The Construction of Roles and Responsibility in 'Europe's' Migrant Crisis: A Study on News Agency Reports

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Abstract

The paper examines the roles construed to migrants and to European states in Reuters and AP news agency reports autumn 2015 and spring 2016. In 2015, more than a million migrants came to Europe. Most of them crossed the sea corridor between Turkey and Greece, which resulted in a chaos along the so called 'Balkan route' towards richer European countries. By March and April 2016, several European countries had either closed their borders or tightened the border controls, moving the problems elsewhere. Metaphors have a vital role in the analysis. States have been metaphorically personalised, and can thus be evaluated by Appraisal values. At the same time, migrants are often seen as a natural disaster, e.g., as a 'chaotic flood'. These kinds of 'liquid metaphors' transform the migrants' ordeal into an inanimate phenomenon and blur the responsibility of human actors. In the issues of responsibility, I draw mainly on two concepts from Functional grammar: ergativity and nominalisation. The study also gives clear evidence of the 'news value' related to 'geographical closeness'. When the 'Balkan route' was more or less shut, the focus of the news media was no longer on Central Europe. Though the crisis was as bad as before, a lot of it was 'out of sight', as Reuters states in August 2016.

Key words: *migrants, news agencies, objective style, metaphors, responsibility, Appraisal, ergativity, nominalisation*

1. Introduction

In 2015, more than one million people came to Europe 'fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East and beyond', as Reuters says. About half a million of them came from war-torn Syria, others e.g. from Afghanistan, or Iraq (cf. Holland 2015: [online]). Over 800.000 migrants chose the relatively short Aegean Sea passage from Turkey to Greece. Though hundreds of them, travelling on overcrowded flimsy dinghies or decrepit wooden boats, lost their lives before reaching Greece, this route was much less fatal than 'the longer and more perilous central Mediterranean crossing, from Libya to Italy' (The Economist 2016: [online]). From Greece the migrants tried to take the so called 'Balkan route' towards Austria, Germany, Sweden, and so on. By the time I collected my first batch of news agency dispatches, in October and November 2015, the situation along that route was already chaotic: Hungary

had closed its border with Croatia, leaders of the neighbouring countries were quarrelling, and 'the torrent of refugees', as AP says, was 'bottlenecked at one border or another'.

By March and April 2016, when my second batch was collected, several European countries had resorted to containment actions, either by closing their borders or tightening the border controls. As a result, the Balkan route was more or less shut so that the problems had moved elsewhere. After Turkey, in March 2016, made a controversial deal with the European Union agreeing to take back the refugees and migrants who cross to Greece, tens of thousands of migrants became stranded in Greece or Italy, or were in Turkey waiting for illegal boat trips to Europe. That also meant that the number of lethal sea crossings from Africa to Italy highly increased.

My data are collected from the news wires of two international news agencies – AP (the Associated Press) and Reuters – as received by one of their media clients, The Finnish Broadcasting Company. These two global news agencies are generally regarded as 'the leading news suppliers around the world' (Tunstall 1999: 191); together with the French AFP (Agence France-Presse) they are often referred to as 'the Big Three'. Since the mid-1800's, the news agencies have had a key role in shaping the form of news reports and, even more importantly, the very concept of news (cf. Boyd-Barrett 1980: 19). In their writing, news agency journalists aim at 'factuality' and 'objectivity'; these ideals are clearly advocated by AP and Reuters in their policy statements on their websites (cf. AP news values and principles: [online]; Handbook of Reuters Journalism 2008: [online]). However, when striving for an objective style, journalists resort to rhetorical strategies that make their language vaguer and may, for example, obscure the responsibility of human actors.

