? The analysis takes into account the complexity and variety of mediums of communication, from mediated forms of communication to face-to-face interactions. To study practices, a corpus linguistics analysis is combined with field survey methods in a Belgian asylum seekers reception centre.

Keywords: asylum, communication, discrimination, reception, voluntary return

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Pratiques communicationnelles dans les centres d’accueil pour demandeurs d’asile : de la précarité de l’information au retour volontaire

Résumé : Cet article explore la communication complexe qui se tisse entre l’Agence fédérale belge pour l’accueil des demandeurs d’asile (Fedasil) et le demandeur d’asile : que dit-on aux demandeurs d’asile ? ; pourquoi et comment le dit-on ? Au-delà du message, c’est donc la relation (Wolton, 2018) entre instances chargées de l’accueil et demandeurs d’asile qui est explorée à travers l’analyse de la communication pendant la phase d’accueil. Les formes de communication destinées aux demandeurs d’asile sont peu visibles (Van Neste-Gottignies & Mistiaen, 2018) ; ces derniers font alors face à la « précarité de l’information » (Wall, Otis Campbell & Janbek, 2015). Bien que l’invisibilité semble prédominer, une exception se profile : la communication sur le retour volontaire. Cet article vise précisément à étudier cette communication : que contient-elle ? Quelles formes prend-elle ? Pourquoi cette communication est-elle prédominante ? L’analyse tient compte de la complexité des moyens de communication, allant de la communication médiatisée aux interactions face-à-face. Pour étudier ces différentes pratiques, nous combinons la linguistique de corpus aux méthodes ethnographiques dans un centre d’accueil belge.

Mots-clés : asile, accueil, communication, discrimination, retour volontaire

Introduction

So far, and even more since the “refugee crisis” in 2015, researchers in media and communication have shown increasing interest in the representation of migrants (Bonnafous, 1999) in various discourses (political, media, voluntary, etc.). Some researchers analyse media content and/or media frames (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; De Cock, Sundin & Mistiaen, 2019), others the discursive construction of terms used to name the protagonists (Baker et al., 2008; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Canut, 2016; Calabrese & Mistiaen, 2018). If some sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists — particularly interested in migration narrative — focus on language practices in the relationship between institutions and migrants (Blommaert, 2001; Beneduce, 2008), fewer studies concentrate specifically on discourses with migrants themselves (Gillespie et al., 2016).

Despite what the media or politicians are saying about migrants, it is important to question what bodies that manage asylum daily are actually saying to migrants. Our first purpose is thus to study the complex communication constructed between the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) and asylum seekers: what do they say to asylum seekers? Why and how? Beyond the message, it is therefore the relation of communication (Wolton, 2018) between reception authorities and asylum seekers that is explored through the analysis of communication (written support and orality) during the reception phase.
In Belgium, applicants (asylum seekers) for international protection (refugee status) are entitled to “reception” for the whole duration of the procedure, while their application is being examined. It is a decisive moment for them because reception arrangements influence the nature and the process of integration into society (Bonaventure 2008, p. 7-6). In addition, how asylum seekers are named, informed and communicated with greatly affect the outcome of the procedure: receiving refugee protection or not will change their life.

Van Neste-Gottignies and Mistiaen (2018) reveal that Fedasil communication to asylum seekers is hardly visible; indeed, very few mediated forms of communication for asylum seekers are available. Beyond this lack of information, communication tools on reception and support seem not to be designed for asylum seekers (content, vocabulary, access, etc.), which results in a non-use of these tools in favour of orality. Consequently, practices and attitudes differ from one social worker to another (Bonaventure, 2008, p. 227). In this context, informing remains an additional favour granted by the host country to its guests rather than a right (De Cleen, Zienkowski, Smets, Dekie & Vandevoordt, 2017, p. 43-44). Asylum seekers seem to cope with “information precarity” (Wall, Otis Campbell & Janbek, 2015), a concept referring to “the condition of instability that refugees experience in accessing news and personal information” (Wall et al., 2015, p. 1). However, this specific need for information is enhanced because foreigners categorised as refugees are newly arrived in the country. They lack the necessary knowledge of both the functioning of the national institutions and languages. The asylum application procedure, as many bureaucratic procedures, requires communicative resources “that are often far beyond the reach” of asylum seekers (Blommaert, 2001, p. 414). This inequality of access to linguistic-communicative resources reinforces the power asymmetry (Spire, 2007; Goffman, 1968) that characterises relations between asylum seekers and reception institutions.

