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Borders and boundaries in words: The linguistic construction of Mediterranean migration in EU/UN and MSF texts

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Abstract

Every year, thousands of people flee war, persecution, and poverty in their home countries and make the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean in search of a safer future. In response to this ongoing humanitarian crisis, organisations like *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) conduct search and rescue operations to prevent the loss of life. However, these efforts are embedded in a broader sociopolitical landscape where migration is increasingly seen as a security threat rather than a humanitarian necessity (Schroeter, 2019), which shapes public perceptions of migration in media discourse (Baker et al., 2008; Bennett, 2025). There is a significant research gap regarding the ways in which migration is discursively constructed by humanitarian organisations such as MSF, particularly in contrast to official institutional narratives. Drawing on a critical discourse analytical approach (Fairclough, 1995, 2014; Fairclough et al., 2007), used in conjunction with corpus linguistics (Baker, 2023; Baker et al., 2008) and key semantic domain analysis (Rayson, 2008), this study examines (a) the conceptualisation of migration in official policy documents of the United Nations and the European Union; (b) the representation of migration across the Mediterranean on the MSF website. By juxtaposing governmental and humanitarian perspectives, the paper investigates how discursive borders are constructed. While institutions seem to frame migrants within inclusive emergency preparedness and vulnerability-aware planning frameworks, MSF highlights vulnerability, suffering, and the imperative of humanitarian aid. These different narratives illustrate how borders are discursively produced, shaping the ways in which migrants are represented, silenced, or granted visibility in contemporary Mediterranean migration narratives.

Keywords: Mediterranean migration; discursive border; discourse-historical approach; corpus linguistics; Médecins Sans Frontières

1 Introduction

Every year, thousands of people flee war, persecution, and poverty in their home countries and embark on the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean in search of safety and a better future. The Central Mediterranean route (from Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia to Italy and Malta) has long been identified as the deadliest migration route in the world (International Organization for Migration, 2025; Médecins Sans

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Frontières, 2024). In response to this ongoing humanitarian crisis, organisations such as *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) conduct search and rescue operations, deploying vessels like the *Geo Barents* to prevent loss of life at sea and to provide assistance to migrants held in Libyan detention centres or arriving in Europe (MSF, 2024). These humanitarian efforts unfold within a broader sociopolitical and institutional landscape in which migration is governed through a range of policy, legal, and operational frameworks developed by international and supranational actors. At the same time, the terminology used to represent refugees and migrants reflects contextual boundaries. According to the 1951 Refugee Convention (1951, art. 1), a *refugee* is defined as "someone who has been forced to flee their home country because of persecution, war or violence". In contrast, a *migrant* is generally described as a person who chooses to move, not because of direct persecution, but to improve their life through work, education, or family reunification (UN Refugee Agency, 2022). This distinction is further complicated by the figure of the *asylum seeker*: a refugee whose application for asylum is pending, and who only attains full refugee status once that application has been approved (Baker et al., 2008). This complexity is reflected in the extensive legal framework developed over time: between 1943 and 2021, at least 201 legal instruments were produced to regulate the status of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, illustrating the fluidity and ongoing redefinitions of these categories.

Drawing on Corpus Linguistics (CL) (Baker, 2023), semantic analysis (Rayson, 2008), and a critical discourse analytical approach (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995, 2014), this study will examine (a) the conceptualisation of migration in official policy documents of the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU); and (b) the representation of migration across the Mediterranean on the MSF website. While the policy documents belong to a technical-institutional register and reflect the authoritative voice of supranational governance, the MSF texts employ an advocacy-oriented discourse designed to raise awareness and mobilise public support. By juxtaposing governmental and humanitarian perspectives, the paper shows how discursive *borders* and *boundaries* are constructed through distinct discursive practices and ideological framings. In this paper, the notions of *borders* and *boundaries* are understood not solely in their territorial sense, but also as discursive constructs. *Borders* are materialised in the language used to define migrants, regulate their movement, and justify interventions. *Boundaries* emerge between competing institutional voices: on the one hand, international and supranational organisations that frame migration as a matter of law, order, and control; on the other, humanitarian actors such as MSF that foreground the vulnerability and rights of people on the move. Mediterranean migration is thus approached here as a discursive site where *borders* and *boundaries* between securitisation and humanitarianism, legality, and compassion are continually drawn, policed, and challenged.

To show this, the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews relevant literature on migration discourse; Section 3 outlines the methodological framework; Section 4 presents the results; Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to the notion of discursive borders and shows the implications of these discursive *borders* and *boundaries* for the representation of Mediterranean migration.

2 Understanding migration as a discursive site

Building on the above understanding of migration as a discursive site, in this section I will review the main strands of scholarship that have examined how migration is framed in institutional, political, and humanitarian discourses. Attention will be paid to studies on securitisation, criminalisation, and polarisation in public debate, as well as to research on humanitarian narratives that foreground compassion and vulnerability, to highlight how the notions of *borders* and *boundaries* are not only geographically but also discursively constructed.

Increasing numbers of scholars and journals devote their work to understanding causes and consequences, current situations, changes in and continuities of migration-related issues in Europe (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). Much has already been said about migration, especially from a political perspective (Schroeter, 2019) and from the perspective of the press (Baker et al., 2008; Bennett, 2025; Parker et al., 2022), which narrate how these are indirectly linked to security policies (Barretta et al., 2017) and which reveal how divisions among EU member states have resulted in unresolved diplomatic debates between some European governments and EU institutions (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018).

Scholarly research on migration discourse has expanded considerably in recent years and has addressed multiple dimensions of the phenomenon, including the implications of port closures from legal, humanitarian, and political perspectives (Cusumano & Gombeer, 2020); the criminalisation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) rescuing migrants off the coast of Libya (Cusumano & Bell, 2021; Cusumano & Villa, 2021); migration in response to crises (Martin et al., 2014); European politicians' alarm at the rise in the number of asylum seekers (Lucassen, 2018); the impact of different crises on migration discourses (Del Fante & Taylor, 2024); negative polarisation in public discourse (Taylor, 2021; Viola & Musolff, 2019); the re-contextualisation of migration discourses and processes of criminalisation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Lucchesi & Cerase, 2023); and how nationalist ideologies and right-wing populism visually and verbally reconstruct migration in social media (Berti, 2020).