Besides the issues of responsibility, the present paper examines the roles construed to migrants, on the one hand, and to European states, on the other. Metaphors have a central role in my study. Traditionally, immigrants have been described by using 'liquid metaphors' (e.g. Charteris-Black 2006; see also Musolff 2011), and in my data, too, migrants are often seen as a natural disaster, for example, as a 'chaotic flood', 'wave' or 'swelling tide'. When examining the parliamentary discourse on immigration in France, van der Valk (2003: 331) argues that the popular 'water metaphor […] symbolizes a loss of control over immigration'. In my study, the frequent use of 'liquid metaphors' clearly demonstrates that both the individual countries and the European Union, in particular, fail to control the massive influx of migrants into Europe. According to van Dijk (2015: 390), metaphor of 'waves' does not only depict a huge number of immigrants, but it also activates 'generic knowledge about waves as large and threatening quantities of water in which "We" may drown' (see also Gabrielatos and Baker 2008: 22 on 'perceived attendant threat' in connection with metaphors for refugees).

While migrants can metaphorically be seen as a threat, European countries are conceptualised as 'containers' which want to protect their own territories (on 'containment schema', see e.g. Chilton 2004). Often the states have been personalised; in other words, a 'state-as-person metaphor' is used (cf. Chilton and Lakoff 1995). 'State-persons' can then be evaluated with values of Appraisal (on the Appraisal Framework, see e.g. Martin and Rose 2003; Martin and White 2005). In exploring the issues of responsibility, I draw

mainly on two concepts from Functional Grammar (Halliday 1994): on *ergativity* and *nominalisation.*

2. Notes on Analytical Tools

2.1 Ergativity

Both semantic models of processes, *transitivity* and *ergativity[1],* which belong to the ideational metafunction in Functional Grammar (Halliday 1994), are useful tools in the analysis of responsibility issues. However, this time I have chosen the *ergative* point of view, because – as Halliday (1994: 162-163) states – it focuses on the similarities, on the basis of just one variable: that of causation. Every ergative process has at least one participant, 'the one through which the process is actualized, and without which there would be no process at all', Halliday (1994: 163) says. This 'key figure' is called the Medium. A central issue in an ergative process is finding the *source* of the process; in other words, has an external agency caused the process, or does it seem to have 'happened by itself'? As an example of the ergative pattern, Halliday (1994: 163) gives the following ergative/non-ergative pair: *the lion chased the tourist/the tourist ran.* In both clauses, 'tourist' is the one experiencing the process, the Medium, while the external agency of the first clause, 'lion', is the Agent.

2.2 Nominalisation

Nominalisation as an analytical tool is a much discussed notion. For example, when Billig (2008: 783) studies how critical discourse is written, he sets to criticise the analysts who examine 'the semantic effects of these linguistic forms [i.e., nominalisations] that are taken as completed entities' (Billig 2008: 791), but 'do not specify what sort of process they are describing' (Billig 2008: 795). However, I argue that looking at the nominalised words, first, as entities – as 'things'– has proved more relevant for my analysis than examining the processes of transformation. The second step for me is to deduce what kind of process might be hidden in a nominalised word.

In other words, I draw on the work of Halliday (1994), Fairclough (1995) and Fowler (1991). As Halliday (1994: 352) says, nominalisation transforms processes (verbs) or properties (adjectives) into nouns after metaphorical rewording. The shift from 'process' or 'property' to 'entity' (a 'thing') also means that the nominalised word now can function as a participant in processes, or as a part of a prepositional phrase (Halliday 1998: 197; Fairclough 1995: 112). From the point of view of news agency discourse and its alleged 'factuality', it is important to note that nominalisation is 'inherently, potentially mystificatory' (Fowler 1991: 82). In addition to obscuring the participant roles, it can leave open the tense of the verb (of the original process), the type of the process, etc.

2.3 Appraisal

In the analysis of the European states, I refer passingly to some values of Attitudes – to *Affect* and *Judgemen*t – which belong to the Appraisal Framework. This is how Martin and Rose (2003: 22, original bold face) define the Appraisal Framework:

> **Appraisal** is concerned with evaluation: the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned.

The system of Attitude, which is relevant to my present study, comprises three sub-systems (as presented in Thomson et al. 2008: 220, original bold face):

– **Affect** – emotional reaction

– **Judgement** – normative assessment of human behaviour, i.e. by reference to notions of ethical/unethical, honest/dishonest, normal/abnormal, and so on.