Although the “invisibility” of reception discourses seems to prevail, there is an exception: communication regarding voluntary return programmes. Indeed, from a quantitative point of view, documents on voluntary return are actually more numerous than on reception and support (Van Neste-Gottignies & Mistiaen, 2018). According to the Belgian law, voluntary return is defined as “the return of a person to their country of origin or to a third country […] following an autonomous decision to ask for a return programme assistance drawn up by the authorities of the host country”1 (SPP Intégration Sociale, 2012). Even though these operations happen without physical restraint, the “voluntariness” of these programmes is contested (Webber, 2011). “The goals of the programme have changed from enabling those wanting to return to pushing the return of those who are no longer entitled to stay” (Liettaert, Broekaert & Derluyn, 2017, p. 974). While return programmes are coordinated by Fedasil by law, one can ask themselves why the latter puts a great emphasis

1 All translations are ours.
on voluntary return communication rather than on the organisation main activity: reception.

This article aims specifically to deeply understand this communicational practice: what does it contain? Beyond the content: what different forms does it take? Why is Fedasil communication on voluntary return to asylum seekers predominant? More broadly, this reflection invites us to question Fedasil reception rhetoric and beyond, the vision it entails. To perform the analysis — after defining the concept of “reception” in the Belgian context — we conduct a content and lexical analysis of the mediated forms of communication produced by Fedasil regarding voluntary return. Then, we study how these communication tools circulate: do reception workers in the field use them? Finally, we go right to the heart of the relation between asylum seekers and reception workers to bring communication practices to light.

1. Reception in the context of the “refugee crisis” in Belgium

In Belgium, the Home Affairs Federal Public Service manages migration policy. All aspects linked to migration are integrated into one cabinet under the responsibility of the Belgian State secretary for Asylum and Migration, a post held between 2014 and 2018 by Theo Francken (from Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), a Flemish nationalist party). In his 2015 political note (Belgian House of Representatives, 2015), he tightens territory access conditions and transforms the unlimited residence permit for refugees to a temporary residence permit. To encourage the return policy, he proposes to increase communication on voluntary returns as well as the financial support allocated to it. His latest political note (Belgian House of Representatives, 2017) reflects a particularly closed and hostile view of asylum seekers (Ciré, 2017). Belgium is not an exception: “the negative and hostile debate around migration in Europe is partly due to the rising popularity the far right, who often have anti-immigrant rhetoric at the centre of their politics […] dehumanising language about migration and migrants is now increasingly heard […] from mainstream national politicians” (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2015, p. 13).

For the whole duration of the procedure, asylum seekers are not entitled to financial assistance, but do benefit from material assistance dispensed by the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers. Fedasil is a public interest organisation, operational since May 2002, responsible for the reception of asylum seekers. Almost entirely financed by federal endowments, the agency is legally distinct from the state, but remains under the tutelage of the State secretary. Although somewhat independent, it must abide by the guiding principles of the powers that be.

The reception network consists of collective and individual reception structures. The collective structures are reception centres managed by Fedasil, the Belgian Red Cross or other partners. Individual structures are housing handled by local reception

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2 The Ciré is an important non-profit organisation working in the migration sector in Belgium.
initiatives called Public Social Welfare Centre or by NGOs. Since the government agreement of October 2014, the reception model provides that preference must be given to collective reception, which thus becomes the “norm”. This article focuses only on collective centres managed by Fedasil. Today, Belgium has about 60 reception centres accounting for two thirds of its total reception capacity. Between June and December 2015, the reception network increased from 16,000 to 33,000 places and the number of centres from 48 to 90. While the “refugee crisis” has left its mark on European political history, at the same time, “we should be careful not to fall into the trap of overstating the disruptive nature of contemporary events” (De Cleen et al., 2017, p. 44). Therefore, data were collected during fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2017.

