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# Transmigrant: one word to hide them all

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On the importance of language as a determinant factor in shaping the way we see the world.



In the tweet of Theo Francken, the Belgian Secretary of State for Asylum, Migration and Administrative Simplification, we can read: "*The Action Plan against illegal transmigration is in full effect. Yesterday @JanJambon [current Belgian Minister of the Interior] and I visited the border police in Dover and Folkestone. Yesterday evening I attended a major police action in my region.- We keep on working*".

## AUTHORS



Roxane de Massol de Rele  
Teaching/Research Staff A

## COUNTRIES



Belgium

## PROJECTS

Combating Human Trafficking and Human Smuggling in intra-Schengen Border /



In the picture, we can see handcuffed undocumented migrants arrested by the Belgian police. Several questions come to mind: what is exactly transmigration, to what “category” belong these so-called transmigrants? Is transmigrant even a legal term, and if so what does it entail in terms of rights and protections? This blog aims to shed light on the recent use of this term and the consequences that might be attached to it in terms of migrants' rights and detection of potential victims of human trafficking and aggravated forms of human smuggling. It is valuable to question the recent and constant use of the word transmigrant in a tense and divided national political context where questions around migration are increasingly being polarized. As it was flagged recently by many academics (see below), migrants or, using one of the commonly used term in Belgium “illegal (trans)migrants”, tend to be more and more dehumanized. This blog aspires to highlight the importance of language as a determinant factor in shaping the way we see the world. Choosing and using a specific term to describe a category of individuals can have substantial impact on how we perceive them and could possibly contribute to the process of their (ongoing) dehumanization.

### **An old term with different definitions**

This recent tweet using the term transmigration should not come as a surprise for a regular Belgian newspaper reader. In recent years (2015 - 2018), the term *transmigrant* or *transitmigrant* became part of the common vocabulary used by politicians and media when talking about matters of migration and border control. Since 2017, both terms are considered as synonymous by the dictionary Van Dale, which is the leading dictionary for the Dutch language (spoken in the Flemish part of Belgium). In its actual use, a transmigrant refers to a “migrant who is temporarily staying in another country on his way to his country of destination” (Van Dale) or more simply, as the online [Vlaams Woordenboek](#) (the Flemish Dictionary) defines it “a migrant or illegal migrant from Africa and Asia who wishes to go to the UK and stays on the Belgian or the French northern coast in the meantime”. For the sake of precision, it is important to highlight that the word transmigrant is hardly new. It was already used in the 1930's in the Netherlands, referring to individuals who didn't live in the Netherlands and were passing through the country to reach a non-European territory ([Hendrickx, 2018](#)). More recently,

the word was reintroduced by the anthropologist Nina Glinck Schiller in the 1990's to describe new types of migrants who “*develop and maintain multiple relations familial, economic, social, organizational and political that span borders*” in the country of origin, transit and destination ([Glinck Schiller et al., 1992, p.1](#)).

### Spread the word

The moment when the term transmigrant appeared is not trivial. It was used for the first time by the Minister of the Interior Jan Jambon in October 2015 at the occasion of a radio interview ([Hendrickx, 2018](#)). It is safe to write that context always matters and the introduction of the word is unlikely to result from an hazardous coincidence. The so-called European migration crisis started in 2015 and since that moment onwards, the difficult yet omnipresent and prominent migration question divides the public opinion in each member state of the European Union (e.g. [The Guardian, 2018](#); [Politico, 2017](#); [Le Monde, 2015](#)). The word transmigrant is now officially used regularly by the members of the executive, in the National Security Plan ([2016-2019](#)), in the Belgian House of Representative (e.g. [Belgian House of Representative, 16 May 2018](#)), by the Prime Minister in the [Governmental Declaration](#), by members of the Public Prosecution Office (e.g. interview of Prosecutor Frank Demeester in [Het Laatste Nieuws, 2018](#)), in the annual report of the National Police (2017), in official operations involving the police “task force transmigration”, in the media both in the North and in the South parts of the country (see below), and even in the scholarship (e.g. Melis and Van Gelder, 2017). Several press articles describing the rise in the use of the term only found 20 articles mentioning the term in 2015 against 102 in 2017 (e.g. [Parmentier, 2018](#)). This blog aims to question the recurrent and increased use of this term that has no legal meaning but invades the executive, the legislative and even the legal realms.

