

# A critical examination of the use of language analysis interviews in asylum proceedings: a case study of a West African seeking asylum in the Netherlands

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**ABSTRACT** This article presents an argument against the use of language analysis interviews in asylum proceedings whenever the case involves questions of dialect, sociolect, closely related languages or distinguishing between languages which are both used in the applicant's claimed speech community. I examine a language analysis interview's interactional constraints and the asylum seeker's response to these constraints. I argue the asylum seeker misreads them as an indication he is participating in a gatekeeping type of interview. Through an examination of the anti-immigrant sentiments in Rotterdam and the defining cultural categories of creole identity in Sierra Leone, I attempt to make sense of his interpretations and subsequent linguistic choices. This exposition is presented as an example of how an asylum seeker's actively constructed response poses problems for the reliability of linguistic identification.

**KEYWORDS** asylum seeker, gatekeeping interview, Sierra Leone Krio, Dutch immigration, sociolinguistics

## INTRODUCTION

This article presents an argument against the use of language analysis interviews in asylum proceedings whenever the case involves questions of dialect, sociolect, closely related languages or distinguishing between languages which are both used in the applicant's claimed speech community.<sup>1</sup> The data presented are taken from a language analysis interview conducted by the Department of Immigration and Naturalization of the Netherlands, *Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst* (IND), as part of verifying the claims of a West African man seeking asylum as a Sierra Leonean. Language analysis interviews were instituted by the IND in order to cope with an increasing number of asylum applicants who did not possess the appropriate documents for their claims. The interviews are conducted by a Dutch official representing the IND. There is usually also a translator. The interview is recorded and sent to a small administrative office within the IND called the Language Analysis Bureau, *Bureau Taalanalyse* (hereafter referred to as 'the Bureau'). This office coordinates contracts with individuals who are native speakers of the language or languages involved in the interview. These analysts – as they are called by the Bureau – listen to the recordings and produce reports indicating whether the applicant is who he/she claims to be. When report conclusions are negative, the report

usually contains a list of words that are not pronounced in the way the analyst expects, followed by a list of vocabulary items that are presented as inconsistent with the applicant's claims, a list of expressions that are not expected, and a list of sentences illustrating grammatical inconsistencies. In each subsection between five and fifteen examples are presented, producing a report of usually two to three pages. None of the Sierra Leoneans who have had contracts with the Bureau are linguists. The hiring criteria of the Bureau privileges native-speaker status over linguistic training (personal communication, Bureau Taalanalyse) (for more details see Arends 2003, Eades and Arends, this issue, and Eades *et al.* 2003).

In this article I present the data from a particular case as evidence for my claims that the multifunctionality of language use often renders identification unreliable. The existence of language analysis reports is testament to the indexical correlation between linguistic differentiation and social differentiation because it is, after all, a lining-up of linguistic facts with sociopolitical ones. The establishment of these correspondences represents the greater part of sociolinguistic work, for instance in the classic study by Labov (1972). Since language is used for, among other things, indexing socioeconomic status or group membership and has the potential capacity to confer such status or membership, language use does not simply represent the instantiation of culturally defined categories. Language use involves the enlistment of cultural categories to particular ends, though with varying degrees of success. In Gal's (1989) critical review of the literature on language and political economy, she notes that 'because language is irreducibly multifunctional, with many kinds of (Peircian) sign relations, it can be seen as denotational, indexical of social structure, and simultaneously as constitutive of it' (p. 347). In the microcontextual realm, this can be described as the dialectic indexical nature of each sign token (sinsign) which can be said to simultaneously presuppose and entail – presuppose as pointing to the presumed appropriateness of use in context and entail as engaging those presuppositions in order to produce future presuppositions which may be then drawn upon in subsequent moments (Silverstein 2003: 193–4; also see Silverstein 1976). It is not just that languages change or indexical correspondences shift, it is that saying something is doing something. As with Austin's articulation of these observations into a description of locutionary and illocutionary acts, the illocutionary force is a direct result of the way in which denotational text is culturally sanctioned (deemed felicitous) for accomplishing certain doings on the interactional plane. Ultimately the problem for linguistic identification is rooted in the entailing potential of language use.

I present a description of the interview construction by IND officials, reviewing their use of particular constraints in the design of the interview. I then present an analysis of the asylum seeker's response to their constraints. What I present is an initial analysis of the interview, but I hope to

present enough of the interview to show that immigration officials are not able to so constrain the interaction that the asylum seeker produces only the sort of data required for the reliable identification of origins.

