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Syrian or non-Syrian?

Reflections on the use of LADO in the UK

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Introduction

The issue of Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin (LADO) has been well documented in linguistic research over the last decade (see, inter alia, Maryns 2004; Spotti and Detailleur 2011; McNamara, Van Den Hazelkamp and Verrips 2016; Eades et al. 2003). LADO is used by immigration departments in different countries, including the United Kingdom, to assist in identifying an asylum seeker's place of origin or nationality. This is often used in cases where asylum seekers lack valid identification documents through which their origin or identity can be verified, or when there are doubts about the validity of those documents.

This issue is a particularly current one: the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that the number of people displaced by conflict is at its highest ever. Estimates in June 2017 suggest that 65.6 million people were either refugees, asylum seekers or internally displaced people – one in every 113 humans on the planet. This chapter focuses on the use of LADO in the UK, with a specific focus on its use with refugees and asylum seekers from Syria. In particular, the chapter discusses asylum seekers' experiences with LADO and legal professionals' perspectives on LADO.

Based on a set of interviews, we identified four key themes: the tendency of LADOs to fail to acknowledge sociolinguistic realities, in particular with regard to language contact and change; the concept of authenticity and test takers practising their language skills towards an expected set of questions; sociolinguistic processes of accommodation, where the language of interviewers and refugees converge (or diverge); and the emotional impact on test-takers. We complete the chapter with a set of recommendations, highlighting suggested improvements to LADOs.

Linguistic variation, authenticity, and the problem of assessment

Recent research on the sociolinguistics of identity has focused on the notion of authenticity (Beinhoff and Rasinger 2016; Holt and Griffin 2003; Lindholm 2003; Coupland 2007). In sociolinguistics terms, authentic language can be considered "language produced in authentic contexts by authentic speakers" (Bucholtz 2003, 338). In the context of LADOs, this raises

interesting questions. If the assessment of a person's Syrian origin relies on their language, first, who, and what, determines what counts as "authentic Syrian", particularly seeing considerable dialectal variation in Syria, as discussed below; second, how can we distinguish between "authentic" or "original, real and pure" (Lindholm 2008, 2) Syrian, and "fake" Syrian, that is, one that is performed as part of a deliberate disguise; and third, what qualifications does the analyst require to make reliable and valid judgements, seeing, as we discuss below, the sociolinguistic complexities that surround the Arabic language in the Middle East.

A considerable amount of work has focused on potential inadequacies in using linguistic analysis to determine a person's geographic origin. Key concerns revolve around the discrepancy between a speaker's sociolinguistic background and actual geographic origin, resulting in doubts about the validity of LADOs, as well as a dichotomy between native speaker analysts and analysts who are (academically) trained linguists.

The use of forensic linguistic methods to determine a speaker's identity, by which characteristics such as regional origin can be determined, is far from unproblematic. Schilling and Marsters (2015) argue that not only is such a determination difficult because of the variety of factors involved but also that one can be actively manipulated by a speaker: "speaker profiling is complicated by the possibility of deliberate disguise" (2015, 196). It seems clear that in a high-stakes context such as LADO, the deliberate use of disguise is a possibility for those tested. Yet, the issue goes beyond deliberate deception: the phenomenon of sociolinguistic accommodation is well documented. Speakers tend to converge linguistically towards one another so as to create "likeness" (see Coupland 2007, for an extensive discussion), whereby convergence may be overt and based on conscious choice, or covert, whereby speakers adjust their speech style to one another without clear intention to do so (Edwards 2009). As with authenticity, this poses particular challenges for LADOs: focusing on the use of LADOs in Belgium, Maryns (2004) addresses the issue of validity of LADOs and suggests that a lack of understanding of sociolinguistic variation may severely impact on the outcome.

