

HOW "REFUGEES" BECAME "ILLEGAL MIGRANTS": CONSTRUCTION, RECONSTRUCTION, ... DECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

In 1998, Marjeta Doupona Horvat, Jef Verschueren, and myself published a booklet *The pragmatics of legitimation: The rhetoric of refugee policies in Slovenia*. The book discusses an episode in Slovenian public rhetoric, historically situated roughly as a one-year time span from April 1992 to March 1993, and topically defined in terms of "refugee policies". The approach was a pragmatic text analysis in a tradition of empirical ideology research, paying special attention to implicit aspects of meaning construction, in interaction or in contrast with explicitly voiced perspectives and with rhetorical goals and constraints.

In the present paper, I would like to re-examine and re-interpret some of these eight years old data in the light of the latest "refugee crisis" that culminated in the first months of 2001. This time the "problem" weren't the Bosnians refugees who chose Slovenia as their final destination, but refugees from the former Soviet Union, Asia, Middle East and Africa, mostly seeking refuge and asylum in the West, and therefore using Slovenia only as a transit state.

The aim of the paper is to show how their "identity" was (re)constructed in Slovenian media, and to uncover implicit mechanisms (and techniques) behind these constructions.

Key words: refugee policies, pragmatic text analysis, meaning construction, reconstruction of the identity, implicit aspects, xenophobia.

1. Refugees and/as "illegal migrants"

When in the beginning of 1992 the war broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina, »the refugee tide [...] swamped our moral obligations as well as the capabilities of an economically exhausted Slovenia« (*Delo*, 28 April, 1992). Even renowned intellectuals of leftist political orientation cautioned that Bosnian refugees made us face »the choice between humanitarianism and accountability to our own country (so that we do not end up as a 'dumping-ground for the leftovers of ethnic cleansing')« (*Delo*, 30 March, 1993). The refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina were reportedly 'causing more and more disturbances', they 'disrupted the habits of local population', 'increased tensions between nations', were 'potential criminal offenders', not to mention the fact that their health was 'already seriously undermined' so we could not rule out the 'outbreak of smaller-scale epidemics', and that their 'civilizational and cultural level and behavioral patterns were different'.

For a Slovenian reader at the beginning of the new millennium (2000/01), these labels must have looked as if they were taken from yesterday's newspaper! And yet, all of them date from the time when Marjeta Doupona Horvat, Jef Verschueren and I were preparing the first edition of *The Rhetoric of Refugee Policies in Slovenia* nine years ago (first published in book form in 1998)¹. Our conclusion at that time was (Doupona, Verschueren & Zagar 1998: 40) that the refugee question was successfully defined as a 'problem' (both in terms of numbers and in terms of a threat to the public order). In other words, *a crisis was constructed* in such a way that deviations from certain principles passed easily as exceptional measures which did not in themselves break a more fundamental, and supposedly stable, system. The refugee population was subject to *other-categorization* as a group of people hardly worthy of the kind attention given to them by the generous people of Slovenia. Thus refugees were blamed for not working, while being forbidden to work. Segregated

education was instituted and abandoned at will. And refugees were said to be completely free, while their every movement was being regulated.

Accordingly, all the labels and "definite descriptions" mentioned above refer to Bosnian refugees, and not to the new "wave"² of **illegal migrants, illegals, immigrants, emigrants, asylum seekers, aliens**, or the peculiar Slovenian category '**prebežniki**'³ that exerted "pressure on our borders" in 1999, 2000 and 2001. This "extraordinary strain" on Slovenia's borders was accompanied by an interesting transformation and recasting of the historical account: Bosnian refugees, whom eight years ago the media and state institutions described using the disqualifying terms quoted above, suddenly turned into 'our people'. Of course they are 'ours', the argument went, "**after all**", we used to be the citizens of the same country (although eight years ago the argument in use was quite the opposite: "**even though**" we lived in the same country, we are not obliged to accept them ...). But the Bosnian refugees suddenly became so much 'ours' that the media virtually never used the term 'refugees' for the so called 'illegal migrants' in Slovenia, regardless of the fact that the use of the term 'refugee(s)' would be in perfect accordance with the Geneva Convention (adopted 1951) and the New York Protocol (adopted 1967). In the beginning of 2001, when Slovenia was used mostly as a transit state for refugees from Romania, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Macedonia, only Bosnian refugees deserved to be called '**refugees**', i.e., only those who **fled from** the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina⁴. All the others were simply 'illegal migrants' (or even less).

