

Bjørghild Kjelsvik

# “Winning a battle, but losing the war”: contested identities, narratives, and interaction in asylum interviews

**Abstract:** Drawing on how divergent discourse frames can lead to contests of how and what to tell in institutional autobiographical narration, this article presents data from a Norwegian asylum interview. Institutional interviewing is basically an information-sharing endeavor; the interviewer aims to get information on the situation of the interviewee in order to establish how to deal with his or her case, framing the discourse as truthful, in contrast to other discourses of innocence and morality. The outcome depends very much on the interviewee’s ability and willingness to share relevant information on his or her case. The interactional dynamics of the interviews must be considered in order to achieve an understanding of what identities are constructed by the participants. Intertextuality plays an important role in the analysis. In the interplay between elicited accounts and interactional processes, meanings and identities are negotiated and resisted in narrative discourse as part of the encounter between the interviewing officer, the interpreter, and the asylum applicant, within the social practice of asylum procedures. Finally, the need for further in-depth analyses of such interviews is pointed out.

**Keywords:** Narrative analysis, identity negotiation, narrative accounts, intertextuality, asylum interviews

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**Bjørghild Kjelsvik:** Department of Linguistic and Scandinavian Studies, University of Oslo, Norway. E-mail: [bjorghild.kjelsvik@iln.uio.no](mailto:bjorghild.kjelsvik@iln.uio.no)

## 1 Introduction

Asylum seekers are a particular migrant group in modern society for whom the negotiation of identity through autobiographical narratives is of utmost importance. Throughout Europe, asylum cases are dealt with in interview-based bureaucratic procedures in which “experiential narration is basically the only tool for explaining and supporting the application” (Maryns 2005: 178). The interviews are institutional encounters meant to establish whether the person in question

actually is who he or she claims to be, and whether he or she is eligible for protection under international asylum law. The narration of the applicant becomes directly linked to the negotiation of a *bona fide* personal identity, worthy of help under international asylum law, which eventually results in valid identity documents. Asylum interviews are in this way very much marked by identity negotiations in narrative discourse, but with the added complexities of asymmetric power relations, legal procedures, and veracity control for institutional purposes.

## 1.1 Previous work on narratives and asylum

Institutional genres of talk and textuality and the diverse repertoires of the asylum applicants play important roles in asylum interviews (Barsky 1994; Blommaert 2001, 2010; Bohmer and Shuman 2008; Jacquemet 2005, 2009, 2011; Maryns 2005; Maryns and Blommaert 2001). Most of these studies are concerned with a social-constructionist understanding of identity, rather than the bureaucratic understanding of personal identity and truthfulness marking institutional interviews (De Fina and Baynham 2005: 3).

This article is informed also by the wider field of research on identity in autobiographical narratives (Bamberg 2007; De Fina et al. 2006; Ochs and Capps 1996; Schiffrin 1996). Furthermore, De Fina's work on the narratives of undocumented Mexican immigrants in the United States has shown how migrants negotiate identities through setting up categories and social relationships in *story worlds* (De Fina 2000, 2003, 2006, 2009; De Fina and Baynham 2005). Baynham (2005, 2006) points out how different speaking positions in personal and generic narratives imply different identities, and he emphasizes the importance of a *performance* perspective in his work on life-stories of migration and settlement of Moroccan immigrants to the United Kingdom. Wortham (2000) has shown how identity is enacted both in the *narrated events* (story world) and in the *narrating event* (storytelling world) (see also Wortham and Gadsden 2006; Wortham et al. 2011). The interactional context is important in identity negotiations, as "identity does not emerge at a single analytical level – whether vowel quality, turn shape, code choice, or ideological structure – but operates at multiple levels simultaneously" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 586).

## 1.2 Difference, domination, and agency

Both a *difference* and a *domination* approach (Eades 2005) are discernible in the literature on asylum processes. On the difference side, institutional genres coming into contact with the diverse communicative repertoires (Blommaert 2010: 23;

173) of the asylum seekers create tensions between different “contextualization universes” (Blommaert 2005: 44). On the domination side, asylum interviews are “power technologies” (Jacquemet 2011: 477). Power relations mark the interaction of any interview, by distributing the roles of interviewer and interviewee, scrutinizer and scrutinized, steering the ways in which the participants speak. Asymmetric power relations are sometimes directly expressed, for example, in the frequent use of interruptions or “metapragmatic attacks” (Jacquemet 2011) that may silence the voices of the applicants.

Both dominance and difference must indeed be part of any analysis of asylum interview data, but as Eades (2005: 312) points out, they are often static and too concerned with structure. Yet, individual participants bring *agency* to their encounters with bureaucratic institutions. Domination is actively worked against; the applicants may use their differences creatively. In both cases, “language is central to this active work, or agency” (2005: 312). Agency is not an easily defined term, but “can be considered the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act, while praxis (or practice) can be considered the action itself” (Ahearn 2001: 118). In Ahearn’s (2001: 112) view, individuals “construct and constrain – rather than passively receive – interpretations that are both socially mediated and intertextually situated within a bounded universe of discourse.” In sum, agency is situated and played out in interaction (Al Zidjaly 2009).

The present paper treats interactional and narrative agency in the asylum interview of a young man from Nigeria in Norway 2010. Close analytical attention is paid both to the story world and to the storytelling world (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012: 24–25; Wortham 2000: 166), specifically in using the notion of narrative *accounts* given in response to evaluative questioning by an interviewer (De Fina 2009: 240). What story to tell and what information to reveal are negotiated throughout the interview. The applicant is consistently resisting domination, through the refusal to tell more than he wants to. That battle is won, but the war is lost: his application is rejected.

The following questions guide the analysis:

- What kind of narrative accounts do interviewer and applicant strive to produce?
- How are these accounts related to the prescribed identity of the asylum seeker as a person needing protection?
- What socially relevant types of identity do the applicant and the interviewer seek to align him with?

The answers to these questions are relevant both for a deeper insight into asylum procedures and into how identities are negotiated in narrative discourse in an institutional encounter.

The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (*Utlendingsdirektoratet*, UDI) has opted for an interview model where the applicant is explicitly invited to tell his or her story freely without interruption. Instead the interviewer's questioning is supposed to help the asylum applicant to clarify his or her case properly. The Norwegian data contrast here with other studies treating Western asylum procedures (e.g., Bohmer and Shuman 2008; Maryns 2006). But, the "bad" cases should still be rejected, so the helper role clashes somewhat with the fact-finding and veracity checking role (Jacquemet 2011: 480). This dual purpose creates an underlying tension within the Norwegian social practice of asylum interviewing.

