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# 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

which claims to reproduce what was actually said. We then examine the relationship between the original and the recontextualized texts to address the question of how the original part figures in the new context. Arguably, the transfer of content from one context to another essentially 'involves new textual relationships with surrounding material' (Mautner, 2008: 30).

We draw on the discourse-historical approach (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009) in combination with Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network model (2008) to analyse the discursive strategies in and linguistic forms of the selected extracts. The analytical categories selected for analysis include nomination, predication and legitimation strategies. Nomination strategies construct in- and out-groups through the way groups of people are constructed and represented. Predication strategies work to bestow either positive or negative evaluation of social actors and are most commonly achieved through adjectives or adjectival phrases, which are descriptive in nature. Legitimation involves the use of various strategies including reference to authority and making claims to truth. We use Van Leeuwen's (2008) socio-semantic categorization to examine the way social actors are represented.

## Analysis

### *Refugees and asylum seekers and as illegal immigrants*

The discourse of illegality features predominantly in the corpus of 62 articles collected for this study. The adjective *illegal* occurs 32 times and is used with *immigrant* 21 times. *Illegals* occurs seven times and the adverb *illegally* occurs twice. To examine how asylum seekers and refugees are represented as illegals and in what context, we selected extracts from three newspapers, two (extracts A and B) drawn from the mainstream newspapers, *Bernama* and *The Star*, and the other two (extracts C and D) from *Malaysiakini*, an alternative online newspaper.

In extracts A and B, the narrative centres on the theme that refugees and asylum seekers are illegals, 'told from the perspective of "us"', a national perspective. *Bernama* and *The Star* frame the factual information as obtained from an official government source to rationalize policy decisions taken which reflect support for ministers and government policies.

Extract A illustrates intertextual relations between the authorial account and the recontextualized attributed voice.

**Extract A**

(1) The Home Affairs Ministry will prepare a Cabinet article to get a clear guide on ways to handle refugees protected by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2) Minister Datuk Seri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad said this was to overcome complexities that arose when the refugees were caught by the Malaysian authorities but asked to release [sic] later as they were given protection by the UNHCR though Malaysia did not recognise the High Commissioner's powers.
(3) 'Malaysia did not sign and ratify the agreement on refugees. (4) We do not recognize and accept UNHCR-hosted refugees. (5) Although the UNHCR is here, it's only because Malaysia is a member of the United Nations along with other countries. (6) We accept UNHCR's presence (in our country) but we don't recognise their powers.'

*Source*: 'Home Ministry to prepare Cabinet article on refugee woes', *Bernama*, 1 February 2007

The authorial account (1) states what action the Home Affairs Ministry will take ('will prepare a Cabinet article') to guide Malaysia in handling the problem with respect to 'refugees protected by the … (UNHCR)'. The attributed voice of the minister explains the need for the Cabinet article and states categorically Malaysia's stand on issues relating to refugees, including the authority of the UNHCR. The immigrants and the UNHCR are silent. Three social actors are assigned specific roles: the Home Affairs Ministry activated as agent in preparing a Cabinet article, the refugees passivated as the object of the handling, and the UNHCR represented as the protector of the refugees.

Sentence 2 legitimizes the action taken in (1) in terms of the need 'to overcome complexities that arose …' as a result of a conflict of authority between the Malaysian authorities who caught the refugees and the UNHCR that asked for their release. The claim that Malaysia was asked to release the refugees under the protection of the UNHCR is framed with 'Malaysia did not recognise the High Commissioner's powers', which questions the UNHCR's authority and the status of the refugees. Sentences 3 to 6 appear as direct reporting in quotation marks. Although not attributed, we may trace whose voice it is from the preceding representation. Malaysia is activated as agent in relation to not signing and not ratifying the agreement on refugees (3), which suggests that it is not bound by international law to recognize and accept UNHCR-hosted refugees. The negative constructions of the social actions ('did not sign and ratify'; 'do not recognise and accept'; 'don't recognise their powers') reject not only the refugee status, but more importantly the body giving that status, namely the UNHCR. The shift from 'Malaysia' to 'We' suggests that the government is speaking on behalf of the Malaysian people, which reflects an image of a consensual group.

Extract B reports a nationwide crackdown on illegal immigrants, including asylum seekers and refugees with letters from the UNHCR. Sentences 2 to 6 represent what Najib said when interviewed in his office after receiving contributions for the tsunami victims the previous day. The headline *Illegal immigrants: None will be spared from Ops Tegas* clearly reflects toughness and authoritativeness on the part of the government.

**Extract B**

(1) No category of illegal immigrant will be spared …, including those with letters issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2) Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said anyone who was an illegal was liable to be arrested.
(3) 'We will take action against anyone who is here illegally. (4) There is no exemption on this including those who are carrying letters, genuine or otherwise, from the UNHCR. (5) If the UNHCR wishes to appeal after these people are arrested, then it is up to them. (6) But it is up to us whether we accept the appeal or not.'

