

# Crisis and otherness: the role of language

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## **Crisis and otherness: the role of language**

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*sed immensum aestimationea tot gentium sermones, tot linguaes tanta loquendi varietas, ut externus alieno paene non sit hominis vice*

*[but one of measureless extent if the number of national languages and dialects and varieties of speech is pondered on, so numerous that a foreigner scarcely counts as a human being for someone of another race].*

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*

*It is only our words which bind us together and make us human.*

Michel de Montaigne, 1:9. *On liars*

*And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story*

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, v. ii. 332-333

The crisis of the European Union in 2018 is intense and multifaceted, encompassing the tribulations of Brexit, the economic after-effects of the banking crash of 2007/8, a crisis in the feeling of genuine political representation among many European populations, and, perhaps most acutely of all, the supposed migrant crisis. The narrative goes something like this: an unprecedented wave of dispossessed, desperate (and potentially dangerous) people is sweeping into Europe unchecked, crossing the Mediterranean in the flimsiest of craft and so slipping into Europe at its geographically and economically weakest point (the coastlines of Greece, Italy and Spain). These newcomers bring difference, and a potential threat to the religious and ethical assumptions and values of European states and the Judeo-Christian tradition. And the fracture lines of European unity have been mercilessly exposed, with promises of acceptance of asylum seekers on the part of European states not on the frontline that are absurdly low, and then consistently not maintained.



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Perhaps the sense of panic and confusion, underlined by far-right demonstrations in Dresden in 2017 and incidents in Chemnitz in August 2018<sup>1</sup>, by increasingly aggressive political rhetoric from certain politicians in most European countries (e.g. Prime Minister Orbán in Hungary and Minister of the Interior Salvini in Italy) and by a singular lack of concerted and effective action by the institutions of the Union, is exaggerated, however. Rather than being of immeasurable extent, the so-called migration crisis is one of perception.

Numbers are difficult to obtain and are often unreliable, but the UNHCR estimates that there are around 68.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at present (UNHCR *apud* Garland, 2018). While this figure is probably an underestimate, as counting displaced subjects is by definition a demanding task with many presumably slipping through the net, and the expression ‘forcibly displaced’ being a rather narrow label to describe migrants in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are nevertheless reminded that the ‘migration crisis’ is hardly that: its numbers are not enormous in comparison with the world population and, instead of constituting some existential threat, they are more likely to be an acute reminder of the issue of world overpopulation as a whole. Indeed, Europe has seen repeated instances of population movements over time: the Roman Empire can be said to have depended on a constant influx of foreign slaves, refugees and soldiers to function (Garland, 2018). Europe’s recent history is full of significant migrations (e.g. the movement of people from the south of Italy to the more industrialised north [especially Piedmont and Lombardy] during the economic boom of the sixties and seventies). While these precedents were not without difficulties

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<sup>1</sup> After the death of a German man late at night during celebrations for the 875<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city, there were repeated clashes of right-wing demonstrators with police, Hitler salutes were allegedly in evidence and people perceived as foreign were chased through the streets. German media suggested the police were caught unawares and members of the AfD in the Bundestag seemed to lend their sympathies to the demonstrators. All this is to be seen in relation to Chancellor Merkel’s controversial attempt to welcome a million refugees to Germany in 2015. See Kate Connolly, “German police criticised as country reels from far-right violence”, *The Guardian* 28.08.2018.

and social tension, there seems to be a completely new feeling surrounding the migrations of the last ten years.

The European migrant ‘crisis’ owes its particular intensity to a variety of factors, not least the contingency with economic difficulties hardly resolved and perhaps exacerbated by austerity policies which hit the lower ranks of European society hardest, but the specifics of the refugee situation should make us reflect on the concept of the ‘other’ and the varying levels of alterity perceived by receiving communities. Indeed a bipolar, ‘us and them’ reading of the migration event in Europe risks being far from the mark, not only because of any moral considerations, but quite simply because ‘us and them’ is a naïve dichotomy, negating or concealing the complexities and shades of difference and otherness in any immigration experience. Indeed, as we shall see, most philosophical examinations of the issue founder precisely because of the inadequacy of the friend-enemy postulate and fail to equip the European mind to grapple with questions that are at once immediate and profound.

