

SCENARIO

In the early 2000s, many northern European countries began implementing a screening technique for asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, called Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin (LADO). This attempts to determine if the accent of an undocumented migrant corroborates their claim of national identity. For example, they want to know—based on accent alone—if a Somali is from Mogadishu (a legitimate place from which to claim asylum) or actually from northern Somalia (considered a safe place to live and thus to be deported back to). The tender to carry out these tests was mostly won by Swedish companies Sprakab and Verified. These companies conduct phone interviews with asylum applicants in the target countries, using Sweden’s largely unemployed former refugee population as a resource of informants to listen in on calls and conduct interviews. These informants’ non-scientific assertions on where they thought people “really” came from were then reworked by linguists, who bolstered the claims with international phonetic symbols and turned them into forensic reports for use in court in the target countries. When academic linguists throughout the world were alerted to LADO they began to contest its ideology of monolingualism. Linguists insisted that the voice is not a bureaucratic document, but rather a biography, and an index of everyone you have ever spoken to. The itinerant lives of refugees meant that their voices in particular should not be used as a national identifier. They argued that while the informants conducting the interviews may speak the same language as the applicant, they frequently were not from the same place. This could obviously affect the dialogue and the quality of the data. After hundreds of wrongful deportations, governments finally began to listen to these campaigning linguists. Yet rather than scrap LADO, they insidiously incorporated the critiques, deciding that since dialogue was rendering the tests unscientific, they would use monologues instead. Now, rather than soliciting speech in an interview, asylum seekers were expected to simply speak for fifteen minutes non-stop. They were free to say anything they wanted, because nothing they said had any relevance. Only their accents mattered. It is these words, emptied of their voice, that are reproduced on the following pages. What seems at first like an anxious stream of consciousness is in fact a precise account of the weaponization of freedom of speech, which is reaching its nightmare conclusion in today’s liberal democracies.

AUDITOR

Off you go.

ASYLUM SEEKER

Umm ... Good morning. I am a married woman. I have two children, [breathes in] that is I have two daughters, very pretty [breathes in]. One of them is fifteen years old, the eldest, [breathes in] and the youngest is still twelve years old. My daughters I feel are the most precious thing in my life. [Sharp intake of breath] Umm ... I feel that happiness and the whole world come from them. [Breathes in] How much I love them I cannot possibly describe to anyone at all, because they are the soul and spirit inside of me and my body. I wish for God Almighty to keep them for me and that I be destined to be able to raise them as best I can so they are productive in society. [Breathes in] I would like to talk a little, I am remembering now, and often remember, my school. How I used to go to school when I was little, how they used to treat us in school. [Breathes in] Maybe there are some very nice things that one can remember, but there are also some very painful things. I studied and learned and was very good at school, I always liked going to school. Even if I was sick, nothing mattered [breathes in], whatever it was. I used to always go to school, even if I was tired and sick. Although I went through some very difficult experiences [large sigh], I experienced some difficult health issues, I was very distressed as I had to undergo surgeries [breathes in], but in spite of that, to me school was always the core of my life. [Breathes in] And I was very studious, I never missed a class. Umm ... one time, and I can never forget this ... One time I was at school and I was in tenth

