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'Do I Have to Say Exactly Word by Word?' (Re)producing and Negotiating Asymmetrical Relations in Asylum Interviews

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Abstract

In this paper, we conduct a critical discourse analytical study of asylum interviews in order to contribute to knowledge and awareness of (a) how asymmetrical power relations are discursively (re)produced as well as manoeuvred and negotiated during the interaction and (b) what this means in terms of positioning of the participants. Focusing on a number of metacommunicative sequences characterised by a notably high degree of interpersonal complexity, we examine how participants are positioned and how positioning is discursively realised. We draw on eight observed and recorded asylum interviews conducted in Sweden 2018–2021. Metacommunicative positioning is analysed mainly with a focus on speech functions and modality. We show that metacommunication is used by all participants largely as a means of constructing an asylum narrative within the framework of an institutional discourse. The participants can position each other in (dis)advantageous ways in their attempts to deny, or sometimes claim, responsibility for miscommunication. The applicants generally obey the metacommunicative instructions given by other, more powerful participants. However, we also show an example of an applicant who makes resistance to the institutional discourse. Furthermore, all participants use metacommunication as a tool to guide each other in the conversation, thereby positioning themselves as responsible for the co-construction of the asylum narrative. Finally, we underline the benefits of conducting critical discourse analysis in the study of asylum interviews, although such studies can barely change the fact that the asylum determination process is unequal and asymmetrical in its core.

Keywords Asylum interviews · Asymmetrical relations · Discourses · Interpersonal relations · Metacommunication · Positioning

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Introduction

Asylum interviews have been reported as extremely complex communicative situations characterised by asymmetrical relations of power between the participants (Blommaert, 2001; Jacquemet, 2009; Kynsilehto & Puumala, 2015; Spire, 2020). They are complicated by the participants' unequal access to critical knowledge and discourses (Affolter, 2021; Bohmer & Shuman, 2007; Maryns, 2005, 2006) and by the different cultures represented in the interaction (Anker, 1992; Crawley, 1999; Dahlvik, 2018; Kälin, 1986). Furthermore, they are often conducted in two or even more languages, and the linguistic resources tend to be unequally distributed amongst participants. The fact that many of these encounters are interpreter mediated further contributes to the complexity of the communication (Barsky, 1994; Dahlvik, 2019; Jacquemet, 2014; Määttä, 2015; Wadensjö, 1998).

Asylum interviews are underpinned by interpersonal relations of dependence and are therefore highly asymmetrical. The participants' different institutional roles dictate different kinds of tasks, while at the same time all of them need to make efforts to construct and maintain good interpersonal relations. An asylum interview entails many face-threatening¹ situations, especially for an asylum seeker, whose credibility is assessed and therefore (explicitly or implicitly) questioned, but also for the interpreter, who runs the risk of being perceived as incompetent or unprofessional. As indicated in our research interviews (presented in more detail below in the section "[Material and Method](#)"), public counsels and interpreters strive to maintain good relations with case officers, even from a wider perspective, in order to secure future work from the migration authority (since they are externally hired and therefore independent from the authority). This inherent complexity makes the communicative situation particularly difficult, as the interactional positioning (of oneself and of others) can seriously affect both the relations of the participants and interaction in progress. In a worst-case scenario, this could, in turn, influence the authority's credibility assessment of the asylum narrative and the final decision-making.

Asymmetrical relations are also evident in the participants' unequal access to different discourses (a concept further discussed below in the section "[Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives](#)"). In fact, asylum interviews are arenas for competing discourses, in relation to both the aims and the roles of the interactants. Speaking in Habermas' (1984, 1987) terms, in asylum interviews the system meets the lifeworld. In sociolinguistic terms, this means that institutional discourses meet mundane, non-expert discourses. Unlike professional discourses, which are primarily based on professional expertise (Roberts & Sarangi, 1999), institutional discourses are shaped by sets of authoritative and bureaucratic rules and regulations that aim for objectivity and compliance with the law (Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1996). Roberts (2011) further argues that institutional encounters are

¹ In a face-threatening situation, the speaker's or the addressee's face is threatened by a communicative act potentially in opposition to the wants and desires of the other (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

characterised not only by asymmetrical relations but also by goal orientation and processes of gatekeeping and labelling. Juxtaposed with this are the asylum seekers' experiential discourses, which are shaped by lived experience and socio-political and socio-cultural knowledge (about their home countries), as well as rumours circling amongst (former) asylum seekers about how the asylum process in the host country works (Eule et al., 2019).²

Because of the interpersonal complexity, asymmetrical power relations, use of different languages and access to different kinds of knowledge and discourses, asylum interviews are often characterised by communication problems. Consequently, the participants recurrently acknowledge the communicative failure, implicitly or explicitly, and attempt to resolve it through metacommunication, i.e. communication about communication (Ruesch & Bateson, 1951). In metacommunicative sequences, the asylum narrative is interrupted, and the participants engage in shorter or longer interactional segments that aim to solve or prevent miscommunication or misconduct. Typical examples of metacommunicative interaction in asylum interviews are when applicants ask questions about the narration's form, when interpreters ask for repetition of something just said or when case officers indicate that more—or less—details are required.

Against this background, our critical discourse analytical study, while focusing on interpersonally complex metacommunication, aims to reaching a detailed and nuanced understanding of the emergent (re)production, manoeuvring and negotiation of asymmetrical relations in asylum interviews and the consequences thereof, in terms of positioning of the participants. Our starting point is that metacommunicative sequences not only serve as clarifying communicative tools but also are inherently positioning moments (Ciliberti & Andersson, 2007), thereby contributing to the (re)production of asymmetrical relations in the asylum interview and, potentially, playing a crucial role in the decisive credibility assessment. Focusing on a number of metacommunicative sequences characterised by a notably high degree of interpersonal complexity, we ask the question: How are asymmetrical relations in asylum interviews discursively (re)constructed in and through metacommunication? To answer this question, we have analysed a sample of asylum interviews using the concept of positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990). More specifically, we draw on eight asylum interviews taking place in Sweden, conducted with five different participants whom we have followed within our ongoing research project on the co-construction and recontextualisation of asylum narratives.

The main part of the article consists of micro-analyses of five metacommunicative extracts from asylum interviews, selected primarily on the basis of their inherent interpersonal complexity. The final discussion revisits the question of asymmetrical relations in asylum interviews focusing on the possible contributions of sociolinguistic micro-analysis.

² Also the institutional discourse is partly shaped by the professional participants' lived experience (see Kynsilehto & Puumala, 2015).