– **Appreciation** – assigning a social value to objects, artefacts, texts, states of affairs, i.e. by reference to aesthetics and other systems of social valuation.

Attitude values can be either explicit or implicit, or even somewhere in between (see The Appraisal Website). In Appraisal terms, explicit values are called 'inscribed', implicit values are 'evoked' (or 'invocations' or 'tokens' of Attitude). The sub-systems of Attitude are further divided into several types and sub-types; however, in my analysis, I only consider the following two aspects: whether the value in question is *inscribed* (explicit) or *evoked* (implicit) and whether it is *positive* or *negative*.

3. *Analysing AP and Reuters News Reports on Migrants*

3.1 Construing the Migrants: Migrants-as-Natural Disaster

Given that AP and Reuters autumn 2015 reported on – as they put it – 'Europe's biggest refugee and migrant crisis since World War II' (Reuters Oct. 21, 2015), it is no wonder that journalists are at pains to find expressions that are strong and newsworthy enough for labelling this huge migrants' influx. I have chosen the following examples from AP (October and November 2015) to illustrate how migrants have been construed in news agency reports (the italics are mine):

(1) *The tide of asylum seekers* [...] along Europe's newest migration route swelled to treacherous levels Monday [...] (Oct. 19, 2015)

(2) *The miserable wave of humanity* left behind a field scattered with soaked blankets, mud-caked clothing and water-logged tents... (Oct. 19, 2015)

(3) [...] authorities [...] intensified efforts to cope with *a human tide unseen in Europe since World War II* (Oct. 20, 2015).

(4) Slovenia deploys troops to border as *migrant exodus* swells (Oct. 20, 2015).

(5) Mohammed's voyage was part of *an historic movement of humanity* as more than 600,000 migrants this year have crossed land and sea, seeking sanctuary in Europe (Oct. 24, 2015).

(6) The latest in *the odyssey of hundreds of thousands of people* trekking across Europe in search of a new life (Oct. 29, 2015).

(7) *The massive influx* despite cooling weather and choppy waters highlights the strains that European policymakers and authorities have been under with *the unprecedented flood of people* fleeing countries including Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan [...] (Nov. 2, 2015)

We can presume that by presenting the migrants as a symbol of humanity, as was done in example (2), the AP journalist has aimed at evoking empathy in the readers; at the same time, this can be seen as an example of extreme dehumanising. The simple definition in the dictionary (cf. Merriam-Webster: [online]) for *odyssey* is 'a long journey full of adventures' and for *exodus* 'a situation in which many people leave a place at the same time', but, in view of the historical or religious connotations of these labels, one might ask how well they fit to denote the migrants' experiences. Migrants are not on their adventurous journey home like Odysseus, neither do they have Moses to guide them in their 'exodus'.

Most of the examples also give evidence of the fact that 'liquid metaphors' are prominent in news agency reports on migrants' influx. As stated above, 'liquid metaphors' construe migrants as a huge, uncontrollable mass which could, in this case, even pose a threat to European countries. In addition, as Charteris-Black (2006: 569) states, these kinds of metaphors 'discourage empathy with immigrants by treating them as objects, rather than as the subjects of life stories'; what readers are observing is 'an inanimate phenomenon', and not – as in my data – a dangerous and extremely arduous trek from one country to another.

3.2 Controlling the 'Disaster': Countries-as-Containers

Scholars who have studied immigration metaphors (e.g. Charteris-Black 2006; Musolff 2011) note that two main types of conceptual metaphors are predominant, namely in addition to 'natural disaster' metaphors, 'container' metaphors are often used. These two 'are related through the notion of a bounded area protecting what is within from external danger', Charteris-Black (2006: 563) says. Chilton (2004: 118) speaks of 'the spatial containment schema which grounds on the conceptualisation of one's country as a closed container that can be sealed or penetrated'.