### THE LANGUAGE ANALYSIS INTERVIEW

In cases where the Bureau produces a negative report, the asylum seeker is allowed to find an expert to produce what the Bureau calls a contra-analysis. This consists of a review of the same recorded interview and also sometimes involves the more direct refutation of the language analysis report produced by the Bureau when that is made available to the expert. In the case I discuss, two 40-minute language analysis interviews were conducted on two separate occasions. The Bureau produced a negative report for each interview, and I in turn filed two contra-analyses in favour of the asylum seeker. They also produced a response to each of my contra-analysis reports, and I also produced two replies to their responses. I also had some correspondence initiated by the Bureau regarding this particular case. In addition to audio recordings of the interviews, I had the benefit of a lengthy correspondence via email and fax with the lawyer regarding details of the asylum seeker as well as an hour-long telephone conversation with him after the two reports had been produced. The Bureau did not have access to those exchanges, of course; however, the asylum seeker's lawyer did have access to my correspondence with the Bureau. The data presented in this article is from the first of the two language analysis interviews.

Any interview situation necessarily involves a power asymmetry since the genre is more or less defined by the roles of interviewer and interviewee. As Akinnaso and Ajrotutu (1982: 121) point out in their study of job interview environments, 'Perhaps the interviewer's greatest weapon is the legitimate responsibility for asking questions designed to elicit responses by which the interviewee will be evaluated.' The interview I discuss has an elaborate set of constraints which locate as much control in the interaction as possible with the interviewers. The Bureau has never explicitly acknowledged the problems posed by the potentially entailing or creative function of language use. However, I suspect their multiple controls are an attempt to constrain the interviewee's production so as to somehow strip away the interactional functions – a way to focus exclusively on the denotational code.<sup>2</sup>

The interview I discuss was conducted in Dutch and English with an IND official, a translator and the asylum seeker. Some time prior to the interview, the asylum seeker indicated that he spoke English, so he was provided with a translator who is Dutch and translates the Dutch of the IND official into English. Aside from one-word confirmatory questions, in the whole of the 40-minute interview, the asylum seeker is the initiator in only one exchange. The exchange involves a failed attempt on his part to

initiate a conversation about his reasons for seeking asylum just before the recording stops. In the discussion that follows I have identified the IND official who conducts the interview in Dutch as IND. I refer to the translator as Ms A and the asylum seeker as Mr B, as representative of their canonical positions in the pair-part structure.

The IND official opens the proceedings and closes them. She controls the topic and the topic shifts. The topic shifts nearly every three minutes for the entire length of the 40-minute interview.<sup>3</sup> The list below is a rough description of each subset of questions asked in the interview.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 introduction
- 2 asked to count, list kinship terms, days of the week, colours and animals in the languages he speaks other than English
- 3 asked to respond in Krio to questions about where he lived in Sierra Leone
- 4 asked about the centre he currently lives in
- 5 asked to compare his kitchen in the Netherlands with his kitchen in Sierra Leone
- 6 asked to list the names of towns near his home town in Sierra Leone
- 7 asked to name rivers and mountains in Sierra Leone
- 8 asked about tribal affiliations
- 9 asked to list traditional holidays in Krio
- 10 asked to explain in Krio the customs surrounding birth, marriage and death
- 11 asked about religion, holidays, clothes, hobbies and musical instruments
- 12 asked about work, farming, fishing and hunting
- 13 asked to give a tour of significant places in Sierra Leone
- 14 asked to name modes of transport available in Sierra Leone
- 15 asked about his impressions of the Netherlands

The sort of answers elicited alternate between one-word answers and lengthier descriptions at each topic shift. In this way the official's control is realized in shifting the content as well as the form. For example, from lines 197–244,<sup>5</sup> Mr B is asked to describe the location of his home town. From lines 243–78, he is asked to name rivers and mountains. Line 279 is: 'Do you belong to any certain tribe or ethnic group?', with no transitions from the quizzing section on mountains and rivers to this new line of questioning about tribal affiliation.

In addition to the control asserted through these rapid topic shifts there is a global topic constraint placed on the interview. Mr B is not allowed to talk about his reasons for seeking asylum. He is charged with making a case for himself but he is not allowed to use the content of his responses. This is Ms A's formulation of the IND official's instructions given at the beginning of the interview:

Now she would ask you please very emphatically not to mention your name and in this discussion this talk she's not going to ask you anything at all about your motives for applying for asylum. So she's not going to ask you at all about your problems or about the route that you followed to come here. And she's not going to ask you your name. So please she's asking you very emphatically not to talk to talk about these things. (lines 36–43)

The turn-taking and topic control exercised by the IND official is also reinforced by the translator's presence. Although she is introduced to the interaction as a translator, ultimately she occupies a role more like that of co-interviewer. This functions to further shift control away from Mr B. He is outnumbered.

First, Ms A's presence means there are two people in the interview room representing Dutch officialdom. Second, the asymmetry is inscribed in the pair-part structure with respect to the contribution of back-channel messages<sup>6</sup> and the structure of turn-taking. Although the IND official frequently produces back-channel messages in response to Mr B, Ms A produces back-channel messages of 'mm-hm' and 'uh-huh' at the end of nearly every one of his clauses. Although Ms A addresses Mr B saying, 'All I do is just to translate what she says to you and the answers you give' (line 34), it becomes immediately clear that the IND official understands English. And, in fact, Mr B's responses are *never* translated back into Dutch. Apparently Mr B's English is intelligible and his Krio so sufficiently English-like that there are only two instances in the entire 40-minute interview which require clarification. In the first instance, Ms A explains to the IND official that Mr B is not talking about Gambia the country, but that he is referring to Kambia, a district of Sierra Leone (line 237). In the second, Mr B says 'kunu', a pronunciation of 'canoe' specific to Sierra Leone. Even as Ms A explains in Dutch, Mr B simultaneously responds to the IND official's confusion, explaining that he is talking about a small boat made of wood (line 789). Because Mr B's responses are not ever translated back into Dutch, the structure of turn-taking is lopsided. The interview progresses with an  $A_1A_2B A_1A_2B$  pattern where the IND official can be considered  $A_1$  and the translator as  $A_2$ .