Communication in Asylum Interviews

Access to different kinds of knowledge and discourses, as well as the participants' different socio-cultural frameworks, can cause communicative problems, according to both previous and more recent studies on asylum determination.

In a study on narrative data, including asylum seeker's narratives, Maryns and Blommaert (2002, p. 11) use the concept of pretextual gaps to refer to 'socially anchored and often invisible differences between what is expected in communication and what people can bring and deploy in communication'. Also, in her well-known study on asylum interviews in Belgium, Maryns (2006) shows that contextualisation work is an ongoing struggle for all participants involved in the interaction. Her starting point is that interactants engage in contextualisation in order to provide information they assess as unknown to their interlocutors, and she claims that it is a demanding task to know beforehand which context is necessary to communicate. Not least, her analysis shows that the asylum interview is characterised by a continuous tension between what she calls experiential and institutional contextualisation work (Maryns, 2006, p. 39), which can be further compared with what we discuss in terms of the participants' efforts to introduce and explain experiential and institutional discourses to each other.

Similarly, in her study on West African asylum seekers in Norway, Kjelsvik (2014, 2015) shows that the interview participants prioritised different content aspects of the interview, with the applicants focusing more on socio-cultural and experiential details from their past, and the institutional representatives focusing on facts and more significant events.

In a study on asylum interviews in Finland, Määttä (2015) argues that asylum seekers can experience difficulties in understanding the case officers' initial instructions about the structure of the interview. Furthermore, Blommaert (2001) argues that the asylum seekers' language proficiency, communicative style and narrating style play a decisive role in their account of events. Both Maryns (2006) and Blommaert (2001) show that the applicants' discourses are often interpreted as irrelevant and unintelligible, resulting in the applicant's narration being perceived by the authority as fragmented and incohesive. Similarly, Bohmer and Shuman (2007) argue that a consequence of the unequal value ascribed to the interactants' preferred discourses during the asylum interview is that the asylum seeker is positioned as ignorant.

Research on communication in the asylum process has also shown that the quality of interpreting can be decisive to asylum determination (e.g. Anker, 1992; Barsky, 1994; Pöllabauer, 2006, 2015). Määttä et al. (2021) have shown that the interpreter both remediates linguistic vulnerability and inadvertently creates it. Barsky (1994) argues that misinterpretations during asylum interviews can have detrimental consequences if they result in errors that are not noticed by any of the participants. For example, they can result in a contradictive asylum narrative. To illustrate this point, Barsky (1994, p. 47) mentions that apparently simple words like *brother*, for example, in some cultures can be used in culture-specific ways. With the present analysis, we aim to contribute to this topic by drawing on a similar example to discuss how the participants are positioned in metacommunicative negotiation.

While earlier studies have shown that asymmetrical power relations are discursively (re)constructed in asylum interviews in a way that is often disadvantageous for the asylum seeker (e.g. Kjelsvik, 2014, 2015; Licoppe & Vernier, 2013; Licoppe & Veyrier, 2020; Maryns, 2006), we want to shed light on how, more precisely, asymmetrical relations play out diversely in interpersonally complex metacommunicative sequences. Furthermore, our analysis contributes with knowledge on how positioning is achieved in and through the abundant instances of metacommunication.

Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

Our study is situated within the tradition of critical discourse analysis (CDA), where focus is placed on the ideological effects of discursive practices and particularly on the (re)production of asymmetrical relations through the way people are positioned in and by interaction.

According to the ontology of CDA, discourse and society exist in a dialectical relationship, since discourse is both socially and culturally constitutive and constituting. More specifically, according to Fairclough and Wodak (2016, p. 6), discourse ...

constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. Since discourse is socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power.

Within CDA, the concept discourse is used in two different ways: first referring to language as social practice, as in the quotation above, and second, referring to 'ways of signifying areas of experience from a particular perspective' (Fairclough, 2010, p. 93). It is in the second sense that we use the concept in our analysis when talking about experiential and institutional discourses, but we also use discourse in the first sense in this paper. Finally, we also use the concept of discourse in a general linguistic sense, referring to chunks of spoken or written language.

We define the study as critical in the sense that we want to identify and expose the discursive processes of metacommunication in asylum interviews on a sociolinguistic micro-level to draw attention to the non-static nature of the (re)production of asymmetrical relations and to the continuous and emergent positioning of participants in and through metacommunication, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of asylum interviews as communicative situations and possibly also adding to the practitioners' existing toolbox with resources aimed to promote a constructive and respectful communicative situation.

Metacommunication

Our focus lies on instances of metacommunication, i.e. sequences when the interactants interrupt the narration and explicitly address communicative problems. Metacommunication serves to frame communication and guide interactants towards an

understanding of each other's utterances (Bateson, 1972). When interactants address communicative problems related to language form, we argue that they use metalinguage (cf. Coupland & Jaworski, 2004). Metacommunicative framing can also be related to Gumperz's (1982) concept 'contextualisation cues', which refer to indexical signs used by speakers to socio-culturally position their utterances in order to help the addressees in their meaning-making process.

On a general level, metacommunication is used to reach common ground and is therefore, like positioning, inherently part of the interpersonal aspect of language. On a more specific level, metacommunication has been discussed as a resource with multiple functions, some of the most frequent being evaluation, argumentation, organisation of the talk, summarising, reformulating, socialising and—important for the current study—positioning (Ciliberti & Anderson, 2007). In institutional settings, metacommunication operates as a resource for the evaluation of language use and of interpersonal relationships (Sarangi, 1998). In a study of metapragmatic comments in institutional settings, Ciliberti and Andersson (2007) found that the majority of metacommunicative comments were produced by the more powerful interactants, while the less powerful conversation participants used metacommunication mainly when aiming to receive confirmation that their interactional behaviour was appropriate. Focusing on metacommunication in asymmetrical institutional contexts, Jacquemet (1994, 2014) coined the concept of 'metapragmatic attack', referring to 'a strategy of consciously and overtly drawing attention to and/or mocking the opponent's performance for the purpose of interactional control' (2014, p. 201). Jacquemet points out that metapragmatic attacks in institutional settings are mostly initiated by the participants who control the interaction.

Positioning

Somewhat simplified, a position might be described as a conversational role that a person takes and/or is ascribed in and through discourse, and positioning is the discursive process whereby selves and others are ascribed such roles (Davies & Harré, 1990). A conversation participant can be positioned as the holder of situationally predetermined and therefore quite static roles, like a civil servant or an asylum seeker, but the term positioning is often used in relation to more fine-grained positions and profound meanings, like the self-understanding that a person may be forced to adopt (Hornscheidt & Landqvist, 2014, p. 135). Positioning is not necessarily intentional but an inherent and ongoing activity in all kinds of social encounters. At least two basic forms of positioning always take place simultaneously in a conversation: interactive positioning, in which a person through their utterances positions another person, and reflexive positioning, in which one positions themselves (Davies & Harré, 1990). Moreover, positioning is a reciprocal process—when interactively positioning someone else in a conversation, you always also reflexively position yourself, and vice versa (Weizman, 2008, p. 14).