In addition, studies have also addressed the role of humanitarian organisations. In the case of MSF, scholars have analysed its humanitarian activities (Akinga & Chisom, 2024), the authoritarian practices and negotiations surrounding its work (Cunningham & Mena, 2025), and the politicisation and criminalisation of its aid operations (Lucchesi & Cerase, 2023; PICUM – the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants, 2025).

Recent scholarship has stressed that borders should be seen as both discursive and territorial (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). Discourses on migration do not merely describe (De Genova, 2017) but also actively *construct* boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate movement, between "refugee" and "migrant", and between those entitled to rights and those excluded (Yerly, 2022). In the European context, state and supranational institutions often reproduce a discourse of securitisation, whereby migrants are associated with crisis, smuggling, and management (Barretta et al., 2017; Del Fante & Taylor, 2024; Lucassen, 2018). Humanitarian organisations, by contrast, typically adopt a discourse of compassion, emphasising suffering, medical need, and the moral imperative to rescue (Cusumano & Villa, 2021; Fassin & Gomme, 2012). The clash between these two discursive domains (law versus humanitarianism, sovereignty versus solidarity) constitutes a central binary in the contemporary governance of trans-Mediterranean migration.

3 Methods

As underlined in the introduction, this paper analyses the MSF website on Mediterranean migration and official UN and EU documents in order to discuss how extra-EU migration is represented from both perspectives, and to what extent, if any, these representations differ.

Two corpora were collected: the *International Migration Corpus* or *INTL-MIG_corpus*, comprising 42 texts (472,026 tokens; 13,496 types), that is, all official documents written in English and regulating migration in force; and the *Médecins Sans Frontières Corpus*, or *MSF_corpus* composed of 31 texts (22,238 tokens; 3,166 types), that is, all available documents written in English about migration and uploaded to

the MSF website, such as Web texts, blogs, narrations, press releases, interviews, reports.[1] For both corpora, the time range is 2015-2024. Although regulatory documents are available since the end of the Second World War, I included only those documents issued from 2015 not only to make both corpora comparable but also because the first great migration crisis (2013-2014) began to be recognised by the media and politicians in 2015, when there were around 1.3 million applications in the EU and over 1.8 million irregular crossings (Statista, 2026). A breakdown of the two corpora is offered in Table 1, below, where the corpus size (2nd row), number of texts (3rd row), topic (4th row), text type (5th row), authorship (6th row), and time range (7th row) can be seen.

Corpus	***International Migration Corpus INTL-MIG_CORPUS***	***Médecins Sans Frontières Corpus MSF_CORPUS***
Size (word tokens)	472,026 tokens; 13,496 types	22,238 tokens; 3,166 types
Number of texts	42	31
Topic	migration flows migrants' rights migrant workers international protection asylum refugee status statelessness admission to the EU residence in the EU	migration flows migrants' rights international protection asylum refugee status statelessness state policies tribunal decisions detention camps abuse and harassment
Text type	Official documents regulating migration, published by UN and EU (international treaties, conventions, arrangements, protocols, directives, regulations, recommendations)	Web texts, blogs, narrations, press releases, interviews, reports (all documents available on the website)
Authorship	Major international organisations (United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IMO))	Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)
Time range	2015–2024	2015–2024

Table 1. INTL_MIG_corpus and MSF_corpus breakdown

By combining CL with the CDA (Baker et al., 2008; Fairclough, 2014), this study explores the collocational patterns of the terms *migrant** and *migration* in the distinct corpora described above, that is international legal documents and MSF texts, thus enabling a systematic comparison of governmental and humanitarian framings of the boundaries of Mediterranean migration.

From a quantitative perspective, the analysis relies on the software package *#LancsBox X* (Brezina & Platt, 2024), which enables the extraction of collocates and the classification of semantic domains (cf. Rayson, 2008). Collocation analysis was conducted with a span of five words to the left and right of the

[1] Where excerpts are cited from documents belonging to the *INTL_MIG_corpus*, examples will be followed by the filename as found online (for instance: 2020_EU_DEC_276); where excerpts are cited from documents belonging to the *MFL_corpus*, examples will be followed by MSF_1, MSF_2, etc., according to the chronological order of document downloading.

node words (*migrant** and *migration**), and Mutual Information (MI)[2] was adopted as the collocation strength measure. A minimum MI threshold of 3 was set (Hunston, 2002, p. 71). To account for differences in corpus size, relative frequencies were used (Brezina, 2018, pp. 42–43), ensuring that comparisons across the two data sets remained sound and consistent across documents.

From a qualitative perspective, a critical discourse analytical perspective was employed to interpret the discursive strategies underlying the use of *migrant** and *migration**.

Construct	***Definition***	***Prompt***	***Operative Notes***
Topic	The subject matter/ aboutness of the text.	What do the texts concern? What are the texts about?	This identifies the primary focus of migration representation (e.g. legal management vs humanitarian crisis) across both corpora.
Discourse	"[S]et[s] of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events" (Burr, 2019, pp. 74–75).	Are the patterns of co-occurring keywords being used in texts to focus on a particular event and/or aspect? If so, what is the event or aspect? How is migration being represented? What aspect of migration is being zoomed in on?	This operationalises discursive construction of migration through top-ranking collocational patterns, revealing competing institutional vs humanitarian framings.
Register	"Registers are described for their typical lexical and grammatical characteristics […] and also […] for their situational contexts, for example, whether they are produced in speech or writing, whether they are interactive, and what their primary communicative purposes are" (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 6). The function of linguistic features in the situational context.	Which lexical and grammatical patterns, (e.g. abstract nouns, nominalisation, concrete lexis), as revealed by collocational profiles, characterise the texts? Are these patterns typical of bureaucratic vs advocacy varieties?	Focuses exclusively on pervasive linguistic features (for instance, abstract nouns, nominalisation vs concrete lexis, dynamic verbs) distinguishing bureaucratic vs advocacy registers.
Migration/ Migrant*	The (dis)vantage points of *migration and migrant* expressed in the documents.	Are the texts overtly pro- or anti-migration /migrant? Are the texts disinterested in some aspects? If so, which ones?	Evaluates ideological positioning and discursive silences regarding migrant agency, suffering, and responsibility attribution.

