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What is This?
Representing immigrants as illegals, threats and victims in Malaysia: Elite voices in the media

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Abstract
This article examines the way the voices of political elites are incorporated in news reporting to represent refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia as illegals, threats and victims, which reflect their ideological positioning. We also examine voices that foreground their plight and appeal for the relaxation of rules. Selected extracts are analysed to illustrate how these voices and authorial accounts are ordered in relation to each other to represent different perspectives for different purposes. To address the issue of how texts from the original are brought into the new context, we examine the relationship between the original text and the recontextualized part. Using tools from Van Leeuwen’s Social Actor Network model and Reisigl and Wodak’s discourse-historical approach, we analyse how the discursive strategies and different features of a text are used to construct particular meaning in the social world.

Keywords
Anti-immigration, asylum seekers, criminalization, critical discourse analysis, discourse-historical approach, illegality, intertextuality, media discourse, newspapers, recontextualization, refugees, representation, social actors

Introduction
Refugees and asylum seekers have been coming to Malaysia since the first boats arrived from Vietnam during the Indo-China crisis in the mid-1970s. In January 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that the registered refugee

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and asylum population in Malaysia was about 142,160 (UNHCR Malaysia, n.d.). Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) estimate the actual population to be somewhere in the region of 150,000 to 250,000.

Malaysia does not have any formal policy on refugees, and has yet to ratify the 1951 United Nations Convention on their status and its 1967 Protocol. In addition, Malaysian legislation recognizes only two kinds of immigrant – legal or documented and illegal or undocumented. Refugees and asylum seekers are included by default in the illegal category. This situation has two implications. First, managed indiscriminately along with other illegal immigrants, they are vulnerable to raids, arrest, detention and deportation by security and immigration officers. Second, because their status is not recognized by the Malaysian government, they are not offered any possibility of resettlement or integration into the local community. And because there is no actual policy on asylum seekers and refugees, the government’s public reaction to and opinions about them are the only indications of policies that affect them, and these can only be obtained through their official statements, some of which are reported in the media.

As a significant site for ideological construction, the media play a prominent role in the representation of refugees and asylum seekers. Access to the media gives politicians ‘the possibility of having’ their will enforced ‘against the will or interests of others’ (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009: 88). The enforcement of power by discoursal means, which is acquired through some form of collective consent, is less obviously repressive and coercive, and more mental than physical in nature (Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

In this article, we examine the way voices of politicians are brought into the news texts to represent refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia as illegals, threats and victims in specific contexts. We examine the way intertextual relations are set up to serve different interests and objectives. Admittedly, how their views and opinions are reported reflects not only the position of the political elites of the time, but also the ideological, economic and political practices of journalism in Malaysia. This analytical perspective illuminates the link between media and political agendas and politicians, and this link is ‘particularly apparent when questions of migration and asylum are concerned’ (Krzyżanowski and Wodak, 2009: cited in Busch and Krzyżanowski, 2012: 279), an issue which shows the ideological positioning of the host country. Those voices contesting the government representations are also analysed where relevant. Van Leeuwen emphasizes the importance of textual analysis when he argues that the ‘theory of transitivity made it possible to interpret differently worded representations of the same reality as different social constructions of that reality’ (2009: 148). This explains why we undertake to analyse the linguistic aspects of text to see how the author uses language to construct particular meanings in the social world.

The media are highly selective in what they choose to include or exclude with respect to the way they represent refugees and asylum seekers and related issues. Here, we agree with Hall (1982: 64) that representation ‘implies the active work of selecting and presenting, and of structuring and shaping’, and does not merely offer a neutral reflection of the world. To provide the relevant background to this study, we describe the wider social context of journalism in Malaysia and the relationship between politics and the Malaysian press.

Since British colonial times, mainstream newspapers in Malaysia have had a close relationship with the state, enabling the government to influence the content of the news. Citing Xu (2009), Amira Firdaus (2011: 149) highlights the role of the press,
namely ‘to promote and preserve economic prosperity and political stability’ and ‘to maintain economic and political cohesion’ by exercising its freedom responsibly.

The press is controlled by the ruling party, Barisan Nasional (BN). *The Star*, the leading mainstream newspaper, is owned by an investment arm of the BN coalition, the Malaysia Chinese Association, while another widely read daily, the *NST*, is owned by a private company closely linked to the BN coalition leader, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The Malaysian National News Agency, or *Bernama*, was established by Parliament in 1967, and since then has been responsible for disseminating information in support of the government’s agenda and policies and is often the source of news for other news agencies. Because of its high circulation, it is the reported government voice which is widely heard. There are several online non-government news websites (e.g. *Malaysiakini*, *The Malaysian Insider* and *Free Malaysia Today*) that report and comment on a range of national issues considered more controversial.

