Migrant and Refugee: Person, Worker or Muslim? Perception of Migration in Slovakia

Andrej Kiner – Patrik Kozár

Abstract

Humans are considered a migratory species. The issue of migration is currently receiving a lot of attention - whether at regional, national or global level. It is currently a source of disagreement between people and political elites and is often discussed by the media, which deal with terms such as migrant or refugee. We consider these terms to be neutral in their inner essence, but they often evoke negative feelings. Therefore, in this article we want to find out what connotations the inhabitants of Slovakia attribute to this term. Our findings show that these are mainly feelings of dismay, incertitude and respect for the unknown. When dealing with refugees, the connotations are identical, but people begin to show feelings of sympathy and compassion. In spite of the fact that the term migrant refers, in general, to a person who has changed their habitual residence, the meaning acquires other attributes and connotations as we refer to sundry foreigners.

Keywords: migrant, refugee, connotation, semantics, Slovakia.

Introduction

Migration has been linked to humanity since time immemorial. People move from place to place for many reasons. Currently, there are estimated 272 million migrants worldwide (IOM 2019a), while in Slovakia there are 152,902 registered foreigners, of whom 97,020 are third-country nationals (ÚHCP P PZ 2021). Migration as such has become a subject of study primarily in international relations, but due to its nature, it has attracted the attention of pundits working in a number of spheres. This is primarily the case in the social sciences and humanities, such as sociology, political science, economics and psychology, but in recent years it has also been the focus of interest for linguists and philologists. In compiling this paper, we will primarily use a semantic approach.

What is the difference between an emigrant and an immigrant? Who is a migrant? Why do we refer to some people as refugees or asylum seekers?

These questions may be asked by people who are not deeply interested in the issue. The results of *the Eurobarometer survey 469 on 'Integration of immigrants in the European Union'*, published by the European Commission in 2018, are evidence of this. According to the data, only 37 % of Europeans claim to be sufficiently informed about immigration and integration issues, despite the fact that around 61% of respondents interact with immigrants on a weekly basis (European Commission 2018).

Immigration has become a very high-profile issue in recent years. In today's globalised world, the word 'immigration' is given a significant space in political discourse, while it also serves as a basis for populist narratives and influences voters. It is the inappropriate use of terms such as migrant, foreigner or refugee by political elites or others that contributes to either conscious or unconscious manipulation of the population, that for this reason often does not distinguish the true meaning of the word. A number of political entities have built their political campaigns on the subject of migration, which has led to surprising electoral results across Europe. Brexit resonates the most, but also the 2017 elections in Germany and France (Dennison, Geddes 2018; Dostal 2017; Edo, Öztunc, Poutvaara 2017). The issue of migration is also reflected in the narratives of Slovak politics, as the growing fear of the population seems to be causing an increase in the preferences of political parties that speak about migration in a negative way (Mihálik 2016). Parallels can also be found in the Slovak political scene, where subjects, regardless of their ideological beliefs, referred to migration as a threat (Štefančík, Kiner 2021).

The aim of the paper is to find out, on the basis of qualitative research in the field of migration, how people in Slovakia perceive selected terms from the described issue and what connotations they associate with them.

The semantic evolution of the word 'migrant' and 'refugee'

Language is constantly evolving. The vocabulary of any language responds to its environment and reflects the changes taking place in that environment. This observation is even more relevant nowadays and is driven by many social, political and economic events. The refugee crisis, which has made headlines around the world, especially in Europe, has brought about changes not only at the socio-political level, but also in language, especially in its vocabulary. Terms such as *immigrant*, *refugee*, *asylum seeker* have become part of the common vocabulary. It is therefore common for a word to evolve during its existence, to acquire a new meaning or to lose its original meaning. Ondrus argues that a single-meaning word can change into a multi-meaning