Table 2. Analytical framework for top-ranking collocates within key semantic domains (adapted from Sha & Clarke, 2025)

In addition, to guide data interpretation, I adapted the analytical framework established in Sha and Clarke (2025), outlining four preliminary areas of enquiry: *Topic*, *Discourse*, *Register*, and the notion of *migration*/migrant**, as seen in Table 2.[3] The table presents the analytical constructs operationalising the

[2] Mutual Information (MI) is a statistical measure of the strength of association between two items, typically words, and is primarily used for *collocation analysis*, identifying words that 'prefer' to appear together (Brezina, 2018).

[3] In their paper, Sha and Clarke (2025) also include the enquiry area of *style*, seen as the use of linguistic features that reflect aesthetic preferences, associated with particular authors or historical periods (Biber & Conrad, 2009, p. 18). Given the non-literary and non-

CDA approach of the study. Each construct translates theoretical concepts into concrete prompts designed to systematically examine top-ranking collocates within key semantic domains. *Topic* identifies the primary subject matter of migration representation across both corpora. *Discourse* (Burr, 2019) explores how co-occurring lexical patterns construct particular versions of migratory events, revealing competing institutional versus humanitarian framings. In line with Biber & Conrad's (2009) register perspective, in this study I describe *Register* through recurrent lexico-grammatical patterns associated with specific situations of use distinguishing bureaucratic from advocacy text varieties, as revealed through collocational profiles. In this study, such patterns are operationalised via top-ranking collocates and their concordances, which reveal pervasive lexical and grammatical choices in each corpus. Finally, *Migration*/Migrant** evaluates the ideological positioning and discursive silences characterising each corpus' stance toward migration and migrants. This multi-dimensional framework enables systematic comparison of how supranational policy documents and humanitarian advocacy texts construct migration through distinct linguistic and discursive practices.

The combination of CL and CDA therefore enables a multi-layered interpretation of how borders and boundaries about migrants and migration are framed, allowing us to map quantitative patterns onto broader discursive strategies and sociopolitical contexts.

4 Data analysis

4.1 The INTL-MIG_corpus

4.1.1 *Migrant**

The analysis of the collocates of *migrant** as found in the INTL-MIG_corpus reveals interesting trends, which are summarised in Table 3.[4]

INTL-MIG_CORPUS ***MIGRANT* (raw freq. 2538; relative frequency per 10k words 53.76)***				
Collocate	***Collocation strength (MI)***	***Collocation raw freq.***	***Collocation relative freq. (per 10k words)***	***Semantic domain***
inclusiveness	7.8	6	0.12	A1.8+ (INCLUSION): *policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for migrants*
drills	7.5	5	0.1	O2 (OBJECTS GENERALLY): *emergency actions migrants should be involved in in case of crisis*
disabled	7.5	10	0.21	B2- (DISEASE): *migrants with disabilities*
smuggled	7,5	7	0.14	G2- (UNETHICAL): *action that is morally not correct*
elderly	7.5	7	0.14	T3+++ (TIME PERIOD: LONG): *migrants*

Table 3. Breakdown of the top collocates of migrant* *in the INTL-MIG corpus*

authorial nature of the corpora under investigation, the category of *style* as defined by Biber and Conrad (2009) has not been applied here, as aesthetic preferences associated with individual authors are not relevant to institutional and organisational texts. Linguistic variation will therefore be accounted for through *Topic*, *Discourse* and *Register*.

[4] Words in italics in the 'Semantic domain' column indicate the topic dealt with by the semantic field under consideration and detected after manual reading of all the texts in the corpus.

Table 3 shows that, in normative documents, the item *migrant** collocates within a discourse of emergency preparedness and inclusive crisis governance. The item *migrant** appears 2,538 times (relative frequency 53.76 p10kw) in 23 texts out of 42. The top-ranking collocational patterns (computed with MI and indicated in the 2nd column of the table) do not point to a purely bureaucratic framing, but rather foreground operational planning (*drills*), differentiated vulnerability (*elderly*, *disabled*), and policy principles aimed at inclusion (*inclusiveness*), as the top collocates seem to suggest. At the same time, the presence of *smuggled* indicates that security-related concerns remain part of the institutional narrative, while *York* (as the second part of 'New York') anchors the discourse within internationally agreed normative frameworks, as we will see below. The texts where these collocates mainly appear, published in 2016 and 2020, are produced in the context of heightened awareness following the 2013-2014 migration crisis and are explicitly oriented towards planning for potential future emergencies. For instance, the collocation of *migrant** with *drills* reflects an approach grounded in emergency management practices, as excerpt (1) shows (emphasis added):[5]

1. *Contingency plans can include a crisis management structure that identifies responsibilities of different actors. […] Sample Practices […] Emergency drills involving migrants to test contingency plans and identify obstacles and challenges* (2016_IOM_MICIC_GUIDELINES)

In this framework, preparedness goes beyond policy formulation and abstract planning: *emergency drills* are presented as essential tools for testing contingency plans in real or simulated crisis conditions and assessing whether proposed measures are applicable and adequately account for the obstacles migrants may face in emergency situations, such as linguistic barriers, limited access to information, or unfamiliarity with institutional procedures. The use of *drills* therefore signals a shift towards operational verification and pragmatic governance, where preparedness is enacted rather than merely declared.

The presence of collocates such as *elderly* and *disabled* further indicates an explicit recognition that the migrant population is not homogeneous:

2. *For the sole purpose of the provision of medical care or treatment, in particular concerning disabled persons, elderly people, pregnant women, minors and persons who have been subject to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical and sexual violence, the transferring Member State shall, in so far as it is available to the competent authority in accordance with national law, transmit to the Member State responsible information on any special needs of the person to be transferred* (2020_EU_MAP_3PR)

By explicitly referring to *disabled persons* and *elderly people*, normative documents avoid treating migrants as implicitly physically resilient subjects or as young and autonomous. Instead, these categories function as markers of differentiated vulnerability, drawing a discursive boundary between generic emergency planning and tailored protective measures.

