Researching Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) repatriation programmes: addressing issues of linguistic inequality in practice

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Résumé

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes provide a repatriation service for asylum seekers and undocumented migrants to return to their countries of origin, and have gained in popularity across the EU in recent years. In the UK, these programmes are funded by the British government and the EU, and may include applicants' travel expenses, support to obtain travel documents and a resettlement package of up to £2000.
AVR in the UK is controversial and has attracted criticism. Most notably the voluntariness of AVR has been questioned: many rejected asylum seekers have few real alternatives given that the Home Office withdraws welfare support from asylum seekers after rejecting asylum claims. This effectively gives people a choice between destitution or AVR. Questions have also been raised about the sustainability of the return, the appropriateness of reintegration support and the evaluation of the support once people have returned.

My research investigates communicative practice within AVR – an overlooked area of AVR research. I examine how social and linguistic inequality is discursively maintained and challenged, particularly in relation to two of AVR's central aspects: the voluntariness of the programmes, and clients' opportunities to make informed decisions about return. Taking an approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Linguistic Ethnography, my research combines a discursive analysis of institutional AVR texts, with semi-structured ethnographic research interviews with institutional staff providing the AVR service.
In this paper, I outline the key findings of my research regarding the institutional use of client narratives, institutional assumptions regarding language, literacy and multilingualism, and staff difficulties in negotiating institutional ideology. I describe how I am disseminating these findings with AVR stakeholders, and how I envisage my research can be employed within the AVR service and beyond. I argue that my findings can contribute to an improved understanding of potential linguistic and social inequality within this bureaucratic setting.

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