## 2 Interaction and identity negotiation in asylum interviews

Narration in asylum interviews is embedded in a social practice; this produces recurrent ways of speaking (Bakhtin 1986 [1979]; Hymes 1972). Consequently, *genre* is a relevant analytical tool, as asylum interview texts will be intertextually related.

Like reported speech, genre is quintessentially intertextual. When discourse is linked to a particular genre, the process by which it is produced and received is mediated through its relationship with prior discourse. Unlike most examples of reported speech, however, the link is not made to isolated utterances, but to generalized or abstracted models of discourse production and reception. (Briggs and Baumann 1992: 147)

As shown by Briggs and Baumann (1992), genre is a complex concept used in multiple ways, though its customary meaning is formal categories of texts with certain structural characteristics. In Labovian narrative analysis (Labov and Waletzky 1997 [1967]), narratives are considered as clearly defined by a fixed text structure, but later developments in narrative analysis view narratives much more as texts deeply integrated in the interactional setting, and as having a number of different genres. Interview narratives arise in social encounters (De Fina 2009: 238). De Fina draws in her paper upon the "vision of genre" that has been proposed by ethnographers such as Hanks (1987), Briggs and Baumann (1992), and Baumann (2001, 2004), where genre is part of "orienting frameworks, interpretive procedures, and sets of expectations that are not part of discourse structure, but of ways actors relate to and use language" (Hanks 1987: 670). These conventionalized expectations of the text guide the understanding and evalua-

tion of what is actually said and done in an actual interview. For those regularly engaged in the practice, such as interviewers at the UDI, a genre model emerges from the practice, based on intertextual links between the various forms of prior discourse (Baumann 2004: 3–8).

For asylum seekers, interview narration and interaction are recipient-designed and have a clear social objective: to negotiate institutionally acceptable identities (De Fina 2009: 237). Importantly, there is no reason to expect that asylum seekers will have a good understanding of *how* to best present their story in order to create a *socially relevant type* of identity (Wortham 2000) for getting asylum. They are likely to use what they have of “prior discourse,” such as stories told by smugglers or by other applicants, and present themselves in ways which make sense in their own context. Again the Norwegian data offer an interesting perspective, as the counseling provided by the Norwegian Association of Asylum Seekers (NOAS) enters into the “prior discourse” of the applicants while being accessible for researchers (see Section 3.2).

### 3 Seeking asylum in Norway

Both the rejection and the acceptance of asylum applications are politically sensitive issues. There is an ongoing process of judicialization in the treatment of asylum seekers in Europe (Gibney 2001, 2004; Jacquemet 2011: 480). Most European states have now endorsed the incorporation of the Human Rights Convention in their legal framework; Norway sanctioned a Law on Human Rights in 1999.<sup>1</sup> The emergence of a human rights discourse has been parallel to an even more widespread policy of restriction as the numbers of asylum seekers have risen sharply since the 1970s (Gibney 2001: 3). Rejections of (too many) asylum seekers may grate against the feelings of human rights movements, while acceptance of (too many) applicants may not sit well with feelings of resentment to foreigners. This leads to a situation where the immigration authorities must be able to point to a legally correct process for both rejections and acceptances of asylum applications. So, while Norwegian asylum procedures clearly are part of the “technologies of power set up by international and national agencies for managing mass displacements of people” (Jacquemet 2009: 530), they are also informed by the human rights discourse. The UDI has a vested interest in making correct decisions, positive or negative.

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1 See <http://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1999-05-21-30> for the full text of the law.

### 3.1 The police registration and the asylum interview

The UDI treated a total of 16,455 asylum cases in 2010. Generally, approximately 95% of asylum applicants arrive without a passport (AID 2009), in spite of its importance in the asylum process (Bohmer and Shuman 2008: 88).

Identity claims must be made on two explicit occasions: in the *police registration interview* upon arrival and in the *asylum interview* by the UDI. Applicants found to come from a “safe country” are expelled from the country within 48 hours. Another 15% (2429 persons in 2010) are sent back to their first country of arrival in Europe under the Dublin Convention. The rest await the UDI interview for a new occasion to present their identity as a bona fide person in need of protection. Of these another 59% were rejected in 2010.

The legal status of foreigners in Norway is regulated by *Utlendingsloven* ‘the Immigration act’ and a legal instruction.<sup>2</sup> When evaluating the asylum seeker’s identity, the UDI will question him/her on why he/she has no passport, and on his/her background, geographical affiliation, family affiliation, and education. The plausibility of the answers and the identity claims are evaluated by referring to information from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the expert body of *Landinfo* (Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre),<sup>3</sup> an independent section within the Norwegian Immigration Authorities. The case officers are also referred to *praksisnotater* ‘practice notes’ on the country in question.

Before the asylum interview, most applicants receive individual counseling from an NGO, the Norwegian Organization for Asylum Seekers (NOAS),<sup>4</sup> which functions as an intermediary body between asylum seekers and official authorities (Sarangi and Slembrouck 1996: 146–147). NOAS explains the interview procedure through a film and a written leaflet, and provides individual counseling. Their service is partly financed by the UDI, who need them to give applicants a “measure of ‘institutional literacy’, so that clients can get to know what the options are, and how to go about putting forward their case” (Sarangi and Slembrouck 1996: 146).

After the interview, the case is decided by another case officer on the basis of the written report.<sup>5</sup> Rejections can be appealed to the UDI within three weeks together with a plea for delayed implementation of the rejection. The case will then be forwarded to the Immigration Appeals Board (UNE) for renewed treatment.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.udiregelverk.no/default.aspx?path={44488280-827A-4F04-B199-3D210E7D7FC8}>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.landinfo.no/id/162.0>

<sup>4</sup> See the NOAS Web site on their information program: <http://www.noas.no/en/tema/info-programmet/noas-informasjons-og-veiledningsprogram/> (accessed 31 March 2013).

<sup>5</sup> This has been changed so that cases now are decided by the interviewer.

## 3.2 The structure of Norwegian asylum interviews

The asylum interviews are part of the bureaucratic institutions “processing people on the basis of the information they provide” (Sarangi and Slembrouck 1996: 36). In order to obtain that information, the UDI follows a quite structured template with a typical order of phases. Below are listed the typical sections of an interview as found in my material.

