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RESEARCH REPORT

# The “Don’t come/Go back home” continuum: the use of storytelling in Migration Information Campaigns

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## ABSTRACT

Campaigns to encourage return or deter migration have become a priority for European governments, revealing a new way of managing migration flows to Europe. If scholars from social sciences have investigated these campaigns, no study in the field of discourse analysis addressed the argumentative discursive mechanisms at work in shaping migrants’ perceptions. The present research analyses the use of storytelling in migration information campaigns (MICs) by comparing two online European campaigns: a dissuasive campaign ([tellingtherealstory.org](http://tellingtherealstory.org)) and a persuasive campaign ([retourvolontaire.be](http://retourvolontaire.be)). First, the discursive features of each website are described, highlighting the central place given to migrant’s stories. Second, a narrative and lexical analysis is conducted on these stories to investigate the way in which they constitute the argumentative dimension of these campaigns’ discourses. The results show that the stories of both dissuasive and persuasive campaigns converge towards the same moral: migratory projects are doomed to fail. These

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migration information campaigns can be seen as part of what we call the "Don't come/Go back home" continuum.

## RESUMO

Campanhas para encorajar o retorno ou dissuadir a migração tornaram-se uma prioridade para os governos europeus, revelando uma nova forma de gerir os fluxos migratórios para a Europa. Se estudiosos das ciências sociais investigaram essas campanhas, nenhum estudo no campo da análise de discurso abordou os mecanismos discursivos/argumentativos que atuam na formação das percepções dos migrantes. A presente pesquisa analisa o uso da narração de histórias em campanhas de informação sobre migração (MICs), comparando duas campanhas europeias online: uma campanha dissuasiva ([telltherealstory.org](http://telltherealstory.org)) e uma campanha persuasiva ([retourvolontaire.be](http://retourvolontaire.be)). Primeiramente, descrevem-se as características discursivas de cada site, enfatizando o papel central dado às histórias dos migrantes. Em seguida, realiza-se uma análise narrativa e lexical dessas histórias, a fim de investigar o modo como constituem a dimensão argumentativa desses discursos. Os resultados mostram que tanto as campanhas dissuasivas quanto as persuasivas convergem para a mesma moral: os projetos migratórios estão fadados ao fracasso. Essas campanhas de informação sobre migração podem ser vistas como parte do que se chama de continuum "Não venha/Vá embora para casa".

## KEYWORDS

Storytelling. Migration. Migration Information Campaigns. Argumentative discourse. Lexical analysis.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Narrativa. Migração. Campanhas de Informação sobre Migração. Discurso Argumentativo. Análise Lexical.

## Introduction

*It is the story that is drawn from the morality. For the fabulist, there is first a morality [...] and only then the story that he imagines as a pictorial demonstration, to illustrate the maxim, precept or thesis that the author seeks by this means to make more striking (Claude Simon, Nobel Lecture, 1985).*

In the past few decades, migrants have been increasingly targeted by awareness-raising and migration information campaigns (MICs) led by Western governments and international organisations, in particular the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). These campaigns originated in the 1990s in Australia, the United States and Europe (funded by the European Union or by one or more member states), mainly through the lens of anti-trafficking in migrants' countries of origin and transit (WILLIAMS, 2020; NIEUWENHUYS; PÉCOUD, 2007; WATKINS, 2017). Highlighting the dangerous nature of the journey (VAN BEMMEL, 2020), the poor living conditions in destination countries, and the numerous opportunities to succeed "at home" (DIMÉ, 2015), these campaigns try to deter "undesirable" migrants to reach Europe. By doing so, they promote a "culture of immobility" (PÉCOUD, 2010) within departure regions by assessing who has the right to free movement and who doesn't. Nevertheless, despite the growing importance of these campaigns, researchers have repeatedly questioned their effectiveness and ability to influence migrants' aspirations (OEPPEN, 2016; BREKKE; THORBJØRNSRUD, 2020; BISHOP, 2020).

Recent studies argue that the counselling on assisted voluntary return (AVR) programmes "extends this logic of deterrence and discouragement from places of 'origin' and 'transit' to destination countries" (CLETON; CHAUVIN, 2020, p. 2). Indeed, in destination countries, state actors promote AVR programmes to encourage migrants to return to their home country (FINE; WALTERS, 2021; CLETON; SCHWEITZER, 2021; CLETON; CHAUVIN, 2020; VAN NESTE-GOTTIGNIES; MISTIAEN, 2019). According to Lietaert *et al.* (2017, p. 974), "the goals of the program[me] have shifted from allowing the return of those who are waiting for it to pushing the return of those who are no longer allowed to stay". As these operations take place without any physical coercion, migrants need to be persuaded to leave on their own and convinced that the decision stems from their own choice. "This requires the use not of raw force but of incentives that purport to make the desired behaviour objectively sensible and hence interpretable as the product of 'agency'" (CLETON; CHAUVIN, 2020, p. 4). These persuasive communication initiatives have become a priority for European governments.