Several earlier studies have explored positioning in police hearings with a focus on, for example, how investigating officers use change of footing (Goffman, 1981)

as a means of preserving the face of the suspected (Byrman, 2017; Heydon, 2005; MacLeod, 2010; Riis-Johansen, 2016). Positioning is also a recurrent theme in analyses of asylum interviews, although the term positioning is not necessarily used (e.g. Maryns, 2005, 2006; Bohmer & Schuman, 2007; Kjelsvik, 2014, 2015). For example, Kjelsvik (2014) writes about how narrators position themselves in both the storyworld and interactively during the process of narrating, and her analysis of an asylum interview shows how the applicant positions himself as a victim. All the abovementioned studies on positioning have shown how asymmetrical power relations in the current settings (i.e. police hearings and asylum interviews) influence and are reinforced by positioning processes.

Aim and Structure of the Asylum Interview

From the Swedish Migration Authority's perspective, the aim of an asylum interview is to obtain comprehensive information about the asylum seeker's reasons for fleeing their country of origin and the potential risks related to a possible return. This is necessary in order to make a well-grounded decision on whether or not the asylum seeker has the right to asylum (or residence permit on other grounds) in Sweden. Since material evidence is usually scarce in asylum cases, a crucial part of the decision basis is the asylum narrative that is produced during the asylum interview. The Swedish Migration Agency is required to examine the details and the coherence of the asylum narrative to assess its reliability and credibility.

In the Swedish context, the time allocated to an asylum interview is usually 2.5–3 h. Framed by an introductory phase and a concluding phase, the asylum interview usually comprises two main parts, prescribed by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO): the free narrative phase, followed by the probing phase. During the free narrative phase, the applicant should be given 'the opportunity to speak about the reasons of his/her application in his/her own words and at his/her own pace without interruptions' (EASO, 2015, p. 8). According to EASO guidelines (2015, p. 11), the case officer should remind the applicant to provide as many details as possible regarding names, places and events that could be relevant to their claim. In cases in which the applicant has difficulties speaking freely, the case officer should try to play a more active role and ask more focused questions, and if the applicant deviates from what the institution considers relevant information, the case officer 'should try to bring the narrative back on track in a sensitive manner' (EASO, 2015, p. 12). In the probing phase, the case officer asks questions to clarify and verify the information given by the applicant.

The formal asylum decision is not made by the case officer but by a civil servant entitled 'decision maker'. However, in practice it is often made in consultation with the case officer.

Material and Method

We have followed five asylum seekers during parts of their asylum process. In four cases, the asylum seekers were contacted via non-profit organisations and in one case with the help of a former asylum seeker. They agreed to participate in the study after being informed about it in their mother tongue or in English (in those cases they were fluent in English). In the study, we do not use their real names but pseudonyms. The primary data used for this study comprise observations (meaning that one or two of the researchers were present in the room during the asylum interviews), audio recordings and transcriptions of eight asylum interviews (including three complementary interviews) that took place between May 2018 and March 2021.

We have also made follow-up research interviews with several of the participants in the asylum interviews and asked them about their experiences, perceptions and feelings in relation to the current asylum interview. Furthermore, we have interviewed 35 persons (asylum seekers, case officers, interpreters, public counsels and representatives of NGOs) about their experiences of participating in asylum interviews. In the present study, the research interviews as well as our observations of the recorded asylum interviews form an ethnographic background for the analysis and interpretation of the primary data.

Furthermore, it is worth sharing some background information about the researchers. We are all active in sociolinguistic research with an interest in examining language use and its effects in social contexts, not least migration contexts. Additionally, Rehnberg and Nikolaidou have earlier engaged in voluntary work with asylum seekers and Wadensjö is involved in higher education for public service interpreters.

To fulfil the aim of the study and answer our research question, we conducted an analysis of the recorded asylum interviews grounded on two analytical questions: How are the participants positioned through metacommunication, and how is the positioning discursively realised?

Of interest to this analysis are sequences in which the interview participants engage in interpersonally complex metacommunication to address issues that can be face-threatening. In such situations, asymmetrical relations tend to be particularly visible. The identified sequences were analysed with a focus on positioning, first by examining the function of each of them in the interaction and then with a focus on speech functions and modality and, to some degree, also on paralinguistic communication (such as giggling) and personal pronouns. Speech functions and modality are central concepts in systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) when analysing the interpersonal aspects of languaging. Systemic functional linguistics, which is one of the most important analytical grounds in CDA, is a theory where language use, context, function and communicative needs are seen as primary concerns, while grammar is viewed as a resource to communicate meaning—i.e. to meet communicative needs—in different contexts. In systemic functional linguistics, meaning is said to be realised, i.e. simultaneously expressed and created, through the speaker's choice of particular formulations.

Speech functions can be described as the kind of moves made by the interactants in a conversation. According to systemic functional linguistics, they are statements, questions, commands and offers. However, a speech function can be 'grammatically disguised' as another speech function, a construct described with the term 'grammatical metaphor' (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, pp. 592–593). As an example: the statement 'it is very cold in this room' could in a certain context be interpreted instead as a request to someone to close the window, although expressed in an indirect manner. Modality refers to the way that different utterances are modified and nuanced. For example, a statement that is formulated with a high degree of obligation, such as 'you must stop talking', is likely to be interpreted as an unquestionable command. A similar formulation, such as 'you should stop talking', could still be interpreted as a command, but with a lower degree of obligation. Alternatively, depending on the context, it could be interpreted as a recommendation.

The extracts presented and analysed here are taken from three of the recorded asylum interviews in our data set. The selection of these extracts is based primarily on their inherent interpersonal complexity but also on our ambition to represent a multifacetedness in terms on metacommunicative topics. In the current extracts, 'Ivan' speaks Russian, and 'Michail' speaks Ukrainian with elements of Surzhyk, i.e. a certain mixture of Ukrainian and Russian. In Michail's interview, the interpreter consistently speaks Ukrainian. Michail's asylum interview stands out from the other in our data, as it contains several interruptions and subsequent metacommunicative sequences, resulting in an extremely complex and fractured narrative. Thus, several of the extracts included in the analysis are taken from this interview. Four of the extracts are taken from the free narrative phase, in which the applicant is supposed to narrate without unnecessary interruptions. One example (Extract 2) is taken from the probing phase.

