

Review of Katrijn Maryns *The Asylum Speaker: Language in the Belgian Asylum Procedure*. Manchester: St. Jerome, 2006.

*The Asylum Speaker* is an extremely successful and important analysis of the linguistic and discursive nature of the Belgian asylum procedure. Katrijn Maryns' book is well crafted, argued, organized, and researched. It is a study that will undoubtedly impassion its readers and raise awareness about the obstacles and difficulties faced by those who seek asylum.

Maryns' work benefits from its accessibility; her introduction prepares her reader for detailed analysis with basic information about the asylum process in Belgium. She indicates, in her introduction, that the number of asylum applications has undergone an enormous increase over the past 25 years, surging from 3,000 applications per year in 1984, to 40,000 in 2000. She illustrates that the asylum seeking process has therefore suffered from bureaucratic oversimplification of claim reports and overemphasis on exact and minute details (5).

Maryns records and transcribes interviews at each of the many stages of the interviewing and appeal process between asylum seekers, their interpreters and lawyers, Belgian officials, and judges. In the Case Koulanga, Maryns had the opportunity to record the original interview and the appeal of a man from Cameroon. Immediately evident in her examination of this case are a plethora of problems and misunderstandings, both linguistic, and cultural. The applicant and his interviewer both struggle with communicating in non-native languages, and the official's lack of familiarity with both the culture and socio-political situation of Cameroon force the asylum seeker to spend most of his interview describing the general situation in Cameroon, instead of telling his own story. Ultimately, important details are tragically left out of the official's written report, the only record of the interaction. The author provides her reader with many more examples of cases and transcriptions from the interviews she was able to record and witness first-hand, including a frustrating demand for detail on the part of an official who wants an exact description of an ID card, and a case that required two interpreters. Reading their own words, and learning the escape narratives, and life stories of the asylum seekers reinforces the striking and saddening reality of the difficulty of gaining refugee status.

Maryns insists that her work is not a criticism of the officials involved in the process, but instead a "study that addresses the bureaucratic system and the unrealistic demands it makes on those involved in it (asylum seekers, institutional representatives, interpreters)" (12). Maryns, by means of a linguistic approach to understanding the asylum seeking process, accurately and convincingly proves that the system is flawed, and that those going through the asylum seeking procedure need a stronger support system, greater understanding, and a procedure that treats them fairly.