Today, campaigns to deter migration and those that encourage return are an integral part of the tools available to Western governments to manage migration flows (SCHANS; OPTEKAMP, 2016; NIEUWENHUYS; PÉCOUD, 2007). Being officially defined as a tool to protect the lives of migrants (PÉCOUD, 2012), they are part of the humanitarian-security nexus that characterises contemporary border management practices (ANDERSSON, 2017). As such, they benefit from the participation of humanitarian actors (VAN DESSEL; PÉCOUD, 2020) as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Messages, strategies and formats have diversified and specialised to reach an ever-increasing number of target groups: "radio; TV; newspaper; internet ads; street

performances; community workshops; billboards; posters; leaflets; comic books; branded merchandise; and YouTube videos” (WATKINS, 2017, p. 286).

Despite all the research conducted on the topic, no study in the field of discourse analysis has addressed these campaigns so far. From a discourse analysis perspective, these campaigns can be defined as “argumentative discourses” (AMOSSY, 2012) that aim at shaping migrants’ perceptions and subjectivities. But contrary to discourses such as advertisements or election speeches that have an explicit “argumentative purpose”, these campaigns do not show their persuasive intent. Indeed, they rely on a specific discursive device – testimonies of migrants embedded in storytelling – which carries an implicit “argumentative dimension” (AMOSSY, 2012, p. 44). The efficiency of storytelling stems from the fact that it is the addressees – migrants themselves – who draw the moral of the stories and make it their own (AMOSSY, 2012, p. 190).

The present research aims at highlighting these discursive mechanisms by comparing two European campaigns. The first one, *Retour Volontaire* (RV; “Voluntary Return”), is the website dedicated to voluntary return programmes designed by the Federal agency for the reception of asylum seekers (Fedasil) in Belgium. It targets asylum seekers in the middle of the procedure, applicants who have been turned down, and immigrants who have never applied for asylum. The second campaign is the website *Telling the Real Story* (TRS), an initiative launched by the UNHCR and funded by the European Commission. Its official aim is to communicate about the dangers of irregular movement to potential refugees and asylum seekers specifically from Eritrea, Nigeria, and Somalia.

After drawing an overview of both campaign websites, stories from both RV and TRS are analysed and compared. Their specific narrative structure (ADAM, 1987; 1996) and lexical fields are detailed to explain the discursive mechanisms that contribute to their argumentative dimension. This allows to demonstrate how these stories work as self-fulfilling prophecies that show how migratory projects end in failure.

## 1. The website as a discursive device

The two websites have similar structures but different discursive features. The main structure can be described as follows:

Tellingtherealstory.org (TRS)	Retourvolontaire.be (RV)
<u>Choose your language</u> (English, Nigerian pidgin, Amharic)	<u>Choose your language</u> (English, French, Dutch, Albanian, Amharic, Arabic, Chinese, Farsi, Pashto, Fula, Lingala, Mongolian, Portuguese, Serbian, Spanish, Russian, Tigrinya, Ukrainian, Vietnamese)
<u>Source</u> (not very visible, at the bottom of the About section): campaign funded by the European Commission and implemented by the UN Refugee Agency	<u>Source</u> (clearly displayed): Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers, with the support of the EU
<u>Stories</u> (mainly videos): first person account	<u>Stories</u> (mainly texts): third person account
<u>General information</u> about the situation of refugees around the world	<u>General information</u> on voluntary return in Belgium

TABLE 1 - Websites description  
Source: Authors

As we can deduce from the list of languages, the recipients of the RV site come from countries with strong emigration rates that produce most asylum demands, whereas the TRS website is intended for Nigerians, Somalis, Ethiopians (the Amharic language is also used in Djibouti, Egypt, Yemen and Sudan). As for the campaign founders, both sites feature them at the bottom of the page, even though the first one clearly displays the name of Fedasil and the support of the EU whereas TRS only reveals who is behind the website at the bottom of the About section (whose link is not on the main menu but at the bottom of the homepage: the UNHCR, with funds from the European Commission). MICs are indeed often “unbranded” on purpose, such as in other campaigns (for instance, the *Aware Migrants* campaign) where promoters, partners or donors are only visible in the background of the website.

The backbone of both sites are the “stories” (see FIGURE 1), testimonies given by people who either have emigrated to Europe and/or decided to go back to their countries.