Similarly, Spotti and Detailleur (2011) in their discussion of the use of LADO in the Netherlands conclude that the LADO can fail "to take into account the sociolinguistic realities, geopolitical and social pitfalls that languages and the spread of language varieties undergo in a certain region" (2011, 11). Eades (2005) highlights that language as a marker of geographic origin is problematic, with the region of an individual's socialisation not necessarily equating to their nationality, and observes that LADOs often ignore an individual's linguistic repertoire, particularly with regard to people's movement and "porous [geographic] borders" (ibid., 510). If LADOs are about determining a person's origin, that is, belonging to a particular speech community (McNamara, Van Den Hazelkamp and Verrips 2016), they need to take their sociolinguistic biography into account. In a discussion of LADOs in Australia, Eades et al. (2003) illustrate how sociolinguistic complexities can raise issues pertaining to the validity of the conclusions drawn from such assessments: linguistic and geographic boundaries often do not overlap, making general statements about origin difficult and resulting in misleading conclusions. Simultaneously, test-takers, particularly those from borderlands, often possess complex linguistic repertoires, and their language may include lexical borrowing from neighbouring languages and/or dialects.

The validity of LADOs has been discussed extensively. McNamara and Shohamy (2008) suggest that tests often considered to be symbols of “objectivity”; and McNamara (2012) points out that any kind of testing is best conceptualised as a social practice, and hence serves a social and political function: “objective” tests in this case regulate access to a particular country. This raises the question of what is actually being measured. As outlined above, sociolinguistic realities may not fall into neat categories but are the result of a much wider linguistic repertoire. Foulkes and Wilson (2011) take issue with a lack of standardized testing methods “with no standard testing methods yet established and little documentation available for public scrutiny” (2011, 691). Based on an evaluation of LADO-use in the Netherlands, where contra-reports are produced by non-governmental (and hence purportedly politically neutral) organizations, Verrips (2011) shows how the use of contra-expertise through the inclusion of a second analyst, can lead to a lack of agreement between analysts; amongst the issues identified is the aforementioned phenomenon of dialect mixing, which blurs boundaries.

Debates on the validity of LADOs have included the issues of whether LADO analysts should be trained linguists or native speakers of the language being assessed. Cambrier-Langeveld (2010) suggests that “data presented here seem to point strongly to the value of supervised, trained native speakers over trained linguists” (2010, 84) but warns that this cannot be generalized, as there are also issues surrounding native-speaker judgements; she suggests trained linguists and supervised native-speakers work together. Foulkes and Wilson conclude that “our initial view is that NSs may have a valuable role to play in the process, provided, of course, that they are proven to have good analytic skills and are supervised by competent linguists” (2011, 694).

The native-speaker debate is, of course, not unproblematic and “rich in ambiguity” (Davies 2006, 432), with most definitions of native-speakers including notions of a normative “standard” language. These issues are compounded when considering the Arabic language: almost 274 million people worldwide speak Arabic, in 31 different countries (Simons and Fennig 2017), spanning a large geographic area. In the context of Arabic, the concepts of native-ness and standard language are complex: Albirini defines “Standard Arabic” as comprising both Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic vis-à-vis Colloquial Arabic, “several regional dialects that are spoken regularly by Arabic speakers in everyday conversations and other informal communicative exchanges” (2016, 13). The relationship between Standard Arabic and Colloquial Arabic is complex, ranging from diglossia, to polyglossia and contiglossia (Albirini, 2016)-the latter two accounting for the range of varieties between Standard and Colloquial Arabic varieties. This heterogeneity of Colloquial Arabic may extend to considerable variation within a single country: “the dialect spoken in the eastern Syrian city of Deir Az-Zour is linguistically closer to the dialects found in Iraq than to those used in other Syrian cities” (Albirini 2016, 30). That is, the concept of a “Syrian Arabic” as a geographic variety is flawed. From a LADO point of view, this heterogeneity needs – or ought to – be reflected in the choice of analyst: a native speaker of Arabic from Morocco may have limited expertise in successfully determining the authenticity of the Arabic of an asylum seeker from Eastern Syria, simply because the Asylum seeker uses a variety that is considerably more “Iraqi” than “Syrian”.