word during its development, or its structure can be enriched with a new shade of meaning (Ondrus 1980). When talking about the change or shift in the meaning of a word, it is important to mention the term c*onnotation*. Connotations are elements of the meaning of words and give words an additional meaning, which often has an evaluative or emotional character (Busch, Stenschke 2008). The Ľudovít Štúr Institute of Linguistics defines connotations as "*the associative meanings that a word or phrase acquires through usage in certain contexts and situations"* (JÚĽŠ 2021). As Dolník states, the world of connotations is variable. Many have disappeared, others are emerging. The dynamics of culture is determined by various factors, resulting in the variability of connotations. In principle, it is the interaction of external circumstances with the motivational world (with the needs, interests, will, etc.) of the culture bearers. External circumstances influence the world, and the activation of this world also affects the semiosphere, i.e., the sphere of connotations. A good example of a change in external circumstances is a change in economic and social formation (Dolník 2013). According to T. Grigorianova and L. Gajarski (2019), evaluation in a language is expressed by the chosen linguistic means, either directly (explicitly) or indirectly (implicitly). Explicit evaluation is reflected in a language by means of value-attributed linguistic means and their interaction in the text or speech. Implicit evaluation, on the other hand, is aimed at indirectly inducing a positive or negative attitude in the recipient and influencing their value interpretation. Explicit evaluation is generally not difficult to interpret, unlike implicit evaluation, where interpretation is more complex and often ambiguous.

In order to better comprehend the issue under study, it is essential to analyse the semantic group of the words *migrant - immigrant - emigrant - refugee - asylum seeker* in a broader sense. According to Cociug (2019), these people are treated differently in the media, with the country of origin playing a key role. As Cociug further notes in her study, people originating from Syria or Iraq are referred to by the media as asylum seekers or refugees. People coming from African countries are most often seen as migrants or illegals; Afghans, on the other hand, are often referred to as economic migrants (Coicug 2019).

However, many people confuse these terms and use them synonymously. The ambiguity in defining these terms dates back to 1951, when the Convention of that year and later its 1967 Protocol defined a refugee as: *"Any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country."*(UNHCR 1951) The United Nations further defines an

asylum seeker "*a person who claims to be a refugee, but whose claim has not been definitively assessed"* (UNGA 1975). The exact chronology of when a refugee becomes an asylum seeker is not established, that is why these terms are used randomly. In addition to the above terms, other terms also occur in social discourse. Migration "i*s a general term describing the movement of people from one area to another".* Immigration *"is a sub-category which normally refers to people moving into a country from another who intend to stay permanently."* Emigration is defined as *"departure from one's native land to settle in another".* This term, according to the author, is less frequently used (Coicug 2019).

The term *migrant* might be considered specific as well. From the etymological point of view the word comes from the Latin – *migrātiō*, meaning *movement* or *change of residence*. To achieve the objective of the article, it is essential to define both examined terms. The IOM glossary defines it as "*an umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students*" (IOM 2019b: 132). Thus, the term may cover both economic migrants (including immigrants and emigrants) and refugees who have fled the country of origin due to persecution or any conflict, yet we hold an opinion that the terms *migrant* and *refugee* cannot be used interchangeably. Besides, refugees are protected and defined by a specific legal framework. According to the 1951 Convention, IOM perceives refugee as "*a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it*" (IOM 2019b: 171). Regardless of the definitions, *migrant* is gradually used as a term to refer to any person who has moved from the place of residence.

Methodology

The aim of this paper is to analyse the perception of the word migrant and refugee by the inhabitants of the Slovak Republic. In the previous chapter, we clearly defined the terms we examined, which in their essence can be described as neutral, but predominate negative connotations associated with actors of international migration, regardless of the reasons why migrants leave the country of origin (Liďák, Srb 2019). We thereby set a research question with an aim to find out what connotations respondents associate with both terms. Moreover, for achieving a purpose, which was set at the beginning of our study, we have used a method of semantic analysis that allowed us to identify the semantic content of both examined terms. In total, 220 respondents were surveyed using an online questionnaire containing both open-ended and closed-ended questions. After further data processing, 3 questionnaires were eliminated due to the inadequately filled in answers. The research was conducted from August 23, 2021 to September 17, 2021. Not only were we interested in finding out the answer to the question, but we analysed individual connotations the respondents stated in their answers. Due to the variety of responses, we included only those which appeared at least 10 times and more. The least frequent answers will not be included in the subsequent charts but may be commented on in the following chapter.