Third, Ms A often locates the deictic ground of her utterances with herself rather than the IND official she is translating. In the passage quoted

above (lines 36–43), she does not give a direct translation. She uses ‘now she would ask you’, ‘she’s not going to ask you’ and ‘she’s asking you very emphatically’. The first time Mr B is addressed directly, Ms A says:

Now she has this interpreter present and you.

Which other languages do you speak other than English? (lines 5–6)

In this example, she shifts her deictic ground in mid-sentence, saying ‘this interpreter’, referring to herself. She refers to her function as interpreter, while at the same time enacting it by shifting the point of deictic calibration to the IND official. There are times when she translates maintaining the deictic ground of the IND official. But, through her reporting, she also locates the deictic ground with herself. She uses some variation of ‘now, she’s asking you ...’ six times (lines 14, 51, 66, 69, 341, 483); ‘she means ...’ three times (lines 311, 507, 569); and ‘she’s saying ...’ once (line 853). Although she uses these embedded forms, her reporting is still consistent with her role as animator and not author or principal, to use Goffman’s terms (1974: 517–76, 1981: 144–5).

Fourth, however, there are moments where, despite her translator status, she is both animator and principal. On four occasions, Ms A generates questions of her own: the IND official announces a topic shift and offers potential questions in Dutch, leaving Ms A to formulate the appropriate questions to introduce the topic as well as formulate her own follow-up questions in English. More frequently, as the interview progresses, she occupies the role of animator and principal at the same time. All of these moves accumulate as the interview continues, having the effect of not so much constructing Ms A as a full participant, but more like the emergence or revealing of a status already conferred: as if to say, Ms A was an IND authorized interviewer all along.

We have seen the extent of the power asymmetries that structure this interview. Mr B is never the initiator in any exchange, the interviewer alternates between eliciting one-word answers and longer passages while steadily shifting the topic, and Mr B is prohibited from discussing the details of his case. Although the roles of interviewer and interviewee involve a power asymmetry, in this case, the asymmetry is made greater by the presence and contributions of Ms A. The asymmetry is greater particularly since Ms A’s role as co-interviewer is not clear at the outset of the interview.<sup>7</sup> Presumably the goal of the IND is to be able to present denotational tokens that can be objectively evaluated by the language analysts. Unfortunately the constraints placed on Mr B’s contribution do not inhibit the multifunctional use of language. In the next section I present the outlines of Mr B’s actively constructed response to the constraints of his asylum-seeker status and position within the interview (after Gal 1987: 650). It is Mr B’s actively constructed response – his attempts to engage the entailing potential of language use – which poses a

problem for reliable linguistic identification. To the extent that he is able, I argue that Mr B uses the interview to align himself with what he perceives is the world-view of his interviewers. He tries desperately to index his status as a ratified resident of the greater Western world in an attempt to make it so.

### MR B'S RESPONSE

Mr B marshals the full breadth of his linguistic repertoire and experience with Western institutional genres (Gumperz 1964: 137–8). Mr B forms some hypothesis about the sort of interview he is participating in as part of his ongoing struggle to make sense of the interview and attempt to participate successfully. In other words, there is some metapragmatic function against which his responses are calibrated in his formation and interpretation of what he takes to be a non-incoherent interaction (Silverstein 1993: 36–7). (It is the mutual understanding of these interviews as genred discourse that in part lends authority to the proceedings.)<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, I believe Mr B interprets the extensive constraints of the language analysis interview as an indication that he is participating in the sort of gatekeeping interview discussed in the sociolinguistics literature by Chew (1994), Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (2002), Gumperz (1982b) and Trinch (2001), among others. In Irvine's (1998: 269) discussion of verbal skills as economic resources she points out that the sort of gatekeeping interviews discussed by Gumperz (1982b) are often designed to exclude candidates who do not possess a certain set of verbal skills: 'even where verbal skills are not crucial to the performance of some particular social role they may be crucial to gaining access to it'. Mr B is told, 'this language analyst will listen to the recording of your language and they will come to a decision about you' (lines 28–9). Like other gatekeeping interviews such as job interviews, academic admissions interviews and oral examinations, Mr B hypothesizes that he is meant to demonstrate his verbal and social fitness for the task at hand – in this case successful integration into the Dutch socioeconomic system. The interview is functionally part of a larger gatekeeping process: his case is being examined in order to determine to what extent he shall have legal access to state benefits, whether or not he will be allowed to 'pass through the gate', so to speak. Mr B wants to demonstrate that he knows how to conduct himself in a Western institutional setting, envisioning his entry into the interview as a diagrammatic icon of his potential entry into full-resident status in the Netherlands. This interpretation is understandable when we consider Mr B's position in the Netherlands as an asylum seeker and Mr B's position in Sierra Leone as a creole man.