LADO in the UK is provided by private suppliers: Verified AB is the main supplier, with Sprakab providing services in a secondary capacity, where language analysis takes place via telephone interviews (Home Office, 2017a). The Language and National Origin Group (LNOG)

(2004) guidelines lay out the process with which LADOs ought to be carried out; the guidelines have since seen considerable endorsement by other organisations (Wilson 2016). Of particular interest for this chapter are the first three tenets of the guidelines: 1. a linguistic analysis should never be the sole piece of evidence in a case; 2. linguists should never be asked or expected to make a determination of origin directly (as this is beyond their skills, responsibilities and jurisdiction); 3. a linguistic analysis is an indicator of socialization as opposed to origin, though these two things can align (LNOG 2004, 261-262). Data collected as part of this chapter suggests that particularly the second and third point are perceived to be often ignored – or applied less rigorously than desirable.

Language assessment focuses on both linguistic form and content, that is, local knowledge that someone claiming to be from a particular area ought to have knowledge of. Yet, in line with the first LNOG guidelines recommendation, “a decision will not rely solely on the direct [Language Assessment] report” (Home Office Science, 2012). In 2008 and 2009, the countries with the largest number of LADOs to determine (claimed) origin for asylum seekers in UK were Somalia, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Kuwait, Palestinian Authority (Home Office Science 2012) – all linguistically complex areas. The success of language assessment as a deterrent for fraudulent asylum claims in the UK is dubious:

“[I]t is difficult to isolate the effect of LA as a deterrent of abusive asylum claims when the drivers of asylum are complex and integrated. The evidence set out in this paper on LA as a deterrent is unclear and mixed, although there are some indications that the use of LA has been correlated with reduced abusive intake for specific nationalities.” (Home Office Science 2012, 32).

This raises the question as to whether language assessment as conducted in the UK is fit for purpose in its current form.

Syrian Asylum-Seekers in the UK

In 2016, around 5.3% of all long-term immigrants in the UK were asylum seekers (Hawkins 2017). In 2016, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan and Bangladesh came top of the list of countries from which the largest numbers of asylum seekers came to Britain (*ibid.*, p. 10), with Syria seeing a dramatic rise between 2010 and 2015, making Syrians the fourth largest group of asylum seekers; in 2016, the country dropped back to rank 8 (*ibid.*).

The Syrian asylum-seekers that are the focus of this chapter are a direct consequence of the Syrian revolution, which started in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring in peaceful demonstrations calling for reforms. However, the Syrian regime’s response was extremely violent, leading to armed conflict between the regime and the opposition. Different factors, including the foreign intervention and the rise of extremist groups, have escalated the conflict. As a result, more than 8 million people (40% of the population) have been internally displaced, and around 5.5 million Syrians are registered as refugees by the UNCHR. As of September 2016, more than 8000 of them are refugees or asylum applicants in the UK (UNHCR, 2016). With

these unprecedented figures, the demand for language analysis has become ever more pressing, with government agencies being careful to check that some asylum applicants might not be genuine in the sense that they are not fleeing persecution or war in their home countries.

The number of Syrian nationals applying for asylum in the United Kingdom has seen a steady rise from 2012 onwards, with a spike of applications in the fourth quarter of 2015, with 902 total applications, of which 345 (38%) were granted at initial decision (Home Office 2017b). In the year ending June 2017, 1,096 Syrian national were granted “asylum or an alternative form of protection”, with “an additional 5,637 Syrian nationals were granted humanitarian protection under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). Since this scheme began in 2014, a total of 8,535 people have been resettled” (Home Office 2017b).

The situation of Syrian nationals in the UK has been subject to considerable political discussion and legal change. In addition, different activist groups (e.g., Citizens UK, Asylum Aid, Refugee Action, Refugee Council) have been critical of the UK policy for not taking a sufficient number of Syrian refugees or sharing the fair share of refugees with Europe. From 2014, Syrian refugees were granted five years limited leave to remain under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) and the Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Scheme (VCRS), respectively. From 1st July 2017, those admitted under VPRS/VCRS were granted refugee status (Home Office 2017c).

Methodology

We conducted interviews with four asylum seekers in the UK, who claim to come from Syria, as well as two lawyers (John and Bilal). All interviewees were recruited through our personal networks. The asylum seekers were selected based on their migration history (i.e., legal and illegal paths), age group and their willingness to participate and share their stories and experiences with LADO. They include three men (Khaled, Wael and Raif) and one woman (Dania), aged between 26-34. Three of them hold university degrees and did their undergraduate studies in cities different from the place of their birth and upbringing; they said that they were in contact with people from different cities who speak different languages/dialects. One interviewee did not finish high school. Two people came into the UK legally (student visas) and the other two illegally. During their journey, which took one 7 months to arrive and other 5 months, they were in contact with other asylum seekers who spoke different languages and dialects. Interviews lasted for around 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted in Arabic, face to face. The interviews with the lawyers were conducted in English. All interviews were recorded on a digital dictaphone and later transcribed. The names given for both the asylum seekers/refugees and the lawyers are pseudonyms.