In the first part of the paper, I'll try to shed some light on the(se) expressions the Slovenian media (and the Slovenian public in general) used in connection with the newly arrived refugees. In the second part (concentrating on an article, published in the main Slovenian daily *Delo*), I'll try to show how xenophobia doesn't necessarily need to use the expressions analyzed in the first part of the paper, but can proceed in a much more subtle way.

2. *Illegals, foreigners, and other 'four letter words'*

For Slovenian public **refugee** is obviously not just a legal term, above all, it is loaded with emotions. Therefore, it cannot be applied to just everybody, particularly not to the unknown, uninvited arrivals with 'vacant gazes' and 'unknown intentions' who sneak into the country on all fours, covered in mud and dirt. These people can only be **prebežniki**, people who fled to Slovenia for unknown reasons and intend(ed) to continue their journey towards the most frequent destination, the West.

'**Prebežniki**' is derived from the verb 'prebežati', meaning, 'to arrive in another place by fleeing'. In contrast to 'bežati', where the usual implication is, 'run away from danger' (see note 3), 'prebežati' does not imply any specific cause for fleeing. Moreover, it is commonly used in the sense 'to desert/deserter' as well. Also, it should be distinguished from the term '**pribežniki**'. While '**pribežnik**' fled to a certain place (usually seeking refuge), '**prebežnik**' is just fleeing (over some territory), with no explicit destination in mind. **Prebežniki** thus became a label for the category of people who found themselves on the Slovenian territory almost accidentally, by mistake one could say, and who violated Slovenian laws because they crossed the border illegally. Slovenians obviously did not want to see that **prebežniki**, the same as **refugees, flee from** something, seeking refuge. This was (additionally) confirmed by the fact that out of several terms available, the media and, consequently, the Slovenian public, chose the one that placed stress primarily on chance, instability, precariousness and shortness of their stay in Slovenia. A semantically very close term '**pribežniki**' did not meet with wide acceptance precisely because it too explicitly implies that one has arrived at the final destination and intends to stay there. The essential difference between the two terms stems from the prefixes 'pre-' and 'pri-' when combined with the verb 'bežati': while the former suggests chance, instability, and shortness, the latter points to intention, permanence, and duration.

Nevertheless, the term '**prebežniki**' retains at least minimal reference to the destiny and situation of those people who mostly fled from a politically or economically uncertain future in their home country. By contrast, '**ilegalci**' (illegals), a term often used by Slovenian media⁵ when referring to 'illegal migrants', openly classifies them as criminals. This 'classification' is done in two steps.

First, as already mentioned, 'illegal migrants' was the 'official' expression used by Slovenian authorities. Note that they didn't use the expressions **immigrants** or **emigrants**, expressions that (implicitly) refer to the status of the person that is migrating. Instead, they used the expression that put emphasis on the **process of migration**. Since Slovenia usually wasn't the final destination such a choice of words may seem quite

appropriate and acceptable. But then, who, when and on what grounds can decide whether a certain 'migration' is legal or illegal? Crossing a border may indeed be illegal, but that has nothing to do with the act or process of migrating: if a person wants to leave her/his country, she/he does not need any approval from the authorities. It is simply one of her/his (human) rights.

Second, 'illegal migrants' are shortened to 'illegals' (quite a usual procedure in everyday use of language). But, '**illegals**' are primarily people who have committed some illegal or unlawful act, i.e., people who have violated laws in some way. And the term '**illegals**' in no way alludes to the fact that such a person seeks refuge and is fleeing from some kind of danger. A person (or institution⁶) who sees these people as '**illegals**' only sees them as violating laws and therefore eliciting corresponding treatment, which usually implies the use of repressive methods and special means.