### Interview phases

1. *The laying down of premises*
  - Stating goal of interview: to clarify the applicant’s reason for seeking asylum
  - The role of the interviewer: asking questions and writing a report
  - The role of the applicant: tell his/her story and answer questions
  - The role of the interpreter: translate for both sides
  - Duty of confidentiality for the interviewer and interpreter
  - Duty of truthfulness of the applicant
  - Interview practicalities (pauses, etc.)
2. *Personal details*
  - Reviewing and expanding information from the arrival interview:
    - Name
    - Date of birth
    - Place of origin
    - Ethnic affiliation
    - Mother tongue and other languages
    - Religious adherence
    - State of ID papers
3. **Main part A**
  - A freely told narrative of reasons for seeking protection in Norway; report writing
4. **Main part B**
  - Questioning on the narrative as the interviewer sees necessary; report writing
5. *Reading through*
  - Printout and reading of the report through back-translating from Norwegian, with possibility of corrections
6. *Remaining standard questions*
  - State of health
  - Earlier connections to Norway
7. *Signing*
  - New printout of report, signing by all parties

### 8. *Information*

- Possibilities of further contact with the UDI
- Right to legal counsel
- Choice of preferred gender of lawyer
- Contact information for NGOs working to help asylum seekers

Especially the initial and concluding sections are institutionally scripted, with themes and questions having more or less fixed wordings, as is the case in most bureaucratic encounters (Sarangi and Slembrouck 1996: 40).

The laying down of premises in Phase 1 is an important foundation for the interaction later on. The use of questioning in order to check the veracity of the applicant's identity claims in Phase 4 is usually concealed somewhat in a formulation of the interviewer's role as helping the applicant to talk of his/her reasons to seek asylum in Norway (see Section 2.1).

Applicants are told that they are under legal obligation to truthfully represent real events in their narratives. The events which the interviewers expect to hear about are ultimately based on the list of various kinds of persecution and abuse in the *Immigration Act* regulating asylum procedures in Norway. In cases where the stipulations of the Act are not clearly met, the interviewer will strive to establish whether the social identity constructed by the applicant is truly relevant to the identities presumed in the law, such as political or religious dissident or victim of persecution of a special social group.

The main sections are the asylum seeker's first narrative, and the follow-up-questioning. The applicant is explicitly given opportunity to tell his/her story freely and without interruptions, to improve the information obtained in the interview. The questions that follow are less scripted than those of the personal details section, but here as well typical formulations occur, such as "tell me more about . . ." -questions. UDI has an explicit strategy of using open questions, to get relevant information with valuable details and information actually providing evidence of the applicant's need for protection. However, the fact-finding function of the questioning surfaces in the strategies used by the interviewer, such as establishing a timeline of the events through a series of "when" and "what happened then" questions.

## 4 Data and methods

The data for this paper come from one of seven interviews of African asylum seekers, audio-taped in 2010 at the Norwegian Directorate for Immigration (UDI). The recordings were not part of standard procedure, but made as research mate-

rial on my request. I specified Africans as interviewees, as Africans as a group clearly struggle with a number of issues pertaining to the asylum process (Blommaert 2001, 2010; Maryns 2005: 155–173). Otherwise, the UDI was entirely responsible for choosing possible applicant candidates and carrying out the recordings. I was given access to the sound files for transcription later.

The interviews were otherwise ordinary asylum interviews, conducted as usual by an interviewer with an interpreter. The recordings differ in length from less than one hour to more than four hours. The two interviewers of my corpus were informed beforehand of the use for research, while interpreters and applicants were asked for consent afterwards. No interview was used without the informed consent of all persons involved. The UDI insisted on recording only participants with a comparatively good language proficiency in (African varieties of) English and French, to ensure understanding of the information letter and consent forms by the applicants. This contrasts with a number of other studies where the applicants (and interviewers) have been much less fluent in the interview medium (Blommaert 2010; Maryns 2006).

The interviews were fully transcribed with the interpreter's turns numbered continuously along with the interviewer's and asylum seekers' turns. In the excerpts of this article Norwegian lines are followed by an English translation, both in regular font, while the lines originally English are in italics. Further transcription conventions are found in the appendix.

The data used here are from an interview recording of 39 minutes, covering the start of the interview until the first pause. The interviewee is a 28-year-old man from Nigeria, Jonah.<sup>6</sup> Both the interviewer and the interpreter were female first-language Norwegian speakers. The interpreter did not have, or cause, serious problems of translation. The interview was chosen for its demonstration of applicant narrative strategies clashing with interviewer expectations.

## 5 Analysis: the man who didn't know

Stories are uniquely suited to do identity work, providing models of the world where social identities and relationships can be acted out (De Fina 2006: 356). In his interview, Jonah uses both the narrated events of the story world and the narrating event to voice himself as a person in need of protection and help. He is mainly concerned with demonstrating his innocence and how impossible it is for him to stay in Nigeria, while the Interviewer (IF2) tries to find information related

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<sup>6</sup> Names of persons and places are pseudonyms, or transcribed as (name).

to the prescribed identity of the asylum seeker as a person needing protection from persecution.

## 5.1 Jonah tells his story

De Fina (2009) points out the central position of elicited descriptive *accounts* in interviews. All accounts involve an explanatory component and are fundamentally recipient-designed and factuality-oriented, responses to an explicit or implied “why” and “how” evaluative question (2009: 240). Accounts are closely tied to interaction, as they emerge from specific questions asked and the relationship established in the interview (2009: 240). Excerpt (1) below is elicited by the interviewer’s question in lines 1–9 that introduces Main part A of the interview (see 3.2). Jonah’s response sets up a story world with his motivation for asking asylum.