In the interview extracts, we include the original utterances in the respective language and our own translations from Swedish, Ukrainian and Russian to English.³ References to utterances in the extracts are given with two figures, for example, 1:5 means Extract 1, utterance 5. Our transcriptions can be read with the help of the following symbols:

xxx	Unclear section
?	Questioning intonation (usually with rising tone)
,	Continuing intonation (usually with rising or sustained tone)
.	Terminating intonation (usually with falling tone)
?	Questioning intonation (usually with rising tone)
(.)	Micropause
*	Laughter in the conversation
[UPPERCASE]	Nonverbal oral expressions
[lowercase]	Specific background noise

³ The translations from Russian to English were made by Cecilia Wadensjö. The translations from Ukrainian to English were made by Cecilia Wadensjö together with a research assistant.

For the interactants, the following abbreviations are used:

A	Asylum seeker
CO	Case officer
I	Interpreter
PC	Public counsel

Finally, it should be noted that the data are collected from asylum interviews which were recorded for the purposes of research and attended each time by one or two researchers. These circumstances can obviously have had various impacts on the data, amongst other things on the professionals' degree of preparation before the interview and the way they dealt with communicative problems during the interview. We find, however, that the gravity of the communicative situation is such that the participants mainly had to focus on the communicative purpose of the asylum interview, despite the potential stress caused by participating in a study.

Metacommunicative Positioning in Asylum Interviews

In this section, we present an analysis of five interpersonally complex metacommunicative sequences. The presentation is structured according to three (interrelated and overlapping) main categories of what is metacommunicated in our material: facts, language and the institutional order.

Metacommunication of Facts

One important aspect that contributes to the complexity of asylum interviews are the many facts that must be communicated in order to construct an asylum narrative. Facts in asylum narratives are usually about the socio-political and cultural context in the applicant's home country. In order to follow the applicant's narration, case officers need to be well prepared when it comes to country-of-origin information (COI). Interpreters need to have knowledge of the socio-political and cultural contexts in both countries (the asylum seeker's country of origin and the host country) in order to interpret accurately. However, in some asylum interviews, gaps in the case officer's and/or the interpreter's factual knowledge are a reality. Factual gaps often lead to metacommunicative sequences during which case officers or interpreters address their lack of understanding and seek clarifications. Such metacommunicative sequences can end up in lengthy narrations about background information, so-called home narratives (Blommaert, 2001) or home narrations (Maryns, 2006).

Michail's interview was rich in metacommunication of facts. His asylum narrative was related to events that took place during his military service as a low rank Ukrainian soldier. The case officer on several occasions interrupted the free narrative to ask for general background information as well as geographical names and other context-specific terms. An example of this can be seen in Extract 1.

1	CO	DNR?	CO	DNR?
2	I	DNR	I	DNR
3	CO	och det är?	CO	and this is?
4	I	och sen vidare de lastade in i en lastbil och körde vidare	I	and then they loaded it onto a truck and drove away
5	CO	men bara vänta lite jag ska få ner det här först [knatter] vad var DNR va var det för nåt?	CO	but just hold on so that I can jot this down first [typing] DNR, what was that again?
6	I	що таке ДНР?	I	what does DNR mean?
7	A	[SUCKAR] ну (.) xxx	A	[SIGHS] well (.) xxx
8	CO	du sa DNR va?	CO	you said DNR, right?
9	I	скорочення чого? це скорочення чого?	I	shortening of what? it's a shortening of what?
10	A	Донецька Народна Республіка	A	Donetsk People's Republic
11	I	Donetsk eh Folkrepublik	I	Donetsk eh People's Republic

Extract 1 Metacommunication of facts

The metacommunicative sequence conveyed in Extract 1 is initiated by the case officer and functions as a means of getting access to information that is unknown to him. The case officer interrupts the applicant and asks for a clarification of the acronym DNR. This factual gap is addressed by direct questions (1:1 and 1:3), followed by a request directed to the interpreter (*but just hold on*, 1:5) and a clearer

1	PC	får jag bara flika in	PC	may I just chip in?
2	CO	mm	CO	Mmm
3	PC	var det din bror eller var det din farbror som som de frågade om	PC	was it your brother or was it your uncle that that they asked about?
4	A	min farbror de frågade min farbror	A	my uncle, they asked my uncle
5	I	men han sa bror	I	but he said brother
6	PC	xxx	PC	Xxx
7	I	вы сказали моего брата но	I	you said my brother but
8	A	я вам объясню. нет, видите.	A	I will explain to you (.) no, you see
9	I	jag kan förklara	I	I can explain
10	A	он мой дядя и вот. допустим у нас называют получается на уйгурском называют ака ака это получается брат якобы. и так.	A	he is my uncle and like (.) let's say (.) we call like, in Uighur we say <i>aka aka</i> that's like they say like brother (.) and so
11	I	så eh min farbror vi kallar för <i>aka</i>	I	so eh my uncle we call <i>aka</i>
12	A	это мой дядя, видите, спрашивают про моего дядю	A	this is my uncle, you see, they ask about my uncle
13	A	han är min farbror men när vi säger <i>aka</i> det blir ord som min bror	A	he is my uncle but when we say <i>aka</i> it becomes a word like my brother
14	I	tolken blev förvirrad här också men det finns inspelning här *om det sades bror eller farbror* så jag tolkar rätt	I	the interpreter became confused here too but there is a recording here *if brother or uncle was said* so I have interpreted correctly

Extract 2 Metalinguistic communication

formulation of the question (*DNR, what was that again?*, 1:5). The interpreter—presumably believing that the meaning of DNR is common knowledge and does not need further explanation, especially in the context of an asylum interview with a Ukrainian soldier—first seems to understand the case officer’s question (1:1) as a request for confirmation that he heard right. As a response the interpreter repeats the acronym (1:2), and she takes no notice of the case officer’s attempt to clarify his question (1:3). Instead, she goes on translating what Michail has said earlier (1:4). Not until the case officer explicitly asks her to wait and make a second attempt to clarify his question (1:5), the interpreter translates it to Michail (1:6). Michail’s reaction is to sigh (1:7) and not give an immediate answer. This reaction seems to make the case officer doubtful, and he now poses a slightly different question (*you said DNR, right?*, 1:8), whereas in the rendition, the interpreter specifies the case officer’s first question and prompts an answer (*it’s a shortening. of what?*, 1:9).