#### *Mr B's position as an asylum seeker*

Mr B's interview was held in Rotterdam, the home of the late Pim Fortuyn and the anti-immigrant sentiments that made him popular. Fortuyn's anti-

immigrant message addressed what he saw as the threat to the liberal state owing to an influx of fundamentalist Muslims and others who militantly oppose progressive Dutch social institutions. In a BBC news interview held in May 2002, Fortuyn is quoted as saying, 'What we are witnessing now is a clash of civilisations, not just between states but within them' (Lang 2002). In my telephone conversation with Mr B, he reported that he had regular access to BBC news in English on the television in his housing complex. We never discussed Fortuyn directly, but Mr B did talk to me about having seen BBC reports on Sierra Leone and also what he felt their impact was on public sentiments in the Netherlands. So it is reasonable to suppose that Mr B was aware of the particular fears articulated in the Pim Fortuyn movement. It would make some sense that Mr B perceives his future access as dependent in part upon a set of English verbal skills (since he does not yet speak Dutch) and a Western orientation in order to distinguish himself from those foreigners who hail from 'backward cultures' (Fortuyn, quoted in Murphy 2002).

*Mr B's position as a creole man*

Mr B identifies himself as a creole man from Sierra Leone. I am not able to give a thorough presentation of the relevant Sierra Leonean social categories, but for our purposes it is important to note the distinction drawn in Sierra Leone between the Western Area and the rest of the country. The Western Area is the peninsula in which Freetown, the capital, is located and was the site of the original British colony. The rest of the country got its current borders when it was declared a protectorate by the British.

The settlement which later became Freetown and the Sierra Leone colony was first established in 1787 by freedmen coming from London known as the Black Poor (Asiegbu 1969: 2, Peterson 1969: 18). The colony population was bolstered by the arrival of the Nova Scotians and Jamaican Maroons who settled in the colony as the result of agreements and treaties held with the British (Peterson 1969: 28, 34, Fyfe 1962: 31–70, 79–81, Campbell 1993). Radical growth in the colony's population resulted from the British abolition of the slave trade in 1808. Royal Navy patrol ships working off the coast of West Africa landed illegal slave ships in the colony (Curtin and Vansina 1964: 186). Between 1808 and 1861, an estimated 94 300 slaves were liberated over this 53-year period (Asiegbu 1969: 191–214; see also Curtin 1975: 244 and Wyse 1989: 2 for somewhat lower estimates). At mid-century more than 100 different languages were being spoken in a colony that was just over 250 square miles. This linguistic diversity is what inspired Koelle to produce the *Polyglotta Africana* (1854), a comparative work on 100 African languages based on interviews he conducted in Freetown. The lingua franca during this period was Krio and as the descendants of settlers and recaptives became known as creoles, Krio became identified as their native language.<sup>9</sup>

The distinction between the Western Area and up-country parallels a distinction between creoles and ‘natives’ – ‘natives’ being the disparaging term for the descendants of the people who were living there before the colony was founded. In an article on the politicization of ethnic identities in Sierra Leone, Kandeh (1992: 83, 97) spells out the importance of these distinctions:

The distinction between creoles or nonnatives and natives (all the ethnic groups of the former protectorate of Sierra Leone) survives to this day ... Although most northern minorities were able to preserve the peculiarities of their respective cultures, the politicization of cultural identities was at first determined largely by the colony–protectorate cleavage.

Although the colony and protectorate continued to be governed separately until 1924, thus maintaining a colonial institutional distinction between creoles and natives, increasingly the distinction was marked by a ‘creole manner’, a Western orientation. As Spitzer (1975: 12–13) says, ‘an up-country man [or ‘native’] could “pass for creole” if he sacrificed his ethnic identity and was willing to dress in European style, adopt a creole name – that is, a European name – and cultivate certain Anglicized social manners’. Natives were described as displaying their nakedness in Freetown (Kandeh 1992: 85) and creoles as belonging to the ‘religion of the Frock Coat and Tall Hat’ (*Sierra Leone Weekly News*, 10 August 1907, cited in Spitzer 1975: 117). Creoles were either Christian or Muslim, but the natives were called the ‘unto whom’, from the biblical quotation ‘unto whom I swear in my wrath that they shall never enter into my rest’ (Porter 1960: 176; also see Spitzer 1975: 76).