We share limited biographic information about the participants, upon their request. Speaking out loud about their experience with LADO and the Home Office is something that the majority of asylum seekers/refugees refuse to do. Therefore, we have kept the discussion of identifying information to a minimum. Data was subject to a thematic analysis aimed at

identifying key themes and patterns (Bryman 2004). In the following sections, we discuss the different themes that arise from the analysis.

Challenge 1: Language contact and change

Syria is located in an area rich of languages and language varieties, due to its geopolitical position. Arabic is the official language but includes considerable geographic variation. Other languages include those of ethnic minorities, exacerbating the linguistic complexity of the country (Simons and Fennig 2017). In addition, Syria borders three Arab countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq), Golan Heights (a Syrian territory occupied by Israel) and Turkey. This position considerably affects language variation. For example, people who come from the east of Syria will speak a dialect that might be closer to Iraqi than Syrian. The same applies to the south of Syria and the Jordanian dialect. Many people who live at the borders have relatives or friends on the other side of the borders. Although they hold different nationalities, they share the same language variety and social localisation to a large extent.

Internal and external migration affects speakers' linguistic repertoires too, resulting in people being bi- or multi-dialectal; it also leads to linguistic borrowing across languages. Additionally, "words associated with languages used in religion, such as Arabic and Hebrew, very commonly spread to countries where the associated religions are practiced" (Eades et al. 2003, 184).

All asylum seekers/refugees interviewed in this study had language contact and change due to their movement, inside and outside Syria. One of the interviewees, Khaled, originates from the city of Hama in Syria. He lived in Syria till the age of four. Then, his family moved to Dubai in the United Arab of Emirates where he stayed until the age of 18. He came back to Syria to study for five years, and then moved to the UK. His language contact was varied, and he was exposed to different languages and to different Arabic dialects while he was in Dubai.

The following excerpts shows his language contact clearly:

1. "Were you in contact with Syrian people in Dubai?"
"Dubai is very cosmopolitan and there were Syrians, Egyptians, Sudanese, Palestinians, and many other nationalities and of course there were Syrians that I was in touch with regularly, but I was also in contact with people from different countries."
2. "You lived most of your life outside Syria, especially at a critical age for acquiring and learning the language. Have you ever felt that there were words or expressions that Syrians or people from Hama city used, but you didn't understand?"
"Yes, when I came back to Syria there were a lot of words that I did not know their meanings, but with time I learned and I used to ask people about their meanings. Even

my friends in Hama used to tell me when I spoke that my accent was not the accent of Hama, it was more of Damascene accent although both of my parents are from Hama.”

3. “Were you in contact with people from Damascus?”
“Yes, most of my Syrian friends and schoolmates in Dubai were from Damascus.”
4. “In Dubai, were you in contact with Syrians or mixed nationalities?”
“It was mixed. I also studied in a British school so I had language contact with Arabs and Westerners, mainly British and Americans.”

These excerpts illustrate Khaled’s language contact with different languages and dialects. His lack of exposure to the dialect of Hama could explain why he could not understand different words and expressions when he came back to his city in Syria. This could also be the reason why his friends in Hama thought that his accent was Damascene, as during his time in Dubai he socialised with people from Damascus. When Khaled was asked whether these questions were ever asked by the interviewer or people from the Home Office, his answer was negative.

Khaled has a history of movement and language change, which is not uncommon; however, he seems to have never been asked about this by either the interviewer or by the Home Office. For example, he could have travelled from Dubai to the UK without going back to Syria first, and that he socialized in Dubai with people from one of Syria’s neighbouring countries rather than from Damascus. This scenario would raise an essential question: how will the analyst be able to provide a reliable analysis without tracing the movement of the asylum seeker in order to know more about their language contact and change?