It is somewhat surprising that among the widely accepted terms used for the people who illegally crossed the (Slovenian) border was the term '**foreigners**' ('tujci' in Slovenian)⁷. Of course they are **foreigners**, as much as anybody else is who crosses the border legally with a valid non-Slovenian passport. Foreigners – a legal category – always existed and they always will. And foreigners are both: people possessing a valid passport and those without it. If such a general and (supposedly) neutral term suddenly starts to be applied to people who illegally cross Slovenia's borders, then it must indicate some basic uneasiness and ambivalent attitude of Slovenians toward foreigners in general. As long as they arrive in Slovenia with valid passports in their pockets, they are acceptable and Slovenian public opinion proudly talks of **traditional Slovenian hospitality**. But as soon as they "sneak" into Slovenia, scrambling through some muddy ravine in an attempt to reach the West, this traditional hospitality shows its other face - **intolerance and dislike**. Another term for this type of attitude is **xenophobia**. Of course, Slovenians try to avoid this term: as I have already pointed out in connection with the term **refugee**, words may carry a lot of weight, and this weight may occasionally be just too heavy...

3. *Eliminating foreigners*

Apart from (sometimes unbearable) weight, words also have their own history and meaning, independent of the history and meaning **we** are willing to ascribe to them. Some years ago, the Republic of Slovenia, supposedly a social state, governed by the rule of law, and a state that signed (all?) international conventions on the protection of human rights and refugees, established the *Center for the Elimination of Foreigners*⁸. For those who find such a choice of words completely natural, let me point to a few things: usually we (try to) eliminate insects, filth, litter or garbage, stains, heaps of snow, peels, pips, stalks, tumours or some other malfunctioning or useless body parts (if we can not cure them, that is). In short, we eliminate things that are not only redundant or getting in our way, but we also want to get rid of them once and for all. Societies that consider themselves 'civilized', or at least want to be seen as such, usually do not eliminate people. Somehow it appears in bad taste, and a kind of unfashionable - at least since the end of the WWII – to name only two reasons in case nothing more essential or rational comes to your mind. No doubt many criminal organizations deal in elimination of people, but governments, at least most of them, do not belong to this type of organization (or at least they do not want to)⁹. The unwanted foreigners are usually 'deported', a (legal) term that has been widely in use, implying a forced departure from a country. They could also be 'returned' or 'turned back'; however, 'elimination' suggests (implies) that the most likely places they could be found after such an act is dustbins, sewers, or even some free-floating fumes.

Slovenia, obviously, does not eliminate unwanted foreigners in such an absolute and total way (at least, not yet). And, of course, it **was** probably just the choice of words that **was** slightly awkward and clumsy. But this is precisely what I would like to draw your attention to: when the government officials come into position to take the word(ly) equilibristic as something natural, as something that is not only their job, but rather something that they are – so they believe - called to do, the **basic meanings of words** become dependent only on their goodwill. Apart from that (i.e. their goodwill), there can only be slips of the tongue, misunderstandings and malevolent imputations. Yet, if we give in just another fraction and allow that the *Center for the Elimination of Foreigners* **was** only clumsiness or misunderstanding – doesn't this speaker's 'clumsy' choice of words say more about what he/she had in mind, and actually wanted to say, than if the words were carefully weighed? Don't such 'misunderstandings' (at least) suggest how the 'problem' was in fact understood?

4. *Refugees as waste*

They might, of course, but I am afraid that 'elimination of foreigners', at least in this case, does not point to any clumsiness or misunderstanding but to an increasingly global, indisputable and profound conviction that, after all, we are not all equal. The evidence that corroborates this claim comes from a seemingly completely different sphere of activity: in the search for solutions of how to put to use fats, which are a by-product in the processing of waste parts of potentially 'mad' cows into bone meal, there was a downright serious proposal that they should be used to make soap for less developed countries... Make no mistakes, this proposal was advanced in Slovenia. Very innovative, one could say, and in perfect accordance with the EU policy where some countries quite open-heartedly suggested that BSE infected beef should be exported to countries struck by famine... Which could probably produce some beneficial demographic effects, too, I am sure.