Beside its main activity, by virtue of the law of January 19, 2012, the agency also coordinates the voluntary return programmes with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Caritas International.

Therefore, our analysis must reflect the complexity of a multilevel communication that mobilises actors with pluralist identities: the State secretary for Asylum and Migration formulates guidelines; Fedasil defines their application, while the centre and its workers are in charge of their concrete implementation. As a consequence, reception workers are in direct interaction with asylum seekers and situational logics (distancing vs. empathy, etc.) challenge these workers in the face of institutional norms (Dubois, 2010, p. 275). As a result, deviations or divergence of opinions in the practices of reception workers in centres from the standards prescribed by political and institutional authorities can impact communication to asylum seekers.

2. Corpus and Methodology
The communication on voluntary return takes various shapes from mediated forms of communication to face-to-face interactions. To perform the analysis, we thus adopted a multi-site approach that combines lexical and qualitative content analysis of mediated forms of communication designed for asylum seekers with field survey methods.

The corpus — presented in Appendix 1 — is composed of all mediated forms of communication on voluntary return produced by Fedasil for asylum seekers (websites, brochures, posters) available online, along with letters signed by the Belgian State secretary for Asylum and Migration and sent to asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016. Written in the languages of asylum seekers, they encourage voluntary return. To bring out macro-trends, these written productions (or media) are analysed with Corpus Linguistics (CL) tools by means of AntConc (Anthony, 2014), a concordancer. Using a “CL methodology allows for a higher degree of objectivity—that is, it enables the researcher to approach the texts (relatively) free from any preconceived notions regarding their linguistic or semantic/pragmatic content” (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008, p. 7). We use keyword frequencies as well as the concordance tool,
which allows the analysis of lexical associations (Sinclair, 1991, p. 115-116). Then, each document is examined qualitatively: the lexicon, forms of address, denominations, verbal forms, as well as pronouns. Finally, we nourish the study with some tools derived from Discourse Analysis as Adam’s discourses genres (Adam, 2001). We complete the primary corpus with diversified documentation (political notes, administrative and legal documents, reports, press articles, etc.).

To gain more insight into communication practices, and the usage and circulation of these communication tools, we select an approach that combines different field survey methods. Firstly, we conducted unstructured (13) and semi-structured (2) interviews with reception workers (social assistants, etc.) and people working at Fedasil headquarters (managing director and communication officer). Then, we perform four life stories with asylum seekers. Finally, we carried out a direct observation in a Fedasil open centre. What we observe is the relation of communication constructed between reception authorities and asylum seekers as well as communication practices on the issue of voluntary return. Interviews, life stories, direct observation and their processes are presented in Appendix 2.

These complementary approaches enable back-and-forth analysis of writing productions (institutional discourse), discourses of people who produced them, as well as those of people for whom these productions are intended.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Communication tools on voluntary return: which content?

In this section, we analyse the content of communication tools on voluntary return programs.

Between 2014 and 2017, the Fedasil website presents one entry for asylum seekers through three pages available in French and Dutch, which are usually not languages used by asylum seekers: “support”, “voluntary return” and “integration”. The content of the “voluntary return” page is succinct and basic; indeed, it defines the “return path” and refers “for further information” to a website entirely dedicated to voluntary return and a form on the return journey which is available in eleven languages.
The voluntary return website domain (https://www.retourvolontaire.be/) was created in 2016. From an aesthetical and practical point of view, this website is much better designed than that of Fedasil. Benoît Mansy, head of communication at Fedasil, confirms: “with the voluntary return website we are a bit further […]. Communication tools are better thought out, […] in different languages […] This information is really more available [than for reception and support]” (ESD2).
3.1.1. The voluntary return website

The website proposes thirteen documents (brochures, posters, etc.), a contact form, a tool to find a return office close to one’s home as well as a free phone number. The analysis of languages (the website is sometimes available in French, Dutch and English, sometimes in languages of some asylum seekers) and forms of address used shows that the target audience is the “migrant who must or wants to leave Belgium” and the person who provides information to him. The dual character of the target audience is confirmed by Benoît Mansy (ESD2).