The collocate *inclusiveness* operates as both an ideological and operational frame within these texts:

3. *Migrants may face discrimination, hostility, and xenophobia in host States and States of transit. Positive communication about migrants promotes tolerance, non-discrimination, inclusiveness, and respect toward migrants*. (2016_IOM_MICIC_GUIDELINES)

Inclusiveness here functions as a normative principle aimed at promoting tolerance and non-discrimination toward migrants but does not reconfigure them as active social agents within processes of inclusion. In this

[5] Excerpts that will be presented to support the analysis have various marking: underlined words refer to the collocate under investigation; whilst words in regular fonts better contextualise the excerpt.

sense, inclusiveness entails the recognition of specific needs, as well as the removal of structural barriers to information and assistance.

Finally, the collocate *York* (which, as hinted at above, is always the second part of *New York*) refers to the declarations and protocols institutionalised for refugees and migrants, anchoring the institutional discourse within an explicit normative and international framework:

4. *Annex Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*
   We, the Heads of State and Government and High Representatives, meeting in Morocco on 10 and 11 December 2018, reaffirming the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and determined to make an important contribution to enhanced cooperation on international migration in all its dimensions, have adopted this Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. (2018_UN_GLOBAL_COMPACT)

Overall, the collocational patterns observed in the institutional corpus point to a discourse of crisis governance that, rather than focusing on enforcement or deterrence, constructs a discursive border between reactive emergency responses and anticipatory, rights-oriented planning. Migrants are framed as people to be integrated into emergency governance, acknowledging diversity within migrant populations while maintaining an institutional logic of organisation, coordination, and control. This seems confirmed by the qualitative analysis of *inclusiveness*, the top-ranking collocate of *migrant** and summarised in Table 4, where Sha and Clarke's (2025) framework is applied.[6]

Construct	***Analysis***
Topic	Migration Normative guidelines

Discourse	- The aspect of migration being zoomed in on is migrants as part of the population exposed to emergencies.
	  - Migrants as subjects of: inclusive planning *(inclusiveness),* vulnerable categories *(disabled, elderly),* operational procedures *(drills).*
	  - Migration is framed as a condition that requires inclusive planning to ensure protection and access to information during crises.
	- FRAME: institutional preparedness vs individual vulnerability
	  - MIGRANTS MUST BE INCLUDED IN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS.
	  - EXCLUSION INCREASES MIGRANT VULNERABILITY.

Register	- *Lexical features*: abstract nouns (*inclusiveness*), procedural nouns (*drills*), vulnerability nouns (*disabled*, *elderly*), institutional reference ([New] *York*) negative ethical adjective (*smuggled*). - *Grammatical patterns*: coordinated noun phrases showing vulnerability categories (*disabled*, *elderly*); modified noun phrases related to security (*smuggled migrants*). - *Register profile*: formal bureaucratic-administrative variety (Biber & Conrad 2009). The primary communicative purpose is that of providing operational and normative guidance on how *migrants* should be accounted for within emergency preparedness and response mechanisms.
Migration*/ Migrant*	Migrants are PATIENTS of inclusive and protective measures; they are recognised as vulnerable subjects whose needs must be accounted for, but they are not positioned as agents actively shaping preparedness processes.

Table 4. Analytical framework for inclusiveness*, collocating with* migrant*

As shown in the excerpts above and in Table 4, *migrants* are constructed through the lens of *inclusiveness*. Discourse is organised around the assumption that migrants must be explicitly included in emergency preparedness and response frameworks in order to avoid exclusion from protection and information. Migrants are thus represented as a population whose specific needs require institutional recognition within crisis management systems. The pragmatic function revealed by the register shows that

[6] Due to space constraints, I will only analyse the top ranking collocates for *migrant** and *migration** in both corpora.

the texts provide operational and normative guidance aimed at incorporating migrants into contingency planning. Inclusiveness functions as a procedural principle guiding the adaptation of emergency measures, communication strategies, and assistance mechanisms to account for migrant vulnerability. At the discourse level, this technocratic and institutional orientation constructs migrants primarily as recipients of protective and inclusive measures rather than as active agents. While *inclusiveness* signals an approach oriented to human rights in emergency governance, migrants remain positioned as patients of protective measures rather than as active agents. Inclusiveness therefore delineates a discursive boundary between institutional actors responsible for preparedness and migrants as objects of inclusion within emergency planning.

4.1.2 *Migration**

The collocations found with the lemma *migration** is summarised in Table 5, below. In normative documents, the most frequent collocations (*management*, *asylum*, *international*, *organisation*, *regulation* and *crisis*) seem to mark *migration** in a technical-administrative narration; what dominates the institutional discourse is the management of the migration issue. Indeed, I find clusters such as *migration management* and *Regulation on Asylum and Migration*.

INTL-MIG_Corpus ***MIGRATION* (raw freq. 2217; relative frequency per 10k words 46.96)***				
Collocate	***Collocation strength (MI)***	***Collocation raw freq.***	***Collocation relative freq. (per 10k words)***	***Semantic domain***
management	6.9	510	10.8	S7.1c (POWER): *of migration*
organization	6.7	106	2.24	S5+c (BELONGING TO A GROUP) s*tructured entity*
asylum	6.2	572	12.11	G1.1 (LAW AND ORDER): *status*
crisis	5.2	128	2.71	A12- (DIFFICULT): *a difficult or dangerous situation that needs serious attention*
international	4.6	238	5	M7 (PLACES): *of rules; of protection* (context-dependant)
regulation	4.3	188	3.98	G2.1 (LAW AND ORDER): *binding rules with legal effectiveness*

Table 5. Breakdown of the top collocates of migration* *in the INTL-MIG_corpus*

This perspective builds *migration* as a phenomenon to rule and manage in juridical frames, with particular attention paid to legal and status (*Regulation on Asylum; international organisation*) aspects. This seems to be confirmed by the excerpts below, showing how *management* (931 hits, 54% of which collocate with *migration* and appearing in 35 out of 42 texts), the top-ranking collocate of *migration**, is employed in official documents:

5. *COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION (EU) 2020/1366 of 23 September 2020 on an EU mechanism for preparedness and* <u>*management*</u> of crises related to migration *(Migration Preparedness and Crisis Blueprint)*

   THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION,

   Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Article 292 thereof,

   Whereas:

   (1) The refugee crisis of 2015 exposed weaknesses and gaps in EU and national migration crisis <u>*management*</u> *systems* (2020_EU_MAP_COMM_REC_1366)

The normative discourse on *migration** seems to focus more on *crisis management* than on migrants as individuals. Indeed, the analytical framework (see Table 6, below), adapted from Sha and Clarke (2025), suggests that migration is narrated as a destabilising crisis and seen as a threat to the social and political order ("The refugee crisis of 2015 exposed weaknesses and gaps in EU and national migration crisis management systems" – 2020_EU_MAP_2CSWD), which can, however, be managed through normative instruments, common policies, and control tools, thus relegating the migration phenomenon to a technical or bureaucratic issue ("Contingency plans can include a crisis management structure that identifies responsibilities of different actors" – 2016_IOM_MICIC_GUIDELINES), as also the collocates *international* and *organisation* reveal:

6. *Guidelines*
   Foreword to the MICIC Initiative Guidelines by the Director General of the International Organization for Migration *(IOM), William Lacy Swing*
   The Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) Initiative and its Guidelines to Protect Migrants in Countries Experiencing Conflict or Natural Disaster are both timely and significant. Migration is a mega-trend of this century. All countries host migrants and all countries have citizens abroad. (2012_IOM_MICIC_GUIDELINES)

Construct	***Analysis***
Topic	Migration Normative guidelines

Discourse	- The aspect being zoomed in on is migrants as populations that must be accounted for in emergency and crisis-preparedness planning.
	  - Migration is not framed as a crisis in itself but as a condition that can be managed condition requiring regulation and international operational preparedness.
	- FRAME: coordinated governance vs uncontrolled flows
	  - MIGRANTS MUST BE INCLUDED IN EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS.
	  - EXCLUSION INCREASES MIGRANT VULNERABILITY
	  - EMERGENCY RESPONSE REQUIRES OPERATIONAL READINESS.

Register	- *Lexical features:* abstract process nouns *(management, regulation),* institutional nouns *(organization),* legal nouns *(asylum),* temporal/process nouns *(crisis),* relational adjectives *(international).* - *Grammatical patterns:* nominalisation of processes *(management*), compound noun sequences *(international organization),* prepositional modification *(regulation [of migration]).* - *Register profile*: formal bureaucratic-administrative variety (Biber & Conrad 2009, p. 6). The primary communicative purpose is that of providing operational and normative guidance for emergency preparedness and response, ensuring that migrants' specific needs are considered within contingency planning.
Migration*/ Migrant*	Migration is framed as a contextual condition to be anticipated within emergency preparedness and response frameworks. It is not constructed as a crisis in itself, but as a factor shaping institutional planning and coordination. The focus remains on governance and operational readiness rather than on migrant agency.

Table 6. Analytical framework for management*, collocating with* migration* *in the INTL-MIG corpus*

In this way, the various institutions (UNO, EU) are advocating the role of a manager dealing with the crisis, assigning themselves agency that establishes rules, allocates responsibilities, and coordinates the nations affected by migration:

7. *Furthermore, the Framework calls for States and regional economic communities (including SADC and COMESA) to "incorporate environmental considerations in the formulation of national and regional migration management policies to better address environment related causes of migratory movements."* (2015_UN-NANSEN_CBD_Vol_II)

The experience of Syrian migration, with the arrival of 1.3 million people to Europe, is, in the corpus, the main context:

8. *Despite the improvements put in place after the 2015 crisis, the EU is still unprepared to address crisis situations, such as an exceptional situation of mass influx of third-country nationals or stateless persons arriving irregularly in a Member State or disembarked on its territory*. (2020_EU_MAP_2CSWD)

As the EU was unprepared for this event, revealing the lack of adequate tools to quickly respond to such issues, and given that such unpreparedness is still the main issue in the context of migration, the normative register has the main purpose of offering guidelines for future emergencies. In this regard, migration is presented as a governance challenge that requires anticipatory planning and coordinated institutional response. Migrants are therefore no longer present in these documents: migration is an impersonal phenomenon to be anticipated and managed in order to address institutional unpreparedness. This orientation is reflected in a register characterised by technical, procedural and forward-looking language, shaped by the situational demands of emergency preparedness.

4.2 The MSF_corpus

4.2.1 *Migrant**

The MSF_corpus shows a diverse narration from the INTL-MIG_corpus. Collocates show that the focus is on seeking protection (*seekers*, *asylum*) and on inhuman circumstances in which migrants live, such as detention in horrible conditions.

MSF_CORPUS ***MIGRANT* (raw freq. 39; relative frequency per 10k words 17.53***				
Collocate	***Collocation strength (MI)***	***Collocation raw freq.***	***Collocation relative freq. (per 10k words)***	***Semantic domain***
seekers	8.1	8	3.59	X7 (WANTING; PLANNING; CHOOSING); S2mf (PEOPLE): *Applicants for international protection*
living	8	7	5.39	H4 (RESIDENCE): *inhumane conditions*
asylum	7.7	8	3.59	X7 (WANTING; PLANNING; CHOOSING): international protection status
refugees	7.7	26	11.69	M1 (MOVING)/S2mf (PEOPLE): *Migrants who have obtained asylum*
detention	5.7	7	3.14	P1 (EDUCATION) /G2.1 (LAW & ORDER): *prison, Libya*
libya	4.4	5	2.24	Z2 (GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES)

Table 7. Breakdown of the top collocates of migrant* *in the MSF_corpus*

As can be seen in Table 7, the MSF_corpus focuses on the migrants' lives and suffering conditions: *living*, *detention*, *asylum*, *refugees*. Migrants here are also represented as vulnerable subjects, who, however, have rights and urgent needs. Indeed, one of the collocates is *libya*, which anchors the narration to the real context of humanitarian crises and of violence ("detention camps in Libya" – MSF_7).