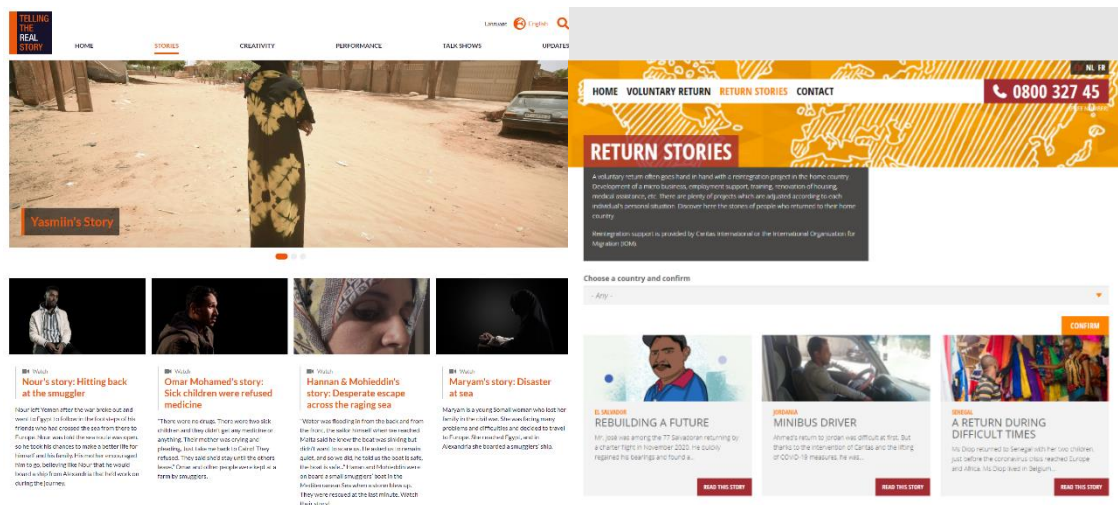


FIGURE 1 - Stories section on Telling the Real Story (left) and Retour Volontaire (right) websites (2021)  
 Source: <https://www.tellingtherealstory.org/en/stories/> (left) and <https://www.retourvolontaire.be/stories> (right)

The stories are written with not-too long (more or less 300 words for TRS and 400 for RV) simple sentences in ordinary language. In both campaigns, protagonists are called by their first names. These stories are migrants' testimonies embedded in the narration of an omniscient speaker (an "unrepresented narrative voice"; CHARAUDEAU; MAINGUENEAU, 2002, p. 185); the UNCHR for TRS and Fedasil for RV. Reported speech marks such as quotation marks and verbs of utterance ("she witnessed", "he recalls", "Hanan says", "she recounts") attest that, on the one hand, these testimonies have been made by real protagonists and, on the other hand, they are framed by an omniscient speaker. Storytelling is defined as a good practice in the IOM public communication campaign toolkit: "Telling a powerful human story is the most effective way to engage people" (2021, online). Indeed, the humanisation at work in these stories told by migrants to migrants contributes to the emotional component of these discourses and promotes identification with the protagonists (VAN DESSEL, 2021). This storytelling intertwined with testimonials plays a key role in the trustfulness of the information these campaigns provide: only those who have lived it know and can testify. This aims at increasing the effectiveness of the message, as illustrated by the following excerpt of an interview of Daniela Cicchella, the head of the TRS project, about video testimonies of refugees:

"The shift was to talk not about them, but to them, [...]" she [Daniela Cicchella, head of Telling the Real Story project] explains. "There is a lot of communication around but the trust of information is crucial so when the [refugee] community talks to itself through these enhanced forms of dialogue that's probably the most effective communication," she tells Euronews (DE OLIVIA, 2019, online).

The campaign makers know that the main source of information for migrants is their community. Most of the time, migrants distrust institutional actors (GILLESPIE *et al.*, 2016) and rely on their family network, home community, and the diaspora (VAMMEN *et al.*, 2021; WALL *et al.*, 2019). Hence, campaigns creators use community-based agents including local artists, religious authori-

ties, and former or returning migrants (MAA, 2020; RODRIGUEZ, 2019) both as sources of information and a vehicle to reach migrants. Moreover, both TRS and RV campaigns assume that migrants lack adequate and truthful information to make the right decision (SCHANS; OPTEKAMP, 2016). Blinded by false beliefs, migrants decide to leave their country because they don't know how risky the journey and life in Europe are. They are thus "presented as ignorant, naïve and gullible, which denies their ability to develop coherent and considered strategies" (PÉCOUD, 2012, p. 45). To tackle this information issue, both TRS and RV display authentic stories of refugees that are told by refugees themselves to tell the real story. This commitment to tell the "real" truth pervades both TRS and RV discourses, but we will see that while the former aims at correcting disinformation, the latter fills the gap of misinformation.