In this extract, the question from the case officer positions the applicant as an expert who needs to guide the case officer in the socio-political context of his narration. Moreover, since the case officer formulates the question without any excuses or modifications, the applicant is positioned not only as an expert but more specifically as an expert who should willingly answer questions and provide the necessary context to the story. However, we interpret the applicant’s response in the form of a sigh and a delayed answer as indications of his questioning or protesting the case officer’s lack of knowledge in relation to a piece of information that should be known to someone investigating the asylum case of a military officer from Ukraine. Our interpretation that his irritation is directed to the case officer is further supported by the fact that the case officer had also earlier asked for further clarifications in relation to what must be considered basic knowledge about the asylum seekers’ home country, including the meaning of another acronym. Thus, through his response, Michail positions the case officer as someone who should be better informed. Later on in the interview, the case officer admits that he should have been more prepared. He does this by making another metacommunicative statement pointing to a temporary technical problem with the authority’s country-of-origin information database, which prevented him from preparing himself properly. In doing so, he acknowledges that he has not followed the institutional order but also positions himself as not responsible for being insufficiently prepared.

Metalinguistic Communication

Another frequent category of metacommunication in asylum interviews comprises sequences in which the participants focus on the meaning of particular words and concepts, in other words, engage in metalinguistic communication. Single words can play a key role in narration, and misunderstandings in relation to them can render the whole story, or parts of it, incomprehensible. According to several participants in our research interviews, the consequences of such misunderstandings could cause the Migration Authority to assess the applicant as not trustworthy which, in turn, could be used as an argument to reject the asylum application.

Uncertainties and errors related to interpreting are often the object of metalinguistic sequences in our material, as interpreters often ask for clarifications, account for their choice of words or explain and justify the occurrence of errors (in Wadensjö's (1998, pp. 109–110) term, they *explicitly coordinate* interaction, in contrast to the *implicit coordination* that follows from the fact that they in principle take every second turn at talk). In cases in which such errors and misunderstandings are not acknowledged by interpreters and are instead identified by another participant in the interaction, the interpreter's professional competence runs the risk of being questioned. In such cases, interpersonal relations between the interactants can become a sensitive issue. One such example can be seen in Extract 2, which is taken from the probing phase of Ivan's interview. Ivan's invoked reason for seeking asylum is fear of persecution based on political belief, and the interview revolved around his political engagement and actions taken by the authorities in relation to this. In the following extract, it is the public counsel who initiates the metacommunicative sequence after having discovered a potential misunderstanding and a consequent error in the interpretation:

In Extract 2, metacommunication functions as a means of exploring the meaning of a word used by the applicant. The public counsel interrupts the narration with a question regarding the referent of the word *bror* (in English *brother*) (2:3). We assume that she already knows or suspects the answer to this question (as she is already familiar with the applicant's narrative) and we therefore interpret this question as an indirect way of drawing attention to the fact that a misunderstanding has occurred. The applicant, who understands some Swedish, answers immediately that he is referring to his uncle (2:4). The interpreter stops interpreting and instead makes a statement of her own: she states that the applicant actually said *bror* (*brother*) (2:5) and repeats the same in Russian, using the word *брат* (2:7), thereby justifying her own choice to both parties. With these statements, she positions herself as an expert in the Russian language and consequently as a competent interpreter. Through the interpreter's use of a third-person pronoun in Swedish (*han/he*), (2:5) to refer to the applicant, it becomes clear that she directs her objection (*but he said brother*, 2:5), not to the applicant but to the other interactants, i.e. the case officer and the public counsel (and the present researcher). The use of the word *but* to show an antithesis and the lack of modality in this implicitly accusatory and defensive statement positions the applicant as solely responsible for the communicative breakdown and reinstalls the image of the interpreter as a skilled professional. She then turns to the applicant, addressing him in Russian using a second-person pronoun (*you said my brother but*, 2:7). This utterance partly fulfils the function of communicating to the applicant what she just said to the other participants but, notably, the adversative conjunction (*but*, in Russian *но*) is now placed in the end of the utterance, consequently not filling the function of constructing the utterance as an objection but rather functioning as a cautious means of inviting the applicant to explain himself.

Ivan, in turn, is quick to grasp and explain the reason for the misunderstanding, producing a statement in both Russian (2:10) and Swedish (2:13), explaining that *aka*, the word for brother in his first language (Uighur), is also used to refer to somebody's uncle. He thereby positions himself as willing to collaborate, attempting to clear up the misunderstanding by acting as an expert when it comes to this

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| <p>1 CO mm förlåt att jag avbryter dig men jag har förstått det här du har berättat flera gånger, att du bad till Gud att du känner dig liksom en syndare att (.) du var rädd för vad dina föräldrar skulle göra om de upptäckte att du var homosexuell (.) kan du gå vidare och berätta vad som hände därefter och vad det är som gjorde att du lämnade landet, när du gjord när du lämnade det?</p> | <p>CO mm, sorry to interrupt you but I have understood what you have told us many times, that you prayed to God, that you feel like a sinner that (.) you were scared about what your parents would do if they found out that you were a homosexual (.) can you tell us what happened after this and what it is that made you leave the country, when you did when you left?</p> |
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Extract 3 Metacommunication of the institutional order initiated by the case officer

specific cultural element in his narration. While adopting an expert position, he also—implicitly—positions himself as someone at least partially responsible for the miscommunication.

The interpreter follows up, once again speaking for herself, but this time explicitly referring to her professional role, starting by saying *the interpreter* (2:14) to indicate that she (and not the applicant) is the owner of the words now spoken. She states that she became confused and points to the research recording as a potential resource to determine whether she has interpreted incorrectly. This statement, partially uttered in a laughing voice, can be seen as an attempt to mitigate the face-threatening situation and at the same time save her own professional reputation, as she is certain that the applicant used the Russian word *брат* (that is *brother*).

This rather lengthy metalinguistic sequence on the use of a single word can be explained by the fact that the applicant transfers a culture-specific way of using the word *aka* from Uighur into Russian. The communicative breakdown here is not caused by the interpreter's lack of linguistic competence but by her lack of access to the right socio-cultural framework that explains the applicant's choice of words. Alternatively, it could be argued that the asylum seeker is also responsible for the miscommunication, as he seemed to be aware of the risk of using the word *брат* as an equivalent of *aka*, as it appears from the conversation reproduced in Extract 2 that he is aware of the difference between the Russian and the Uighur word (2:10 and 2:13).