The homepage is composed of seven questions, available in twelve languages, among which Pashto, Farsi and Lingala. The questions echo those that applicants might have in mind. They are presented as FAQ written in the first person singular and mention no addressee. This gives an impression of self-reliance and shows that the target audience is the potential returnee.

The “voluntary return” page details all the features of the programme organized with the help of Caritas international and the IOM. Because of the usage of the third person to refer to the migrant (“to make things easier for the person returning and to support him”), we can attest that this page is aimed at people willing to provide information about voluntary return to potential candidates.

The “return stories” page is the most important from a quantitative point of view. Moreover, among the thirteen publications available on the website, we found four posters titled “stories of reintegration”. The latter illustrates via many pictures and eight testimonies of people from various origins (Armenia, Georgia, Afghanistan, 3

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3 English, French, Dutch, Albanian, Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, Peul, Lingala, Mongolian, Serbian, Russian.
Nepal, Ghana, Senegal and two from Iraq) the success of reintegration in the country of origin thanks to the programme. These testimonies are issued by Caritas International or the IOM and are included in the 21 return stories that we just mentioned above.

These return stories illustrate successful experiences: “Shaima and her daughter are happy to be back with their family”, “a successful reintegration project”, “Narine is very happy with the support she received from IOM”. They become the emblem of the promises of success in the country of origin (Levoin & Oger, 2012). Probably to meet a wider public, stories underline the diversity of the countries of origin as well as family, economic and environment situations. Furthermore, some stories are presented as comic strips with light-hearted treatment and simplistic vocabulary.

According to Adam’s discourses genres (Adam, 2001), these stories meet the definition of “narrative” (récit). Indeed, they include the stages of a narrative sequence as it may have been studied, for example, in tales (Adam, 1987). “The transformation of the protagonist, a necessary condition for the characterisation of a narrative sequence, is even here the central object of the subject” (Levoin & Oger, 2012). In this case, the protagonist goes from a difficult situation as asylum seeker in Belgium to a successful reintegration in the country of origin.

In almost each story, the narrative begins by the explanation of the difficult situation in Belgium. The reasons for the return are listed in a way that could discourage migrants from applying for asylum. It insists on the length, the complexity and the uncertain issue of the procedure (“as she did not have any certainty about the asylum procedure's outcome”, “after realizing that the asylum procedure would be long and that he had very little chance of receiving a positive response”, “he received several negative responses to his asylum application”), the distance from family (“once he learnt in Belgium that his family would not be able to join him soon”, “however, she found it difficult to be separated from her husband”), life conditions in Belgium (“furthermore, life in Europe is difficult and stressful, especially as an illegal immigrant”) and the difficulty of the journey (“the journey to Belgium had a great emotional impact on him and he does not want to put his family through the same ordeal”, “the road through the desert to Libya and by sea to Lampedusa is very dangerous. They must not take it under any circumstances”). These statements can have a dissuasive effect that is sometimes very clearly stated as in the example below: “Kwasi discourages his young countrymen from fleeing their country”. 
These stories also insist on the financial success for returnees: "I can say that the store is working well. Customers are flocking in, there is not much competition", "I have a regular clientele. Thanks to that, I can provide for my family", "for the moment, my income is sufficient". In some cases, the story sounds as if the initial decision to leave the country of origin and to introduce an asylum application in Belgium was motivated by economic purposes: "Shaima applied for asylum in Belgium. [...] She hoped to create a better and more stable future in Belgium for herself and her family. [...] She also saw little work and future prospects. Therefore, she returned to Duhok". It is a causal relationship, she returned to Iraq because she saw little work and future prospects. The French version of this narrative is slightly different: we can read “she decided to return”. There is therefore the idea of a free decision, she made her own choice, she has control over her destiny. It is a recurring element in the corpus: “David decided to return home voluntarily”, “Bogdan finally decided to return to the Russian capital”.