Pliny in the *Natural History* (Pliny the Elder, Book VII) gives a sense of the potential depths of a crisis of this kind in the suggestion that we cannot fully recognise as human someone who speaks a different tongue. Such is the variety of language and linguistic behaviour that we do not have the faculty to appreciate the humanity of someone speaking in a different way: their humanity is diminished because we cannot recognise, appreciate or interpret it to an adequate degree. Besides the implicit assumption that language is something that defines our humanity, his observation is perhaps mostly one of awe: we are incapable of dealing with the sheer complexity and richness of the world and so refute the intimate reality of linguistic diversity. In good times, or from a position of power, this awe might provoke curiosity or a sort of patronising concern, in times of economic

difficulty the other side of awe, which is fear or even panic, could arouse feelings of suspicion or hostility.

There may be a temptation to think we have gone beyond Pliny: it is easy to refute some of his stranger descriptions of the exotic parts of the world and so our multi-cultural and multilingual Europe, where bilingualism (at least) is increasingly the norm (European Commission/Eurydice 2017) and negotiations between 27 different nation states go on without obvious difficulty, might expect to be ideally equipped to deal with the other, and to appreciate her/his humanity. The ‘migrant crisis’ however, forces us to question this, and to explore the theoretical underpinning of Europe’s occasionally open hostility to clearly desperate people.

Nigel Farage, the doyen of the Brexit campaign, gives support to Pliny’s suggestion, implying that those who don’t speak the same language can’t really be our friends: “Our real friends in the world speak English,”<sup>2</sup> allowing the suspicion that even those that are ostensibly friendly, but in a foreign tongue, are potentially deceiving us. This might be part of a political discourse centering on diplomacy, state-level decision-making and national elections, but we are immediately left to ponder whether the coincidence of this rhetoric of suspicion with outright hostility towards migrants on the part of certain groups in Europe is entirely down to chance<sup>3</sup>. All the more so because politicians, including Farage himself, have made this connection explicit on occasion (e.g. in Farage’s case when discussing the ‘threat’ of future mass immigration from Turkey if the United Kingdom remained in the European Union).

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<sup>2</sup> Nigel Farage, Conservative Political Action Conference, February 2017, quoted in Owen and Smith, “Nigel Farage says Brexit and Trump win are ‘beginning of global revolution’”, *The Guardian* 24.02.2017.

<sup>3</sup> An example, among very many, of the kind of rhetoric used might be the infamous quotation from an article by media personality Katie Hopkins in the *Sun* newspaper in 2016: “These migrants are like cockroaches”. It is interesting to note that the comment was immediately followed by a fearful recognition of the hardiness of these unwanted guests: “they are built to survive a nuclear bomb.” This, perhaps inadvertently, encapsulates both the contempt and fear of the other. See Zoe Williams, “Katie Hopkins calling migrants vermin recalls the darkest events of history,” *The Guardian*, 19-04-2015.

At this point it becomes politically imperative to identify who is not your friend, to classify the visitor, migrant or uninvited guest as (exceptionally) friend or, more probably, foe. Europe has an unfortunate theoretical tradition in this regard. Karl Schmitt (*apud* Derrida, 1997) postulates the friend-enemy distinction as the essence of politics:

*If the political is to exist, one must know who everyone is, who is a friend and who is an enemy, and this knowing is not in the mode of theoretical knowledge, but in one of practical identification: knowing consists here in knowing how to identify the friend and the enemy. The practical identification of self – and from one self to another – seem to be sometimes conditions, sometimes consequences, of the identification of friend and enemy (Derrida, 1997: 116).*

Identification, and so identity, becomes key, both politically (as Schmitt proposed) and in social relations. And what is more indicative of provenance, of culture and of mind-set than language? As a shorthand for identification, language has an obvious role, and this might be the tongue or dialect spoken, or the accent and cadences with which it is spoken. “Group identity is based on important narratives and the language in which they are told.” (Edwards, 2009: 254). The evaluative nature of the reception of speech is analysed effectively by Garrett (2010), who emphasises the influence even the slightest phonological idiosyncrasies can have on the listener.