### MR B’S CULTURAL CREOLENESS

Although the creole/native distinction is a salient one among Sierra Leoneans, for creoles there has always been some amount of anxiety regarding their position in this distinction because historically Europeans did not necessarily distinguish between creoles and other Sierra Leoneans in this way. As Fyfe (1962: 455) says in a discussion of this divide within the British colonial context, ‘Few creoles felt sympathy for the “aborigines,” the “natives,” words normally used in a slighting, patronizing sense (though to Europeans creoles were “natives”).’ Thus Ms A’s incredulous response to Mr B’s answer that he does not belong to a tribe (lines 281–7). (In the lines that follow, <> encloses descriptive information and [] indicates overlap between speakers):

Ms A:	Do you belong to any certain tribe or ethnic group?
Mr B:	No
IND:	Nee?

- Ms A: You don't belong to a tribe?  
 Mr B: I don't understand.  
 Ms A: Tribe <louder, some irritation>  
 Ethnic group  
 You say [you  
 Mr B: [Oh, me na<sup>10</sup> Krio man  
 'Oh, I am a creole man'<sup>11</sup>

That the Dutch officials in the interview are unfamiliar with the distinction is understandable. But the fact that they are unaware would have likely fuelled Mr B's anxiety about not being distinguished from the 'natives'.<sup>12</sup> This response is consistent with his replies to questions regarding the customs of 'his people'. When he is asked three times for more details about how naming ceremonies are conducted in Sierra Leone, he replies good-naturedly *He, den de<sup>13</sup> nem di chayld* (line 356; 'Hey, they name the child'). His description of marriage rituals and funerals is also unremarkable with respect to Western customs. When asked about Sierra Leonean clothing, Mr B replies that they wear clothes like the clothes he is wearing (line 505). Ms A responds, 'now, what she means is traditional for Sierra Leone/typical dress/traditional' (lines 506–7). Mr B will not report the use of exotic rituals despite his interviewers' efforts to elicit information on customs that would be regarded as peculiar to Sierra Leone. The interviewers understandably press Mr B for these peculiarities because they know how the interview is to be used as evidence – the more bits of information or pronunciations that would be unique to Sierra Leone, the better for Mr B. However, Mr B likely perceives the peculiarities they are looking for as indexing the sort of 'backward' native described by Pim Fortuyn.

When the topic of the interview is not one politically charged in the either anti-immigration discourse of the Netherlands or in Sierra Leone, Mr B consistently uses 'we' to refer to himself and Sierra Leoneans. For example:

- wi de kəl di sməl wan bot<sup>14</sup>  
 'We call the small one 'boat'. (line 134)  
 wi de uz pət tu kuk  
 'We use pots to cook.' (line 193)  
 wi get maunten kət na fritən  
 'We have Mountain Cut in Freetown.' (line 259)<sup>15</sup>  
 wi get di riva rokel  
 'We have the Rokel River.' (line 265)  
 wi get bintumani mawnten  
 'We have Bintumani Mountain.' (line 271)

However, when the topic involves a site of the Sierra Leonean creole/native divide, and Ms A uses the generic form of the verb asking after those timeless tribal affiliations or rituals, Mr B takes up her use of the generic, but he doesn't use 'we,' he uses 'they' or the Krio equivalent *dɛn*:

dɛn get sɔm traybs dɛm layk di fula, di soso, di mendes, di timinis, di mandingos

'They have some tribes like the Fula, the Soso, the Mendes, the Temnes, the Mandingos.' (line 299)

laykɛ di ɔjɛ sosayɛti dɛn get drɔm dɛm plɛ

'Like the Oje society, they have drums they play.' (line 561)

dɛn de du ɔl kaynd ɔv dans

'They do all kinds of dances.' (line 320)

The Ojeh society is a Krio institution, but no thoroughly middle-class Krio would be caught dead drumming in the streets. Mr B may not economically count as middle class, but this is the particular sort of persona he is trying to project – one that distances himself from a kind of European stereotype of the ever dancing and drumming native.

#### *Mr B's linguistic creoleness*

In line with Mr B's Western orientation, he establishes that he speaks English and that Krio is a kind of English. At some time prior to the interview Mr B indicated that he speaks English. We understand this at the very beginning of the interview because Ms A says, 'Now she has this interpreter present and you. Which other languages do you speak other than English?' (lines 5–6). First, we can see Ms A addresses him in English. Second, her question presupposes that he speaks English. Third, she has indicated that she is the interpreter/translator who is presumably there on his behalf. The IND official speaks English, so the translator has been called for the purpose of translating the Dutch questions into English. Fourth, neither Ms A nor the IND official speaks Krio or Hausa. So at the outset of the interview, Mr B would seem to have successfully located his English speaking as mutually presupposed by everyone present. The Krio tokens and passages are elicited, but Dutch and English are the framing languages throughout. That the IND official obviously understands English serves to reinforce Mr B's sense of the appropriateness of this international language with all its institutional trappings for this interview, even though it is being conducted in the Netherlands by Dutch government officials.