The discursive construction of migration within the MSF_corpus is based on a clear humanitarian framework. Indeed, the collocate *seeker* consistently occurs within co-texts that foreground healthcare

provision, vulnerability, and constraining circumstances, making these elements central to the discursive representation activated by the term, as shown in excerpt (9):

9. *Data and information from the International Activity Report 2022 […] In Libya, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) continued to* provide essential healthcare *for* *migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other people* in vulnerable circumstances. (MSF_10)

As summarised in Table 8, the analytical framework for *seeker* collocating with *migrant** (26 occurrences out of 56, with a dispersion of 59%) shows what MSF does, that is, offering healthcare to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, which is what MSF discourse zooms in on.

Construct	***Analysis***
Topic	Migration Normative guidelines

Discourse	- The aspects of migrants being zoomed in on are:
	  - Healthcare is needed for migrants and asylum seekers. Only MSF provides this.
	  - External conditions constrain migrants' agency.
	  - As a consequence, humanitarian intervention is necessary.
	  - Migrants are perceived as victims of deadly journeys and institutional neglect.
	- FRAME: suffering patients vs policy failure
	  - MIGRANTS ARE PEOPLE WHOSE AGENCY IS CONSTRAINED BY CIRCUMSTANCES.
	  - MIGRANTS' HEALTHCARE IS PROVIDED BY MSF
	  - MIGRANTS' JOURNEY IS NEGLECTED BY INSTITUTIONS.

Register	- *Lexical features:* concrete human nouns (*seekers*, *refugees*), process/experience verb (*living*), legal noun (*asylum*), location nouns (*detention*, *Libya*). - *Grammatical patterns:* concrete noun phrases combining status and place ('In Libya, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) continued to provide essential healthcare for *migrants, refugees, asylum seekers* and *other people in vulnerable circumstances*'). - *Register profile:* advocacy-oriented written variety foregrounding concrete human subjects in specific locations, in contrast with the more abstract institutional register. The primary communicative purpose is that of explaining what MSF does in medical terms to people in need (providing healthcare).

Migration*/ Migrant*	Migrants are constructed as PATIENTS of:
	  - a positive action done onto them by others to overcome negative circumstances;
	  - circumstances.

Table 8. Analytical framework for seeker, collocating with migrant* *in the MSF_corpus (adapted from Sha & Clarke, 2025)*

The main frame can be summarised as migrants *being represented as people whose agency is constrained by circumstances*. Migrants are depicted as individuals exposed to adverse conditions, such as conflict, detention, or lack of access to basic services, that limit their capacity to act independently and make humanitarian intervention necessary. This construction establishes a causal link in which vulnerability is attributed not to individual choices but to structural and situational factors, as shown in excerpt (10):

10. *For those people who do make it to Europe, the challenges – and dangers faced – start again once onshore. A lack of shelter,* being forced to live in unhygienic conditions or in adverse weather, treacherous border crossings, hostile authorities – in these circumstances, people become sick, injured, or struggle with mental health issues. *Instead of confronting the vicious cycle that their own policies are creating, politicians have hidden behind unfounded accusations towards NGOs and individuals who attempt to help people in dire straits*. (MSF_13)

In these texts, the register is strongly oriented to showing what MSF can do in operational and medical terms:

11. *MSF volunteers in Palermo, Turin and Udine set up helpdesks to orientate and support people needing* access to healthcare*, including migrants, asylum seekers and marginalised people.* (MSF_9)

Even though the primary aim of MSF texts is informative, it is constructed in a way to legitimise MSF's concrete actions to fulfil urgent needs. Against this backdrop, MSF discourse insists on *vulnerability*, revealing the migrants' inaction. As conditions are presented as *external* circumstances (MSF_27), migrants do not have the possibility to control their own lives, thus becoming patients of actions done by others, as evidenced by lexical choices that underline the forced passivity of migrants:

12. *Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Libya* face *high levels of violence, extortion, and arbitrary detention with serious consequences to their physical and mental health.* (MSF_7)

Within this frame, migrants are, syntactically, patients receiving not only the positive actions done by MSF (as, for instance, in "Straight after a rescue, our medical staff perform an initial triage to identify people in need of immediate care" (MSF_29), where 'people' are migrants who are literally *medical patients*), but also patients of the very same circumstances, which make them passive subjects of the structural conditions that determine their vulnerability:

13. *They also face containment, detention and deportation, since population movements (whatever drives them) at times are seen as a threat, rather than inciting expressions of solidarity. Some governments fail to protect men, women and children already exposed to heightened* vulnerability *from further violence or deprivation. Safety is denied to those in need of refuge, blind eyes are turned to the high risks of passage, and remaining dignity and rights are crushed.* (MSF_5)

In this way, MSF discourse humanises migrants who are recognised as people with fundamental needs but, at the same time, reduces their agency, ascribing them a role depending on others' actions or on external conditions.

4.2.2 *Migration**

When it comes to the term migration*, unlike the INTL-MIG_corpus, the discourse of MSF evokes concrete paths and human dimensions, as can be seen by the top collocates shown in Table 9.