Obviously, there is still (and all the more) a deep gap between "us" and "them". And the only place we can analyze how "we" see "them" is speech, language, tongue. But we have to be careful, though. A tongue is a very sly and tricky thing. It is always there for us to fool around with, loitered and squashed in its teeth-chamber, stretched and strained, used to negate and to deny or, when in urge, kept tightly shut in the mouth. And despite all these commodities, despite the mighty elasticity, stretchable all the way to the stiffness of the ineffable, the tongue keeps its meanders and pockets of meaning, a kind of palimpsest fields, that enable us to dissect and analyze (and then, if necessary, continue with interpretation and evaluation) each and every kind of speech – be it sophisticated academic diction or vagrant babbling and gibbering.

5. *Xenophobia as "simple reflexes"*

And that is exactly what I will try to show in the second part of this paper; I will concentrate on just one text, the column of dr. Alojz Ihan in the Saturday supplement of the national daily newspaper DELO (February 10th 2001, p. 32). The column titled *(Ob)vladamo – (Put) under control* or *We manage* is 'dedicated' to 'illegal migrants', and is an exemplary case of how this 'problem' can be treated differently, namely, in between the lines, without using any explicit discriminatory expressions.

In the first part of his text, dr. Ihan claims (among other things) that the right place for the introduction of "cosmopolitan atmosphere and racial tolerance" – is a city. In a city, he continues, "the variety of nations and cultures feels **even** relaxing" but

"in a village it is different. When you meet someone in a village, you should greet him, look into his eyes and know him, or else it gets awkward – **some ancient defence mechanisms activate. I do believe that kind rustic women burst into tears when they see a chocolate-coloured African in the fields. But I do not believe we are talking xenophobia here, just simple reflexes.**"

Since I'm a philosopher, allow me to be somehow naïve and wonder (as philosophy is allowed to - and even has to - do) about certain things dr. Ihan has written. Namely, I really wonder, why kind rustic women should burst into tears when they see a chocolate-coloured African in the fields? They may be surprised or dazzled when they suddenly see a black person where mostly white people live, but why should they burst into tears? What happened, after all, was that they have "seen" a person of a different colour, nothing more. And that person (according to dr. Ihan's dramatization) did not do anything to them – did not threaten them, attack them or hurt them. That person was just there, that is all.

6. *Linguistic construction ex nihilo*

But, was he or she really "there"? Nobody – be it the media or *vox populi* - has ever reported about crying rustic women gazing at chocolate-coloured Africans wading the furrows. However, dr. Ihan used various linguistic (and argumentative) means to make his entirely hypothetical and made-up story sound intriguing, believable and convincing:

- 1) Instead of "if they see... in the fields", which would be clearly hypothetical, within the register of probable and not (yet) accomplished, he writes "**when** they see... in the fields", clearly implying that he is writing about something that had happened or happens all the time, on regular basis, or at least often;

- 2) He uses the plural, "kind rustic **women**", instead of singular, "a kind rustic **woman**", as if there had been more similar cases;
- 3) Last but not least, his narration begins with "I do believe": "**I do believe** that kind rustic women burst into tears when they see a chocolate-coloured African in the fields".

Namely, what exactly do we believe when we say "I do believe..."? Usually something not proven beyond any doubt, something we have heard about and think that it could or should be true. If we could prove or demonstrate what we claim to believe, if we saw it or heard it ourselves, we would not only **believe** it, but **know** it, instead.

The yarn about the wailing rustic women staring at the black gents in the fields is therefore put before the readers as a fact, (already) overheard by the author, as a piece of hearsay widely talked about. The use of plural (rustic women...), and the particular choice of time and tense (when...) make the story even more credible. Yet, that is not all. The real beauty of "I believe that..." lies in its mitigating role: when somebody says that he/she **believes** something, it only means that he/she **thinks** that something could be true, but, by no means, **claims** to **know** it is really so. Which is a handy and cosy rhetorical strategy, as the speaker can easily renounce his standpoint, if necessary.