Results and discussion

First, we asked our respondents the following open-ended question: *What feelings do you have associated with the word 'migrant'?* The most prevalent feeling respondents stated was incertitude, fear, or the unknown. On the other hand, some pupils expressed positive or neutral feelings, such as hope, luck, courage, opportunity.

WHAT FEELINGS DO YOU HAVE ASSOCIATED WITH THE WORD 'MIGRANT'?			
n=51 (23%)	dismay		
n=45 (20%)	incertitude		
n=24 (11%)	the unknown		
n=23 (10%)	neutral		
n=15 (7%)	hope		
n=15 (7%)	freedom		
n=12 (5%)	luck		

Source: Based on authors' findings.

To find out the difference in feelings associated with *migrants* and *refugees* we posed a corresponding question to the surveyed. The most frequent answer was fear, followed by sorrow. We noticed that refugees are perceived more sympathetically compared to migrants and that respondents are aware of the threat they face, as most indicated their desperation related to the ongoing wars and other conflicts. On the contrary, we recorded several answers related to increased threat and Islamization of Europe, however, similar answers were rare. We included a control question to verify whether the respondents are fully aware of this term. Generally speaking, all answers were legit, however, some people claim that refugees opt for developed countries only: "*A person who, due to unfavourable living conditions such as war or poverty, flees beyond the borders of his country to a developed country, from which (s)he expects security, social support, higher earnings and an overall improved standard of living*" (respondent n. 38), or "*a person looking for better living conditions in another country*" (respondent n. 207).

| *WHAT FEELINGS DO YOU HAVE ASSOCIATED WITH THE WORD 'REFUGEE'?*			
n=85 (39%)	dismay		
n=50 (23%)	incertitude		
n=48 (22%)	desperation		
n=39 (18%)	sympathy		
n=21 (10%)	grief		

Source: Based on authors' findings.

After having examined both terms, our intention was to determine what attitude respondents have towards migration. Note that we do not closely specify what type of migration it is dealt with, therefore it might refer to any kind (as *migration* is an umbrella term covering a broad number of issues, it was done with an intention to find out whether respondents are aware of, for instance, circular or domestic migration). The following question offered various answers with an option to include the own one. Among other responses, three respondents provided their own answers accentuating the importance of considering migration as an essential part of human history, and two questioned people pointed out that there are also other types of migration which are often overlooked – domestic and forced migration.

WHICH CONNOTATIONS OCCUR TO YOU WITH THE TERM 'MIGRATION'?	
n= 149 (68%)	a foreigner working in the territory of the given country
n= 103 (47%)	willingness to work for a lower wage
n= 98 (45%)	economic benefits for the country
n= 91 (41%)	enrichment of local culture
n= 85 (39%)	fear of the unknown
n= 67 (30%)	shift of religious and social values
n= 54 (25%)	transformation of domestic culture
n= 33 (15%)	increased crime rate

Source: Based on authors' findings.

To see the difference between different perceptions of the term *migrant*, the respondents were inquired about their attitude toward migrant representing other cultures, territories, religion, and values in a scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 – positive, 2 – less positive, 3 – neutral, 4 – less negative, 5 – negative). These include foreigners from Serbia, Afghanistan, and Czechia. It can be observed that the most positively perceived migrants come from Czechia. On the other hand, citizens of Serbia and mainly Afghanistan are viewed neutrally or even negatively. This finding is not that surprising as we hold an opinion that third-country nationals are universally regarded less positively, in particular, if they are of a different religion than Christianity.

On a scale of 1 - 5 (where 1 is positive, 2 - less positive, 3 - neutral, 4 - less negative, 5 - negative), how do you perceive a citizen of a selected country legally living and working in Slovakia?
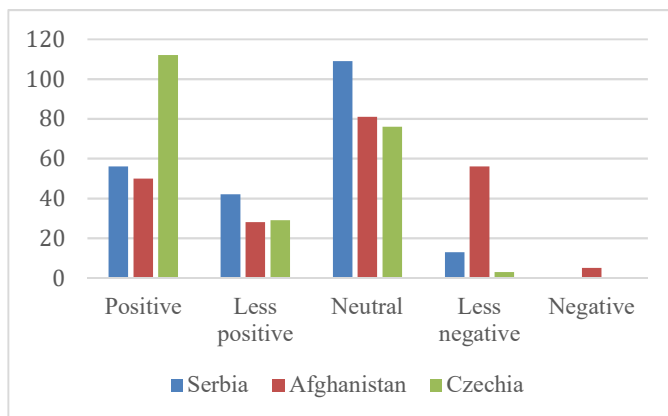
Source: Based on authors' findings.