grade, [breathes in] I was a little late one morning. In order to make it on time and not be very late, I started running. I ran and ran [stretches word] from my parent's home until I reached school. I went in, our first class was Arabic language [breathes in]. I entered, I got there and I entered, I knocked on the door and I entered. Our teacher was there, and she had started giving the class. So she looked at my face and said [imitates a stern tone], What's up with you? Where were you? I told her [imitates an innocent tone], I am very sorry teacher, I apologize, but I am late because the alarm didn't ring at home. She looked at me and started berating me, using nasty words, I can't repeat them because when I remember them and repeat them, I feel a lot of pain and a lot of pressure that I don't need in my life. [Breathes in] Anyway the important part of the story is that she said, So you are late to school and you have makeup on? I told her, I am not wearing makeup teacher, because my mom and dad were very strict about this, [raises the pitch of her voice] it's shameful for a girl to wear makeup, a girl should not dress this way, a girl should not speak this way. [Breathes in] So all the time, thank God, they had raised us in the best way. I swore to her by the Quran that I hadn't done anything, that I wasn't wearing makeup on my face, that I had never used any [breathes in]. She opened her bag and took out a Kleenex tissue, and the color of the tissue, I remember, was white [Breathes in] And she started rubbing and rubbing [stretches word] and rubbing my face, and my face was getting redder and redder. She'd rub and look at the tissue and see that it was clean, there was nothing on it, nothing that indicated that I had makeup on my face. But because my skin is white, and I'd been running, and I felt very hot from running, my face and cheeks turned very red [breathes in]. She looked at me and said, go [short pause], get out of my face and sit in your place [breathes in]. Although I was one of the best students in her class, [swallows] but what she thought at the time, I have no idea [breathes in]. Unfortunately some memories are painful [discreetly clears throat, swallows], but nevertheless, some experiences that a person goes through are very difficult to forget [fingers tapping on table]. [Breathes in] Another thing, also one time at school [exhales], umm ... the teacher responsible for discipline at school. I came to school, and my mother had forgotten to wash my trousers the day before, my school trousers, the uniform that we all wore. So I had to wear other trousers. And I went to school. The teacher saw me, or the supervisor. She said to me, come here you why aren't you wearing the complete uniform? [Fingers tapping on table resumes] I told her my mother didn't have time to wash it, what could I do I had to wear whatever trousers I had ...

TYPIST

[whispers something inaudible to the auditor]

ASYLUM SPEAKER

[Breathes in, catches breath], or different colour trousers [resumes breathing in]. In order to punish me, she made me take off my shoes ...

TYPIST

[Whispers to the auditor, louder this time but still hard to make out]

ASYLUM SPEAKER

... and stand in a pool of water, and the water was very, very cold, it was ice cold, I remember that very well, because I was in the ninth grade then [breathes in]. It was very cold, and she made me take off my shoes, as well as my socks, everything, and to stand in the pool. When I got very cold and I felt that I could no longer stand there with my feet in the cold water, I started shouting and crying. When I shouted and cried, she took me out of the pool. Then, and as a result of this, I had a renal colic because I was suffering from a kidney stone. If I caught cold, I would have an episode, the pain wouldn't stop until I would be admitted to the hospital and given tranquilizer and painkiller shots [sighs]. Of course the director came out because of the sound and noise we made in the schoolyard. She said, what's wrong with you? [voice hardens] I told her, I have a pain in my kidney, [raises pitch of voice] I can't take the pain anymore, I need medicine. Call my dad so he can come and take me to the hospital. Of course the school director knew my father well and had a very good relationship with him. And she used to visit us at home sometimes. [Breathes in] When she saw me like this she told her, couldn't you find another student than this one to punish, she spoke to the teacher, she's one of the very polite students in school this one, [breathes in] she doesn't neglect her