"**I believe** that ..." is therefore a useful defence mechanism against all kinds of potential counter-arguments and objections, for we can interpret it as: "I didn't say that **I knew** something was so and so, I just said that **I believed** something was so and so. And I have right to my own beliefs".

But, why does dr. Ihan **believe** that kind rustic women weep at the sight of the chocolate-coloured Africans? Because we are talking "simple reflexes", says he, not xenophobia. What kind of "simple reflexes" he had in mind, he didn't bother to explain. Which is unusual, because:

- 1) those reflexes are supposed to be "simple" and therefore
 - 2) easily explicable; especially when a person, talking about "simple reflexes", holds a doctorate in medicine (as dr. Ihan does).

In case we are in fact talking reflexes, that is. It is much more likely that we are dealing with a special "argumentative" technique, made up for the (common) folks, where we put forward a conclusion and hope that our listener would not mind asking for the argument. Because there is none. Or is it?

7. Xenophobia as "ancient defence mechanisms"

At the beginning of the quoted fragment, dr. Ihan claims that there are differences between a city and a village. "When you meet someone in a village, you should greet him, look into his eyes and know him, or else it gets awkward – some ancient defence mechanisms activate" he says. Yet, if it is so that when you meet someone in a village, you should greet him and look into the eyes, why didn't dr. Ihan's rustic women do that? Why didn't they look the "chocolate-coloured Africans", they found in the fields, into the eyes and greet them? Why did they burst into tears instead? Could it be that the order of events in dr. Ihan's description of human relationships in the country is in fact **the opposite of what he wants his readers to believe**: that you should **first** know someone, and **then** greet him/her (and look him/her in the eyes)? And, if you do not know that person, you simply don't greet him/her. And, on top of everything, if that person's skin is of different colour from yours, you even start crying.

But then, if it is so, there is absolutely no difference between dr. Ihan's village and dr. Ihan's city, where, too, we usually only greet people we know (only that we do not cry as much when we see chocolate-coloured Africans, lemony Japanese and ruby-red Indians...). That, of course, thwarts his main distinction between a village and a city. The distinction on which he founded his whole heart-breaking tale, featuring tearful rustic women and strangely coloured aliens creeping all over Slovenian soil...

8. Construction of normality

Let us sum up: dr. Ihan postulated a distinction between a city and a village to point out how human relations in the city are different from those in the village. That fear, distrust and tears are the elementary features of

the village locals, when encountering an alien. The distinction – set by dr. Ihan, in his words and with his arguments – proved non-existent and groundless in the end, following his own line of argument, his own setting and his own dramatization.

All that we are left with in the end is a bad taste in the mouth and an unpleasant feeling that dr. Ihan's writing is no more but a "simple reflex", nicely wrapped into harmonious sweet-talk, one can consume with his Saturday morning coffee and a hot croissant. And that is exactly how xenophobia is generated and maintained: not with loud manifestations and militant slogans, but with soft words, describing the image of normality. Only that the image in question is really being constructed, not described.

NOTES

- 1) Cf. Doupona Horvat, M., Verschuere J. & I. Ž. Žagar (1998).
- 2) Expression used regularly in connexion with refugees in Slovenia.
- 3) The expression will be explained later in the text.
- 4) The Slovenian word for a refugee is 'begunec'. It is derived from the verb 'bežati' (to flee, to run away from danger, escape) which, in turn, is derived from the noun 'beg' (flight, escape). In contrast to the English term, it does not place explicit stress on 'seeking refuge'.
- 5) Two major dailies (out of three), and news programs of the national TV were systematically scanned from November 2000 to March 2001.
- 6) Slovenian police is still using the term 'illegals' on their web-site (<http://www.policija.si/si/>).
- 7) Although the term (illegal) aliens is often used in English in similar contexts, the Slovenian 'tujci' is closer to the English 'foreigners'.
- 8) In Slovenian, *Center za odstranjevanje tujcev*.
- 9) That was written before Bush's new doctrine of preventive war, so I apologize if I am being (politically) incorrect.

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