The enunciation of both websites is radically different, it goes from a lexicon of fear to one of hope:

Tellingtherealstory.org (TRS)	Retourvolontaire.be (RV)
Dangers	Reintegration project
Atrocities	Development of a micro business Employment Support
Lost their lives	Training
Psychological and physical trauma	Renovation of housing
Risks and suffering	Medical assistance
Perils	
Irregular movement	
Traffickers	
Misinformation	
Lured by false promises	

TABLE 2 - Websites lexical fields  
Source: Authors

The lexical fields are different because each website has a different goal: RV seeks to persuade migrants (addressed as "you") to go back to their country of origin, while TRS tries to prevent them from moving (they are named "asylum-seekers, refugees and other people on the move"). In the end, the aim is to reduce migration and resorting to asylum.

Lexical fields of fear and hope, and the use of emotions in general, are central in TRS and RV storytelling, making them the pillars of these persuasive discourses. Scholars have indeed stressed the importance of emotional discourse in dissuasion campaigns: "Since affect is considered a crucial mechanism to change public opinion, this campaign foregrounds testimonies and narratives over evidence and expertise, which are genres which have been more classically associated with migration management" (DE JONG; DANNECKER, 2017: online). If campaigns assume that migrants are rational actors who lack information to take the right decision, at the same time, by using emotions such as fear, they contribute to hinder rational decision making (MARCUS, 2003).

## 2. Corpus and methodology

The corpus consists of all stories from the websites *Telling the Real Story* and *Retour Volontaire* (collected in 2021). The observable units that are analysed are stories of voluntary return (RV) or stories of migrants who experienced a difficult moving journey (TRS). These data have been manually retrieved, selected, and analysed according to their narrative structure and lexical fields.

According to Adam's narrative outline (1987, 1996), every narrative presents the six following features:

1. A minimal temporality: a minimal succession of events occurring in a time  $t$  and then  $t + n$ ;
2. The presence of an individual or collective actor who can be a state subject (patient) and/or an actor subject (agent of transformation);
3. Predicates that define the subject at time  $t$  and then at time  $t + n$ ;
4. A structure consisting of an initial situation (before), an undergone transformation (at the same time) and a final situation (after);
5. A narrative causality;
6. A final evaluation or moral of the story. According to Adam, the moral informs the "configurational meaning" of the story (ADAM, 1987, p. 62), its global meaning, its "intention" (ADAM, 1996, p. 18).

However, "it is not enough for a reader to be able to follow a story in [...] its *episodic dimension*, they must also be able to *grasp altogether* these successive events and identify a semantic configuration" (ADAM, 1996, p. 17)<sup>1</sup>. This is what Adam calls the "configurational meaning", resulting from "the passage from the chronological narrative sequentiality of events to the whole in its argumentative and semantic dimensions" (ADAM, 1987, p. 63). Following his theory, we consider that the specific configurations of argumentative discourses lead to different morals and give the story its configurational meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are ours.



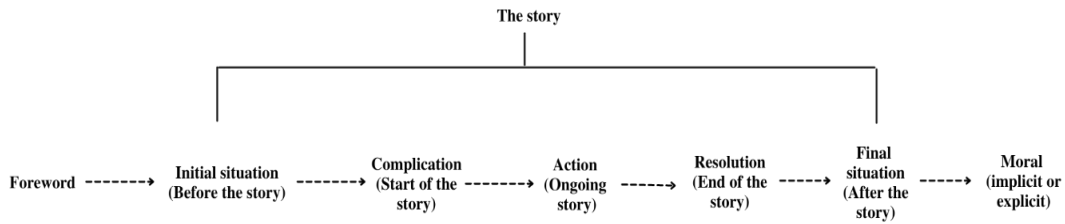


FIGURE 2 - Adam's narrative sequences of a story  
Source: Adam (1996, p. 62)

The comparison of TRS and RV shows that stories found on each website match this structure, even though the focus is not placed on the same sequence (the focus of each narrative is circled in red in the figures below): when the overall goal is to dissuade migrants (TRS), the emphasis is put on the Complication sequence, whereas when the narrative seeks to persuade (RV), the focus is on the Resolution sequence. To explore the construction of meaning in these sequences, the most prominent lexical fields of each of them are then identified and analysed. The prominent lexical fields used in the two types of stories are fear for the first set, optimism for the second.