*Source*: 'Illegal immigrants: None will be spared from Ops Tegas', *The Star*, 4 March 2005

The authorial account (1) identifies the refugees under UNHCR protection as illegals, and as illegals they are 'liable to be arrested', a threat attributed to Najib and represented as indirect reporting in (2). They are declared illegals by *fiat* rather than by any discernible criteria.

Statements 3 to 6, claimed to reproduce what Najib actually said, are typical of the ways newspapers create a dichotomy of 'us' ('we', 'us') and 'them' ('anyone who is here illegally', 'the UNHCR'). The discourse of illegality criminalizes and positions 'those … carrying letters … from the UNHCR' on the wrong side of the law, and so justifies their arrest. No distinction is drawn between illegal immigrants and them. Their legitimacy as refugees is subordinated [–power] to the Malaysian government's authority [+power] and the sovereignty of the state, as stated in no uncertain terms in (6).

In contrast, the news report from *Malaysiakini* (extract C) is predominantly dialogical, with the authorial account and the humanitarian voices of the UNHCR speaking on behalf of the Acehnese, articulated together with the voice of the minister who questions the UNHCR's authority. Several social actors (e.g. Janowski, Syed Hamid Albar, the UNHCR), presenting different perspectives, are incorporated. The headline 'UN agency protests over the arrest of Aceh refugees' foregrounds the protest, and necessarily assumes that arrests have already been made. Reference to the immigrants is specific rather than general. The report reads:

**Extract C**

(1) GENEVA – The UN refugee agency has protested to the Malaysian government over the arrest of more than 400 asylum seekers from Indonesia's war-torn Aceh province, said a spokesman. (…)
(2) 'They were detained by the Malaysian police as they tried to approach the UNHCR office to seek asylum which is their right', Janowski continued. (…) (3) The UNHCR has stopped registering refugees in Kuala Lumpur as there are now Malaysian police stationed outside their offices.
(4) On Monday, Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said that 'it is not right for UNHCR to register the Acehnese as possible refugees when they are not refugees'. (5) Malaysia, which is not a signatory to the UN convention on refugees, does not recognize refugees or asylum seekers, he said. (6) 'If we encourage refugees to come to Malaysia, all the illegals will want to come', he said. (…)

(7) But the UNHCR accused the Malaysian government of sapping the right to asylum, as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

*Source*: 'UN agency protests over the arrest of Aceh refugees', *Malaysiakini*, 26 August 2003

In (4) the Foreign Minister is quoted as criticizing the UNHCR's action for registering 'the Acehnese as possible refugees when they are not refugees', which explains why the government takes a tough line against them, namely stationing police outside the UNCHR office. The relative clause in (5) states as a fact that Malaysia is not a signatory to the UN convention on refugees, declaring its status as non-signatory. This presupposes that no explanation is necessary, or indeed possible, which explains the unmitigated pronouncement, 'Malaysia . . . does not recognize refugees or asylum seekers'. Part of the representation of asylum seekers as illegal immigrants involves passivating them as being subject to Malaysia's decision not to recognize asylum seekers and refugees. Through a

conditional clause (Sentence 6), a link is established between 'refugees' and 'illegals'. The subordinate clause contains a statement of condition, 'If we encourage refugees to come to Malaysia', on which depends the conclusion that 'all the illegals will want to come'. The outcome, namely 'illegals' coming to Malaysia, is dependent on Malaysia's response to refugees, and so Malaysia is represented as an agent acting to uphold its sovereignty. The main thrust of the argument for not relaxing the rule is border security.

The minister's voice, markedly decisive and tough, is intertextually textured with the voices of the UNHCR and Janowski, identified as the UNHCR's spokesman. It was reported that the UNHCR protested about the arrest of 400 Acehnese asylum seekers (1), implicitly claimed that their detention was not legal because they had the right to seek asylum (2), and accused the government of 'sapping the right to asylum' (7). The terrible situation of Aceh ('war-torn') justifies their decision to flee and seek refuge. The UNHCR refers to the authority of international law to legitimize the accusation made against Malaysia (7), which questions the legitimacy of the Malaysian government's action in stopping the UNHCR from registering the Acehnese, and foregrounds the legitimacy of their claims for asylum. Notice how different aspects of the same reality are represented to serve different interests.

Extract D, published two days after extract C in *Malaysiakini*, should be read with the latter in mind. These form a running report. The lead echoes the government's earlier stand with respect to the Acehnese. The attributed headline is presented like a slogan: 'No asylum for Acehnese, says PM.'