But the role of language in this is manifold and complex as much as it is important, if not decisive, for the refugee seeking asylum. Besides its most explicit role in the ‘migrant crisis’, which is in describing the very crisis itself, selecting terminology with rhetorical effect (Aristotle’s *lexis* in its truest sense – the skilful, artful use of words and language<sup>4</sup>) and so framing the narration of the events in politically slanted terms. An example might be the repeated use of war vocabulary to describe what is essentially a political, social or perhaps economic question: ‘invasion’, ‘hordes’, ‘army of migrants’. A more striking example is the political slogan utilised by Matteo Salvini in

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<sup>4</sup> See Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, Chapter 1, for an analysis of Aristotle’s suggestion that the meaning of *lexis* is linguistic dexterity informed by profound understanding of vocabulary and language in general.

June 2018 immediately after he became Minister of the Interior in the new coalition government: “E’ finita la pacchia” [the party is over], colouring immigrants’ stories with a careless linguistic sleight of hand, and defining them as freeloaders who should be packing their bags in readiness to leave (we might observe that few, if any, have ever arrived with the luxury of a suitcase)<sup>5</sup>. Here we note how the language used imposes a significant identity on (all?) migrants: that they are numerous and are trying to get something for nothing.

This is, however, probably merely the most explicit (even blatant) aspect of the role of language in Europe’s crisis of otherness. A second, deeper mechanism might be found in the assumptions of the narratives associated with *who* these people are, most of all in the sense of *what kind of people* they might be. Rather than a subtle appreciation of national or regional cultural diversities, this is largely an imposed generalised view of other, non-European arrivals, using vague or catch-all epithets such as *asylum-seekers* or *migrants*. The greatest challenge to attempts to welcome or offer refuge to migrants in Europe probably comes from suggestions as to what they are doing or might do in the future: the safety of the nation or of the general public is at stake, along with the cultural integrity of the autochthonous community. Bauman’s concept of ‘securitisation’ (Bauman, 2016: 24/5), the re-casting of various phenomena as instances of insecurity is relevant here, and the neologism reminds us of the intimate connection between language and society.

This involves branding the arrivals either as potential terrorists, or at the very least, as people with radically different lifestyles, morals and spirituality<sup>6</sup>. The ‘other’ in every sense. These differences

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<sup>5</sup> See “Salvini: ‘È finita la pacchia per i clandestini, preparatevi a fare le valige’”, *La Stampa TV Politica*, 3.06.2018, video.

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most striking example of this would be the New Year’s Eve controversy surrounding events in Cologne, Germany in 2015: reports circulated widely in Europe in the early days of January 2016 describing apparently coordinated attacks by largely Muslim immigrants on defenceless (exclusively white) female victims. The debate following the events became accentuated when it was found that for four or five days the German media chose not to report the story (the TV channel ZDF later apologised for this editorial failure), despite mounting evidence on social media. The police response on the day was generally seen as inadequate, and prosecutions were fewer than might have been expected, and these mostly for theft rather than sexual assault. Though attacks did take place, the element of

are naturally described in language. The cultural fears are mediated by linguistic behaviour. Language can become a fundamental part in the systematic imposition of the status of ‘enemy’ on an individual or a group, thus realising Schmitt’s idea of political action.