Metacommunication of the Institutional Order

An inherent difficulty in asylum interviews is that neither applicants nor case officers can know in advance how much and what kind of information is necessary for the narrative to be assessed as credible according to the institutional order. The applicants are typically new to the institutional context and interactional situation, and the case officers do not have access to the applicants' lived experience and are therefore unable to evaluate the relevance of events and details before the story reaches an endpoint. This is a major difficulty with asylum interviews and it is arguably one

of the most significant grounds for the extremely complex nature of these communicative situations.

In a couple of our interviews, there are plenty of examples in which the case officer interrupts the free narration either to request a change of topic or to ask for more—or less—details. Requests for a change of topic usually happen after the applicant has talked for a long time about the same topic, or when the content of the narration deviates from the narrative structure that is inscribed by the institutional order. The following example comes from Samuel's interview. Samuel applied for asylum claiming fear of persecution on the grounds of sexual orientation. Throughout the interview, he talked lengthy and rather repetitively about his sexual orientation and the fear he experienced in his home country. The case officer interrupted him in many cases and urged him to focus and give concrete answers to her questions. This is what happens also in Extract 3.

Extract 3 can be interpreted as an instruction to the applicant to talk less about feelings and more about events directly related to grounds for asylum. Through the summarising statements, the case officer positions herself as attentive which, in turn, could be seen as a way of both justifying the interruption and playing down the face-threatening quality of the interruption and the command that follows.

Metacommunication is used to move the narrative further and also to point out that the applicant's narration is not in line with the institutional discourse due to unnecessary repetitions. Through these statements, the case officer positions the applicant as someone who needs to be reminded of the institutional framework, i.e. that he needs to focus on the events that led to him fleeing his country of origin. But she also positions him as someone who has the right to understand the reasons for her interactional moves and for the communicative situation as a whole. The applicant complies with the position ascribed to him, as he obeys the instruction and conveys new facts in his narration.

The asylum seekers' unfamiliarity with the institutional discourses can be further addressed by the applicants themselves, who are often eager to narrate in an institutionally appropriate way. The most common resource used by the applicants to adjust their narrating to the institutional discourse is the use of questions in relation to the content and form of the narration. In quite a few situations, the case officers' answers to their questions are not clear and this leads to lengthier metacommunicative sequences. Michail's interview has many such sequences, in which Michail asks for instructions on how the narrative should be told and what it should include. These questions are not random but rather the result of earlier metacommunicative statements made by the case officer and the interpreter, who accused Michail of narrating without enough details and in a rather unclear way. A question from the applicant regarding limitations and expectations set by the institutional discourse can be found in Extract 4.

In this sequence, the case officer asks Michail to give a detailed account of an event that seems to be of critical importance in the narrative (*but what exactly was it that you had previously asked your commander*, 4:1). Michail asks for guidelines in relation to the appropriate amount of information and also on the linguistic form that this information should take. He does this by asking whether he should give a word-for-word account of the narrated interaction which, in this case, would mean

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| 1 | CO men vad exakt var det som du hade tidigare frågat din chef (.) för nånting eller sagt till honom som gjorde honom så upprörd att du menar att han (.) ja. bombade er då va exakt hade du | CO but what exactly was it that you had previously asked your commander (.) or said to him that made him so angry that you believe that he (.) well (.) bombed you then (.) what exactly had you |
| 2 | I а що конкретно ви тоді сказали вашому командирові що ви- вот вважаєте що після того він настільки (.) розлютився? що- що вас обстріляли | I but what exactly did you then tell your commander what do you like believe made him so (.) angry? that- that you were fired upon. |
| 3 | CO [knatter] | CO [typing] |
| 4 | A дословно? прямо. | A word by word? straight. |
| 5 | I måste jag säga exakt ord för ord | I do I have to say exactly word by word? |
| 6 | A [с матом еще и? [FNISSAR] | A with the swear words, too? [GIGGLING] |
| 7 | I med alla svär- svordomar? | I With all the swear swear words? |
| 8 | CO eh nej men jag vill få en bild av liksom hur han kunde bli hur det kunde uppstå en sån här eh allvarlig eh situation med bomber och sånt på grund av | CO eh no but I want to get a picture of like how he could be how it could develop such a eh serious eh situation with bombs and the like because of |
| 9 | I но я хочу просто мати якусь приблизно | I well I simply want the swear words only roughly |
| 10 | CO nånting som du har sagt till honom | CO something that you said to him |
| 11 | I якусь приблизно картинку що приблизно ви йому казали. щоб зрозуміти | I some rough picture that roughly you told him (.) to understand |
| 12 | CO [knatter] | CO [typing] |
| 13 | A блін це було так (.) нецензурна | A shit it was so (.) vulgar |
| 14 | I shit det var så (.) ocensurerat | I shit it was so (.) uncensored |

Extract 4 Metacommunication initiated by the applicant

having to relate profanities in his narration (4: 4 and 4:6). The mere question, followed by his giggling (4: 6), indicates that he considers such an account inappropriate. However, his metalinguistic question indicates that he positions himself as someone who is willing to adjust to the institutional discourse as soon as he knows what is expected of him. The interpreter's rendition of this question in Swedish, with a high degree of obligation (*do I have to*, 4:5), reinforces this positioning.

The case officer initially answers negatively but then engages in metacommunicative negotiation, stating his reasons for asking the question and what he hopes to gain from it. The case officer does not produce a straightforward yes or no answer, as he goes on explaining: *I want to get a picture of like how* (4:8) and *something that you said to him* (4:10). The vagueness of the case officer's statements, realised, for example, by the expressions *like* and *and the like* (in 4:8), is reproduced by the interpreter by using the modal adverb *priblizno* (roughly) (4:9 and 4:11), indicating approximation instead of exactness. It is noteworthy, however, that the interpreter does not immediately render the case officer's account for asking the question (4:8) but first interprets his utterance in the form of a more direct answer to the applicant's question (*well I simply want the swear words only roughly*, 4:9), possibly positioning herself as someone taking responsibility for the continued communication