From the previous results, it is obvious that not all migrants are perceived in the same manner. Some are viewed positively, some negatively, yet it is customary that Slovaks adopted a neutral attitude towards migrants inhabiting the country. On the other hand, the surveyed were asked to answer a follow-up question which was to ascertain their opinion about Slovak immigrants. The vast majority of respondents assert that their point of view is exclusively positive, while stating that the Slovak citizens are people who "*migrated for a better life*", or "*left for better conditions*", or persons who "*use their abilities and talent, which they are unable to apply in Slovakia*". It can be concluded that Slovaks have double standards when referring to migrants. Once you ask a Slovak citizen about their opinion about migration, migrants or refugees, it is possible that their attitude is neutral. Nonetheless, if we dissect these terms, we observe different connotations and feelings people bear towards the examined issue.

Conclusion

Words like *migrant* or *refugee* have a neutral meaning, but as we have found, they are often given negative attributes. Hence we can identify with Balykhin, Balykhin and Netesina (2018) who claim that in modern language the word *migrant* is not neutral. Despite the fact that most perceive migration as a neutral and naturally occurring phenomenon, among the most common connotations mentioned by the respondents in the questionnaires were terms such as fear, incertitude, and the unknown. Surprisingly, the seemingly related terms *migrant* and *refugee* evoke at first glance similar, but on closer inspection, different feelings. While migrants are more likely to be perceived as people who arouse fear and ignorance, feelings of empathy and compassion are beginning to prevail when addressing refugees.

As we predicted, the term migrant is not homogeneously perceived as it takes on a variety of connotations. If we mean by this term a Slovak citizen living abroad, the vast majority of respondents perceive him/her positively and with a certain understanding. Slovaks consider the Czech population living and working in Slovakia to be more positive and to some extent neutral. This finding is no surprise, as the people of this country are relatively similar in their values, beliefs or religion. On the contrary, we are detecting a slightly more aloof attitude with regard to the citizens of Serbia. They are primarily known as economic or labour migrants and this fact also influences the opinion of Slovaks, yet such an attitude towards labour migrants was detected in other countries as well (Woo 2021). However, with regard to third-country

nationals with different beliefs and religion, Slovaks express a slight concern based on negative attitudes, which they stated in the questionnaire. Our findings are confirmed by the findings of other academics. The notion associated with the term migrant or immigrant is related to something exotic, different, culturally distant, in some cases even hostile, and thus, Muslim foreigners are often stereotyped, prejudiced (Štefančík, Lenč 2012).

In conclusion, it remains to be stated that our research was largely limited by the fact that it was carried out using the Internet survey. It would be appropriate to use other scientific, primarily qualitative methods in the form of individual in-depth interviews. However, the nature and content of our research has allowed us to use quantitative methods such as online research. We can eventually confirm that our objective was met and hopefully the article will inspire other academics dealing with migration and linguistics to conduct further research.

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Contacts:

Mgr. Andrej Kiner

Katedra medzinárodných ekonomických vzťahov a hospodárskej diplomacie
Fakulta medzinárodných vzťahov
Ekonomická univerzita v Bratislave

Department of International Economic Relations and Economic Diplomacy
Faculty of International Relations
University of Economics Bratislava

E-mail Address: andrej.kiner@euba.sk

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6055-2670

PhDr. Patrik Kozár

Katedra medzinárodných ekonomických vzťahov a hospodárskej diplomacie
Fakulta medzinárodných vzťahov
Ekonomická univerzita v Bratislave

Department of International Economic Relations and Economic Diplomacy
Faculty of International Relations
University of Economics Bratislava

E-mail Address: patrik.kozar@gmail.com