The analysis resulted in a specific configuration of each set of stories, each matching one or several lexical fields:

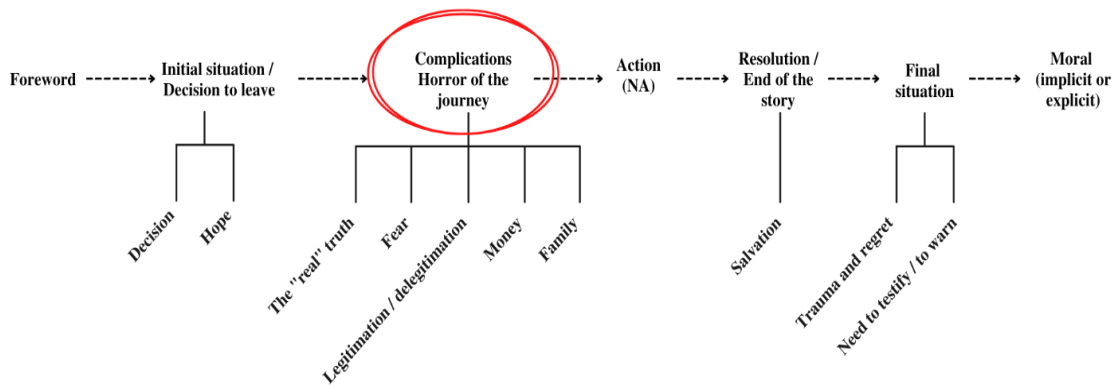


FIGURE 3 - Narrative sequences of TRS with their respective lexical fields  
Source: Author's diagram based on Adam (1996, p. 62)

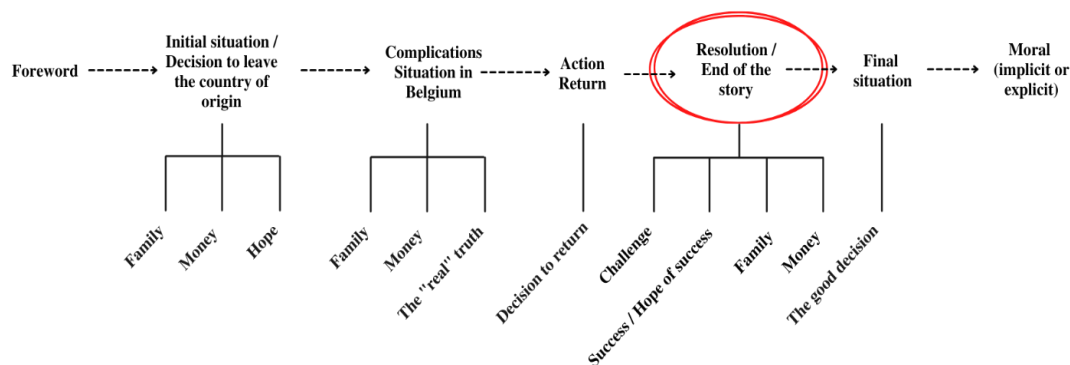


FIGURE 4 - Narrative sequences of RV with their respective lexical fields

Source: Author's diagram based on Adam (1996, p. 62)

The following section discusses the discursive features of each set and the development towards the moral of the story: do not leave or return back home.

### 3. Results and discussion: bad endings (TRS) *versus* success stories (RV)

The 42 RV stories tell successful experiences of migrants returning to their countries of origin who received a reintegration support provided by Caritas International or the IOM. The TRS website gathers 144 tragic stories of people on the move who undertook the journey to Europe.

Both RV and TRS follow the canonical structure of narratives. The way these texts are structured plays an important role in their persuasive dimension. Even if some of them (the Action sequence in TRS, for example) are sometimes absent, both types of stories encompass an initial situation with complications that lead to action(s) and their resolution due to some helpers. At the end of the story, the protagonist has undergone a transformation. The moral is not always explicit but is easily inferable. Beyond these similarities, the morals of RV and TRS stories are conveyed by very different lexical fields: the former are mostly stories with a happy ending, while the latter are dark tales with a sad ending.

#### 3.1. Initial situation

Stories of both TRS and RV do not really dwell on the reasons for departure that make up the Initial situation. The story usually begins with the protagonists' decision to leave their country and the lexical fields of decision and hope prevail:

- (1) “She could not stay there any longer and decides to leave Somalia.” (Yasmin’s story, TRS)<sup>2</sup>
- (2) “Hoping for a better future for their children, the Harbi family arrived in Belgium in September 2014.” (Harbi family, RV)

In TRS, the decision to depart is often triggered by a relative or friend, overlooking the reasons that drove the person to leave, as we can see in the following example:

- (3) “Yehia’s parents advised him to flee to Egypt.” (Yehia’s story, TRS)

### 3.2. Complication

In TRS, the Complication is the longest, predominant sequence. This sequence insists on the horror and the violence encountered by people on the move, depicting them as victims of smugglers and describing the harsh conditions of their journey. The lexical field of violence, fear and horror is predominant:

- (4) “[...] [we] were threatened with being sold as slaves. [...] There is a big danger, and any false movement would mean the end. [...] and soon they were suffering badly from hunger and thirst. [...] They had started to despair [...].” (Issa’s story, TRS)