Furthermore, these stories insist on the quality of the programme, the professionalism of advisors and the result for the “grateful” returnees: “a counsellor of IOM Brussels visited her to map out what the concrete situation was”, “his project really took shape once he had returned, following meetings with IOM advisers in Kabul”, “several visits were conducted on the field to make sure Mansour did not have any

4 « Elle remarquait également qu’il y avait peu de perspectives de travail et d’avenir. Pour cette raison, elle a décidé de retourner à Dahuk. »
trouble with the launch of his activity”, “I thank Caritas for their advice about keeping my sheep healthy”, “grateful for all the support she received in Belgium”. If the returnee hits some obstacles or difficulties, he performs his story thanks to the institution and her partners that play the role of a “magic auxiliary” (auxiliaire magique or adjutant) (Adam, 1999): “despite the usually difficult reintegration in Moscow, Bogdan quickly found his way. […] Thanks to a higher wage and IOM’s wage subsidy programme, he was able to combine this job with a medical course”.

Each story has a simplistic “end-purpose” (fin-finalité) going hand in hand with “moral sense” (Adam, 1987). The initial decision to leave the country was a bad choice, return in the country of origin is the good one: “Despite the difficulties he is currently facing, Mansour doesn’t regret the choice he made to return”. These “enchanted narratives” then take a “consoling dimension” (dimension consolatoire) in the sense that their outcomes do not question what it is expected from the role of the institution which has to finance aid programme for return. The social order is preserved (Levoin & Oger, 2012): assisted return programs have succeeded. Researchers have already shown that the reality on the ground is quite different: “the participants consider the support they received […] as minimal […] most interviewees eventually evaluate their return as unsuccessful” (Lietaert, Derluyn, Broekaert, 2013, p.144).

Among other publications, the travel guide for returnees details every step of the flight journey from Brussels National Airport to the airport in the country of origin. A checklist of all the necessary verifications to make before departure is printed on the reverse side of the travel guide. Another A2-sized poster promotes voluntary return and is often found in reception centres as well as in the entrance to the Immigration Office, which Medhi Kassou from the citizens Maximilian park platform condemns as “intimidation acts” (Blogie, 2017). Another poster available on the website is exclusively for Iraqis, while the last four brochures deal with reintegration in Senegal, Cameroun, Morocco and Afghanistan. Except for the one for Afghanistan, written in English, Pashto and Farsi, the others, edited in partnership with the IOM and Caritas International are only available in French and Dutch.

3.1.2. Is there a discrimination based on the country of origin?

The qualitative analysis shows that communication regarding voluntary return differs from one country of origin to another, even if Fedasil (2014) recommends equality in treatment for all asylum seekers as well as no discrimination as written in its code of ethics. To verify if there is a difference between countries of origin, we focus on all occurrences of nationalities in this corpus:
The analysis of this table shows that voluntary return communication is mainly aimed at Afghans, Iraqis and Moroccans. Theo Francken’s letters to Afghan and Iraqi asylum seekers perfectly illustrate this trend.

The first short letter dated 22nd September 2015 written in Arabic and English is signed by Theo Francken with “the coat of arms of Belgium”. It was nominatively sent to every Iraqi asylum seeker living in a reception centre. This letter states that “[the situation in Baghdad] is no longer such that every applicant from Baghdad runs a real risk in case of return. Currently no decisions are being taken granting refugee status”. It also clarifies that Belgium will systematically implement the Dublin procedure. The letter ends by “do not put faith in false promises made by smugglers or profiled on social media” and it encloses a voluntary return brochure. On 3rd September 2015, the Belgian Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS, 2015a) decided to freeze all decisions for asylum seekers from Baghdad and its surroundings to examine if the protection was still necessary. This freeze was a temporary measure removed on 14th October 2015 (CGRS, 2015b). On the other hand, in 2015, 72% of Iraqis obtained either a refugee status or a temporary protection, which makes Iraq the fourth country of the “top ten countries of origin according to the number of people who receive a decision of refugee status recognition” (CGRS, 2016). According to Caroline Intrand, Ciré former co-director, it is a “dissuasive attempt as well as an encouragement to voluntary return […] [Since] the Geneva Convention guarantees a file examination on a case-by-case basis, […] Here, the State secretary collectively assumes that these Iraqis are not in danger” (Joie, 2015).