Malaysian newspapers are closely guided by the authoritarian press practice of advancing and supporting government policies (Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 2005). They are ideologically ‘national services’ with a responsibility to promote national interests by constructing a positive image, especially in the face of adverse criticism (Gunaratne, 2005). Print newspapers and magazines are required to apply annually for a licence from the Ministry of Home Affairs, and these licences can be withdrawn if they are seen to be violating any national policies or posing a threat to national security, a decision left to the Ministry’s discretion. Regulatory tools include key legislation such as the Printing and Publications Act (PPPA), the Official Secrets Act (OSA) and the Sedition Act. There was initially neither filtering system nor law to actively censor internet content. However, the authorities have been known to use other national laws to control online content and restrict the circulation of certain information.

### Media reporting of immigrants

KhosraviNik (2009) examines the representation of refugees in newspapers during the 1999 Balkan conflicts and the 2005 British general election. Despite the different strategies used to represent them, ‘they all contribute to a similar construction’ (p. 477) centring on the ideological polarization between ‘us’ and ‘them’, with them depicted as the threatening Other. The anti-immigrant stance is closely linked to the theme of national sovereignty and border control (Pugh, 2004). Those advocating anti-immigration policies often argue for the need to protect the country’s borders from the influx of immigrants. The discourse of sovereignty is often used as an exclusion strategy by the media, who rely on categorizations of refugees and asylum seekers as ‘problematic’, ‘illegal’ and, therefore, a ‘threat’ (Pickering, 2001).

A dominant theme in the discourse of threat is the representation of immigrants with associated negativity (O’Doherty and Lecouteur, 2007), which foregrounds the problems created by immigration and the immigrants’ threat to us. The linguistic means of communicating this ideological positioning covertly but persuasively (Hart, 2010) is the use of metaphors. Studies have shown that the natural disaster metaphor relating particularly to water (Pugh, 2004) is often used by right-wing political groups to legitimate anti-immigration policies (Charteris-Black, 2006).
Messer et al. (2012) explain that the othering of immigrants may begin with an emphasis on their illegal status, which then leads on to their criminalization, namely their alleged involvement in criminal activities. Teo (2000) illustrates the way discursive strategies are used to contribute to the general theme of negativization and crimes associated with Asian immigrants in Australian newspapers. This moral evaluation is based on values, namely good and bad, and when combined with authority, legitimation can be a powerful strategy to deny the bad Others entry into the country.

A common strategy used to legitimate certain representations is to draw on the voices of symbolic elites whose authority is vested in them because of their status or role in a particular institution (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 106). The recontextualization of these voices constructs new realities in media discourses. Having access to public discourses means that they have control over the re/production of hegemonic narratives in the public domain, and their words have more influence and are able to shape social practices to a greater degree (Van Dijk, 2005).

Van Leeuwen (2008) develops a systematic analysis of discourse as recontextualized social practice which is defined as socially accepted ways of doing things that include strictly regulated social practices such as institutionalized practices. He argues that all texts are representations of social practice, and discourse or knowledge produced through texts can be embedded afresh into new content and made to ‘serve the contextually defined purpose’ (p. 6). Consequently, in the course of recontextualization, certain aspects of social practice, including participants, actions, performance modes, presentation styles and locations, are represented in specific ways through the manipulation of language. This manipulation of language or linguistic strategies used to represent asylum seekers and refugees while engaging with asylum-related issues in Malaysia is the main concern of this article.

**Methodology**

The data for this study were collected as part of a research project on refugees and asylum seekers, funded by the University of Malaya. It consists of statements made by government leaders and officials on issues relating to asylum seekers and refugees drawn from 62 newspaper articles from mainstream and alternative newspapers published in 2003–2012. We examined the data for common themes, and 12 articles were studied in detail to identify the appropriate voices for illustrative analysis. Van Leeuwen (2009: 146) argues that the few selected voices do not provide ‘enough evidence for reconstructing a discourse, but (they) could be used for methodological demonstration’ to illustrate how linguistic tools can be used to analyse the social world from a critical perspective.

Extracts selected for analysis included two articles from Bernama, and two articles each from The Star and the NST; alongside this were articles from the alternative media – four from Malaysiakini and one from The Malaysian Insider. The Prime Minister’s article, published in the Sydney Morning Herald, is also analysed to show how he represents Malaysia’s position abroad and how some of the content is recontextualized in the Malaysian press for local consumption.

Following Fairclough (2003: 51), we examine intertextuality in two ways. We analyse the way recontextualized voices and authorial accounts are textured together to present a particular perspective. A preliminary analysis shows a kind of structure typical of press reports, namely an alternation of authorial accounts, indirect reporting and quoted speech