Thus, seeing the migrant influx as 'treacherous' flood calls for control from the part of the European Union, and, in particular, for protective actions from the individual states on the Balkan migrant route. Example (8) presents some of these actions:

(8) EU and Balkan leaders agreed at a weekend summit *to stem the massive migrant flow* by introducing *tighter border controls*. Since Oct. 16, when *the refugee flow was rerouted* to Slovenia after *Hungary sealed off its border* with Croatia, around 84,000 people have crossed into Slovenia (AP Oct. 27, 2015; my italics).

Besides 'sealing', AP (Oct. 20, 2015), in another news report, resorts to a somewhat 'stronger' 'container' metaphor by saying that 'Hungary has *padlocked its borders* for migrants progressively over the past month'.

Since in this case only one nation, Hungary, is powerfully 'protecting what is within from external danger', the neighbouring countries, Slovenia, in particular, have to bear the brunt, and thousands of migrants suffer:

> (9) Attempts by Slovenia to stem the flow of migrants since Hungary sealed its border with Croatia on Friday *have triggered a knock-on effect* through the Balkans, with *thousands held up* at border crossings (Reuters Oct. 20, 2015; my italics).

That the 'container-states' have porous borders which can be easily penetrated by overflowing liquid, is still obvious in November 2015, when AP writes:

> (10) Police say a total of 307,000 refugees and other migrants have passed through Croatia since *the surge of people spilled over* from neighboring Balkan states (AP Nov. 2, 2015; my italics).

In 2016, by the time I collected my second batch of news agency dispatches, several European nations had tightened their border controls; among them Germany and Sweden, which, according to news agency reports, were the most favoured destinations for migrants. In addition, Austria and the Balkan nations north of Greece – Serbia, Croatia and Macedonia – had closed their land borders in March, as example (11) shows:

> (11) Unnerved by the hundreds of thousands of people flooding into Europe, *Austria and other northern nations tightened border controls*, creating a domino effect throughout the Balkans. Macedonia, just north of Greece, has all but *locked its gates* (AP March 17, 2016; my italics).

As we can see, 'container-states' are construed as being affected by fears of penetration, which is presented as the cause for their actions. All these tightened controls, with Macedonia metaphorically 'locking the gates', 'slowed the flood of migrants entering Germany to a trickle' (Reuters March 18, 2016); at the same time, they left more than 46.000 migrants trapped in Greece, in 'overflowed camps... enduring deplorable conditions', as AP (April 1, 2016) says.

3.3 Migrants in Conflicting Roles

A natural consequence of resorting to liquid metaphors is the fact that migrants become *Mediums* in *non-ergative processes*: something just 'happens' to them without any external cause. In example (10) above, AP states that 'the surge of people *spilled over'*; Reuters (Oct. 25, 2015) speaks of 'thousands of migrants *streaming* into the EU every day', and AP (March 31, 2016) of 'the massive flow of refugees *pouring* into Europe', and so on. At the same time, both AP and Reuters do report on the migrants' ordeal:

> (12) Many of those *demanding* to leave the Slovenian border town for Austria, Germany and other European Union nations to the north *had waded* the previous night through the Sutla River, which marks the border between

> Slovenia and Croatia, in frigid conditions made worse by their soaked clothes. Sometimes in the pitch dark, at other times aided by light from a police helicopter's searchlight, more than 1,000 souls *strode chest-deep* into the muddy waters on the Croat side and *struggled up* the muddy embankment into Slovenia (AP Oct. 21, 2015; my italics).

As we see, migrants in example (12) are no more *Mediums* in *non-ergative processes*; they are now construed as *Actors* in *material processes* (cf. Halliday 1994: 109-112 on *material processes*). In addition, the migrants' are presented as determined: they are *demanding* to leave Slovenia.

