Naming and categorising: 200 years of labelling migrants in the British press

This paper takes a linguistic approach to the conference topic and examines the language used to represent migrants and how this construes particular kinds of identities for the people involved. As recent debates have highlighted, the choice of which term to apply to describe people who move is an ideological one, in which certain features are foregrounded or backgrounded. To take a contemporary example, the term ‘migrant’ has been presented as an umbrella term which encompasses ‘refugee’, but to use the former where the latter is appropriate is to discursively negate or background a set of rights for those individuals. Following a similar line of reasoning, it is also possible for the term ‘migrant’ to act as a superordinate to labels like ‘expat’, but in contemporary discussion this rarely occurs. Indeed, as will be shown, in contemporary press discourse emigration is rarely discussed at all. Perhaps more disturbingly, this sometimes appears to be reflected at the academic level too, with few (if any) studies considering both immigration and emigration when analysing discursive representation. As King argues, interdisciplinarity is key to migration studies, an aspect addressed by this very conference. However, he also goes on to note that further ‘barriers to an holistic, synthesising study of migration are posed by the division of the migration process into its many fragmented component stages (departure, arrival, return)’ (2002: 89). This project aims to bring these components together by looking at the full range of terms applied to people who move. The overarching aim of this paper is to challenge or denaturalise the labels which are applied to migrants by looking back in time to uncover how people were categorised and named in the past. The principle research questions posed in this paper are: i) which labels are used to describe people who move in the different time periods? ii) who is subsumed under the labels in each time period? (e.g. when the term ‘immigrant’ is used, who are the people named with this label?). The paper takes an empirical approach and employs combines corpus linguistics and discourse studies in order to go beyond the impressionistic sample and work with a very large, representative body of data (as discussed in Baker 2006, Partington et al 2013 *inter alia*). The corpora used are the digitised British Library Newspaper Collection (compiled into searchable corpora by Lancaster University) and a contemporary corpus constructed by the author through the Nexis database. In the first stage, the candidate terms were identified through reference to previous research and by using the computer tools to retrieve noun forms used with verbs of movement. In the second stage, the terms or labels for people who move are analysed in terms of 1) their frequency in the different time periods (reflecting their newsworthiness), 2) their evaluative potential at each point in time, 3) which groups of people they are used to describe and 4) who they are set up in discursive opposition to. Through this detailed analysis of the patterns from a diachronic perspective, we can observe how these labels are not immutable ‘facts’ but discursive tools used to categorise people in particular ways at particular times.

References