During the interview with one lawyer, John, it emerged that the issue is a well-known one:

“Some Syrians lived maybe all their life outside Syria, so this will affect their dialect; it might be the same of the country they were living in but not Syrian. Therefore, when they assess their language as Syrian it might turn out that it’s not Syrian, taking into account that their nationality is Syrian so that causes a big issue morally and legally as well. Also, language analysts do not have access to the immigration history of the applicant so they do not know if this person has lived outside Syria or not which makes the results of the test invalid because the analyst might conclude that the dialect is not Syrian, which is a high possibility.”

The potential lack of in-depth engagement with an applicant’s sociolinguistic history poses considerable questions regarding the validity, but also legal and ethical status of LADOs. If decisions are being made on incorrect, insufficient, or inaccurate assessment, it raises the issue of whether LADOs are fit for purpose tools in a high-stakes decision making process.

Another interviewee, Wael, whose language test reportedly lasted only for nine minutes, was told by the interviewer towards the end of the interview that he was not Syrian:

“Then, he told me that you’re not Syrian. The way you speak and the dialect you’re using is not Syrian. He said “we, Syrians, don’t say “g” instead of “q” as in the word “qal” you said “gal”.”

This statement is problematic in three ways. First, jumping to conclusions during the assessment process poses a considerable danger of language anxiety for the applicant, and it is morally dubious and unprofessional to announce the result without proper analysis. Second, this shows the interviewer’s lack of knowledge of the different language varieties that exist in Syria. People in the east and south of Syria and other pockets in different parts of the country say [g] instead of [q] in the word ‘*qala*’ (‘he said’). These problems contribute to the third issue, which is the assumption that asylum seekers will use only one dialect or language variety in the interview. These issues bring us back to the notion of ‘authentic’ language – “attested and attestable language” (Coupland 2003, 421) – in the late-modern world, language and language practices show increasing levels of complexity and diversity (Blommaert 2010).

Determining the origin of people based on pronouncing a word or many words with a “different” accent or dialect shows the interviewer’s (who could be the analyst himself, especially that he’s giving judgments) lack of knowledge in the language variation in Syria, and highlights the assumption that asylum seekers will use only one accent or variation: the implication being that performance to the contrary amounts to deception. In addition, in multilingual countries, loanwords and language borrowing is a common sociolinguistic phenomenon.

Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) in what they call “homogeneism” claim that societies share a common language, and consequently see individuals as normally monolingual. This ideology of homogeneism ignores language variation and bilingual speech (Eades 2005), which are very central to understanding the language practices of asylum seekers, especially when there are multiple communities with a variety of language variations in a country such as Syria.

Challenge 2: Practising language for the test

The main purpose of the language test is to judge the asylum seeker’s claims of origin. The analysis can also involve making a judgement about whether the asylum seeker’s speech is authentic (that is the way they really speak) or performed. Such judgments require a careful and thorough analysis to distinguish between Syrians and non-Syrians applying as Syrian asylum seekers. The linguistic challenges involved in making this determination are heightened by the fact that many non-Syrians applying for asylum are also in dire need of protection.

An interesting theme emerging from the interviews is that of the predictability of the test: everyone interviewed in this study claimed that most of the questions in the language test

were anticipated. Furthermore, when we asked them about the questions they encountered during the language test, their answers illustrated considerable similarities. Common types of questions shared by interviewees include:

- Questions and detailed descriptions of their claimed neighborhood of origin
- Descriptions of life and culture within the wider city/area
- Questions regarding family life, including religious practices and hobbies

Having questions that could be easily expected and are known to most of the asylum seekers, even before applying for asylum poses different problems. The opportunity for abusing the asylum system is considerable, in the sense that some applicants, who are not genuine asylum seekers, could practise both the answers to these questions and the language variety used while answering. In addition, even genuine asylum seekers will experience increased levels of stress because of the test. They usually ask about the would-be questions before sitting the test, to prepare the answers. One of the interviewees, Raif, said that he almost “memorised the answers”. This could lead the language analyst to conclude that the applicant’s speech is not authentic and that s/he is trying to sound like someone from, say, Syria. When questions are expected, and answers are rehearsed, asylum seekers will more likely either stumble for words or speed up while they speak. Consequently, their speech might sound inauthentic to the interviewer/ analyst.