duties, she's well raised by her parents, why did you do this to her today? The supervisor told her [imitates a belligerent tone], because she has changed her trousers, she's wearing different trousers. She thought of course that I had liked to embellish and beautify myself and that sort of thing, but I didn't have that intention or thought at all. It was just that I didn't find other trousers to wear because the other ones were dirty [discreetly clears throat, breathes in]. Anyhow she took me to the administration, to the administration room [breathes in], the director, she sat me down there for a bit, she brought me a hot cup of tea, and gave me a pill, a painkiller from her drawer. And she called my dad. Of course my dad came and took me from there in the car to the hospital. As a result, I spent the night at the hospital, and they had to do a surgical operation. [Foot tapping on floor] Now I'd like to speak a little about my childhood memories. [In the background, the sound of a key turning in a lock] I was living happily, I remember, with my parents, my sisters and brothers. [Breathes in] We are, praise God, a large family, may the evil eye be shamed. I had many girlfriends at school, and also in the area I was living in [swallows], but the dearest one to my heart and best friend, she's my lifelong friend, her name was Serene. May God ease her way and give her happiness wherever she goes. She was someone a person could really trust [breathes in], a person who deserves all my appreciation and respect. [Breathes in] Because she is someone who stood by me through many difficulties and through life's trials, that one naturally goes through. Of course life is full of them, and every person has certainly gone through a lot, and yet, this person I would always feel standing by me. I remember, even in 1980, when I had my operation, how she stood by me, how she cried [pronounces word emphatically], when they took me to the operating room, how when I came out and woke up from the anesthesia, I felt her standing beside me, waiting for me to open my eyes. She felt with my pain, and laughed with my laughter. She used to be with me the whole time, we went to the same school, the same class, even the same bus [catches breath] where we sat together. A wonderful person, I can't describe her. But I also had another friend, we used to be together all the time the three of us, our parents used to call us 'the merry trio'. [Breathes in] We used to hang out together, we slept over at each other's house sometimes. Once, she and I, on New Year's Eve, I told my parents that I would like to spend it at her house [breathes in], to hang out just the two of us. Her parents weren't home, they were going out somewhere [breathes in]. We sat together, she had prepared food, she had made mulukhiyyeh and other delicious dishes that we liked, we stayed up late just the two of us, there was nobody else there at all at all [swallows]. We stayed up almost until the next morning [breathes in], we didn't sleep until maybe after six o'clock in the morning [breathes in]. [Chair leg scrapes on the linoleum floor] We would talk about how our school day went, what our childhood was like, we talked about our shared memories, the bitter and the sweet, and sometimes laughed at each other. Anyhow, we spent the whole night drinking juice and drinking tea, and smoking also of course, smoking was forbidden, it was shameful for a girl to smoke, but maybe to me it was something new, and I felt like trying it. But now that I'm grown up, I feel that my parents were right, they used to always tell me, [imitating strict tone] don't smoke, it's shameful. Maybe they said it was shameful for a girl to smoke, but at the same time, they shouldn't have just said it is shameful, they should have explained to me why it was shameful, maybe they could have said that it is dangerous for the health, maybe I could have been more convinced, but just that it's shameful, that I shouldn't do it because it's shameful, why not tell me from the beginning that it is dangerous, healthwise, that it hurts the lungs, that it harms a person's health, even fitness decreases with time because of it, with the years and with age, you can no longer breathe normally, it causes constriction in the arteries, it could lead to heart attacks God forbid, it could cause many health problems. [Breathes in sharply] But unfortunately this health education was not at all available to any of our parents. Maybe, when they forbade us to do certain things, they thought, first and foremost, that it was shameful, because society said it was shameful, because it is shameful for a girl to go out, it is shameful for a girl to come in, it is shameful for a girl to smoke, it is shameful for a girl for example, to do this or that. At least explain to us, you're supposed to raise some kind of awareness in us, [breathes in] something that I used to read about a lot in books, and it was a hobby of mine, reading, I liked books. [Breathes in] I read many books. Until now, the story that I can never forget as long as I live