### (1) “I didn’t know”

- 1 IF2-n: Jeg kommer først til å be deg om å fortelle fritt \0.8\ e::h- så::- detaljert som::-  
 2 t.: (I’m first going to ask to tell freely \0.8\ e::h- so::- detailed as::-)  
 3 IF2-n: eh, mulig, om- hvorfor du søker beskyttelse I Norge \1.5\  
 4 t.: (eh, possible, about- why you seek protection in Norway \0.5\  
 5 IP-e: *Eh, I will first ask you to tell freely, with as much detail as you can,*  
 6 IP-e: *about the reasons why you are seeking protection in Norway. \0.9\  
 7 IF2-n: Så, relevante detaljer, selvsagt.  
 8 t.: (So, relevant details, of course.)  
 9 IP-e: *So, relevant details, of course.*  
 10 IF2-n: Eh, så vær så god å fortell!  
 11 t.: (Eh, so be welcome to tell!)  
 12 IP-e: *So, please, go ahead and tell!*  
 13 J.: *Okay, well, you know? \2.2\ (sounds of moving)*  
 14 J.: *My reason of coming to Norway is this:*  
 15 IP-n: Ah, okei. Grunnen til at jeg kom til Norge, det er dette. \3.2\  
 16 t.: (Ah, okay. The reason I came to Norway, it is this. \3.2)  
 17 J.: *I’m sad.*  
 18 J.: *But I have a very big problem in my place.*  
 19 J.: *And the problem is this:*  
 20 IP-n: Tru- jeg hadde et veldig stort problem på mitt hjemsted, og problemet,  
 21 t.: (Belie- I had a very big problem in my home place, and the problem,)  
 22 IP-n: det var dette \1.2\  
 23 t.: (it was this \1.2\  
 24 J.: *Attending a girl.**

- 25 IP-n: Det har å gjøre med ei jente.  
 26 t.: (It has to do with a girl.)  
 27 J.: *So, the, the girl-* \1.9\  
 28 J.: *I don't know that the girl related to me.*  
 29 IP-n: Og ho jenta, jeg visste ikke at ho jenta var i slekt med meg. \1.2\  
 30 t.: (And that girl, I didn't know that that girl was related to me. \1.2\  
 31 J.: *So-* \2.0\  
*the girl got pregnant from myself.*  
 32 IP-n: Og ho jenta, ho blei gravid med meg. \3.7\  
 33 t.: (And that girl, she became pregnant from me. \3.7\  
 34 J.: *So-* *and in my place,* \1.1\  
 35 J.: *such a thing is an abomination, cause the girl related to me.*  
 36 IP-n: Og på mitt hjem[sted]  
 37 t.: (And in my home [place])  
 38 J.: [And-]  
 39 IP-n: så er en sl- noe slikt en synd fordi ho jenta er i slekt med meg. \7.3\  
 40 t.: (such a th-- something like this is a sin because that girl is related to me. \7.3\  
 41 J.: *And why this thing happens like this is because I did not grow up in my c-*  
 42 J.: *in my particular town [and in]*  
 43 IP-n: [Og-]  
 44 t.: ([And-])  
 45 J.: *my town I didn't grow up there, cause I'm from (name) states.*  
 46 IP-n: Grunnen til at dette skjedde, det er fordi jeg vokste ikke opp i min egen hjemby,  
 47 t.: (The reason that this happened, it is because I didn't grow up in my own home town,)  
 48 IP-n: akkurat i min by, der vokste ikke jeg opp fordi jeg kommer fra delstaten (n) \2.3\  
 49 t.: (exactly in my town, there I didn't grow up because I come from the state of (n) \2.3\  
 50 J.: *So for this reason* \0.7\  
*tsk* \0.4\  
*the people there* \2.2\  
 51 J.: *they really want to kill me.*  
 52 IP-n: Så av denne grunn så- folka der de- ville virkelig drepe meg.  
 53 t.: (So for this reason so- the people there, they- wanted really to kill me.)  
 54 J.: *So they want to kill me in person. I don't know, I didn't know this thing was*  
 55 J.: *gonna happen, you understand,* [so-]  
 56 IP-n: [Og], og de ville virkelig drepe m[eg.]  
 57 t.: ([And], and they wanted really to kill [me])  
 58 J.: [So-]  
 59 IP-n: Men, men jeg visste jo ikke, hadde jeg visst det, så had- ville ikke dette ha skjedd,

- 60 t.: (But, but, I didn't know, if I had known that, so ha- wouldn't this have happened,)
- 61 IP-n: altså hvis du skjønner. \2.3\  
 62 t.: (that is, if you understand. \2.3\  
 63 J.: *So they want to kill me, then I have to \2.5\  
 64 J.: *escape. So [I have]  
 65 IP-n: [Så de-]  
 66 t.: ([So they-])  
 67 J.: *to run away for my life and for my future.*  
 68 IP-n: De ville drepe meg så jeg måtte rømme, jeg måtte rømme for å redde livet mitt  
 69 t.: (They wanted to kill me so I had to flee, I had to flee to save my life)  
 70 IP-n: og for fremtida mi. \10.7\  
 71 t.: (and for my future. \10.7\  
 72 J.: *Mmm, that is all, that is all I have [xx.]*  
 73 IP-n: [Det er alt]  
 74 t.: ((That is all))  
 75 J.: *That is all.***

In this first presentation of his story, Jonah conveys his problem of having transgressed against a cultural ban on sexual intercourse with a certain degree of kinship relation, lines 31–40. In Jonah's story world, the characters are himself, the girl he has made pregnant, and an unspecified "they" living in "his place".

### 5.1.1 Orientation and details in Jonah's story

The interviewer explicitly asks for "relevant details" in Jonah's story (lines 7–9) following a general trend in asylum interviewing of considering details important for assessing the applicant's claim (Bohmer and Shuman 2008: 134–150; Jacquemet 2005; Maryns 2006). However, Jonah tells his story very tightly, and his story world in Excerpt (1) is devoid of such details as time and place. Instead, a description of the social setting functions as orientation: Jonah's kinship relation to the girl he has made pregnant and the ban against sexual intercourse between people so related. The incestuous relation/pregnancy is not anchored in any specific judicial or religious tradition. So, though Jonah does provide information about his problem for the interviewer, it has no orientation that is clearly connected to real world events, places, times, and persons. From the interviewer's point of view, such details and the placing of events on a timeline are important features in the negotiation of a bona fide identity (Bohmer and Shuman 2008: 144–146).

### 5.1.2 Building a victim identity: evaluation and epistemic modalization

In the telling of an autobiographical story, the cues in the layer of narrated events are interrelated to the layer of the narrating event, serving to position the narrator interactionally as he tells his story (Wortham 2000; Wortham and Gadsden 2006: 324). In the layer of the narrating event here, Jonah introduces his storytelling with an interactional move of accepting the floor, moving in his chair, and saying “Okay, well, you know?” (line 13). The use of the discourse marker “you know?” seems to have the function of “imagine the scene” or “see the implication,” to involve the hearer in the coming narrative (Müller 2005: 171–177). Together with line 17 “I’m sad”, Jonah’s introduction puts his narrative in an affective mode, and is part of the narrating event: Jonah indexes interactional involvement for the interviewer in his story to come. However, this very move is left out by the interpreter, in one of the few instances of interpretation lapses in this interview.