### A harmless straightforward word?

Before using the word under question in this blog, the terms illegal migrants, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers were used. The adoption of the word can be explained by the need to make it clear that the individuals are in transit, on the road ([Parmentier, 2018](#)). We can quickly see how the term can be helpful for several politicians as it simplifies a highly complex reality and places in the same box different individuals with different statuses. The blanket term is helpful to make a necessary distinction: is the person there to stay or not? More specifically, the trans/transit implies that the individuals will not apply for asylum in the country, although they might be eligible for the asylum-seeker status. The importance of the terminology used to depict migrants is clear, a difference has to be made between refugees fleeing war/persecution and (economic) migrants who seek for a better life. The dichotomy between the deserving/underserving migrant was, and still is, primordial in our current politically tense context. Yet, legally speaking, a transmigrant can be a refugee, a victim of aggravated form of human smuggling, a potential victim of human trafficking, a potential asylum seeker, etc. It is not new that when we face difficult and sensitive issues, the human brain, as a natural optimizer, will always be keen on using mental shortcuts to simplify complex realities in order to come up with solutions (see [Kahneman, 2011](#)).

### Creation of distance

The historian scholar Claes ([2018](#)) explained recently in her blog how choosing a specific terminology is never an insignificant choice and has consequences in the psyche and in the ways we picture people. When we think of refugee, a specific picture comes into mind imagining a human being fleeing from war and danger. We can assume that this mental image can and is likely to generate feelings of compassion or empathy. A recent research on public attitudes of Dutch students towards migrants can indirectly support this claim

([Verkuyten et al., 2018](#)). The researcher's findings are the following: *“Perceived involuntariness of migration elicited feelings of empathy and therefore higher support for newcomers. In contrast, perceived voluntariness elicited stronger anger and therefore less support.”* (op. cit., p. 901). Because a refugee is by definition an individual who migrates “involuntarily”, the feelings of compassion or empathy are more likely to be developed. It is fair to write that the linguistic choice of the term transmigrant could create even more distance between “us” and “them” (the migrants) (see also [De Potter, 2018](#)). As [Claes \(2018\)](#) explained, when reducing individuals to a status such as transmigrant, it is easier to forget about the human being hidden behind it. As a result, any inclination to empathy will be considerably reduced which can in turn initiate or reinforce the ongoing process of dehumanization (see below). Moreover, because the transmigrants are not there to stay, why should we care about them in the first place? This is relevant in the context of the Maximilian Park where migrants gather temporarily in Brussels and where constant tensions exist between civil society organizations, volunteers, migrants and law enforcement officials. The example of the now aborted draft bill that aimed to authorize house visits at volunteer's homes sheltering irregular migrant is enlightening ([RTBF, 2018](#)). The word transmigrant necessarily implies that the individuals are in the country temporarily and illegally, which can in turn help us justify to ourselves the “tough” approach embraced by law enforcement and politicians towards them (see photo and [Claes, 2018](#)). The law is the law after all?

### Why language matters

Many scholarly debates in the scholarship existed on how language could shape the way we see the world. A large-scale study conducted by the MIT and Stanford University found how even grammatical rules such as grammar gender can have substantial impact in shaping our thoughts ([Boroditsky, 2009](#)). To make it understandable for non-neuroscientist aficionados, the author takes the clear example of personification of death in paintings and gender grammar. The gender attached to the word death will determine the representation of death in paintings as either masculine or feminine in 85% of the cases. She then takes the example of a Russian painter who will be more likely to paint death as a woman while a German one will represent it as a man. If a grammar rule can have so much impact, one can quickly imagine what could be the influence of the use of the clinical term transmigrant in the perception that we have of migrants. The conclusion of this ground-breaking study fits within other important linguistics and neuroscience research showing how *“linguistic processes are pervasive in most fundamental domains of thought, unconsciously shaping us from the nuts and bolts of cognition and perception to our loftiest abstract notions and major life decisions”* ([Boroditsky, 2009](#)).

### An additional step towards de-humanization of migrants?

The historian scholar [Claes \(2018\)](#) carries on her explanation of the use of the word transmigrant explaining how it allows for the reduction of the individual to a status/box, denying him or her his/her own identity. This process, as philosophers and psychologists previously observed, builds the path towards dehumanization and violence. To write about dehumanization here can seem extreme at first glance. However, in light of the recent incident involving the death of the little Kurdish girl Mawda resulting from a police chase with human smugglers and migrants, a petition of 1000 scholars from all Belgian universities called *“We claim the right to humanity”* opened the debate. They saw the death of Mawda and the rough treatment reserved to her parents by the authorities<sup>[1]</sup> as a symptom resulting from the anti-migrant climate reigning in Belgium more than a police blunder. Even if the petition does not refer to the term transmigrant, the Belgian academics fear a progressive degradation of the respect and protection of vulnerable individuals and observe that refugees and migrants are pictured in a manner that is “less and

less humane". They refer among others to the use of the term "illegal migrant" as a root of the dehumanization and the regular negative portrayal of refugees or migrants in mass media (see petition in RTBF, 8 June 2018). Similar remarks were made by the two presidents of the League of Human Rights in Belgium ([Venet and Verstrepen, 2018](#)).