In *The Politics of Friendship* (1997, *passim*) Derrida explores the identification, role and possibilities of friendship, and therefore enmity, from a wide range of deep philosophical perspectives, but is perhaps guilty of making a similar assumption that the enemy has a certain unity (is an ‘individual’ in the most literal sense), instead of underlining the complexity and often contradictory nature of whatever and whoever the enemy may be. The likelihood of a comfortable dichotomy (as Schmitt proposes in his somewhat simplistic concept, *political decision*) between familiar and the *providential enemy* (Derrida, *apud* Cromwell, 1997: 123), of a ‘hostility without affect’ (Derrida *apud* Schmitt *ibid.* 124), or simply of having a coherent picture of other humanity to identify Europeanness against, is paltry. In Derrida’s defence we should say that immediately before the passage in question he quotes Plato’s idea that “the purity of *polemos* or the enemy ... remains unattainable” (Derrida, 1997: 114). But this is not enough. If we are to recognise the other as an enemy or as a friend, or even as a neutral figure, we need to discover her/him. Knowing the enemy is not merely a philosophical question or a moral or theological obligation. It happens in law repeatedly: the identification of those guilty of sexual assault in Germany in 2016 as refugees of one kind or another has legal ramifications.

This involves listening to the arrival; hearing, understanding and having the means to interpret her/his (often extremely tragic, but possibly disjointed) tale. Both politically and legally

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organisation was found to be lacking, but became a significant element in descriptions of events, leading to a terrorist-threat narrative. For us an interesting linguistic point is highlighted by the fact that when only three of 58 arrested suspects were defined as ‘refugees’ by the media, Cologne’s chief prosecutor was quick to point out that “The overwhelming majority of persons fall into the general category of refugees. They have various legal statuses, including illegal entry, asylum-seekers and asylum applicants. That covers the overwhelming majority of suspects.” A clear reminder of the importance of linguistic choices in highly-charged narratives. “Cologne rapists WERE refugees: Prosecutor slams reports exonerating migrants as ‘nonsense’”, *The Daily Express*, 19.02.2016.



this is quite a tall order, linguistically speaking. Blommaert (2010) outlines with great detail how difficult the process of establishing the ‘truth’ of an asylum seeker’s tale often is, and it is wise to bear in mind that the creation of identity by linguistic means (largely through narratives employing what linguistic repertoires the teller has at their disposal) is absolutely not a one-way process. The general perception may be that a person seeking refuge in a foreign country should be able to present documentation which presents her/his status and supports her/his claims – in other words a bureaucratic narrative with details and tangible items such as passports and visas, or should at least have a compelling explanation, presumably following a western-style (and so credible) plot, as to why these vital, life-changing pieces of paper are absent<sup>7</sup>. But this is only half the story. Identity is also created by the receiver; it is a dynamic process in that it can (will) change and develop over time, but also in its two-way nature. “People don’t *have* an identity, but ... identities are constructed in practices that *produce, enact or perform* identity – identity is identification, an outcome of socially conditioned semiotic work” (Blommaert, 2005: 205, italics in the original). It is hardly surprising that government departments find it so difficult to name the migrant and to adjudicate her/his case efficiently and fairly. It is also worth remembering that a performance requires an audience, and that this audience might be from a different milieu each time, and will be an audience sitting in a changed social and historical environment each time the tale is told as well. Most of all, the audience might be hostile or primed with strong preconceptions, prejudices or previous narratives which will clearly impinge upon any creation of meaning, which is of course a dialogical practice (Blommaert, 2005: 205).

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<sup>7</sup> It is tempting to expect that a lack of documents might be caused by administrative incompetence in ‘third world’ countries of origin, compounding the difficulties of the hapless asylum seeker, or might be due to the breakdown of government in a war-torn region, but it should be noted that the Windrush scandal which erupted in the United Kingdom in 2018 was provoked by an absolute lack of documentation by the British Home Office which does not produce identity cards for citizens or residents and destroyed a substantial raft of arrival information pertaining to Caribbean citizens in 2010 following the closure of a storage depot. As many as 60,000 residents in the United Kingdom face the threat of having to prove their date of entry (as many as fifty or sixty years ago) without any state apparatus to help them to do so. See William Davies, “Weaponising Paperwork”, *London Review of Books*, May 2018.