In the layer of narrated events, Jonah makes use of the *lexical level* (De Fina 2003: 24; Wortham 2000: 172) to position himself in the story world. The story characters are denoted with neutral words. Using the distancing term of “a girl, the girl” (lines 24–35) for a girl pregnant with his child conveys a sense of her holding little importance for him. Her role in the story is only to be “a very big problem” (line 18) for Jonah in his place. “They”, referring to “the people there” (lines 50–63) are also underspecified; their role is to force him to flee, since they “really want to kill” him (line 51). This *voicing* of their characters (Wortham and Gadsden 2006) together with the word “abomination” used of the pregnancy (line 35) evaluate the situation as truly putting Jonah in a difficult position.

As for his own story character, Jonah strongly underlines his ignorance, using *epistemic modalization* (Wortham 2000: 172) to negotiate an identity as innocent. He simply did not know that the girl was related to him. His ignorance is the real culprit here, and even here he feels he cannot be blamed, as he had grown up elsewhere and had not had access to this information before it was too late. In this way, Jonah presents himself as a victim of his own ignorance in wrongdoing, with no other choices than fleeing if he wants to remain alive. This ignorance on his part, later extended to the girl as well, becomes a main theme throughout the ensuing interaction.

At the same time, he conveys a very definite moral stance (Ochs and Capps 2001: 45) to the transgression as such. The label “abomination” on the incestuous relationship “in my place” (line 14) is an *evaluative indexical* (Wortham 2000), showing both his own and the villagers’ position toward it. At a later stage of the interview he even formulates quite clearly that he himself would probably agree with those who seek to kill him, if this had been done with full cognizance of the family relatedness. The alignment of Jonah with the incest idea makes it more

powerful as a danger to himself, as it underpins his claim of everyone's condemnation of his act, even his very own.

Through these textual cues in his story, Jonah constructs his identity as a morally aware person fully compliant with the cultural ban on incest and yet innocent of crime, thereby worthy of help. He possibly sees this as a socially relevant type for the goal of getting asylum. This positioning is pursued throughout the recorded part of the interview. The interviewer has a quite different agenda: she tries to establish the reality of the purported threats against his life, which is the UDI view of social relevance here. The interviewer seems to take for granted that Jonah and she have a common understanding of this, talking as she does about "relevant details, of course" (lines 7–9); this may be based on her knowledge of the NOAS counseling (see Section 3.1).

## 5.2 Follow-up questioning and timelines

In the follow-up phase the interviewer first poses an open information-seeking question about a story character, the girl (Excerpt [2]).

(2) "Tell me more about the girl"

- 1 IF2-n: Mm. Men- fortell meg mer om den her jenta, er du snill.
- 2 t.: (Mm. But- tell me more about this girl, please.)
- 3 IP-e: *But please, tell me more about this girl.* \1.5\
- 4 J.: *Telling you more about the girl?*
- 5 IP-n: Om du vil vite mer om jenta?
- 6 t.: (Do you want to know more about the girl?)
- 7 IF2-n: Ja, takk.
- 8 t.: (Yes, please.)
- 9 IP-e: *Yes, please.*
- 10 J.: *Mm, of course you can know more about the girl.*
- 11 IP-n: Ja, selvfølgelig kan du få vite [meir om jenta, ja.]
- 12 t.: (Yes, of course you may know [more about the girl, yes.])
- 13 J.: [mm xx xx x]
- 14 J.: *Like I said before, the girl \0.8\ related to me.*
- 15 IP-n: Som [jeg sa i stad så er jenta]
- 16 t.: (As [I said before, then, the girl is]=)
- 17 J.: [*But I don't know this as I*]
- 18 J.: *no grew up in my community, [in my state.]*
- 19 IP-n: [=i slekt med meg.]
- 20 t.: (= [related to me.]

- 21 IP-n: Men jeg visste ikke det, og n:g- grunnen, grunnen til at jeg ikke visste det, det
- 22 t.: (But I didn't know this, og nng- the reason, reason I didn't know it, it was)
- 23 IP-n: var fordi jeg ikke vokste opp på mitt hjemsted, i den delstaten. /14.0/
- 24 t.: (because I didn't grow up in my home place, in that state. /14.0/)

Asking about a story character will be an obvious step for the interviewer from the structure of the asylum interview (see Section 3.2), but Jonah seems to be surprised. He formally complies with IF2's request (line 10), but then only repeats that the girl was related to him and that he was ignorant of this (lines 14, 17–18).

After the translation of this and a pause of 14 seconds (line 23), he then takes the initiative and changes the theme completely, reminding the interviewer that he is here for protection and asking for “anything for me to be doing” since he cannot go back and endanger his life in Nigeria. He enacts here an interactional position as a person having full confidence of getting asylum based on his story. The interviewer's response follows in Excerpt (3).

(3) “Tell me like details”

- 1 IF2-n: Æ::- Jeg vil gjerne at vi skal snakke om litt forskjellige deler av, av-e e::h,
- 2 t.: (E::- I would like us to talk about somewhat different parts of, of-e::h,)
- 3 IF2-n: det du fortalte. Og da skal vi snakke litt om hva det var som førte til
- 4 t.: (what you told. And then we shall talk a bit about what it was that led)
- 5 IF2-n: at du er i fare i hjemlandet, og hva som du trur vil skje,
- 6 t.: (to you being in danger in the home country, and what you think will happen,)
- 7 IF2-n: hvis du, du- returnerer
- 8 t.: (if you, you- return.)
- 9 IP-e: *I- e::h, will now- we will now talk about the different aspects of what you have*
- 10 IP-e: *been explaining, and so what we will talk about is what made it so that you are*
- 11 IP-e: *in danger, at risk if you return to your country, and also what you imagine*
- 12 IP-e: *would happen if you went back to your country.*