Raif commented that, “If you train well on the accent and get lucky to have an analyst who’s not from the area you’re claiming to be from then you can get away with it”. One of the methods that the respondents reported is being used by asylum-seekers to practice “sounding Syrian” is studying to popular Syrian dialects via the media. Syrian television drama has gone viral recently, which has made the conventional Damascene accent familiar to many Arabic speakers across the Arab world. For non-Syrians who apply for asylum as Syrians, these means are helpful tools for them to practise the Syrian dialect, particularly the Damascene or Aleppian varieties as well as the Levantine dialect which has gained increasing popularity in the Arab media over the last two decades.

All the interviewees agreed that studying Syrian television series has helped many non-Syrian applicants who have applied for asylum as Syrians. Dania said:

“I know that some people actually memorise scenarios and practise on the would-be questions in the interview, so they go there and repeat these scenarios in front of the analyst. They watch Syrian TV series and practise the words that they want to use till they pronounce them correctly.”

Bilal, the other lawyer, also made similar observations to those of the asylum seekers participating in this study. He commented:

“I would say 60-80% of the questions are expected. What non-Syrians who apply as Syrian usually do is that they practise the questions and answers by watching Syrian TV drama or talking to Syrian people.”

The above comments sum up most of the issues raised regarding having expected questions. The inconsistency in the test timing, which suggests that the process is unsystematic and unfair, and the expected questions are major issues that need to be addressed and solved.

This issue raises a moral challenge to language analysts and the UK Home Office. It is important to make a distinction between Syrian and non-Syrian asylum seekers. People from different nationalities, especially in the Middle East, apply for asylum as Syrians as their chances of success will be higher in the light of the raging war in Syria. These people apply as Syrians for different reasons such as poverty, insecurity in their home countries or seeking a better life. Abusing the system or the increasing number of asylum applicants could result in larger number of rejected or delayed asylum applications. The UK government’s policy towards hosting refugees and asylum seekers from Syria has been strict, in the light of the rise of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment across the country. Therefore, there is a moral and legal obligation for methods of assessment not to be developed to suit the government’s policy and facilitate its rejection of people who are in dire need of protection. On the contrary, methods must be developed to allow for proper assessment through linguistic means, resulting in reports with valid and reliable conclusions.

Challenge 3: The Role of Language Analysts

Having interviewed asylum seekers who experienced the language test, different concerns related to the language analysts, who could be interviewers themselves at times, have been raised. The following extract from one of the interviewees, Wael, relates most of these concerns:

“He really provoked me especially the way he was speaking to me. He was intimidating and every few moments he says “mmmm, hmmm,” in an annoying way. Then I told him “please you ask me and I answer then you do whatever you want, but please do not say mmmm, hmmm”. Then he stopped.”

This extract highlights many issues pertaining to the use of LADO. It also reflects the interviewer/ (maybe) analyst’s lack of linguistic knowledge and of Syrian dialects on many levels (see challenge 1 above). Also, the interviewer’s comment shows that his statement is both erroneous and that it contradicts linguistic research. The interviewer seems to ignore a well-known sociolinguistic fact that native speakers of Arabic are by “default diglossic speaker in that they master to a greater or lesser extent two varieties” (Spotti and Detailleur 2011, 7). Also, the assumption that the asylum applicants should speak only one language variety during the

interview reflects the analyst's lack of knowledge of well-known processes of linguistic variation. Therefore, if asylum seekers used words from two language varieties, it could be taken as a proof of deception about their claim of their country of origin. In a country such as Syria, where the linguistic landscape is a rich and complex one, it is normal that people use/master more than one language variety.

Third, the interviewer's reasoning for stating that the applicant is not Syrian is confusing. Which Syrian variety was he referring to when he told the applicants that Syrians do not speak this way? In addition, to conclude in less than ten minutes that the applicant does not come from Syria is problematic, unethical and based on 'folk linguistic views' - "popular beliefs about language, many of which differ from linguistic understandings" (Swaan et al. 2004, 112).