One month later, a similar letter to Afghans was posted in Persian, Pashto and English on the Belgian Immigration Office’s Facebook page. The content of the letter is almost the same as for the previous one. The page states in uncorrected English to be “The Immigration Department [that] comes under the Federal Public Service Home Affairs[,] under the political authority of the State secretary [secretary] for Asylum and Migration” (Belgian Immigration Office’s Facebook page, 2018). Actually, “Immigration Department” is not the official denomination commonly used by the Immigration Office. As a consequence, the author plays semantics and the identity of the sender seems unclear. According to press reports, this is a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country/nationality</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>31 (Afghanistan: 19; Afghans: 7; Afghan: 5)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>14 (Iraq: 9; Iraqi: 4; Iraqis: 1)</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>14 (Morocco)</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>13 (Senegal: 10; Senegalese: 3)</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameroun</td>
<td>11 (Cameroun)</td>
<td>132</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>6 (Georgia)</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>6 (Ghana)</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>4 (Armenia)</td>
<td>339</td>
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campaign launched by Theo Francken in consultation with the Immigration Office (Joie, 2015). We analysed the whole page composed of 15 posts displayed between the 20th and the 27th of November 2015. Six of them were in Arabic, five in English and four display pictures (without captions) of queues in front of the Immigration Office and in reception centres. Even if the 15 posts had 320 shares, this page counted only 6,984 “likes” and was followed by 6,986 persons, which leads to the conclusion that the audience was quite limited.

On 2nd June 2016, a third, longer, letter, written in Dari and Pashto, once again signed by the State secretary, was sent to Afghans in reception centres. In this message, we can read that “most of the territories of Afghanistan […] are not unstable regions” and Theo Francken adds that “in [the] first four months of 2016 almost more than half of the decisions have been negative […]. Belgium government will not provide you individual house, […] you will not be benefited by economic […] assistance”. However, in 2016, Afghanistan was in fourth place out of ten in the above-mentioned ranking, with 59% of positive decisions (CGRS, 2017). The letter insists on the procedures’ length (asylum seekers procedure as well as family reunification procedure). Finally, Theo Francken says that he offers free flight, various aids and a financial support of 500 euros to anyone who would apply for voluntary return before the deadline.

The content analysis of these three letters reveals some interesting patterns. First, the length of these messages increases (149, 315, and 750 words for the last one). The first two letters do not specify the intention or the context in which the letters have been written, whereas the last one argues that because of the very high number of applications in Belgium, the process is slow, and it is thus advised to read the message before applying for asylum. We also note an evolution in the way Theo Francken writes to asylum seekers. The first letter mentions neither nationality nor subject pronoun, the second and the third one greet the reader on the basis of origin (“are you an Afghan and applying for asylum in Belgium?”). The last one shows many usages of the second person subject pronoun you as well as the associated possessive pronoun your, although it is better structured (10 bold points) and formal (“Dear Sir, Madam”, “Ladies and Gentlemen”). The first two messages give information and advice (“do not put faith in”) confirming that it is an “authentic” and “genuine” message. The last letter refers to the State secretary’s duty to “precisely” well inform asylum seekers before their application.

Similarly to what is written in returnees’ testimonies, the letters underline the benefits for an asylum seeker to choose to go back home: free flights, money support in the origin country as well as 500 euros to leave Belgium. This is the basic

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5 The English translation was been forwarded to us by a member of the “collectif citoyen Acces Couvin”. This is also available on the Belgian Work Party website. (2016). Francken étend sa campagne de dissuasion aux réfugiés afghans. Retrieved from https://ptb.be/. The translation content has been corroborated with a formal complaint for harassment made to the King prosecutor against this letter, sent by a Ciré social worker. Nevertheless, the translator’s identity being kept secret, it is difficult to conduct a precise discursive analysis of this message.
strategy of the “carrot or the stick”. Indeed, “many institutional arrangements sug-
ggest that punishments and rewards each play a separate role in providing incentives”
(Andreoni, Harbaugh & Vesterlund, 2003, p. 893). The “carrot” pushes asylum
seekers to start a return procedure. On the contrary, if they do choose to stay, Theo
Francken threatens them by exposing all the things that the Belgian State will not
offer to them. He implies that, according to the Belgian law, the person who refuses
to start a returnee procedure will live as an illegal person in Belgium. But yet, the
asylum seeker is still waiting for his demand of asylum to be dealt with and he still
has no answer from the Belgian State to know if he could legally stay in the territo-
ry.