- 13 IF2-n: Så, når jeg spurte deg om ho jenta, så:- vil jeg gjerne at du skal fortelle e::h,
- 14 t.: (So, when I asked you about the girl, so:- I would like for you to tell e::h.)
- 15 IF2-n: \0.6\ det- \0.7\ detaljer om ho jenta hvem hun er og-
- 16 t.: (\0.6\ that- \0.7\ details about the girl who she is and-)
- 17 IP-e: *So- When I was asking you about the girl, I was like, I, I, I wanted you to*
- 18 IP-e: *tell me like details about her, like who is she-*
- 19 J.: *Okay, okay.*
- 20 IP-n: [Åja. Okei, greit.]
- 21 t.: ([Ah, yes. Okay, fine.])
- 22 J.: [*Okay, okay, right.*]
- 23 J.: *The name?*
- 24 IP-n: Sånn som navnet, kanskje?
- 25 t.: (Like the name, maybe?)
- 26 IF2-n: Og så videre.
- 27 t.: (And so on.)
- 28 IP-e: *Yeah, [and things like that.]*
- 29 J.: [*Okay. The name is Goodness.*]
- 30 IP-n: [Åja.]
- 31 t.: ([Ah yes.])
- 32 J.: [*She claims*] *Goodness as her name.*
- 33 IP-n: Nn- [navnet er Goodness.]
- 34 t.: (Th-[the name is Goodness.])
- 35 J.: *but [I don't know her surname.]*
- 36 IP-n: Ho sa at navnet hennes var Goodness, men jeg visste ikke-
- 37 t.: (She said that her name was Goodness, but I didn't know-)
- 38 (IP-n:, J) (clarifying a missed sentence)
- 39 IP-n: Men etternavnet vet jeg ikke. Vi, vet ikke hva etternavnet hennes er. \1.0\
- 40 t.: (But the surname I don't know. We, don't know what her surname is. \1.0\)
- 41 J.: (unclear) *And know why, reason I no grow up in that same place.*

IF2 now introduces the questioning phase more carefully (lines 1–12), and then returns to her question about the girl (lines 13–18). She wants “like details about her, like who she is-”. Again Jonah formally complies, and proposes to provide her name, but this turns out to be her first name only: he does not know her surname. He uses this to bring in his reason for ignorance again (line 41).

The questioning above introduces a section where the interviewer tries to establish a timeline of the events leading to Jonah's flight. The interviewer asks how he met the girl, and he explains that he saw her on the street, approached her and "my friendship offered", which she accepted, without knowing of the family relatedness. The interviewer hears this as a concrete event story of Jonah and the girl becoming lovers from a first meeting on the street. The following story emerges: Last year, Jonah came to his father's village; this year, he met the girl. She became his girlfriend, and later she tells him of the pregnancy. Jonah later brings in another story character, an uncle who tells him of his kinship relation with the girl. The kinship rule in question may be the Igbo rule of village or paternal lineage exogamy (Smith 2001: 135), but Jonah never provides any account of whose traditional law he has broken.

A link to the "Personal details" section of the interview is of interest here. When asked about his "ethnic affiliation", Jonah asked if this meant "the particular place I come from", and was told that shared language and traditions were more important than geographic details. He finally admitted only to speaking Igbo, stopping short of saying that he belonged to an Igbo community. That negotiation indexes the importance that his upbringing elsewhere later holds in his story, as his reason for not knowing about the kinship with the girl, and also his reluctance to clearly state a connection to the Igbos.

In Excerpt (3), Jonah sticks to his main point of not knowing about the kinship relation. The ignorance theme later concerns the uncle as well: he had been ignorant of the love affair until he noticed the pregnancy. The interviewer tries to elicit more concrete details of the uncle's reaction to the pregnancy, but Jonah says only that he was "not happy", making minimal use of the common narrative device of constructed dialogue. Again he fails to provide details that could have bolstered his claim for a bona fide identity.

The interviewer on her side assumes that there was a certain sequence of events that led to his flight, in accordance with the expectations of stories of reportable and clearly defined events.

### 5.3 Tradition versus concrete threats

IF2 next concentrates on the threats on Jonah's life in Excerpt (4) below, taking them to be reportable events of interest to the asylum application.

(4) "Who are you afraid of?"

- 1 IF2-n: Så, onkelen din, e::h, var ikke glad o::::g- \0.8\
- 2 t.: (So, your uncle, e::h, was not happy a::::nd- \0.8\)

- 3 IF2-n: som du sier e::h, blir det oppfatta som en synd på ditt hjemsted.  
 \0.5\  
 4 t.: (as you say e::h, it is considered as a sin in your homeplace. \0.5\  
 5 IF2-n: Men- sa onkelen din noe om- \0.7\  
 6 t.: (But- did your uncle say anything about- \0.7\  
 against you?)  
 7 IP-e: *So, eh, you said your uncle was not happy, and this was an abomina-  
 tion in*  
 8 IP-e: *your place, Eh, did your uncle come with any threats directly against  
 you?* \2.1\  
 9 J.: *The, the issue like is this* \0.5\  
*My uncle himself-* \2.1\  
*come there at*  
*me,*  
 10 J.: *threaten me- Not just only him alone. [The community, everybody, the  
 culture]*  
 11 IP-n: [Den- Saken er jo denne- ]  
 12 t.: ([That- The thing is this- ])  
 13 J.: *cause is self, ih, ih, this is tradition.*  
 14 IP-n: Saken er denne, onkelen min truer meg, ikke bare han alene,  
 15 t.: (The thing is this, my uncle threatens me, not just him alone,)  
 16 IP-n: men lokalsamfunnet, eh, kulturen, fordi dette er en tradisjon. \12.6\  
 17 t.: (but the local community, eh, the culture, because this is a tradition.  
 \12.6\  
 18 IF2-n: Hjelp meg å forstå, fortell meg \0.6\  
 hvor- trusselen kommer ifra.  
 19 t.: (Help me understand, tell me \0.6\  
 where- the threat comes from.)  
 20 IF2-n: Helt fast, ikke bare tradisjonen. \1.6\  
 men hvem- \1.3\  
 er du redd for?  
 21 t.: (Quite firmly, not just the tradition. \1.6\  
 but who- \1.3\  
 are you afraid  
 of?)  
 22 IP-e: *Eh, help me to understand, who is the threat coming from.*  
 23 IP-e: *Not just the tradition, but which, which persons are, are the threat  
 coming fro-*  
 24 IP-e: *are the threats coming from.* \1.4\

In lines 1–8, IF2 recapitulates Jonah’s account and asks if the uncle had said anything about direct threats, framing this as a concrete conversation with reportable threats. This kind of questioning can be considered interactional assistance to tell hidden stories through providing opportunities to report important facts (Blommaert et al. 2006).