### Ending the zero sum game in the polarized migration debate

Even after these explanations, you might still think that the use of this word is not a big deal and actually enhances the clarity of the situation. After all, these individuals do not wish to establish themselves in Belgium, as their only goal is to reach the perceived UK "Eldorado". There is a convincing counterargument to put forward here, which might not exclusively touch the hearts of "radical no borders" but also members of law enforcement and policy makers. The importance of these reflections is linked with the effectiveness of the fight against human smuggling and human trafficking. While the fight against irregular migration is one of the top priorities of the government (see [Governmental Declaration](#) of the 8 October 2018), the fight against human smuggling and human trafficking is equally high on the national and European agendas (see [National Security Plan 2016-2018](#)). One of the golden rules in the fight against human smuggling and human trafficking is to see the individual first as a potential victim and not necessarily as an irregular immigrant that has to be sent back at the border rapidly (see the reports of the national rapporteur [Myria](#), the reports of the [Greta](#) within the Council of Europe and the [circulars](#) of the Bench of the Prosecutor General on the fight against both phenomena). One of the Belgian reference magistrates on human smuggling, Frank Demeester (2015), recalled how important intercepted migrants were for the investigation and how empathic police officers managed to pick the migrants who are willing to talk and share relevant information. With regards to the increased use of the term transmigrants also in the context of police operations, one could question the extent to which this term could create a form of dehumanization towards the migrants that police officers intercept frequently along the highways. The distance the word creates could possibly reduce police officers' inclination to empathy, reinforcing their perception of potential victims of human trafficking or aggravated form of human smuggling as mere irregular migrants. This could in turn prevent the victim's detection and reduce subsequently the opportunities for successful investigations and prosecutions.

### Lessons from George Orwell

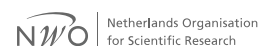
In his essay "[Politics and the English Language](#)", Orwell gives important lessons to write in an appropriate manner, but more importantly, to realize how important language is and how it can easily be distorted by politicians. Using his words: "*if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought*". Among his key lessons, the problematic use of "meaningless words" lacking of clear definitions and meaning could certainly be applied in the transmigrant case. One could argue that the word is the opposite of that as it depicts a clear reality: people who are in the move to their country of destination. The opposite is true as this apparent clarity could be rather used to hide a much more complex and difficult reality. With the adoption of such a blanket, and all-encompassing word, there is more at stake than simply hiding mere distinct legal "categories" of migrants. The use of the word transmigrant is creating ever more distance between "us" and "them" in denying migrants' primary status as human beings. From a legal standpoint, there is a necessity to uphold a clear and transparent legal language. One could further argue how dangerous it is to have this type of word with no legal meaning invading the legal realm. As Orwell explained, these meaningless words can "*spread by tradition and imitation*" to reach a point where the use of such a political "buzzword" will not even be questioned anymore. It is debatable whether the word transmigrant can or cannot belong to the category of political euphemism as it was previously highlighted in the press (see [De Potter, 2018](#)).

When looking at the euphemism's definition laid down in the [Oxford dictionary](#), namely a “*mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant or embarrassing*”, the usage of the word transmigrant could be said to have the reversed effect. Nonetheless, one could argue that this almost clinical term might have been chosen and instrumentalized to serve a certain political agenda given the governmental priority to fight against irregular migration. As there is no evidence of this, it still important to leave the benefit of the doubt to the Belgian government and several of its Ministers and State Secretaries on the intentionality of their linguistic choices. Nevertheless, as Orwell explained, one should be extremely cautious with political language that consists of “*euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness*”. It is indeed this vagueness, the presumed dishonest un-clarity and gross simplification that could build the path towards the dehumanization, and what Orwell wrote: “*the defense of the indefensible*”.

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## Footnotes

<sup>[1]</sup> Right after their daughter took a stray bullet from the police and was taken in an ambulance, the parents were taken into custody and were not able to accompany their daughter, who died the same night.



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2311 ES Leiden, The Netherlands · [Disclaimer](#)

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