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| <p>1 CO jag vill bara vara tydlig med att det är du som ska göra sannolikt att det finns en hotbild mot dig (.) och då ingår att du ska eh va väldigt mm vi måste få veta vad de e exakt som du eh riskerar då och då duger det inte att spekulera kring varför utan du måste vara lite tydligare</p> | <p>CO I just want to be clear that it is you who needs to make it probable that there is a threat against you (.) and then this includes that you must eh be very mmm, we need to know what it is exactly that you eh risk then and then it will not do to speculate about why, but you must be a bit clearer</p> |
| <p>2 I мhm я хочу наголосити що обов'язок лжить повністю на вас пояснити звідки йде загроза вам (.) ви не можете просто сидіти й розказувати про ваші здогадки [knatter]</p> | <p>I mhm, I want to stress that the duty lies entirely on you to explain where eh the threat against you is coming from (.) you can't just sit and talk about your guesses</p> |
| <p>3 CO</p> <p>4 A но це якби не здогадка це (.) логическа цепочка, от одні действии й як вони провили до други действии, й люди які в цього замішені</p> | <p>CO [typing]</p> <p>A but it is like not a guess it's (.) a logical chain, of some actions and how they led to other actions, and the people involved in this</p> |
| <p>5 I det är inte spekulationer det är en logisk tänkande om man tänker vad som hände först och sen därefter (.) och så kopplar man det ihop</p> | <p>I it is not speculation; it is logical thinking if you think what happened first and then after (.) and then you put these together</p> |
| <p>6 CO men om du säger konkret då varför blev ni beskjutna?</p> | <p>CO but if you say clearly then why did you get shot at?</p> |

Extract 5 Discursive resistance by the applicant

between the asylum seeker and the case officer (even if the latter did not understand any Ukrainian).

As Michail's question is still not clearly answered by the case officer, he has to decide by himself what is relevant and appropriate. He reacts to this by expressing even more uncertainty and perhaps some degree of resistance to the request for details, when he first curses (*shit*, 4:13) and then makes an evaluative comment in relation to the interaction with the commander, describing it as *necenzurna* (*vulgar*) (4:13), which is interpreted with the similarly sounding Swedish word *ocensurerat* (in English: *uncensored*) (4:14). The applicant's obvious reluctance to make a verbatim quotation seems to be related to the institutional context of the asylum interview, within which he finds it inappropriate to utter profanities.

This metacommunicative sequence is a powerful illustration of the difficulty experienced by applicants in adjusting to the expectations ascribed by the interview's institutional order, since the case officers—who act as representatives of this discourse—may, in practice, also be uncertain of the way the narrative should be told in order to comply with institutional and legal norms, or uncertain of how asylum seekers should be instructed in order not to be (mis)led in their free narration.

Thus far, we have looked at metacommunicative sequences in which the applicants are encouraged to adjust their narration to the interview's institutional discourse and are themselves eager to do so, either by obeying instructions or by asking

questions. There are, however, a few instances in our data in which the applicants take the chance of questioning instructions or reprimands by making discursive resistance. Staying in Michail's interview, Extract 5 shows how the case officer uses metacommunicative statements in order to clarify the institution's expectations and how the applicant makes discursive resistance.

In this sequence, the case officer emphasises the applicant's responsibility to make a case that he has been threatened. In this way, the case officer attempts to explain and clarify the institutional order to the applicant. An instructional statement (*it is you who needs to make it probable*, 5:1) is followed by an implicit accusation of speculation on the part of the applicant (*it will not do to speculate*, 5:1). Even though it is grammatically formulated as a statement, this utterance could be interpreted as a command not to speculate, and ultimately as a threat (of not attending to his asylum case unless he stops speculating). The case officer concludes his statement with another grammatical metaphor, a statement which is even closer to a command since it includes a high degree of obligation (with the use of the modal verb *must*; *måste* in Swedish), even if softened by *a bit* (*you must be a bit clearer*, 5:1). In and through this utterance, the case officer positions himself as a representative of the institutional order and, as such, in control of the interactional order.

The case officer's statements are loaded to an extent that, taken altogether, they can be interpreted as a metapragmatic attack (Jacquemet, 1994), drawing attention to the applicant's inappropriate performance and aiming to gain institutional control. In the interpreter's rendition, the attack is upgraded: (*you can't just sit and talk about your guesses*, 5:2). Notably, it is after this metapragmatic attack that Michail makes resistance and stands behind his argument, and he does this by pointing out that his reasoning is based on logical thinking. It is rare in our data for an applicant to make discursive resistance in such an explicit way: in this particular case, Michail refutes the reprimand, thereby positioning himself as someone who can question the case officer's instructions. This metacommunicative negotiation of whether the applicant's narration is based on speculation or logical thinking can be explained by the underlying pretextual gaps that shape, and here also surfaces in the interaction. The applicant claims that his interpretations and explanations are not speculative but rather quite logical in light of the socio-political context in which the narrated events took place (in 5:4). In other words, he seemingly grounds his reasoning on lived experience and what makes sense in the socio-political context of his home country.

What seems to have made this metacommunicative sequence necessary at this point in the interaction is initially a need on the part of the case officer to impose institutional order and then a need on the part of the applicant to claim that there must be some limits in relation to how much the institutional discourse can prescribe and proscribe, particularly if the guidelines are contrary to common sense. The case officer's question following this claim (in 5:6) can be interpreted as taking a step back and accepting the applicant's reasoning. This question certainly indicates that a better answer is still needed, but it also informs more specifically about what kind of information is requested. In other words, it could be argued that the applicant's resistance in this extract is rather successful in terms of the outcome of the interaction, although, probably needless to say, this does not mean that the fundamental asymmetrical relations in the conversation have changed.

Discussion

In this paper, we have, within the framework of critical discourse analysis, sought to identify the emergent (re)production, manoeuvring and negotiation of asymmetrical relations in asylum interviews, with a focus on interpersonally complex metacommunicative sequences. In the analysed extracts, the asylum interview participants engage in metacommunicative sequences to solve communicative problems that emerge in relation to facts, language and institutional requirements.

As becomes clear from our analysis and also from our research interviews, one of the main concerns of the professionals in the interaction is to keep the narrative within the framework of the institutional discourse. Metacommunication seems to be the main resource for guiding the applicant in this direction and, to this end, metacommunication in our material is mainly initiated by the case officers (cf. Ciliberti & Anderson, 2007; Sarangi, 1998). The interpreters are generally familiar with the institutional discourse and, in some cases, also with the applicants' experiential discourses. In line with their professional ethics, they are expected to maintain a professional discourse by serving both the institution and the applicant. The applicant's experiential discourse, however, needs to be toned down or, if it is about emotions, even eliminated from the constructed narrative. The demand to keep the narration within the framework of an institutional discourse is one of the most crucial aspects of the interview's underlying asymmetrical character, considering that the average applicant is unfamiliar with the institutional order. The professional participants—and primarily the case officers—are at an obvious advantage here, since they are not only comfortable with the dominant discourse but also entitled to impose it and dismiss experiential deviations when they are not deemed relevant. The applicants strive to avoid falling into the trap of building up their narration grounded in experiential discourses, by making frequent requests for guidance regarding what and how much information is appropriate to include in their narration. However, the applicants can also choose to resist the institutional discourse, for example, when they are at risk of not being believed or when the institutional discourse does not make sense to them, as in the case of Michail (Extract 5).