But these audiences exist in a complex relationship to the states that claim to be ‘dealing with’ the issue of migration; creating a discourse that might be sympathetic, questioning or highly and aggressively critical. The linguistic arena in which the migrant finds her/himself is manifold, involving not only varied media and sources of journalistic information, but also pressure groups and interests, institutional players of varying authority and resources, and a perhaps confused general public. “Ethnic identity is typically produced by, or with reference to, the state. The state there acts as the ‘othering’ actor defining citizens in terms of an essentialised identity category, while in the same move it defines itself” (Blommaert, 2005: 208). We might add the corollary to this assertion that the state’s weakness (and that of European institutions) in the face of the so-called migrant crisis risks making the state appear inept or sluggish in difficult times, and so encouraging more extreme remedies to luridly narrated dramas of contact with the other.

But language is at best an imperfect medium for these discourses which attempt to reach delicate (or harshly decisive) consensus as to social and political value. Blommaert (2010) and Pennycook (2010) both stress the part played by *location* in linguistic creation of meaning: languages are not immobile, and a universalist idea of what is English, French or German, or indeed almost any other language, is of limited use when we are trying to identify, or verify the identity of a speaker, an applicant for asylum or someone accused of illegally residing in a particular place. “We need to think of truncated repertoires rather than of ‘complete’ languages in the traditional sense of the term, and ... we need to see communication in globalisation as often ‘unfinished’, as a deployment of incomplete communicative forms” (Blommaert, 2010: 180). In other words, the linguistic description of experience is highly varied, changing according to place and milieu, and certainly will not fit snugly into bureaucratic categories or nestle conveniently under political labels. As Blommaert notes, this view of language as a collection of resources only serves to underline the

inequality at its basis: any migrant will have to argue her/his case, perform identity and look acceptable with the linguistic skills available, and depending on the linguistic skills of the audience to interpret their meaning. The pragmatics of each debate or conversation becomes paramount, diverse *voices* need to gain acceptance or credibility and, due to the ever-changing nature of communicative practice (over time and place/space), *semiotics* becomes as important as linguistics in understanding the other.

This may be why stories associated with migrants seem to be so powerful narratively. It is not just a skilful mix of rhetorical devices and a certain fear of the unfamiliar, but a highly semiotic charge that episodes artfully described (or retold) can contain. Gestures, with their linguistic elements of clever sound-bites or sympathetic journalism, have become the stuff of the politics of the other in present-day Europe. A few examples should suffice to underline this: the ‘wall’ blocking the southern border of Hungary (actually a fence, and this is perhaps significant linguistically: it is the gesture that matters rather than the precise intersection of vocabulary and concrete form); the sixty-nine (a larger number than usual) Afghan refugees/asylum seekers/illegal immigrants deported by Germany on the sixty-ninth birthday of the Minister of the Interior, well-known for his hostility to migrants<sup>8</sup>; the 177 migrants picked up by the Italian authorities and ‘held hostage’ by the Minister of the Interior in direct contravention of the Italian Constitution for purely propagandistic purposes (interestingly there were sixteen children among them, being held just at the time that the notorious ISIS claimed to be holding seventeen children hostage). These three actions are replete with rhetorical potential and are noticeable for the lack of any attempt to identify

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<sup>8</sup> “Of all things on my 69th birthday - and I didn’t order this – 69 people were sent back to Afghanistan,” Mr Seehofer said. “That’s way above the usual level so far.” Horst Seehofer quoted in an article, “German minister jokes as Afghan migrants deported”, *BBC website*, 10-07-2018. It behoves us to note that the Minister laughed at their fate while they were being sent back to a country not regarded officially as safe. Fifty was the agreed maximum for a single day, and it is perhaps significant that fifty-one of the deportees were from Seehofer’s home state of Bavaria and he was in the midst of a highly-charged political scrap with his ally in government, Angela Merkel.

the ‘other’ with any real accuracy: the only exception might be the Afghans, victims of over-zealous German officials, but even here we should mention how notoriously fluid national identity is in the post-modern world where many are without passports, languages and ethnicity do not fit political barriers and borders, and trickery and false testimony might also be used by applicants.