[breathes in] is The Mother, by Maxim Gorky. I liked his novels a lot. I also read, with my friend that I am speaking about, Serene, I read a lot of books by al Manfalouti. Until now I remember one of the stories, it was called Majdaline, it was very beautiful. Praise God books were always accessible to me [breathes in], I loved reading, I liked, what I liked most of all was to sit on the couch and just read. [Breathes in] I wasn't that much into watching television, because I always felt like: so what are all these programmes? [Breathes in] They are just entertainment, but not useful mentally, there's no culture in them, no educational value, whether in terms of health awareness or any other kind [breathes in]. So I wasn't too interested in sitting and watching TV series, very rarely, although I felt that the rest of the family was. And maybe that's the time that we as a family would sit together, we'd sit, eat together, and watch television together [breathes in]. Especially during the evenings of Ramadan, may God allow it many returns, always in prosperity and good health for all. It was a month that brought together the family. Our customs during Ramadan were very enjoyable, we used to prepare a variety of dishes, [swallows] my mom used to always cook sayyadiyyeh, which the whole family [breathes in] loves. We'd sit, gather together and eat, she used to like making tabbouleh, and we liked it a lot, especially when we were little, and I still love it and prepare it for my children, and my girls like it very, very much. They always tell me, mom cook for us, make us umlukhiyyeh, make us tabbouleh, make us fattoush, the dishes that they like and enjoy very much. I try as much as I can to make the food that they like, always. [Breathes in] Anyway the nights of Ramadan were the most beautiful nights of the year, especially on the night of Eid when the Takbir for the feast would begin, it was a very, very beautiful thing. We would sit and make the kaak biscuits together, the kaak for Eid, we'd get together with the neighbours [breathes in]. These were the beautiful moments and occasions. [Sharp intake of breath]

AUDITOR

OK, thank you, that is enough.

AUDITOR

Off you go.

ASYLUM SPEAKER

Hello? [Sharp intake of breath] Now I [short pause] want to talk about where I come from. Yeah, we, in the city that I come from, we have, well it is an old place, with many tribes, or clans as they are also called, we have many well-known tribes, such as: we have the Jaafaris, we have the Ajlunis, we also have among them the Rajabis, and also the smaller ones like Natsheh and Abu Sneina and others. [Breathes in] Our area now is different from the other areas in the West Bank. [Breathes in through nose] Those who want to get out of the city, of Hebron, they can go to other locations in the West Bank, you need to take the bypass, and the Jews make it difficult for them there at the bypass, at the checkpoints and what not [pitch of voice undulates]. In our city now, in our governorate, there are some nice places too, you can go from the north of al Khalil, down to Ras el Joura, [pitch of voice undulates] you can go down to Ain Sara, down to al Haouz, the first and second etc. there are other places, sector 2 which is under Israeli control, you have the Fahs region and Jabal Johar and Tarek bin Ziyad, then you go to the northern areas. Now there, in that area, there are a lot of checkpoints, they make life very difficult for people, they crucify guys at the checkpoints too. Our area is different from the rest of the places there. [Typing sound is heard] [short pause] We also have feasts and what not, people try to celebrate them but it's kind of difficult because of the situation they are in, people are not happy or joyful or anything like that anymore, because of the situation they are in. [Hesitant tone] We have weddings there, they hold weddings, but how? Since Hebron is a conservative place, the guys are on one side and the women on the other. People sit, you have dabkehs, songs and celebrations, all the usual wedding ceremonials. And the following day they go out, have gatherings, they invite people, acquaintances and relatives and so on, and there are popular dishes like mansaf and qidra but mainly mansaf. They sit, eat, it's a tenminute affair then people leave. [Breathes in through nose sharply] There's a festive atmosphere and what not. We also have the other feasts, of course they don't celebrate them much, because as I said there is no festive atmosphere and what not. There's also of course, we have the

