

HELENA TUŽINSKÁ:

Medzi riadkami. Etnografia tlmočenia azylových súdnych pojednávanií
[Between the Lines: The Ethnography of Interpreting Asylum Court Hearings]

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A book that is both easy to read and not easy to read. Helena Tužinská applies in it the ethnography of communication as a research and analytical tool which serves to deduce contexts that at first glance appear to be obvious, but are not obvious, because they refer to complex issues of understanding people from several language communities, including their professional backgrounds (p. 320). The publication *Between the Lines* is based on research that the author conducted in 2016–2019 at the Bratislava Regional Court and other institutional places with which asylum seekers in Slovakia come into contact. As noted in the introductory part, the text of the book was also influenced by her previous activities and research among asylum seekers in the period 2005–2008.

Helena Tužinská is an ethnologist/anthropologist, and her publication outputs cover, in addition to academic works (e.g., Tužinská, 2009, 2018) and discussions, also books and manuals intended for teachers and people working with inter-cultural communication (e.g., Tužinská, 2018; Tužinská, Vofanská, 2016). Within the asylum seekers' environment, the author was engaged in various roles – as a researcher, trainer, observer of interviews at the Migration Office of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, interpreter to English, she conducted various workshops for people applying for asylum as well as professionals working in this sector. She has long cooperated with several organisations from the non-profit sector – the Human Right League, the Milan Šimečka Foundation, and the Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture. Helena Tužinská is a committed researcher, teacher, and methodologist, and all these aspects can be felt in the way this publication is written and in its flow.

The book is a great read that develops gradually. Step by step, the author reveals her way of thinking and arrangement of the key terms and domains. It consists of three chapters and four sub-chapters. Each chapter is preceded by a case study – a part of a recorded court hearing with three different asylum seekers. What is unusual in this book is the fact that the author inserts domains after each excerpt – interpretation references in square brackets, i.e., key terms and the context through which she views the given statements and data. This increases clarity and sequence in observing how Helena Tužinská worked and looked at the data. This is certainly inspiring also from the point of view of methodology, data analysis, and work with the transcription of interviews.

Chapter 1, *Space and Report*, describes the conditions under which reports (from the police, reception or accommodation centres, or from courtrooms) are drawn up. The author focuses on how the institutional environment – the space itself as well as behaviour – non-verbal expressions, time-frame, clarity of the procedures and processes – determine many communication aspects.

Chapter 2, *Space and Meaning*, concentrates on the “actors’ opinions on the institutional routine in interpreting and on the background in which the asylum seeker’s credibility is checked” (p. 183). An important part of court proceedings (and previous decisions) with



asylum seekers is the process of proving the reliability of their stories – and hence, the reasons for why they should receive international protection in Slovakia and the related legal residence. The court proceedings focus on court rules, official records, legal terms, and routine, while the context and efforts to achieve mutual understanding disappear. In this chapter, the author deals with the process of identifying the language of interpreting, highlighting the need to identify the linguistic and social diversity in order to prevent “communication noise”. She looks at the ethics of interpreting and the expected impartiality of interpreters and communication of the legal terms. In addition, Helena Tužinská points out the need for professionalisation and “refinement of the ethics of community interpreting” (p. 201). Like in qualitative research, consistent self-reflection and awareness of one’s own role and position in field work (court proceedings) is essential in interpreting as well.

In Chapter 3, *Space and Sentence*, the author, through the statements of the individual actors and their subsequent analysis, highlights the structural inequalities in relation to asylum seekers, i.e., how the choice of grammatical forms changes even their symbolic effect. When interpreting the narratives of people applying for asylum, Helena Tužinská observed the use of the third person and passive voice, silencing of the subject or agent, the use of the past tense and indefinite pronouns or evaluative particles. There is much at stake in court proceedings with asylum seekers: their residence in Slovakia and the possibility to live here. Inaccurate interpreting – various inter-cultural noises or misunderstanding – may have a negative impact on the overall outcome of the asylum granting proceeding and process. The expressions and words used by the interpreter when speaking has an impact on how the judge views the asylum seeker and his/her credibility. Hence, there is power in the language, which the author reveals, names, and explains.

Reading the case studies was at times exhausting and even too frustrating and alarming, in particular the transcriptions of interviews from court proceedings between the attending actors. The reader indirectly “experiences” slow speech due to recording, constant interruption of the flow of speech, as well as the disruption of the presented story. Thanks also to these introductory insights and excerpts from interviews with the research partners, interwoven in the text, the reader can better understand what can be lost in language between the lines. The publication uncovers the power of language in specific situations and in the specific environment of court proceedings; however, the principles of sensitivity and prudence in approaching how and what we say can be applied more broadly.

For the publication or its further continuation (or resulting studies), it would be interesting if the author dealt more widely with her own self-reflection and research ethics, also given her involvement in this topic. In the introductory part, Helena Tužinská notes that she complied with the Code of Ethics of the Ethnographic Society of Slovakia and that the text should not be considered a criticism of police officers, decision-makers, lawyers, interpreters,

and judges. She intentionally avoids the text being advocative or critical of the state authorities: “The finding that the misunderstanding, uncertainty, improvisation, or the lack of fairness are part of this complex process is not criticism, but an observation of the system settings with individual as well as institutional responsibility” (p. 23). At the same time, through the views of all actors, she identifies some problems and proposes solutions. In her text, Helena Tužinská attempts to give space to all stakeholders – she listens to them, does not judge, and looks at the data through the ethnography of language. While reading the book, I could not avoid the feeling of a systemic failure of institutions and the lack of empathy of their representatives whose decisions fundamentally influence the lives of asylum seekers.

It is a book that I needed to read more than once. Every further reading reveals new layers and provides a deeper understanding of the author’s thinking. As a researcher who does not deal with the ethnography of language, I found several points interesting – especially those related to language and the revealing of the structural asymmetrical position of institutions towards people in a vulnerable situation (people from minority backgrounds). The publication serves as a guide also thanks to its extensive and precise overview of literature. As the book suggests, through interpreting, in which much of what is said can be lost, it is also possible to look at the context of inter-cultural communication or communication as such – it is important to ask the right questions, leave enough room for reaction and clarification, and work also with one’s own expectations. These findings are important when conducting qualitative research as well as for communication as such, in particular in a minority environment.

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