Most importantly, based on this analysis, we claim that interpersonal relations in asylum interviews should not be understood as static entities with interactional power having only a top-down direction. Instead, the interactional sequences analysed in this study reveal a more nuanced and dynamic situation, in which all interview participants can find themselves in interactionally face-threatening situations and risk being positioned in disadvantageous ways. Metacommunicative sequences are crucial in (re)creating and managing asymmetrical relations especially when the interactants position each other as doing or saying the wrong thing and consequently as ignorant, unprofessional, illogical, unwilling and so forth.

More specifically, in the metacommunicative sequence in Extract 1, the case officer runs the risk of being perceived as unprepared and therefore unprofessional, but in order to fulfil his institutional obligations (i.e. to conduct a proper investigation) he is forced to take the communicative risk of asking a question that reveals his ignorance. However, he refers to an earlier problem with the online database to

explain this ignorance, thereby not taking full responsibility for it. In Extract 2, the interpreter runs the risk of being perceived as incompetent, but the applicant prevents this from happening and takes, instead, responsibility for the identified miscommunication. In Extract 3, it is the applicant's turn to be positioned unfavourably. The case officer positions him as rather talkative and repetitive, while at the same time trying to mitigate her authoritative positioning and save the interactional situation, i.e. by motivating her new instruction. The interpersonal complexity of Extract 4 can be ascribed to the fact that the applicant expresses a strong concern about an inappropriate communicative performance, which he suspects will go against the institutional discourse. In reality, this concern seems to collide with the institutional demands for a detailed and realistic narration of events. The asylum seeker positions himself as eager to ascribe to the institutional discourse, and while the case officer fails to give a straightforward answer to his questions, the interpreter positions herself as responsible for the continued communication, anticipating a potential risk of breakdown, something she possibly could be blamed for. Finally, the metacommunicative sequence in Extract 5 is an example of positioning taking place in what might be interpreted as an even more interpersonally loaded manner than in the previous examples. The case officer is indirectly threatening the applicant, whose reaction is to resist and reject the institutional order of the interview.

The dynamics of the conversation are also expressed in the fact that all participants, from time to time, make efforts to introduce and guide each other into new discourses. This means that not only the professional participants position themselves as instructors guiding the asylum seeker in the institutional discourse, but also the asylum seeker and the public counsel recurrently introduces the other participants to the asylum seeker's experiential discourse, as in Extract 2, where the public counsel implicitly encourages Ivan to explain the culture-specific Uighur word *aka*, corresponding to both брат (*brother*) and дядя (*uncle*) in Russian.

Despite the interactionally dynamic nature of the interviews, the fundamental asymmetrical relations remain unchanged, and there is no doubt that being positioned in a disadvantageous way is riskier for the applicant than for the other participants. The case officer can afford the risk of being positioned in a dispreferred or negative way, as their institutional role gives them institutional control over the situation (cf. Affolter, 2021). The interpreter and the public counsel have an advantage in that they are familiar with the institutional discourse, but they always risk being negatively assessed by the case officer and therefore potentially denied future employment. This is a risk particularly grave for the interpreter, not least given the precarious work situation of interpreters in many countries, including Sweden (Ing-hilleri, 2012; Norström et al., 2012). Obviously, the applicant is the most vulnerable participant in the interaction, as it is their credibility that is to be assessed in asylum interviews and, more importantly, their future lives that are at stake. The analysis presented here, as well as all the material in our disposal, suggests that in interpersonally complex metacommunicative sequences, it is, to a large extent, the asylum seekers that are positioned unfavourably, usually as individuals who are either ignorant or unwilling to adjust to the institutional order. Institutional representatives can use metacommunication as a tool to guide and advice but also to reprimand and

even threaten the asylum seekers. Asylum seekers, on the other hand, mainly use metacommunication in order to seek advice and, more rarely, to make resistance.

Admittedly, this study offers only a glimpse of the discursive construction of applicant resistance. Further research on the ways that applicants resist the imposed institutional discourse and on the effects that such resistance may have on the direction of the interaction is necessary in order to reach a thorough understanding of the possibilities offered to or claimed by the applicants to shape the content and form of the asylum narrative.

Nonetheless, with this analysis, we have contributed to and developed previous studies on asylum interviews that have highlighted their asymmetrical nature (e.g. Blommaert, 2001; Bohmer & Shuman, 2007; Jacquemet, 2009; Maryns, 2005, 2006). More specifically, we have further contributed with a micro-analysis that highlights how these asymmetries are continuously and dynamically (re)produced, manoeuvred, negotiated and even challenged and resisted in the ongoing communication.

Finally, a note about the way our study practically contributes to the asylum determination process. Traditionally, studies within CDA have aimed to lead to social change with an emphasis on equality in communication and in the society at large (e.g. van Dijk, 1993). Regrettably, our study can barely change the fact that the asylum determination process is unequal and asymmetrical in its core, as is the wider social order that forms the current migration. Our study can, however, lay the ground for increased awareness on how asymmetrical power relations are (re)produced in metacommunicative sequences in asylum interviews. For example, our analyses could be used as material in practitioners' training and thus add to the existing resources aimed to promote a respectful and constructive communicative situation.

Author Contribution Nikolaidou and Rehnberg contributed to the study's conception and design. Data collection and material preparation were performed by all three authors. The analysis was performed by Nikolaidou and Rehnberg. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Nikolaidou and Rehnberg. Nikolaidou and Rehnberg commented on all previous versions of the manuscript and Wadensjö commented on the last versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Wadensjö has further translated the interview extracts from Russian, Ukrainian (and elements of Surzhyk) and Swedish to English.

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Availability of Data and Material The authors are bound by an agreement with the research participants to keep the data partially confidential and to not share it *in its entirety* outside the research group.

Code Availability N/A.

Declarations

Ethics Approval The study is approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

Consent to Participate All research participants have given consent to the following statement: 'I have been informed of the study in writing and give my consent to participate. I am aware of the fact that my

participation is completely voluntary and that I can discontinue my participation in the study without giving any reason. My signature below means that I choose to participate in the study and agree to Södertörn University processing my personal data in accordance with current data protection legislation and submitted information’.

Consent for Publication All research participants have given consent to the following statements: ‘Your personal data are treated with care and the same degree of secrecy applies as when the Swedish Migration Board processes your personal data. When we publish results from the research study, we will not state your name or disclose any other personal data. The material that is collected will only be used for research and for educational purposes’.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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