

The language used around borders tells us a very great deal about what borders mean. The words used to talk about borders shape our cultural understanding. I want to give a snapshot of how words and phrases used in recent newspapers create a language around borders that is hostile, demeaning, and frightening. I then will contrast that with language used of borders that give a totally different picture. What if we twined one with the other?

It's possible to use computer programmes to search for particular words and phrases used in contemporary newspapers. So I searched for the word 'border' in UK newspapers between 1st June and 30th June 2019 i.e. last month. The search engine broke down because there were so many examples, the computer couldn't cope with more than 3,000. That in itself tells a story: the sheer number of words for border turn borders into a multitude that cannot be contained or controlled. I've collected the words that came up again and again in news articles discussing borders between territories and between people.

Here's a snapshot of the words and phrases I found. They are not easy listening:

Bodies (numerous times), death, dying shot dead, drowning (numerous times); targets, patrol, wall, sentry towers, force, surveillance, police, control, guard, 2 million land mines, arrested, illegal, flood that could become a torrent; influx, triples, swelling, streaming; virus.

I found loads of examples where migrants who had died or drowned were listed just as numbers; no names e.g. a record 6,000. 'People with no names; the doomed migrants buried in paupers' graves.

Protection, shame, crisis, trying to sneak, detain, intercept, strip-searched, removed, caught, cages, dangerous crossings, fence, scorching temperatures, raped around the clock; concentration camp

Migrant boats threaten a summer of channel chaos

765 stuffed in a cell designed to hold just 12 and forced to stand on a toilet after they were arrested. Is showing compassion to migrants a crime?

Aid worker faces 20 years in prison to giving food, water and clothing to undocumented workers.

People donating nappies and wipes for detained migrant children at squalid border facility are being turned away.

Record number of migrant boats spotted off UK coast

Traumatized sick children who haven't bathed for weeks forced to wear urine-stained clothes and eat rotten food.

I'm sorry to read out such a horrible list of words. Of course, in one way the horror of the words is because what's happening around borders is so horrific; the journalists are reporting events. But they are also shaping a language of how the story and meaning of borders must get told. A compulsion to write about borders as sites of danger; of death; under military surveillance. Of course, that's true. But borders are consistently associated with dirt and disease that must be expelled. There's the language of plague with the focus on numbers, floods. Borders are associated with people who have to be blocked; guarded; intercepted, caged, arrested; strip searched; removed. There's the language of criminality: illegal, caught, cell, detained, sneaking.

And there's the language of crisis and chaos. Borders are caught up into a language of menace and a threat to order, ramped up to apocalyptic significance.

What kind of mind-set does this language produce? – and here I want to make the important point that none of the articles I read were written from the perspective of those moving between borders. Their voices were not heard. Their words of borders were not heard. I am sure, had they been, the language of suffering, death and inhumanity would be told loud and clear. But would they have described themselves in terms of deadly threat, apocalyptic chaos, statistics, plague, dangerous criminals that have to be caught, shot or detained?

It's those kinds of associations that are so deadly. For English readers of English newspapers migrants are presented as dangerous filth; unstoppable, devious, threatening. Borders as things that must be defended and patrolled; otherwise floods that will overwhelm the whole land. Borders get caught up in the language of geographical disaster – and as we know, that's not 'natural', but caused by human arrogance and greed and by self-serving interaction with land that they presume to own.

Does the story of borders need to be told this way?

As it happened, in the same newspaper that featured an article about the summer of chaos, and on exactly the same day, there was an article about another kind of border. Here are its words:

Carefree (2), 'diverse and charming group', 'well-regarded', originally native to mountainous regions of southern Europe, hardy, adaptable, flamboyant colours of summer, mixed (2) borders, growth and resilience, irresistible to pollinators, varieties (4), delicate soft pink, romantic charm, fresh green leaves, tall branching stems, rise, upright, excellent, star-shaped, cluster together attractively, blooms.

Flowering, robust, self-supporting, profusely, definitely warrant a place in the border, dressed in brilliant white flowers, clear-sky blue, desirable, reliable, incredibly resilient, ideal for brightening the back of a border, will grow in pretty much any soil of location.

Any guesses as to what this language describes?

Campanula: their name means little bells – Canterbury bells are campanula – which is a rather nice link back to Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales.

As I say I came across this article by chance. Why is it that the language of flower borders is so different from that of larger land borders? The occupants of this mixed flower border are migrants – originally from Southern Europe, they are colourful, brightening desirable, resilient, they warrant a place, adaptable, will thrive pretty much anywhere, well-regarded, ideal.

Why can we apply such hospitable, welcoming, praising words to the value of migrant flowers in a border, but employ such demonizing language to people in a land border? Borders don't have to be sites of threat, fenced by barbed wire, deadly, populated by pestilent swarms. Borders can be places of variety, mix, abundance, welcoming soil for growth and cross-pollination, brightness and joy, where their inhabitants are desirable and warrant a place.

So why such a difference in the language of borders? Of course, to describe the horrors of migrant experience you can't sanitise the words you use. But you can examine the perennial language of disaster, chaos and disease that over and over again is used to present anything perceived to be a threat. A garden of course with mixed borders, is a strip of land that's personal property. Owned by someone with the disposable income to have a garden and be able to buy plants for it and to tend them. Gardeners choose which plants to have in their gardens

and take great care to defend them from pests. The language used in what is effectively a commercial advert (including prices) is all about display. A garden shows off its gardener.

But MUST there be such a gulf between the words used to describe different kinds of borders?.

There are many borders whose language is about togetherness, attractiveness, becoming – in all senses of that word. Think of braid, brim, hem, decoration; pieces of wood mitred together, plait. In medieval manuscripts, borders are a place of imagination and beauty. Filled with tendrilled leaves – and laced with curling flowers. Go back to those early manuscripts and you see a space for artists to revel; glorying in their craft. Often the borders outshine the text. Often the borders play with the texts; a book of holy psalms with monks showing their bottoms; or an animal made up of the head of a dog, the body of a leopard and the feet of a chicken that wears a crown; or a delightful picture of a dog and a rabbit playing an organ together. The dog (who should be dominant) looks absolutely exhausted as he squeezes the bellows that allow the rabbit to play with a bright grin between its ears. Borders can be places to speak back to the language of power.

I've talked about medieval manuscripts. There's a word in medieval English that sounds very much like border. It came into English from French. The word is *bordour*. It means a joker, an entertainer, witty social commentator. A storyteller. Could we use this French-English chime to tell a very different story about how borders get told?

ON THE VERGE OF BE-COMING

A band of land one row of raspberries away
 From the peeling orange of bleeding boats
 Is our- yes ours- space of appearance.
 Bright paper chains curl jungled Calais
 Into purpled braids of campanula rooted
 In chalk that grew in the sea. Bells of endurance
 Ring out our ragged arrival. Bunting
 Hangs like clean washing across the streets;
 Handshaking open ears are trusting
 The cracked bureaucracy in our walk-lined feet:
 Papers, family, promises drowned.
 Your welcome overwhelms us, freshly soiled
 From gun-rape temper of red-taped guards:
 Oceanic trans-plants to bloom common ground.

A lunchtime talk given by Professor Helen Barr at East Dean during Refugee Tales 2019