Thus any conversation or dialogue aimed at identifying the other, or the enemy, will use highly varied linguistic resources, perhaps repertoires from different European and non-European languages, and will do so against a backdrop of strong, emotive narratives. In other words, it is the *pragmatics* of these dialogues that will be the defining factor, rather than linguistic structures or vocabulary in a classical sense. Many conversations might take place in a lingua franca context, with both parties using forms of English from different contexts and geographical spaces, in a European nation in order to identify, assign roles and accept narratives as genuine. Here the ability of a lingua franca as mediator might be found wanting, its pragmatics barely adequate in an extremely high-stakes situation where the idea of cooperation and the ‘let it pass’ principle’ (see Chapman, 2015, for a critical discussion of this) are probably far from sufficient to enable competing and controversial stories and explanations to be received and accepted as true. Jenkins (2007) claims that English as a lingua franca communication is “by its very nature, inclusive” (Jenkins, 2007: 71), but we have to question this in contexts of great inequality (e.g. journalist speaking to refugee, or refugee to border official), where the migrant will have to achieve audibility within a dominant discourse (Jenkins, 2007:205).

The lingua franca solution to communication between state and the other, or the other and society in general is probably inadequate precisely because of the complexity of the issues involved: it is the context of situation that makes language simultaneously have to carry so much weight and be unable to do so. The meanings are not merely too detailed and subtle, but they are also dependent upon a politics which is in flux and a society which is insecure. Bauman’s concept of the “precariat”

(Bauman, 2016: 47/49) gives greater contextual information to all this: the working classes of Europe (like the middle classes of America) are anxious because they might lose employment and fall out of the system at any time, so creating a fertile environment for tales of a privileged coloured or migrant population (*c.f.* Salvini's *pacchia* mentioned earlier). And while the context is difficult, the essence of language is deeply divisive, as well as unifying: "Speaking the same language is not only a linguistic operation. It's a matter of *ethos* generally" (Derrida, 2000: 133). We might have more in common with the speakers of another tongue, if there are cultural, social and psychological similarities, but how much more difficult will this communication be if both the *ethos* and the linguistic tools are distant and diverse?

The greatest danger is, of course, as Pliny warned us at the start, that we de-humanise the visitors in our midst, empathising how they came unannounced ("No-one invited you here" – Milos Zeman, Czech President, quoted in Bauman, 2016: 85), and attributing to them all manner of crimes, with the added advantage that a dehumanised subject might quite likely commit anti-social acts (Bauman, 2016: 85/6). Agamben (2005: 80) describes an aspect of sovereignty in Roman Law allowing a citizen who is deemed a threat to the security of the state to be declared a *hostis iudicatus*, deprived of his belongings and legal status and liable to be put to death. Of course, the times and the context are wholly different, but there are interesting parallels: sovereignty under threat arrogates enormous power to itself over the person and negating customary rights, the enemy is ill-defined and so must be named as such by a judicial procedure, and the consequences for the individual might be devastating. *Hostis* is much discussed by Derrida (1997), especially in contrast to *nimicus* (a private enemy), but we can see that this dichotomy is far from adequate when we are dealing with thousands of migrants from different countries, crises and scenes of desperation. With the stakes so high, language must be used with pragmatic delicacy, deep human understanding and political caution if we are ever to recognise a real enemy accurately, and treat friends or

acquaintances with kindness. St. Augustine is credited with the ugly epigram, “even a dog we do know is better company than a man whose language we do not know” (*apud* Montaigne, 2003: 35), but it is this very humanity that we need to recognise, using all of our linguistic resources. Montaigne stresses the role falsehood would have in destroying companionship (*ibidem*), and so we are forced to strive for the opposite: a profound effort employing all linguistic and social repertoires to enable each and every migrant to tell their story. Hamlet invokes the assistance of Horatio in death to affirm his humanity, and he needs dialogue to achieve it. In de-humanising our migrant visitors we risk in some way dehumanising ourselves. A possible solution is language, for language, as Levinas (*apud* Derrida, 1997: 134) said, is hospitality.

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