Moreover, the Human Rights League thinks that “the initiative [of these mes-
ges] is unfairly based because it is aimed at one nationality in particular, without
adjustment or a right motive” (Human Rights League, 2015).

This discrimination based on the country of origin could be linked to media rep-
resentation of the “deserving” and “undeserving migrant” which is a possible conse-
quence of political discourses aiming at limiting migration to Europe (Holmes &
Castañeda, 2016). According to De Cleen et al. (2017), “the category of refugee has
mainly been limited to Syrian asylum seekers, whilst for example Iraqi and Afghan
asylum seekers were largely excluded from that category” (p. 40). In the words of
Akoka (2011), if the Syrian asylum seeker corresponds to the “archétype rêvé du
réfugié” (the ideal figure of the refugee or the refugee archetype), it is both for its
sociological similarities with the European middle classes and the geopolitical and
ideological context from which Syrians flee (Akoka, 2016). Without mention of the
country of origin, the 2017 political note justifies this difference in treatment: “an
asylum seeker is not another one. [...] This difference in terms of permits shows that
a uniform communication is not the most appropriate way to inform asylum seekers
[...]” (Belgian House of Representatives, 2017). These categories, discursively con-
structed, become therefore crucial political instruments (Blommaert, 2001).

According to Myria — The Belgian Federal Migration Centre —, these letters
are more “information that soothes unrealistic expectations” than threatened mes-
gages. What the Federal centre denounces is that

at the same time, the Belgian State neglected to give simple information on the Dublin
procedure. [...] the respect of this legal obligation is not necessary anymore to inform
of their right to a possible transfer to another country (Myria, 2016).

3.2. The reality in the field

The sending of the letters generates unease in the reception centre where the par-
ticipatory observation occurred. A board member told us:

It is always necessary to distance political reality from reception reality. So much bet-
er indeed, I consider that is a very good thing that in Belgium they are separate be-
cause if we had to do politics, it would be complicated because we cannot be judge
and be judged. I rather prefer my place here. [...] I received no Minister injunction that
told me that at some point we would treat these people differently. [...] The letter was
directly sent to asylum seekers. It was not sent to Fedasil workers. They are residents, so, they received official mail from the State (ESD1).

Two social workers of the reception centre add that the distribution of the letters without them knowing the content was particularly difficult for them: “It generated fears and confusion. We had to answer many questions” (EL1). Social workers have to deal with the situation without the help of the Agency: “we told them to not watch out, that Theo Francken was somebody else than Fedasil” (EL2). If the four refugees interviewed were informed about voluntary return, only one, of Afghan origin, received the letter: “I was really really sad and a little bit angry […]. I went to my social assistant and I said ‘come on, why you do that’, I was really really sad […] but I don’t believe that” (EB4).

The character of such messages destroys the delicate confidence that is constantly being constructed between asylum seekers and social workers. Indeed, asylum seekers and refugees tend to be suspicious of information given by official authorities and tend to turn towards many other sources of information that they think are reliable (Gillespie et al., 2016, p. 56).

In the centre, social assistants explain that Fedasil puts pressure on workers to inform every applicant at every stage of the possibility of a return (EL1, EL2).

Oh no! I never talk about voluntary return during an intake. I do not do that. In theory, we should. For some asylum seekers, it is a small miracle to arrive here. They have just arrived, and I have to tell them they can go back. […] There is clearly a political will to encourage voluntary return, but it’s not shown in my work practice (EL1).