But Jonah does not take up the interviewer’s lead. Instead of telling of concrete threats from specific individuals, he claims that not just his uncle, but the whole community is involved in threatening him (lines 9–15). IF2 again tries to

elicit concrete information on the threats (lines 18–24), asking him to go beyond the general tradition. This question now leads to an argumentative story (De Fina 2003: 152) by Jonah, not of direct threats, but of the general situation of transgressing traditional dictums and being sentenced to death (Excerpt [5]).

(5) “You know, when . . .”

- 1 J.: *You know, you know when you come in the community, [or in- or in a country,]*
- 2 IP-n: [Du vet når du kommer]
- 3 t.: [(You know when you come)]
- 4 IP-n: inn i et lokalsamfunn [eller inn i et land,]
- 5 t.: (into a local community [or into a country,]
- 6 J.: [xxx-] *everywhere, they have their own culture.*
- 7 IP-n: eh, over alt så har man [sin egen kultur]
- 8 t.: (eh, everywhere so one [has one’s own culture]
- 9 J.: [So- so when] *you offend the culture of the land.*
- 10 IP-n: [Og du vet at når du-]
- 11 t.: [(And you know that when you-]
- 12 J.: [There are some- there are] *there are punishments that will come directly to you.*
- 13 IP-n: [eh, når du fornærmer den kulturen, som er-] er på et sted
- 14 t.: [(eh, when you insult the culture, which is-] is in a place,
- 15 J.: [So, and this, and this]
- 16 IP-n: så fins det en straff. som kommer direkte til deg, *and this?*
- 17 t.: (so a punishment exists, that comes directly to you, *and this?*)
- 18 J.: *So, and this punishment- \1.1\ if- this punishment, when it comes,*
- 19 IP-n: Og denne straffen, når den kommer, \1.5\
- 20 t.: (And this punishment, when it comes, \1.5\)
- 21 J.: *is like- I don’t know how to- this- \0.7\ is it- \0.7\ this thing now, hold on,*
- 22 J.: *this is- a community something, all over the country. And when you offend it,*
- 23 J.: *there are punishment for it, and this punishment for it is death.*
- 24 IP-n: [Det er- sånn-]
- 25 t.: ([It is- like-])
- 26 J.: [They will kill you] *in order to sacrifice for what you have commit.*

Excerpt (5) is a story highlighting typicality and iterativity, suspending the uniqueness condition of the “canonical” narrative of Labovian narrative analysis (Baynham 2003, 2005). A narrator telling this type of story may take the role of representative for a group of people, with the right to propound what everybody knows to be true.

Interactionally, Jonah positions himself in two ways, first using “You know” to produce a common ground, then positioning himself as a representative of the general Nigerian culture. He claims that he has offended the culture of the whole land, and the only possible outcome for this is the punishment of death. In other words, he goes to the opposite extreme of the interviewer’s question of direct threats from concrete persons, trying instead to convince her of the magnitude of his offence by bringing in the entire Nigerian society.

But Jonah has not finished his argumentation. His next move in Excerpt (6) below directly challenges the power asymmetry of the interview.

(6) “Now I’m asking question”

- 1 J.: *?He? just, he will ask as it is now. Even in Norway here now, I hope you people*
- 2 J.: *have some certain thing that you people are against.*
- 3 IP-n: Her i Norge er det sikkert også, jeg håper også, også sånn at dere har noen ting
- 4 t.: (Here in Norway also there surely is, I hope also, also like when you have anything
- 5 IP-n: som dere er imot.
- 6 t.: (which you are against.)
- 7 J.: *Now I’m asking question.*
- 8 IP-n: [Nå stiller jeg et spørsmål, jeg vil stille et spørsmål,
- 9 t.: ([Now I am asking a question, I will ask a question,
- 10 IP-n: det kan gå som du kan trenge-?]
- 11 t.: (it may turn out as you may need-?)
- 12 J.: [*xxasking that question. Is there not something, something you people are against of.*]
- 13 IP-n: Det- men det finnes ikke noen ting som dere er imot?
- 14 t.: (It- but aren’t there anything that you are against?)
- 15 IF2-n: Selvsagt er det lover i Norge
- 16 t.: (Of course there are laws in Norway)
- 17 IP-e: [*Of course there are laws in Norway,*]
- 18 IF2-n: [der er ting vi er imot.]
- 19 t.: ([there are things we are against.])
- 20 J.: [*Yeah!*]

- 21 IF2-n: [men::-]  
 22 t.: ([but::-])  
 23 J.: [*So that is something applicable to my place.*]  
 24 IP-e: [*There are thing we are against.*]  
 25 J.: [*So- I'm-*] (J. strikes table)  
 26 t.: [*Ja! Så det er det samme som*] gjelder på mitt sted. \0.4\  
 27 t.: ([*Yes! So it is the same that*] is applicable in my place. \0.4\  
 28 J.: *You understand.* [So-]  
 29 IP-n: [Så] skjønner du?  
 30 t.: ([So] du you understand?)  
 31 J *there is nothing I can do then to- find a way to save my life and equally my future.*

Jonah here takes his argumentation one step further: from the generic narrative of Excerpt (5), he now directly involves the interviewer as a representative of the Norwegian culture. In lines 1 and 2, Jonah hopes that “here in Norway”, “you people” have things “you are against of”. And then he turns the interview roles upside down with the rhetorical question in line 12, introduced with a metapragmatic comment (Jacquemet 2011: 477) in line 7: “Now I’m asking question.”

With his general example story and the direct address of the rhetorical question, Jonah tries to put the interviewer in a position where she has to agree with his point of view and admit that he needs protection in Norway. Interactionally, Jonah here enacts a very argumentative and affective voice. The intensity of his argument orients to his positioning as being completely truthful in telling his story of abominable breaches of traditional law and death threats (Blommaert et al. 2006: 54).

In her response in lines 15–22, the interviewer accepts to a certain extent this change of roles. She self-identifies as a Norwegian, talking of laws in Norway and things “we are against”. The exchange in this excerpt is fast-paced with several overlaps, as all three start their turns without waiting for the others to finish. With Jonah’s triumphant response “Yeah!” in line 20, he already claims the analogy as support for his cause – seeing the nature of such unbreakable laws, known to Norwegians as well as Nigerians, there was nothing he could do to save his life except to flee.

However, from the UDI perspective, all this is quite irrelevant to Jonah’s case. The interviewer is there to clarify what happened to Jonah, not assess his argumentative capacities.