MSF_CORPUS ***MIGRATION* (raw freq. 39; relative frequency per 10k words 17.53)***				
Collocate	***Collocation strength (MI)***	***Collocation raw freq.***	***Collocation relative freq. (per 10k words)***	***Semantic domain***
route	8.4	6	2.69	M6 (LOCATION AND DIRECTION): *migration*
policies	7.9	12	5.39	X7+ (WANTED): *migration deterrent*
human	7.4	8	3.59	S2 (PEOPLE): *rights*
year	6.6	5	2.24	T2.3 (TIME): *every, deadliest*
European	6.3	10	4.49	Z2 (GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES): *states, members, governments*
Mediterranean	5.8	15	6.74	Z1mf (PERSONAL NAME): *Central*

Table 9. Breakdown of the top collocates of migration* *in the MSF_corpus*

Such terms as *route* and *Mediterranean* anchor migration in the physical space of movement and border crossing, where *human* recalls how people's rights and dignity are negated, while *year* introduces the temporal and cyclical dimension of migration crises:

14. *The southern region of Calabria and the islands of Sicily and Lampedusa are some of the main arrival points for the thousands of people who embark on the* dangerous *migration route across the Mediterranean Sea every year*. (MSF_9)

15. *MSF operates its own ship, the Geo Barents, to rescue people in distress at sea and provide emergency medical care to rescued people, making survivors' voices the main witnesses to the world's* deadliest *migration route*. (MSF_29)

Although *European* and *policies* signal the direct involvement of states and institution dimensions, these terms are negatively connoted, as they refer to texts showing criticism of these institutions, which do not grant human dignity:

16. *06 September 2017 MSF sends open letter to European governments* criticising *migration containment policies which feed* human suffering *and trafficking in Libya. (MSF_12)*

In other words, while the normative discourse found in political institutions (cf. paragraph 4.1) produces frames of migration within emergency preparedness and inclusive planning frameworks, the discourse of MSF constructs a humanitarian frame that focuses on routes, places, and migrants' lives, while simultaneously criticising governmental policies that are presented as deterrent and as contributing to human suffering. On the one hand, migration is a governance object; on the other, it becomes a concrete experience comprising dangerous routes, denied rights, and political responsibility. This is clearly shown in the analytical framework presented in Table 10.

Construct	***Analysis***
Topic	What MSF is doing

Discourse	- The aspects of migration being zoomed in on are:
	  - Migration routes constructed as *deadly Mediterranean paths* under *European policies*.
	  - Migration routes described as the deadliest in the world.
	- FRAME: geographical specificity (*Mediterranean route*) and institutional responsibility vs human cost.
	  - *TO MIGRATE IS TO DIE*

Register	- *Lexical features*: geographical nouns (*route*, *Mediterranean*), institutional adjectives (*European*), relational nouns (*policies*), temporal noun (*year*), human descriptor (*human*). - *Grammatical patterns*: geographical specification (*Mediterranean route*), institutional attribution (*European policies*), temporal framing (*year*), compound descriptors (*human* [life/cost/suffering implied]). - *Register profile*: mixed institutional-humanitarian variety combining geographical concreteness with policy reference (Biber & Conrad 2009, p. 6). The primary communicative purpose is that of explaining what MSF does to help people in need (*rescue people*).
Migration*/Migrant*	Migrants are PATIENTS of a positive action done onto them by others. Migrants do not speak. Migrants' voices are witness to something terrifying.

Table 10. Analytical framework for seeker, collocating with migrant* *in the MSF_corpus (adapted from Sha & Clarke, 2025)*

In the MSF_corpus, the collocate *migration route* activates a powerful frame: the route as a space of death. Migratory routes, in particular those of the Central Mediterranean, are not simply geographical routes but rather travel trajectories characterised by extreme risks and human lives lost, as can be seen by such descriptions as *the deadliest migration route in the world* (MSF_29) or as shown in excerpt (17) below:

17. *The deliberate inaction of European Union states on migration in the Central Mediterranean has led to 2023 becoming the* deadliest *year since 2017.* (MSF_4)

This representation shifts the attention from migrants as moving subjects to the route as a lethal space, an environment that transforms the act of migration into an experience of death, framing the narration with the idea that *to migrate is to die*. The use of *route* contributes to evidencing the collective dimension of the phenomenon, whereby not single individuals but entire flows of people travel the same *route,* sharing the same risks. While MSF tries to interrupt the lethal trajectory of the route, MSF itself becomes the salvific actor, as seen in excerpt (18):

18. *NGOs completed 35 per cent of the total of rescue operations in the central Mediterranean.* MSF alone has rescued and brought to safety more than 16,000 people. (MSF_16)

From a discursive and semantic perspective, *route* creates a strong rhetorical contrast: what is normally neutrally connoted (the Oxford Dictionary of English defines *route* as "a way or course taken in getting from a starting point to a destination") becomes a synonym of sufferance, sinking, and death, which is reinforced by the survivors' narrations:

19. *MSF operates its own ship, the Geo Barents, to rescue people in distress at sea and provide emergency medical care to rescued people,* making survivors' voices the main witnesses to the world's deadliest migration *route*. (MSF_29)

Importantly, references to migrants' or survivors' "voices" in MSF texts do not correspond to the presence of direct speech or first-person accounts. Rather, as illustrated in excerpt (19), such voices are invoked and mediated through MSF's discourse, with the organisation speaking on behalf of survivors rather than allowing them to speak for themselves.

MSF texts are informative, offering figures and statistical data. They are also accusatory, as they underline the political position, obstructing and undermining MSF rescue operations:

20. *As refugees, migrants and asylum seekers continue to die in the Mediterranean Sea, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and its partner SOS MEDITERRANEE have been forced to terminate operations by the search and rescue vessel Aquarius. Over the past two months, with people continuing to flee by sea along the* world's deadliest *migration route, the Aquarius has remained in port, unable to carry out its humanitarian work. This is the result of a sustained campaign, spearheaded by the Italian government and backed by other European states,* to delegitimise, slander and obstruct aid organisations providing assistance to vulnerable people. *Coupled with the EU's ill-conceived external policies on migration, this campaign has* undermined international law and humanitarian principles. *With no immediate solution to these attacks, MSF and SOS MEDITERRANEE have no choice but to end operations by the Aquarius. "This is a dark day," says Nelke Manders, MSF's general director. "*Not only has Europe failed to provide search and rescue capacity, it has also actively sabotaged others' attempts to save lives. *The end of Aquarius means more deaths at sea, and more needless deaths that will go unwitnessed."* (MSF_1)

5 Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to discuss how the Central Mediterranean migration route is represented from normative and humanitarian perspectives. Analysis of the collocates of *migrant** and *migration** in both official UNO and EU documents and in MSF documents available online has offered interesting insights. Indeed, analysis of the collocations of *migrant** and *migration** in the two corpora considered (the INTL-MIG corpus and the MSF corpus) reveals the presence of profoundly divergent discursive frames, which nevertheless share a tendency to represent migrants not as subjects with agency, but as patients of external actions and circumstances.

