Mind your language: the semantics of asylum

by Stephen Moss

Our confusion over the language of asylum reflects our confusion over the issue itself.

In its report last Saturday of William Hague’s speech on asylum policy, the Times referred to ‘asylum seekers’ in its first paragraph; ‘immigrants’ in its second; and ‘refugees’ in its third. The terms appeared to be used interchangeably.

The Guardian library has resolved the conundrum to its own satisfaction. Everyone gets put into a file called ‘refugees’, with the exception of high-profile individuals in well-publicised cases who are seeking political asylum in the UK. The library has decided that the term ‘asylum seeker’ is bogus, rather than the bona fides of the claimant. Refugee organisations have drawn the same conclusion. There has been no obvious rush to rename themselves: the Asylum Seeker Council would not have quite produced the new category of asylum seeker, and the media quickly latched on to the change of nomenclature. Significantly, it will enter the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary later in the year.

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The term ‘asylum seeker’ was first used in the American Political Science Review in 1959 and was a cold war creation: most asylum seekers were political dissidents from the Soviet Union. Refugees were quite different: people displaced in large numbers by war or famine. ‘Refugee’ is a word that evokes immediate sympathy; ‘asylum seeker’ is a colder, more bureaucratic term.

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The term is abused on all sides. Those on the right no longer even have to use the word ‘bogus’; their tone suggests that they consider all asylum seekers bogus. But some of those entering the UK are also to blame for bringing the term into disrepute: many people who are clearly on the move for economic reasons claim to be asylum seekers. The latter are really ‘illegal immigrants’, though that is a horribly Powellite term redolent of fear and xenophobia that should also be consigned to history. The linguistic solution is perhaps to phase out both ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘illegal immigrant’, and use only ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’. So farewell, ‘asylum seeker’. Is it too late for the OED to rescind its decision to give the term its seal of approval?

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This article appeared in the Guardian on 22 May 2001 and also in Welcome to Britain: A special investigation into asylum and immigration, published by the Guardian in June 2001 which presents a wide range of reports first published as part of a three day series in the Guardian from 20-23 May. Thirty Guardian writers investigate the issue of asylum, focusing on aspects such as the humiliation of living on vouchers, the truth about trafficking, the history of Britain’s immigration policy, the impact on developing countries of the brain drain and the reality of life inside Britain’s most notorious asylum detention centre.

100pp. £4.50 (£5.00 incl p&p).
To order a copy of Welcome to Britain, telephone +44 (0)870 727 4155 or write to: The Guardian, 119 Farringdon Road, London EC1R, UK.

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2. Previous leader of the UK Conservative Party.
3. Enoch Powell – former Conservative Party member of parliament (and minister) who in 1968 condemned multiracial immigration into the UK.