The interviewer soon takes up her role as fact finder again, summing up his argument and then exploring the possibility of living in another part of Nigeria, where possibly nobody would know of his transgression. In a striking parallel to

Jonah's former claims of ignorance, he now claims that in his village "everyone knows" of the illicit relationship. This is later expanded to all of Nigeria: he cannot be safe anywhere in the country, only "aside from Nigeria". The idea of concrete threats from specific persons, on grounds of specific religious or cultural views on marriage, completely disappears from Jonah's story world.

## 5.4 Intertextuality and gaps

Is Jonah's story intertextually linked to any "prior discourse" (cf. Section 2)? Relevant texts used by asylum applicants to construct their stories are difficult to get at. However, for Norwegian interviews there is an accessible source: the NOAS counseling which Jonah has had (cf. Section 3.1). The NOAS counseling is generally viewed as useful by their clients (Lauritsen et al. 2005: 15). Their information leaflet correctly states:

You have the right to protection, i.e. asylum, if you are at risk of being killed, tortured or exposed to other serious violation if you return to your homeland. If the authorities in your homeland can protect you, or if there are safe areas for you in your homeland, you will normally not have the right to protection in Norway. (NOAS n.d.)

Jonah knows from this that claiming danger of death is important, and in his main story he insists that he had to flee because "they" wanted to kill him (Excerpt [1], lines 50, 51, 54, 63, 64, 67). His later insistence that he cannot be safe anywhere inside Nigeria may be seen as answering to the proscription of "safe areas." Furthermore, he downplays ethnicity, as the argument of being in danger all over Nigeria will fall apart if the kinship law forbidding marriage is not valid for the whole country.

However, the attempt to link his story to this text severely backfires. Jonah's application was rejected on grounds of being based on what the UDI considers a private conflict with his uncle and other villagers. According to the UDI, Nigerian law can protect him from these people, or he can relocate within Nigeria. Whether Jonah is innocent or not according to local marriage rules is not considered at all; it is seen as quite irrelevant to needing protection.

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

In asylum interviewing, the interaction is shaped by the interplay of the interviewers' expectations of certain stories and the divergent texts produced by the

asylum seekers. Jonah's interview exemplifies conflicting orienting frameworks and complex identity negotiations in interaction. There are large *intertextual gaps* (Briggs and Baumann 1992: 149) between the expected accounts and the actual texts produced.

## 6.1 Questioning and accounts in asylum interviews

The interviewer wants reportable events with relevant details and concrete threats, which she can place neatly on a timeline. She presumably does her best to elicit stories that conform to the specifications of asylum law, but she does not go beyond questioning of concrete details and events. These questions could have helped to make his case better if answered, but she discontinues questioning when Jonah resists responding. She proceeds instead to other questions, following the internal guidelines of the UDI of not pressing reluctant interviewees to talk about sensitive themes. She dutifully goes through the list of things she must clarify, such as the possibility of other safe areas in Nigeria, and what Jonah thinks will happen if he goes back, but she is not able to get beyond his resistance to provide information.

Jonah presumably tells of real events in Nigeria, but in a way that renders them useless as motivations for asylum. The characters of Jonah's story world are described in an off-hand way, where their only role is to explain Jonah's need for flight. The events leading to flight are under-specified; no concrete threats are cited, only the general punishment stemming from traditional regulations of marriage. His hinted connection to the Igbo could possibly help to explain the severity of the situation for him, as they do have such marriage rules, but he does not quite admit to being Igbo. Instead, he generalizes the crime to being a problem all over Nigeria, regardless of ethnicity; therefore he cannot be safe anywhere "inside of Nigeria."

Jonah is in some ways a skilled orator, making use of rhetorical devices such as argumentative "you know"-stories and clear-cut dichotomies. His strategy of pleading innocent because of ignorance may draw on local Nigerian genres of how to defend one's case. In rhetorical counterpoint to his ignorance, he claims that now everyone in the village knows of the illicit kinship between him and the pregnant girl. Throughout the interview, Jonah consistently sticks to his story of why he left to apply for asylum in Norway, the story coming across as carefully constructed to reveal some things and not others. His attempt to assert himself interactionally certainly brings out agency (cf. Section 1.2) and is a way of negotiating identity in its own right, but he is not able to use this in a way that the interviewer can report as grounds for asylum.

The intertextual gaps between the expected accounts of an asylum seeker and Jonah's narratives are too large. In both the narrated and narrating events, he enacts a persona that is not a socially relevant type for this social practice, and so does not succeed in constructing a bona fide identity with his narrative.

## 6.2 Conclusion

European nations have a perceived need to separate “real” refugees from others considered as not truly in need of protection, while adhering to international standards of human rights. Institutional interviews eliciting information in order to treat a case correctly are part and parcel of this practice, thereby causing specific genres and regimes of textuality to emerge. Intermediary bodies such as NOAS in Norway become part of this practice through their counseling activities, not always with happy results for the applicants. A deeper understanding of agency, intertextuality, and genres is especially important when considering cases in which the applicant's chosen story is contested as irrelevant and untrustworthy in the textuality regime of asylum interviewing, as the interview treated in this paper. Narrative analysis deploying an interactional perspective is highly suited to fill such gaps in the institutional and societal knowledge guiding the asylum procedures.

## Appendix: transcription conventions

### *Speaker labels*

J.	Jonah, the interviewee; utterance in <i>italics</i>
IF2-n:	Interviewer speaking Norwegian; utterance in regular
IP-n	Interpreter speaking Norwegian; utterance in regular
IP-e	Interpreter speaking English; utterance in <i>italics</i>
t.	Line translated from Norwegian to English; utterance in regular

### *Other symbols*

\0.4\	measured pause in seconds
.	sentence final intonation
,	sentence continuing intonation
-	self-interruption
:	lengthened syllable
!	animated tone of voice
[ ]	overlapping speech

= latching  
 xx xx unclear segment  
 (laughter) comments on voice quality, sounds, laughter, etc.

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## Bionote

*Bjørghild Kjelsvik* holds a PhD in linguistics on communities of practice and learning interaction in Cameroon (2008, University of Oslo). She had a postdoctoral fellowship in a project investigating identity in migrant narratives in 2009–2012. Her research interests include: oral narrative analysis, genres, intertextuality, discourse analysis, and cognitive linguistics. Current occupation is revising a Norwegian dictionary. Address for correspondence: Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies, B.P. 1102 Blindern, 0317 Oslo, Norway <bjorghild.kjelsvik@iln.uio.no>.