All the stories found on TRS website mention at least one characteristic of the horror of the journey. People suffer from tiredness, food and/or water scarcity, mistreatment, prostitution, human trafficking, and so on. They undergo “absolutely terrible” (Kiro’s story, TRS), “full of suffering” (Homam’s story, TRS), “nightmarish” (Hassan’s story, TRS) situations, and witness their fellow travelers die without a proper burial. Many of them have never been “so afraid in [his] [their] live[s]” (Raed’s story, TRS) and expected to die. Some of them put their trust – and fate – in God to overcome these emotions:

- (5) “God knows.” (Omar’s story, TRS)
- (6) “I prayed every night before I went to sleep, hoping this day would come.” (Kiros’s story, TRS)

Complications are illustrated by numerous quotes and the second part of the title often refers to the difficulties met during the Complication sequence. Most of the titles found on TRS follow the same structure: “[NAME]’s story: [EMOTIONAL ASPECT] of the story”, where the emotional aspect underlines the main moving element of the story:

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<sup>2</sup> All the examples that are discussed in the results are excerpts of testimonies from both RV an TRS campaigns.

(7) “Abdelmejid’s story: Anguish at sea.” (TRS)

(8) “Joy’s story: Fleeing insecurity and violence, ending up in slavery.” (TRS)

The complications of the journey are clearly attributed to misinformation. In TRS, the sources of this misinformation are clearly identified and delegitimised. On the one hand, smugglers are depicted as criminals not to be trusted (examples 9, 10), and on the other hand, the diaspora is said to tell “fairy tales” (Hassan’s story, TRS), perpetuate a distorted image of life in Europe, and be thus “partly responsible for the exodus of refugees” (Hodan’s story, TRS) (examples 11, 12):

(9) “She was tortured; raped and endured physical attacks by the human smugglers.” (Medina’s story, TRS)

(10) “The first thing that struck him when dealing with smugglers and their brokers was the sharp contrast between their sweet promises and the harsh reality of the journey.” (Aman’s story, TRS)

(11) “They post pictures and stories on social media about how wonderful life is in Europe, misrepresenting reality and inducing others to waste their time, money and health.” (Frank, Blessing and Isibor’s story, TRS)

(12) “They rarely (if ever) describe or depict the difficulties of the journey or the problems and daily stress of living in exile. The Somali diaspora must stop misleading those at home, especially the young and hopeful; they must stop posting fake photos and stories on social media, declares Hodan.” (Hodan’s story, TRS)

The term *trafficker* (89 occurrences) is often used as a synonym of *smuggler* (280 occurrences), resulting in a lexical confusion between smuggling and trafficking that contributes to criminalise migrations as an “organised crime” (MUSARÒ, 2019, p. 631). In doing so, these stories devalue an important source of information for migrants: “Migrants are not naive when they trust smugglers with their travel plans and money but regard them as important gatekeepers facilitating their migration and bringing them closer to realizing their individual dreams” (VAMMEN *et al.*, 2021, p. 18). The construction of the figure of the “criminal smuggler” (OEPPEN, 2016) shifts the responsibility for migrants’ ills onto the smugglers and, ultimately, onto the migrants themselves (OEPPEN, 2016, p. 66) as the latter decide to leave. This delegitimation of the sources of migrants’ information, in turn, reinforces TRS’s commitment to share trustful information by tackling misinformation.

In RV stories, the Complication sequence always begins with a challenge that takes the form of an unexpected event:

(13) “In Belgium, she tried to obtain a residence permit, without result.” (Agnès’s story, RV)

The lexical field of hope for a better future in the Initial situation gives way to one of disillusion in RV stories:

(14) “Nana arrived in Belgium with her husband in 2014 in search of a better future. [...] But reality in Belgium did not match her expectations.” (Nana’s story, RV)

Moreover, as the nostalgic images referring to “home”, RV stories use the idea of family to show (or rather to make people feel) that life in Belgium means being away from loved ones:

(15) “He was missing his family.” (Safiullah’s story, RV)

(16) “His family had stayed in Georgia and he needed to reunite with his wife and children.” (Irakli’s story, RV)

(17) “She found it difficult to be separated from her husband without knowing how long it would take before a decision would be made about her dossier.” (Shaima’s story, RV)

In example (17), the distance from relatives is compared with the length of the procedures. The loneliness will last over time:

(18) “His wife and two daughters had stayed behind in Baghdad and his main goal was to bring them to Belgium. [...] [H] [h]e became aware that the road to family reunification would take longer than expected.” (Mohammed’s story, RV)

In both TRS and RV stories, the lexical field of money is closely related to complication as the cost of travel is often responsible for the family’s ruin:

(19) “To pay for the journey, the family sold all of their belongings in Baghdad.” (Harbi’s story, RV)

(20) “They were detained under horrifying conditions, beaten, and given electric shocks to force them to call relatives for money.” (Dunia and Ahmed’s story, TRS)