This conclusion provoked Wael and created a stressful environment, which could affect the interviewee's speech and his language anxiety. This leads us to the concern that was raised repeatedly by linguists on the criteria that should be followed in the selection of language analysts. The British Home Office's language analysis capability is provided by two Swedish private suppliers. The main company mentions in its website the following criteria to work with them as a language analyst:

- "ability to identify different dialects of his/her own native tongue(s);
 - good knowledge about and experience of the social, political and cultural life in his/her home country;
 - good oral and written communication skills in Swedish or English;
 - computer skills."
- (http://www.verified.se/eng_jobs.html)

The company does not seem to require any academic qualification with the language in question, or a higher education degree in linguistics, as none of these are explicitly mentioned as part of the advertisement. If this was indeed the case, it would come as little surprise that analysts provide folk linguistic views: even good knowledge of ones' native language and its diversity does not imply the ability to academically, and forensically, analyse it.

From a legal professional's perspective, John said:

"The language analysts that are chosen [talking about the Syrian cases] are not familiar with the varieties of the Syrian accent. Syria has a wide range of different accents and dialects and that's because of its geographic situation, bordered with many countries. So some of these analysts are not even Syrians. This will definitely result in unreliable results. There is a big shortage of language analysts, which make the Home Office use non-Syrians to analyse the Syrian accent, so I wonder how they can do that. It's impossible."

In addition, Raif was interviewed by a Lebanese person in the language test. We asked him whether this influenced his speech in any way, and he answered the following:

“Yes, it did actually. While I was speaking, I said “Teʔsha’a” instead of “teshoof”. I realised after I said it that I pronounced it differently, but luckily she didn’t comment on this.”

“Teʔsha’a” and “teshoof” both means “to see”; the first is usually spoken by Lebanese and the second by Syrian people. It is a common phenomenon for people to accommodate their dialect to that of the interviewer when it’s different from the interviewee’s dialect, whether consciously or subconsciously. Whether on purpose or by coincidence, it is good that the analyst did not comment on the applicant’s use of one word that is typically Lebanese. This language accommodation could block the interviewees from participating fully in the interview.

Challenge 4: Feelings and attitudes towards LADO

Although there is an increasing interest in the field of forensic linguistics and its application on LADO, little research has been carried out to discover the asylum seekers’ attitudes towards LADO. The interviewees’ feelings and attitudes, in this study, are broadly similar. When they were asked if they felt comfortable when they did the language test, three showed their dissatisfaction and Wael “felt like a criminal in an interrogation session”, while only Khaled “was comfortable because there was nothing to hide”.

Having asked them about their preference of whether to have the test on the phone or face to face, three preferred face-to-face while only one on the phone. Their reasons varied. Dania said:

“That will be better for both the analyst and the applicant. The analyst might actually also use the applicant’s face expressions to recognise their language behaviour. The applicant will also be more comfortable talking to a person in front of them than someone whom they don’t know on the phone. I felt like a prisoner when I was talking in that closed room on the phone with someone who has a lot of power over my application and my fate.”

All the other answers were similar. It was clear that the interviewees’ attitude towards having the test on the phone was negative.

Finally, we asked them if they think that the LADO system is open to abuse and if they believe that LADO could determine their place of origin. All the interviewees, with no exception, strongly agreed that the LADO system is easily open to abuse and cannot determine people’s nationalities. Khaled said the following:

“Of course, the system is open to abuse. Imagine if my mother was Syrian and I lived there for long time and my dad Egyptian, then my nationality will be Egyptian [that’s

because mothers can't pass citizenship to their children in most of the Arab World], but I will be able to speak Syrian, maybe more than Egyptian, because my mother was Syrian and I lived there. So how would they know that my nationality wasn't Syrian if I spoke the Syrian dialect?"

These feelings and attitudes, which are mostly negative about LADO, reflect the mistrust by asylum seekers and legal professionals in this system. The interview data has shown an interesting interplay between the notion and perception of authenticity ("being Syrian for speaking Syrian") on the one hand, but also that this very authenticity is difficult to achieve ("playing Syrian"). Two important issues need to be addressed here. First, the feeling of discomfort the asylum seekers experience during language tests, where two of the interviewees in this study felt imprisoned. From a linguistic point of view, this could influence their speech, raise their language anxiety and might prevent them from participating in the test fully. Consequently, the results might not actually reflect reality. Second, the issue of relying on untrained linguists, who harbour mainly folk linguistic views rather than professional standards (Eades 2010), is crucial insofar as it could diminish the reliability of the data.