In both corpora, migrants are represented as vulnerable. In institutional documents, however, vulnerability is framed as a factor that must be taken into account in preparatory and contingency actions aimed at future migration-related emergencies. In MSF texts, by contrast, vulnerability is foregrounded as a condition that requires immediate humanitarian intervention, justifying assistance, care, and rescue operations directed at migrants themselves.

In the INTL-MIG corpus, the most salient collocations of *migrant** (e.g. *inclusiveness*, *drills*, *elderly*, *disabled*, *smuggled*) situate migrants within a discourse shaped by emergency preparedness, differentiated vulnerability, and inclusive planning. Rather than privileging criminalisation or administrative categorisation, these collocates foreground the representation of migrants as differentiated social actors (van Leeuwen, 2008), whose heterogeneous vulnerabilities must be accounted for within crisis-response frameworks. Similarly, the collocations of *migration** point to a discursive framework in which human mobility is addressed as a contextual condition that institutions must anticipate and integrate into policy and operational planning. Migration is not constructed as a crisis or a threat in itself, but as a factor shaping preparedness, coordination, and response mechanisms within international governance structures. In this context, the European Union and other international actors are positioned not primarily as enforcers of order, but as coordinators of preparedness and inclusion-oriented responses. This discursive configuration produces a symbolic boundary between inclusion and exclusion in emergency planning (rather than between legality and illegality), highlighting the institutional responsibility to mitigate vulnerability through anticipatory and inclusive governance measures.

In the MSF_corpus, collocations construct a humanitarian frame. For *migrant**, terms such as *asylum seeker*, *refugees*, *detention*, *living* (in inhumane conditions), and *Libya* are recurrent, outlining a narrative focused on vulnerability and suffering. Even more significant is the collocation of *migration** with *route*, which activates a frame in which the route itself becomes a place of death: the central Mediterranean is defined as *the world's deadliest migration route* (MSF_1; MSF_29), with repeated emphasis on daily deaths and extreme conditions for survival. Here, the migrant does not appear as an agent of mobility, but as a victim of a lethal environment and hostile policies, as shown in excerpt (20). In this context, MSF takes on the role of a humanitarian actor whose mission is not only to interrupt the deadly trajectory of migration routes through rescue and healthcare operations, but also to articulate a critical stance toward governmental actions that are represented as contributing to human suffering. The top-ranking collocates within key semantic domains of the two corpora reflect different discursive orientations. In the regulatory texts, bureaucratic language prevails, characterised by abstractness and technicality, which naturalises migration as a management issue. In MSF texts, on the other hand, the lexical choices emphasise the urgency, concreteness, and drama of the migrant condition, making the route a symbol of a deadly journey and the migrant a silent experiencer of unspeakable suffering. At the same time, they support a critical stance toward governmental migration policies, which are discursively represented as contributing to the conditions that produce such suffering.

Despite the different discursive orientations of the two frameworks, both perspectives share a central characteristic: migrants remain discursive patients rather than social agents. In regulatory documents, migrants are primarily addressed with preparedness and response frameworks, where they are accounted for through planning, coordination, and inclusion-oriented measures. In MSF texts, by contrast, migrants are represented through narratives of rescue, medical care and lived experience, which foreground the human consequence of displacement. In both cases, however, migrants' voices are largely mediated: whether incorporated into institutional preparedness frameworks or represented through humanitarian testimony, they rarely emerge as (speaking) agents. This mediation limits migrants' agency and reinforces a discursive boundary between those who produce authoritative accounts and those who are represented within them.

The comparison between the two corpora thus highlights different discursive borders structuring contemporary representations of Mediterranean migration. In the institutional corpus, boundaries are drawn around inclusion and exclusion within emergency preparedness and crisis-response mechanisms. In the MSF corpus, boundaries emerge between vulnerability and care, articulated through narratives of suffering, rescue, and moral responsibility. Rather than opposing securitisation to humanitarianism, these discourses reflect distinct but intersecting ways of framing migration, which converge in positioning migrants as objects of protection rather than as social agents. This also illustrates how borders operate not only as territorial demarcations but also as discursive mechanisms that shape visibility, responsibility, and voice. Across both institutional and humanitarian texts, migrants are predominantly constructed as subjects to be planned for or cared for, while their capacity to articulate their own perspectives remains limited.

These results confirm the idea that borders are not only territorial but also discursive (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). The two discursive perspectives adopt different representations of migration and yet converge in denying migrants full subjectivity and agency, representing them as discursive figures rather than autonomous voices. This convergence points to the need for future research to focus more explicitly on how migrants' own voices can negotiate, challenge, or reconfigure these representations, contributing to a redefinition of the discursive boundaries that shape how migration is understood and narrated.

This study certainly has some limitations. First of all, the selected corpora are not perfectly symmetrical: the regulatory documents belong to a technical-institutional register, while the MSF texts are intended for advocacy and awareness-raising. This difference in textual genre can affect the results. Secondly, the methodological choice to focus mainly on the collocations of *migrant** and *migration** paints a targeted but partial picture, which does not include other potentially relevant discursive aspects (metaphors, rhetorical strategies, multimodality). Finally, in both corpora, the absence of migrants' direct voices results in perspectives that are externally produced rather than self-represented. Despite these limitations, the present study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the contemporary debate on migration. By showing how institutional and humanitarian discourses construct different discursive boundaries – on the one hand, between preparedness and lived experiences and, on the other, between vulnerability and care – the research highlights how language contributes to shaping not only migration policies but also broader social perceptions of migrants. Highlighting these dynamics means exposing the mechanisms through which migrants are represented primarily as objects of planning of protection and of care, rather than as autonomous speaking subjects. The relevance of this type of analysis extends beyond academia: it helps civil society understand the power dynamics underlying the representation of migration and provides critical tools for reflecting on dominant narratives framing responsibility, visibility and voice. In this sense, this contribution lies at the crossroads between linguistics, critical discourse studies, and civic

engagement, aiming to restore analytical complexity to a phenomenon that is too often simplified through reductive interpretative frames.

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