### 3.3. Action

In TRS, protagonists are depicted as helpless beings, and the action sequence is often non-existing, preventing them from agency. The complications are either unsolved or resolved by a helper. This helplessness is reinforced by the use of the passive voice:

(21) “She was floating helplessly for 11 hours. She saw people struggling to keep swimming, then giving up and disappearing into the deep. She was saved when an Egyptian boy close to her saw a fishing boat and shouted for help.” (Maryam’s story, TRS)

(22) “He was evacuated from Libya and eventually reached Sweden, where he is living today.” (Aman’s story, TRS)

Contrary to what happens in TRS, protagonists of RV stories take actions and are agents of their destiny. To cope with the bad situation, the RV protagonists must accomplish a difficult action: decide to return to their country. To influence migrants' decision-making, these campaigns also mobilise the lexical field of family:

Even mentioning seemingly banal issues, such as the “pleasant climate in Suriname”, is believed to make a difference for migrants' return decision-making. Often this includes reminding potential returnees of their family and friends who still reside in their country of nationality, in order to evoke feelings of longing, missing or regret (CLETON; SCHWEITZER, 2021, p. 14).

The family has indeed been long recognised by scholars as closely intricated with migratory projects and used, in turn, by migration policies to constrain movement (BONJOUR, 2008).

### 3.4. Resolution

For TRS, the Resolution sequence is usually truncated, as the narrator does not tell where the protagonist is when they are testifying or how they ended up there. Some testimonies present the UNHCR as a saviour, tinging those stories with a positive tone. Some of them even conclude with a happy ending, although the protagonist does not reach Europe and stays in a camp.

Contrary to TRS, the RV Resolution sequence is the most developed part of the story and usually ends on a happy note. Indeed, the return is successful or well on track:

(23) “While his choice to return to Ethiopia was successful [...]” (John's story, RV)

(24) “After successfully learning the basics of the profession in just a few weeks, she was hired as a freelance hairdresser.” (Luiza's story, RV)

This success is made possible thanks to Fedasil, Caritas International or the IOM, who plays the role of a “magic auxiliary” (ADAM, 1996):

(25) “Thanks to advisers from the IOM office in Moscow, a tutor was hired.” (Luiza's story, RV)

(26) “They were therefore helped by the IOM office in Kosovo.” (The Miftari family's story, RV)

This is one of the main differences between TRS and RV stories. In TRS, protagonists are framed as victims of human trafficking, whereas RV protagonists undergo a transformation and are empowered by their decision to return home. As observed in the lexis, the decision to leave is presented as stemming from the migrants themselves:

(27) “After several months Hoda decided to return to Iraq, as she was unable to find work in Belgium in her field as a qualified accountant. Her goal: to start a company and show her sons that you need to work hard and that nothing is handed to you.” (Hoda’s story, RV)

(28) “After his asylum request was denied, he was assigned an open return place in Fedasil’s center in Jodoigne. There he decided to return to Afghanistan.” (Bogdan’s story, RV)

As a result, the decision to return home is presented as a free decision that leads in the Final situation to economic success:

(29) “She started her company in an old sewing workshop at her parents’ house. Despite the local difficulties (power failures, bad connection) the cybercafe is highly successful and Hoda is able to contribute to her family’s income. Hoda’s eldest son goes to school and hopes to later attend university.” (Hoda’s story, RV)

The lexical field of family also appears in the Resolution sequence of RV stories. Contrary to the sad feeling it generated in the Complication sequence, here stories present the reunion with the family as a warm event:

(30) “Narine returned to Armenia, where she was warmly welcomed by her parents and brother.” (Narine’s story, RV)

(31) “Shaima and her daughter are happy to be back with their family.” (Shaima’s story, RV)

### 3.5. Final situation

In the Final situation, TRS stories present the protagonists as traumatised and urging people not to undertake the journey, even when they made it to Europe. The lexical field of trauma underlines the psychological suffering induced by this experience. This trauma will never heal, even if the person obtained the refugee status:

(32) “Homam still carries the psychological effects of the journey with him, and every New Year remembers what he put his family through to taken them to safety.” (Homam’s story, TRS)

TRS stories emphasise the disillusion of the protagonists about the journey and about Europe. The protagonists “realise” that the journey is “much worse than expected” (Liban’s Story, TRS):

(33) “He was told the journey would be easy, but once he started, he realized he was being trafficked—and thus a prisoner.” (Hargeele’s story, TRS)

This disillusion and trauma lead to the need to testify, to warn people not to undertake the journey. Even though they made it to Europe and have been granted a status, refugees feel “a responsibility to warn other people about the dangers of the Sahara route” (Aman’s story, TRS):

(34) “Today, Natsenet says that this was a journey she would not wish even upon her worst enemy. She says people should learn from her experience and not go travelling with smugglers.” (Natsenet and Meron’s story, TRS)