Like most less-educated English speakers, Mr B exhibits some anxiety regarding his pronunciation and, as the interview progresses, there is evidence of his deferring to the English translator. Although Ms A is Dutch

and presumably not a native speaker of English, she is a professional speaker of English and serves in that capacity in the interview. The instances of accommodation evident in the interview involve an alternation between pronunciations that are both part of a Sierra Leonean Krio speaker's repertoire. One is associated with more local basilectal Krio forms and the other is considered acrolectal or as approximating standard English. For example, the first time he pronounces 'Freetown' and 'rice', it is: [fritɔŋ] and [rɛs]. He later shifts to [fritawn] and [rays].

Mr B uses [fritɔŋ] when he presents the name of his own accord (line 212). When Ms A asks the following question using the more standard English pronunciation of Freetown [fritawn], then he responds using a pronunciation that most approximates hers.

Ms A: Now how far away was your town from your place where you lived from Freetown [fritawn]? Have you ever been there? And how did you get there?

Mr B: We go na Freetown [fritawn] with boat.  
'We went to Freetown by boat.' (lines 228–30)

Later in the interview when he does not have Ms A's pronunciation as a model, he shifts to [fritɔŋ] (lines 259, 260, 618) (Ms A uses her pronunciation [fritawn] in line 273 some time after and before Mr B's tokens). Once, again, however, when Mr B uses the name directly after Ms A, he approximates her pronunciation (lines 536–7). (The asterisk in the lines that follow indicate a false start):

Ms A: Now you that\* you sometimes went to Freetown[fritawn].

Mr B: I go na\* to [fritaun] two time.  
'I went to Freetown twice.'

In this instance, Mr B pronounces 'town' as two vowels rather than a diphthong as perhaps a hypercorrect pronunciation to differentiate from the more basilectal [tɔŋ]. Note also that he has a moment of self-correction where he shifts in the actual line from the locative preposition, *na*, to the standard English equivalent *to*.

When he lists what he grows on his farm, he says [rɛs] 'rice' (line 595). However, when Ms A asks him about 'rice' using the word four times in the same question, he continues through the rest of this line of questioning with [rays] (lines 621–48). Any speaker of Krio commands both of these pronunciations, but, as one would expect, the [rays] pronunciation is identified as the more acrolectal option, that is the more English-like one. On more than one occasion during my fieldwork in Sierra Leone, I was witness to mothers reprimanding their children for saying [rɛs] instead of [rays] in my presence. Krio is seen as an uneducated variety associated

with the home and private life. What is called English is the standard. It is appropriate for public spaces and is associated with education and power on the national scene:

[Language] was an expression which pointed to the level of culture attained. Therefore, like Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* who could not really become a lady until she shed her Cockney accent, many Creoles felt that they would not be accepted as ‘truly civilized’ if they went about speaking Krio to anyone but intimate friends and members of the family. (Spitzer 1966: 41)

Although these conventionalized associations of Krio and English exist, that is not to say that Sierra Leoneans only speak Krio at home or only speak English in public. Of course these matters are complicated. There have been Krio literary movements that valorized the use of Krio in public spheres. However, Blom and Gumperz (1972) provide a helpful way of understanding some portion of the distribution. In their study of code-switching between the Ranamål and Bokmål varieties of Norwegian, they identified both situational switching and metaphorical switching. Situational switching is their term for a change of context which is accompanied by a change in dialect. But they also identify what they term ‘metaphorical switching’ in which one may exploit the associations between linguistic codes and cultural categories in order to create a particular effect. For example, the use of Ranamål (dialect) instead of Bokmål (standard) in a context such as a government office where Bokmål is the associated variety may be used to generate confidentiality or to mark more private talk (p. 425). As we have seen in the asylum-seeker interview, Mr B consistently shifts his pronunciations to be in line with Ms A’s. Mr B’s accommodations in pronunciation are matters of metaphorical switching. They represent his attempts to exploit the sociopolitical associations that are mapped on to the Krio/English distinction to a particular end.

Consistent with a goal to represent himself as a competent English speaker, he also represents himself as a member of the international English linguistic community. At the beginning of the interview Mr B says explicitly that Krio is bad English (lines 51–61):

Ms A: O.K. now she’s asking if you can count from one to twenty in the Krio language please.

Mr B: Krio?

Ms A: Yes.

Mr B: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten,

Ms A: Go on.

Mr B: eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty

- IND: Is that the same as English?!<sup>16</sup>  
Mr B: Yah, Krio is bad English.  
Ms A: And can you count in the Hausa language or is that the same?  
Mr B: No  
dia, bio, oko, hodo ...

In this last passage, Mr B has not only established a link between Krio and English but also his membership in an English linguistic community through his identification of Krio as bad English. Silverstein (1998a: 284) defines linguistic community in this sense as contrasted with speech community:

A linguistic community, such as the kind we refer to as a culture of standardization, is a group of people who, in their implicit sense of the regularities of linguistic usage, are united in adherence to the idea that there exists a functionally differentiated norm of using their 'language' denotatively (to represent or describe things), the inclusive range of which the best language users are believed to have mastered in the appropriate way.