Throughout my data, the migrants' desire to 'reach Europe's rich countries' (Reuters Oct. 21, 2015) is stressed. The obvious contradiction between the 'floods' that pass the borders by themselves, without any seeming effort, and the images of 'active' migrants sometimes leads to inconsistent language, as examples (13) and (14) demonstrate:

> (13) More than 260,000 people have passed through Croatia since Sept. 15, when Hungary closed its border with Serbia and *the tide streaming toward rich EU nations turned west* to Croatia, EU's newest member (AP Oct. 27, 2015; my italics).
>
> (14) On the ground, it's a 24-hour battle to keep up *with the river of people entering Europe and trekking hundreds of miles north to wealthier EU nations* (AP Oct. 30, 2015; my italics).

In example (13), 'tide' is a *Medium* in a *non-ergative process*, *streaming* and *turning west* by itself, but as the tide is caused by a natural force, how can it be directed 'toward rich EU nations' (and by whom)? In example (14), migrants are construed both as *Mediums* in a *non-ergative process* – 'the river of people entering Europe' – and as *Actors* in a *material process*: they are 'trekking hundreds of miles'. Notably, here, too, migrants want to trek 'to wealthier EU nations', which might be taken as negative implicit *Judgement*: are migrants too 'picky'?

3.4 Construing the European States: States-as-Person

Germany is 'Europe's richest economy' (Reuters Oct. 19, 2015), and Sweden is clearly one of the 'wealthy states'. EU's 'poorer members' are in south-eastern Europe (Reuters Oct. 24, 2015); among them the 'impoverished', 'recession-hit' Greece. Evaluating countries on the basis of their wealth can certainly be argued to rely on 'pure' economic facts; at the same time, this kind of categorising might entrench – as Reuters (Oct. 18, 2015) calls them – 'deep and often ugly divisions in the EU' rather than mend them.

The division into rich and poorer countries is emphasised by frequent references to the overwhelming popularity of Germany. Germany is 'a magnet for migrants' (Reuters), while one of the other 'richer' countries, Austria, according to Reuters (April 6, 2016), 'has mainly acted as a conduit into Germany for migrants'. One of the poorer nations, 'tiny' Slovenia, struggling to cope with the sudden migrant influx, is presented as 'the next obstacle', or 'the next step … toward richer EU states, such as Germany or Sweden' (AP Oct. 18, 2015).

While migrants have been depersonalised by the frequent use of liquid metaphors, European countries are sometimes conceptualised as having personalities; in other words, journalists resort to 'state-as-person' metaphor (see Chilton and Lakoff 1995). 'State-persons' can be evaluated by values of Appraisal, for example, by those of *Affect* and *Judgement*. In example (11), we saw how Austria and other nations were so 'unnerved' [inscribed negative *Affect*] that they set to tighten the border controls. In example (15) from October 2015, the same kind of feelings could have made Slovenia to act:

(15) ***Worried Slovenia*** [inscribed negative *Affect*] **might build fence to cope with migrant crisis** (Reuters headline Oct. 23, 2015; my italics)

The popularity of Germany and Sweden does not depend just on their economic prosperity; their laws offer the migrants 'the most beneficial conditions' (Reuters April 6, 2016). Germany is said to be the leader of 'lenient EU partners' (Reuters Oct. 18, 2015); in other words, it is appraised with a value of inscribed positive Judgement. However, by March 2016 Germany, too, had seen it necessary to introduce some border controls. That it has become somewhat less 'lenient' is implied in a Reuters report in March 2016:

(16) But Germany's 'Willkommenskultur', or welcoming culture, has since faded, with doubts growing after a spate of sexual assaults on women in Cologne on New Year's Eve that police blamed on foreigners (Reuters March 18, 2016).

Positive Judgement of Sweden is evoked by several expressions in Reuters news reports: a country famous for welcoming refugees (Oct. 23, 2015); Sweden has laid out the welcome mat for tens of thousands of asylum seekers (Nov. 2, 2015); Sweden, known globally for its traditional generous foreign aid programmes (Oct. 23, 2015).

But Reuters journalists also stress another feature, characteristic of the 'state-person' Sweden: it is sensitive about its reputation:

(17) The controversy *could hurt Sweden's image as a poster child* for effective foreign aid (Oct. 23, 2015; my italics).