Conclusions and recommendations

During this study, different issues have been raised which question the reliability and validity of the LADO process. These pitfalls include: producing analysis reports by untrained linguists or native speakers with folk linguistic views (Eades 2010); lack of analysts'/interviewers' knowledge of language varieties in Syria, language mixing, language change and other sociolinguistic features that could affect the results of the report significantly (Patrick 2016); hiring non-Syrian analysts/interviewers or even those with a different language variety which could lead to language accommodation; the questions asked in LADO interviews are highly expected and that could result in either abusing the system or producing inauthentic speech even by genuine people; and the intimidating atmosphere the asylum seekers are experiencing is unethical and raises their language anxiety, which could block them contributing fully in the interview.

In light of the different issues presented in this chapter, which also coincide with the problems cited in the *Guidelines for the Use of Language Analysis in Relation to Questions of National Origin in Refugee Cases* (LNOG 2004; Eades 2010; Patrick 2016) we propose the following points to improve the LADO system in the UK in general, and while assessing the language of Syrian refugees in particular:

1. Language analysts must be trained linguists, not merely interpreters or native speakers with folk linguistic views (Eades 2010; Patrick 2016).
2. Language analysts/interviewers must be Syrian, preferably speak the same claimed variety of the asylum seeker.

3. There are more than a million Syrian refugees/asylum seekers in Europe now; surely some of them hold degrees/higher degrees in linguistics and that they might cover all the languages/language varieties in Syria. Companies offering LADO services are encouraged to hire them more and offer them academic/training courses on the system to produce reliable language reports, based on professional linguistic views.
4. Changing the forms of questions and the questions themselves helps to avoid the high percentage of prediction. It is better to have natural authentic conversation, guided by general headlines, rather than prepared questions. The best approach for this might be having semi-structured interviews.
5. It is understandable that some cases might take more time in the interview than others for the language analyst to produce the report. However, the inconsistency in the duration of the interviews reflects the random process. There must be a minimum time and maximum time (without a big gap). This will make it a more just system for the asylum seekers, and also give more time for the analyst to validate the authenticity of the asylum seekers' speech.
6. Asylum seekers are not criminals, and to create an intimidating environment in the interviews similar to "interrogation sessions" is unethical and raises their language anxiety. Creating a non-threatening environment in the interview aids asylum seekers to participate fully in the interview. LADO companies are also encouraged to hire some experts in psychology and non-threatening communication to help with this issue.

These recommendations contribute to improve the LADO system in different ways: relying on professional language analysts to produce highly professional language reports; solving the problem of shortage of language analysts, reducing the probability of language accommodation; and creating a non-threatening environment that pertains directly to the asylum seekers' authentic speech. By improving the technical procedures of LADO, one would also be ensuring fairer treatment of both real and bogus asylum seekers, in an attempt to advocate a system that could bring justice to the most vulnerable people.

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Keywords

asylum seekers; refugees; LADO; Language Assessment for the Determination of Origin; Syrian; Syria; Arabic; linguistic variation

List of acronyms

LADO Language Assessment for the Determination of Origin

LNOG Language and National Origin Group

Biographical sketches

Mohammed Ateek's main research interests are English language education, refugee education, language and migration, L2 reading and learner autonomy. His PhD research was on the impact and effectiveness of extensive reading in the EFL classroom. Being an academic and a Syrian refugee himself, Mohammed is currently involved in different research projects that draw on English language education and language analysis for asylum seekers/refugees. His recent research project sought to analyse the Syrian refugees' linguistic choices on social media, with more focus on identity, translanguaging, social media and language teaching. Mohammed also has a teaching experience in the fields of TESOL and EFL. He previously taught at the University of Aleppo, Syria, where he was involved in BA language education programmes. Mohammed also taught English in different countries in the Middle East. Mohammed is also a member of different organisations in the UK which supports the rights of migrants.

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