The lexical field of regret unmasks the moral – do not come, it is not worth it:

(35) “During this time, she thought a lot about her parents and the warnings they had given. There was nothing she could do now, she was already too far along the journey and could only move forward. “I regret it. I wish I had stayed with my mother and started a family”, she says. “It has been contrary to my expectations. But what can I do, I have made the decision and started the journey already.” (Lwam’s story, TRS)

In contrast, the Final situation of RV stories reinforces the Resolution sequence. Despite the difficulties and challenges brought by the decision to leave the destination country, returning to the country of origin is always the right decision:

(36) “Despite the difficulties he is currently facing, Mansour doesn’t regret the choice he made to return.” (Mansour’s story, RV)

The project which led the protagonist to migrate is accomplished in the country of origin:

(37) “He can now provide for his family, something that was his main concern in Belgium.” (Henrik’s story, RV)

The analysis shows that the lexical fields of family and money are closely intertwined as migration, including irregular migration, is often a collective project that ensures the economic success of the entire family (BOUILLY, 2008, p. 16). Here, migrants “are told that migration attempts gone awry lead to mothers and wives being left in a position of greater precarity and economic vulnerability” (WILLIAMS, 2020, p. 1207).

### 3.6. Moral

Both TRS and RV aim to influence migrants’ decision-making, either not to leave or to return. (Re)constructed by the readers throughout the story, the Moral derives from the succession of se-



quences, i.e., from the configurational meaning. This Moral is oriented by the most prevalent sequences of the stories: the Complication sequence in TRS and the Resolution sequence in RV. In the Complication sequence of TRS, the most prominent lexical fields are fear, violence, and horror, giving to the sequence order of the narrative structure a configurational meaning that discourages people to undertake the journey to Europe. Similarly, based on the lexical fields (challenge, success, money and family) of the main sequence (Resolution), RV stories try to convince migrants to go back home.

The moral (whether implicit or explicit) of TRS and RV stories can be seen as part of a continuum: don't leave your country to go to Europe, the grass is not always greener on the other side. It's not worth risking your life. If you are in Belgium in a complicated situation, go home. This moral derives its persuasiveness from TRS and RV commitment to telling the "real" truth by filling the gap of misinformation or disinformation. Indeed, the "right" decision (return to the country of origin/don't come to Europe) can be taken only because migrants received the information they lacked:

(38) "After getting information from our return partner in Antwerp, she ended up returning to Georgia." (Nana's story, RV)

In TRS stories, retrospective comments put an emphasis on the lack of information or the misinformation the protagonists had on the dangers ahead. They either "knew nothing about the perils of the journey" (Saida's Story, TRS) or "refused to listen [...] to try their luck" (Shishay's Story, TRS):

(39) "I used to hear about human trafficking, that they sell people, but I never believed it", she says, "I just thought it was a lie and an attempt to keep us from going to Europe." (Selam's story, TRS)

## 4. Conclusion: information campaigns, a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Both TRS and RV use storytelling to persuade migrants and convey their message, whose argumentative force relies on two discursive dimensions.

First, the narrative sequences and the lexical fields lead the reader to reconstruct the configurational meaning of the stories: coming to Europe is dangerous (TRS), returning home leads to success or at least repairs the damages done by leaving the country of origin (RV). TRS stories underscore the Complication section, where the horrors of the journey are described at great length, while RV stories focus on the Resolution sequence and stress the success back home. The use of emotions makes the audience identify with the protagonists. Both configurational meanings converge towards the same moral: the Don't come/Go back home continuum.

Second, the discursive device itself – storytelling embedding migrants' testimonies – makes the omniscient speaker (UNCHR and Fedasil) disappear. The message is told by migrants to mi-

grants. By emphasising or blinding out certain bits of information, these campaigns try to induce the choice to leave or not to leave. The migrant makes his/her own decision. In TRS stories, no propositions are made to follow the legal path to seek asylum in Europe. In RV, the other options (forced return or illegal stay) are the only possible alternatives to voluntary return. Therefore, the “choice” of not coming or returning back home is most often forced as there is no other viable alternative. Nevertheless, the storytelling of RV stories presents the protagonists as empowered agents who take the right decision with the right information. On the other hand, TRS protagonists are framed as victims of human trafficking whose foremost responsibility is to warn their community not to undertake the journey to Europe. By providing the right information and/or tackling disinformation by means of migrants’ stories, RV and TRS narratives demonstrate to the reader that it is not worth migrating. The stories come full circle and the continuity between the two campaigns is clear: if the migration project always ends in failure, if the success is only possible in the country of origin, if the journey is traumatic, why taking the risk to leave? The prophecy self-fulfils: migratory projects are doomed to fail.

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