This could be seen as implicit *Judgement* (but is it positive or negative?). Furthermore, in addition to the economic problems brought by the huge migrant influx, unsolved attacks on asylum centres tend to damage *Sweden's self-proclaimed role as a 'humanitarian superpower'* (Reuters Nov. 2, 2015), as examples (18) and (19) show:

(18) Although arson attacks on refugee centres are not uncommon in other European countries such as Germany, they have still *led to much soul-searching* in Sweden**,** a country that *likes to see itself* as a beacon of tolerance in Europe (Reuters Nov. 2, 2015; my italics).

(19) **Arson attacks at asylum homes raise fears in *tolerant*** [inscribed positive *Judgement*] **Sweden** (AP headline Oct. 22, 2015)

3.5 Blurring or Distancing Responsibility

It is by turning verbs and other parts of speech into nouns ...that we increase the possible content of our text, and thus increase its **lexical density'**, Eggins (2004: 97) states. In news language, packaging information into compressed noun phrases has been a popular convention since the 18th century (Biber 2003: 170). This kind of economic style saves space, and it also conforms to the demands of news journalists' 'objective', impersonalised style; the style which White (1998: 271-288) calls 'reporter voice'. At the same time, the meaning of the compressed sequences, which often contain nominalisations, can be far from explicit. By analysing noun phrases and nominalisation, it is thus possible to deduce whether or not news actors' responsibility has become ambiguous; and if it has, what might remain hidden. Below, I also examine how *ergative* choices can blur the responsibility; in many cases, the Agent role is either hidden or it has been given to an inanimate noun or a noun phrase.

The migrants' mass arrival in Europe is in my data largely conceptualised as 'Europe's' crisis. Though the collective reason explaining why more than a million people have come into Europe in 2015 is repeatedly presented – the fact that migrants or refugees are 'fleeing war and poverty in the Middle East and beyond' (Reuters) –, the past of individual migrants is referred to only occasionally. Thus, the issues of responsibility mostly focus on handling the chaotic situation which the migrants' influx has caused in Europe. The central questions are: who is to blame for the chaos and who suffers most from it?

The 'cause and effect' relationship looks rather unambiguous in example (20) from Reuters:

> (20) About 700,000 *refugees and migrants* [Medium in non-ergative process] have poured into the European Union from war-torn and deprived areas of the Middle East, Africa and Asia in 2015, *causing major financial strain* on EU member countries, *political disputes* within them over to how to best handle the influx, and *heightened security concerns* (Reuters Nov. 3, 2015; my italics).

At the first glance, one could think that 'refugees and migrants' are responsible for the big problems they have caused for the European Union. However, the *non-ergative process* 'have poured' implies that, in fact, migrants' mass arrival in Europe has not been intentional; it is just something which has 'happened by itself' to migrants, the Medium of the process. In the same vein, in example (21), Reuters again seemingly puts the blame on the migrants:

> (21) ...questions remain over how far *the EU* [Agent in ergative process] can manage *hundreds of thousands of migrants* [Medium] whose *chaotic movements* [Agent in ergative process] have divided *EU leaders* [Medium] and jeopardised *the bloc's open internal borders* [Medium] (Reuters Oct. 14, 2015; my italics).

Here, too, 'culprits' remain unclear, since the EU is presented as being responsible for 'managing' the migrants, and the Agent in the second phrase is a nominalisation (*movements*). The EU, however, is the obvious 'victim' – probably though suffering from its own inability.

Example (22), a rather short sentence with as many as four nominalisations, clearly conforms to news journalists' intentionally 'economic' style:

(22) The Hungarian border *closure* is the latest *demonstration* of EU's uncoordinated *response* to the *surge* of people reaching its borders (AP Oct. 18, 2015; my italics).

In this case, we can rather easily 'unpack' the nominalisations into congruent clauses, for instance, as follows:

> A huge number of migrants suddenly arrived in Europe, and the fact that the European states could not agree on how to handle the situation led to all kinds of quarrels, and, as a result, Hungary has now closed its border.