The assistant responsible for voluntary returns shows us a range of voluntary return communicational tools. For example, a colouring book for asylum seekers’ children inviting them to colour the flight that will take them back home.

![Figure 5. Colouring book](image-url)
In practice, the social worker does not give this documentation straightaway and prefers to explain it directly to the applicant at the best moment according to him/her. According to Pascale De Ridder, clinical psychologist at the mental health service Ulysse, in this context, social workers cope with a paradoxical situation: welcome with one hand and reject with another (De Ridder, 2017, p. 18).

For Benoît Mansy, if the communication on return is so important, this is partly because Belgium receives important European funding for it (ESD2). Belgium is no exception; voluntary return programmes are promoted by all European governments (Weber, 2011, p. 98) and are the subject of significant funding from the European Union. This political priority is reflected in everyday reality.

**Conclusion**

The instability between abundant information on return and inadequate information on reception and support accentuates the “information precarity” in which asylum seekers find themselves (Van Neste-Gottignies & Mistiaen, 2018). This imbalance reflects a Belgian and European political will and priority, which is materialised in the funding of information and communication tools on voluntary return. They are better designed, useful and user-friendly as website features include free phone number, FAQ, and a tool designed to find a return partner nearby. Furthermore, the way of presenting the information (light-hearted treatment and simplistic vocabulary) appears as if the decision to return was easy to take. The reintegration stories illustrate this point well.

These narratives have a recurrent logic: migrants had left their country for economic purposes; arrived in Belgium, they encounter difficulties that they had not anticipated; they want or decide to leave Belgium; this will become possible thanks to the help of institutions responsible for the voluntary return aid programmes; the reintegration in the country succeeds because of institution’s professionalism. These “utopian discourses” seem to thus reinforce the consoling force, which pertains to a certain model of society promoted by public policies (Levoin & Oger, 2012): aid programmes financed by the state achieved its objectives. On the one hand, “false refugees” (Valluy, 2006) or “economic migrants” have left the host country. On the other hand, the reintegration in the country of origin is a success.

Beyond the prevalence of communication tools on return, we reveal a difference in communication according to asylum seekers’ country of origin. If so few are seen as “legitimate refugees” who correspond to the ideal figure of the refugee, many are considered to be “illegitimate refugees”. In the letters sent by Theo Francken, even if Afghanistan and Iraq are considered as quite dangerous countries, applicants of these origins are often encouraged (often and mainly with economic benefits) to return to their home country. Return stories and Theo Francken’s letters — by placing a greater emphasis on the length, the complexity and the uncertain issue of the procedure, the distance from family, life conditions in Belgium and the difficulty of the journey — discourage migrants from applying for asylum. We could also argue
that the reward language, often linked with marketing arguments (very simplistic, colourful, enticing graphics, almost as if appealing to children), is used to convince someone to do something that might not be in his interest. As a consequence, that communication can have a dissuasive effect that undermines the “voluntariness” of these return programs.

However, informing of the possibilities to return just after arrival and before the decision to grant or not refugee status seems irreconcilable with the asylum seeker’s “psychological time”; sacrifices linked to the decision to leave the country of origin, ordeal during the journey, sudden social/cultural/linguistic changes in the host country create a temporality of confusion during which it is impossible to accept the prospect of return (De Ridder, 2017, p. 19). The character of such messages may destroy the confidence that is constantly being constructed between asylum seekers and social workers. Political discourse tries to impose its vision of reception on social workers by interfering in their relations with asylum seekers, as illustrated by the letters sent by the secretary of State. Fedasil — who has to respect political guidelines — exerts some pressure on people in direct contact with asylum seekers to orientate their work in a particular way. In this context, social workers cope with a paradoxical position: reception and support on the one hand, encouraging return on the other. In practice, they adapt their discourses to resist institutional and political injunctions.

References


Lietaert, I., Derluyn, I., & Broekaert, E. (2013). Returnees’ Perspectives on Their Re-migration Processes. International Migration. 52, 144-158.


Documentation


## Appendix 1. Corpus composition

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<tr>
<th>Document</th>
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<th>Origin</th>
<th>Date</th>
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## Appendix 2. Interview and observation process

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