By identifying Krio as bad English, Mr B acknowledges his perception that there is a standard or some more 'correct' way to speak English. Given the hegemony of standard within the English linguistic community, it is quite understandable that presented with a notion that his language is to be examined, he would be inclined to use a register of Krio that in the Sierra Leonean context indexes proper English or English appropriate to institutional settings, and would do what he could to approximate the English being spoken to him.

In the following excerpt, Mr B is asked to give the names of colours in Krio. The IND official and Ms A are attempting to elicit the kind of uniquely Sierra Leonean tokens they know the language analysts want. But Mr B's response is to set up equivalencies between English and Krio words. Responding to the interviewer's request for a gloss, he says in essence there is no gloss. They are the same:

- Mr B: The colors?  
Green na green, white, black  
'Green is green, white, black'  
Ms A: So it's just the same as English? (lines 119–27)

A few lines later Ms A asks:

- Ms A:       What is sheep? sheep?  
 Mr B:       Ship na ship. The big one na ship  
               ‘Ship is ship. The big one is ship’  
 Ms A:       Yah  
 Mr B:       Sometime we de call the small one boat.  
               ‘Sometimes we call the small one boat.’  
 IND:       Nee, nee, nee.  
 Ms A:       oh bah bah <sheep sound, little laugh>  
               the animal  
 Mr B:       Na sheep <hearty release; his hands audibly hit his lap>  
               ‘It’s sheep.’ (lines 130–6)

Although in these passages Mr B uses the Krio copula *na* as in ‘green na green’ and ‘ship na ship’, and *de* in this case marking the generic in ‘we de call the small one boat’, neither of the Dutch officials nor Mr B calls attention to the use of these Krio grammatical words. Although Krio words are being elicited, the framing language of Mr B’s responses is understood as English.

## CONCLUSION

The Dutch immigration service set up a series of control mechanisms for the language analysis interview. They attempted to constrain the asylum seeker’s production by choosing the venue and topics, eliciting particular forms of answers and disallowing him from discussing his reasons for seeking asylum. The IND officials were hoping to elicit the most exotic and peculiar facts of Sierra Leonean customs and linguistic tokens in order to verify Mr B’s claims of Sierra Leonean origins. I have argued that the asylum seeker misreads these controls as an indication he was participating in a gatekeeping interview. We are able to make sense of his linguistic choices when we consider the anti-immigrant sentiments in Rotterdam, defining cultural categories of creole identity in Sierra Leone, and the very tidy way in which the oppositions in both places fit together. Pim Fortuyn’s categorizations line up Westerners with progressive society and radical Muslims (and non-European foreigners in general) with backwardness. We have seen that in Sierra Leone there are distinctions between colony and protectorate that line up with creole and native and with civilized and the ‘unto whom’. Having seen something of the way in which the Sierra Leonean sociopolitical categories correspond to linguistic ones, we begin to see how Mr B engages these categories in his attempt to locate himself on the creole/Westernized/civilized end of the divide. He does not belong to a tribe, wears Western clothing, and does not engage in any exotic rituals. On the linguistic side, he shifts his pronunciations to

approximate the more standard pronunciations of the translator. We know from the recording that he is not fully competent in Standard English. Even when he is not being asked to speak Krio, he uses the copula, *na* (lines 120, 131), *na* as a locative preposition (lines 230, 259), the durative marker, *de* (lines 134, 193, 320), *den* 'them' as a plural marker (line 299), and *den* 'them' as the first-person plural subject pronoun (lines 299, 320, 356, 561). However, his translator only speaks Dutch and English, he communicates successfully throughout the interview, and neither the official nor the translator seem to notice these non-standard indiscretions. Through the course of the interview, then, Mr B has successfully relocated his assertion of being an English speaker to that of a presupposition held by the IND official and the translator. He has ascended to the position of English speaker. This status is not a given, but all three participants have made it so in the course of the real-time interaction. That this occurs is directly related to Mr B's deployment of particular linguistic indexes; however, ultimately the success depends on the uptake of his interlocutors and in this case the Bureau's Sierra Leonean report writers. Unfortunately, his success does not turn out to be an advantage. Cited as a significant fact against him is that he probably learned to speak English at a very early age, and this would be inconsistent with his claims of being a poor Krio farmer.

Asylum seekers should have linguistic experts available for producing positive linguistic evidence for their claims, but because code switching is capable of being entailing as much as it is presupposing, we won't know necessarily how cultural categories are going to be exploited. This means there is not any good way to make these linguistic identifications as reliable as we need them to be. What we say is not simply an instantiation of our origins or even of our socialization. It is an instantiation of our engagement of the cultural categories of our socialization. 'Blom and Gumperz (1972) discovered (to variationists' methodological chagrin) that as an indexical phenomenon, "code switching" in such circumstances is as frequently context-entailing or performative (their term is "metaphorical switching") as it is context-presupposing or expectable from other, verifiable circumstances (their term is "contextual switching")' (Silverstein 1998b: 413). As long as a case involves questions of code switching, the entailing potential is unavoidable. There is never going to be a list of diagnostic linguistic features that is exhaustive enough for identifying asylum-seeker origins because these features are deployed in creative ways, not simply in context-presupposing ones.