However, the readers need some specific background knowledge, for instance, of the quarrelling Balkan states and of 'Hungary's anti-immigrant government' (Reuters Oct. 27, 2015).

In addition to resorting to nominalisations, journalists sometimes blur the responsibility by giving the Agent role to a somewhat ambiguous noun phrase, as in example (23):

(23) *Different asylum rules in EU states* [Agent in ergative process] have also encouraged *chaotic flows* [Medium] of potential refugees within the EU… (Reuters April 6, 2016)

As we see, the blame here is partly put to an abstract, inanimate noun phrase, 'different asylum rules'; in other words, neither the individual EU states nor the refugees can be claimed to bear the whole responsibility for the chaos.

All in all, European countries in my data are most often presented in a 'double' role: they are responsible for the chaos, but even those who suffer most from it.

4. *Concluding Remarks*

The metaphors used by AP and Reuters in my data on the migrant crisis strongly support Lakoff's and Johnson's famous argument that 'metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 6). As discussed above, speaking of migrants metaphorically as a natural disaster, e.g. as a 'chaotic flood', hides the problems and sufferings of individual migrants, and thus discourages empathy towards them (cf. Charteris-Black 2006). Furthermore, metaphors of liquid 'spilling over', etc., make containment actions taken by several European countries seem only natural; these countries are just 'protecting' their own borders from 'the massive flow'. And if the migrants' influx was caused by a natural force, how can anyone be held responsible for the crisis? In the issues of responsibility, news journalists' deep-rooted conventions of 'objective' news reporting also have an important role, leading to vague and ambiguous language.

Comparisons between the two patches of my data give clear evidence of a basic 'news value', the one related to 'geographical closeness' (cf. e.g. Bell 1991: 157). In October and November 2015, when the countries along the

Balkan route 'traded accusations over who is to blame' (AP) and European leaders in their meetings 'lashed out... at each other's handling' (AP) of the crisis, the focus of the news media was on the European Union's heartland. That meant, too, that the migrants were, at least to some extent, in the spotlight. For example, AP followed their difficult situation on the Balkan borders almost hour by hour, often telling stories of the sufferings of some individual migrants or families.

In March 2016, the European Union made a deal with Turkey, 'which if successful, could turn the chaotic flood of migrants onto Europe's southern shores into an orderly, manageable stream', as Reuters (March 18, 2016) said. But as shown above, by then, the 'flood' to Western and Northern countries in Europe had already 'slowed ...to a trickle', due to tightened border controls and border closures. Tens of thousands of migrants were trapped in Greece or Italy, or were in Turkey waiting for illegal transport to Europe. Their stories did not easily 'hit' the news anymore. These would be reported only, if something really 'newsworthy' happened; if, for example, a boat full of refugees capsized on the sea, or if migrants staged protests outside the Idomeni border camp in Greece. In April 2016, an AP reporter talked with a desperate young man in the Turkish coastal town of Izmir. Mohammed, 'the scrawny young man' from Syria, said to the reporter: 'If any Syrian asked me today, "should I make the journey?" I'd say go back and die in your land with honour ... Europe wants you dead. Turkey wants you dead' (AP April 8, 2016).

In August 2016, when Reuters journalists were looking into Europe's migrant crisis 'one year after', they found that it was 'at the very least numerically worse than it was last year' (Kambas and Bronic 2016: [online]). According to them, more people were arriving and more were dying, but 'the twist is', they say, 'that, compared with last year, a lot of it is out of sight'. The question Reuters poses in the story headline also encapsulates my thoughts after the analysis of my second batch of AP and Reuters news reports: 'Out of sight, out of mind?'

Notes

1   *Ergativity* here refers to the term in Functional Grammar (Halliday 1994: 163-172); in other words, it is a narrower concept than *ergativity* in typological studies. For Halliday, it is a semantic concept, connected to causativity.

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