dabkeh and songs and other, the usual Palestinian things. Umm ... in the city we have the old town, we have famous places such as souk al Haram, and the Haram itself, the street of the Haram. It's an old site, a long time ago, during the time of my grandfather and grandmother, the elite used to live there, high class people used to reside there. [Sighs] It's an old town until today, and they try to preserve its old architecture. But you know what, Hebron is known for its stone. For its stone, and shoes. They make shoes too. The stone of Hebron, and its marble, are very famous. From there, there is, for example, there is, we have the area of al Fahs. The al Fahs area is the southern area, west of Hebron. This area, you could say all of it, all of it has quarries, they cut stones there and such, and prepare them so people can use them to build houses. [Sharp intake of breath] And Hebron stone and marble are known, and also famous. We talked about the old town, the old town is there, it is now taken by the settlers. There are also settlements there and they mistreat people something fierce every day. You enter al Shallala Street, there are settlements there too. They hurl stones, they throw dirty water and I don't know what, in short it's an ordeal. Anyhow, God help us [swallows], God help us. There's, to go back to the houses and the built environment there, the area is old, it has small apartments, built in the old style, that is, small houses, you could call them vertical, the apartments in them are small also. The souk we are talking about, the one in al Haram Street, the old souk that is, in the old town that is [breathes in], long ago, this souk was very active, you'd enter the souk and have nowhere to step. If you wanted to walk in the souk it would take you a long time from the Haram to the end of the souk, to al Shallala and what not, it would take you a long time, it would take you an hour or two until you're done, why? Because there are shops, coffee, all sorts of places and things, it takes a long time to do the whole souk. But what about now? With the IDs, [breathes in] the checkpoints and what not that the Jews have now put up, it's very difficult to pass through there. And even if you did go through there is nothing, there is nothing there now. Now if you go up Thia Street you might find a shop or two that is open, and there's nothing else, just enough to make do. And the municipality too, you give them a small amount of money let's say ... yes, people are living, so to say, in spite of difficulties, people are living, there is nothing ... to help them. In any case God help them. [Breathes in] Also if you go to Ras and other places, it's also an area that used to be nice. In any case it's different now. We have also ... the life there in that area... it's kind of a normal life, you go ... despite as we have said that Hebron is an area, a conservative city, it has customs and traditions, people there are very, very strict. Yeah. Now if you go out, you can see ... after we are done with work of course, we would go out, go to the café, smoke nargileh, play cards with friends and such things, and so ... days go by in this way, we take walks, go down to the street, to Salam [swallows] Street, to al Haouz, to spend the time. In any case there's nothing there, there's nothing, people are repressed, there are lots of negative points. In the old days, they say things were easier. Anyhow the events and what didn't happen, it's become difficult to move around, it's difficult to ... [takes a deep breath] go out and move around or do anything. Now I have some hobbies, I have ... I like football, I like football. We have a field nearby, near [voice thins from fatigue] our area, we go out and play football after studying, and now school has ended, and there's less interest in football ... you know, people go in time, time goes by. [Breathes in] Anyway football was my favourite hobby, one of the nicest thing that I ... I used to enjoy it a lot. Sometimes, we'd go out, my friends and I, we'd go to Bethlehem and to other places, and as I said we'd take the bypass, [breathes in] you go there ... There's nothing really ... most of the time you can go there without problems but you see the Land Rovers and Jeeps parked on the road, they can ask you for ID and I don't know what, then you are on your way again. [Clears throat quickly] Normally, like in every city that has tribes and clans and what not, naturally there the man rules. He says his word and that's it. Like in every conservative society that follows old ways, so to say. [Sharp intake of breath] There are popular dishes that I like a lot like musakhan, we have musakhan. Musakhan is basically chicken, and they put sumac and onions on it and what not, and bread, [breathes in] and it's grilled. And you have of course as usual the mansaf, the mansaf is very well known but you have to know how to make it, and there are a couple of places, [breathes in] very good restaurants that make mansaf well. And you have sweets. Sweets like knafeh, the one that ... it's true that knafeh is delicious there, there are a couple of places that make a knafeh to your

taste, just the way you like it, such as Hulwayat al Andalus and al Diplomacy [voice creaks] and others. Now those are well known. And you have lots of restaurants that make very decent stuff. Excellent stuff. [Swallows] The areas, as we said, are as follows: you have places where we just can't, I mean you can't walk there or take a stroll, go this or that way, you can't. We have the centre of the town, now the town centre, you can go there, we have ... we have ... It's more active there, people gather there. In the afternoons and evenings you can go there and meet your friends, you walk around with them there, it's a nice place, but there's nothing else to do, there's nothing. [Voice sounds as if throat is clogged] You try to work, to get things done, but it's all for nothing, all for nothing.

AUDITOR

Thank you, that is enough.

ASYLUM SPEAKER