## NOTES

- 1 I am so explicit about the cases in question because I do not wish to exclude the use of linguistic expertise in situations where the distance between the language spoken and the language claimed to be spoken is great enough to render my objections inconsequential. I was involved in a case in which an applicant claimed to speak Dinka in an interview, but he instead spoke Yoruba. When he was asked to produce a short narrative regarding his origins, he did so in Yoruba and listed the Yoruba towns of southwestern Nigeria in which he had lived. Yoruba and Dinka are not closely related, if at all, and there is no history linking these language communities that would contribute to identifying a Yoruba speaker with a Dinka speaker or vice versa. That being the case, there is no reason immigration officials should not have access to this sort of information while making their decision. But asylum seekers rarely present linguists with such easy choices, as we shall see in the case I discuss.
- 2 To be fair this is in essence what happens in the Dinka/Yoruba case I mentioned in note 1. In that case the relevant differences concern comparing only denotational codes.
- 3 See Covelli and Murray (1980) on topic control by interviewers and Hymes and Cazden (1980), Mehan (1979) and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) for topic control in the classroom. For a critical review on of the use of interviews in social science research, see Briggs (2002).
- 4 In my experience different combinations of these sets of questions are common in language analysis interviews. My experience includes having produced 15 reports for the German immigration service, *Bundesamt für die Anerkennung ausländischen Flüchtlinge*, in 1999–2000 and having participated to varying degrees in 23 contra-analyses in cases involving West African asylum seekers in the Netherlands from 2001 to 2003.
- 5 These are line numbers from my own transcription which are included to give some indication of relative sequence. I use a return to indicate the end of an intonational unit, so turns often consist of more than one line. There are a total of 865 lines.
- 6 See Yngve (1970) for the introduction of the term back-channel to discussions of discourse.
- 7 Morris (1999) discusses the conflicting role expectations placed on court interpreters. She describes how defendants with a linguistic disadvantage often view the interpreter as a ‘linguistic and psychological haven’. So in addition to Ms A’s contributing to Mr B’s lack of control within the interview, her role as co-interviewer means he is bereft of any of the support that is sometimes associated with a translator’s role.
- 8 See Briggs and Bauman (1992), Hanks (1987) and Muana (1998) for

- further discussion of metapragmatic calibration as it relates specifically to genre.
- 9 'Krio' is the spelling in the phonemically based orthography adopted in the Krio–English Dictionary (Fyle and Jones 1980) and the official orthography adopted for Sierra Leonean languages (Coomber 1992:16). Some scholars reserve 'Krio' for the name of the language and 'creole' for the people (Spitzer 1966, 1975). Wyse (1989: 6), however, uses 'Krio' for both. The etymon of Krio is contested with one group suggesting it is from the Yoruba *kiri yo* 'walk about and be satisfied' said of people visiting after church on Sunday rather than 'creole'. For disputes on the use of 'creole' and the origins of 'Krio,' see Allsopp (1994), Fyfe (1980), Fyle & Jones (1980), Hancock (1993, 1995), Skinner & Harrell-Bond (1977) and Wyse (1979).
  - 10 *Na* is the Krio copula, as it is in Nigerian Pidgin English, Cameroon Pidgin English and Sranan, which is relevant in the context of these interviews since *na*'s use is not limited to Sierra Leone.
  - 11 In this excerpt, I use an English spelling rather than a Krio one because everyone present seems to regard what the IND official is speaking as Dutch and what both Ms A and Mr B are speaking as English despite his use of *na*.
  - 12 Of course, certainly non-creole Sierra Leoneans would have problems with the sort of characterizations of 'natives' implied by the interview questions as well. But their issues would be somewhat different owing to a different historical relationship with creoles and colonials.
  - 13 *de* is a durative marker in this case used to mark the generic. As noted of *na* in note 10, this is a feature shared by a number of other pidgins and creoles; in this case including Nigerian Pidgin English, Ghanaian Pidgin English and Cameroon Pidgin English, as well as a number of English creoles spoken in the Caribbean.
  - 14 In these examples, I present a transcription of Mr. B's pronunciation, so some of these words deviate slightly from their orthographic representations in the Krio-English Dictionary.
  - 15 This is the name of a road located at the base of Mount Aureole in Freetown, not a mountain. The Bureau presents this as evidence against him, but Mr B does not live in Freetown and has only visited on three or four occasions. Mount Bintumani is the only mountain he can name – it is the highest peak in West Africa. When this answer does not satisfy the interviewers – he is asked to name mountains on three separate occasions – I suspect he offers this answer because 'mountain' is in the name. I lived on the side of Mount Aureole myself for three months before I knew the name. The fact that Mr B was told after the interview that his missing a question on Freetown geography counted against him probably further confirmed his interpretation of the situation as a gatekeeping interview.

- 16 This is the only time the IND official produces an entire line only in English. The rest of the time she speaks in Dutch, although as I noted previously, she understands English.

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