**Extract D**

(1) Malaysia will not grant asylum to those who flee here from the war-torn Indonesian province of Aceh, said Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad today. (2) They will be treated as illegal immigrants hence subject to arrest and deportation, he added. . . . (3) The decision not to grant asylum is a blow to the hundreds of Acehnese fleeing to Malaysia to escape the violence in their homeland which is locked in a bloody struggle for independence. … (4) Several quarters, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have called on the Malaysian government to draw a distinction between asylum seekers and illegal immigrants.

*Source*: 'No asylum for Acehnese, says PM', *Malaysiakini*, 28 August 2003

The Prime Minister is quoted in (1) to lend authority to the pronouncement that 'Malaysia will not grant asylum'. Those Acehnese seeking asylum mutate into illegal immigrants, justifying the decision and the subsequent action of subjecting them to arrest and deportation (2). In (3) the decision is restated, but now articulated together with the Acehnese reaction that 'The decision … is a blow', and a description of the horrific situation from which they have fled, which orientates readers towards a certain 'meaning', namely questioning the decision taken on humanitarian grounds. The Acehnese voice, silent in extracts A and B, is now heard. The report also foregrounds opposing voices (4) that urge the government to 'draw a distinction between asylum seekers and illegal

immigrants'. This strategy of differentiation is in contrast to the government's and the mainstream media's usual practice of conflating the two categories, both done in the service of different interests.

It is interesting to see the way Acehnese immigrant identity is being represented and contested in the same context. Representing the immigrant as 'refugee', 'migrant', 'economic migrant' and 'illegal immigrant' contributes to focusing the attention on whether or not they are legitimate or legal, rather than on how to help them (Goodman and Speer, 2007). This generic reference to classes of people in the data, regardless of their genuine need, delegitimizes their position as asylum seekers and refugees, and justifies subsequent state action. For example, as seen in extract D, by declaring the Acehnese refugees 'illegals', the Malaysian government denies their right to asylum and presents their action to send them back to Aceh, even though there is a war on, as legitimate.

## *Asylum seekers and refugees as threats*

Asylum seekers and refugees have at times been represented as a 'problem' population, a representation calculated to give them an unfavourable slant. Analysis of government statements in this corpus agrees with Pickering's (2001) analysis of Australian media discourse that represents asylum seekers and refugees as not only a problem but a deviant problem, namely a population that deviates from what is deemed normal and acceptable. Pickering (2001) argues that deviancy, as constructed in opposition and seen as a threat to normality, is a means by which a state legitimizes exclusionary policies towards refugees.

Extract E reports on the conflict between the Malaysian government and the UNHCR with respect to the issuing of refugee cards to people seeking refuge. The voice of the Home Minister is incorporated to represent the government's position. The relationship between authorial account and attributed speech is clear: (1) and (4) report on the tough line the government is taking against the UNCHR's action, and (2) and (4) legitimize the government's subsequent responses, namely urging the UNHCR to verify status (2) and hoping that it will evaluate it (3).

**Extract E**

(1) The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was on Thursday urged to verify the actual status of people seeking asylum in Malaysia before issuing them refugee cards. (2) Home Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said this was to prevent indiscriminate issuing of refugee status that caused the country to be flooded with foreigners.

(3) 'My ministry hopes the UNHCR will evaluate the people seeking refugee status before issuing the cards. (4) We do not want crime and social problems to proliferate here because of the actions of the UNHCR.'

*Source*: 'UNHCR asked to verify status first before issuing refugee cards', *Bernama*, 19 February 2009

In (1) the UNHCR is passivated with respect to 'urged', with the agent excluded but mentioned in (2). Syed Hamid Albar is nominated and titulated as 'Home Minister Datuk Seri' to give authority to his voice when explaining the need for verification, namely 'to prevent indiscriminate issuing of refugee status'. Note the link between the UNCHR's act and the consequence of its act, which 'caused the country to be flooded with foreigners'. 'Flooded' can be analysed as a combination of the image schemata CONTAINER and CONTENT, with Malaysia construed as a container with limited capacity being flooded by the continuous inward movement of foreigners, against which, it is implied, Malaysia will have to defend herself.

Sentences (3) and (4), which are represented as actual words from the minister, construct the causal relations between the issuing of cards to 'people seeking refuge' by the UNHCR and the proliferation of crime and social problems. This group of people is indirectly represented as being associated with crime and social problems, posing a threat to us. In (3), 'My ministry' is activated as Senser in relation to 'hoping' with the UNHCR in object position, both represented as non-human agents. Interestingly, in (4) the collective human agency 'we' is activated in place of 'my ministry' when expressing something undesirable, namely the suggestion that the actions of the UNHCR will lead to 'crime and social problems', although no supporting evidence is given.

In April 2007, the *NST* published an interview (extract F) with the then Foreign Minister, and the statements made were subsequently reported by *Malaysiakini* (extract G), giving some sense of genre chain. We will begin by analysing extract F to address the issue concerned with the way the selected statements are recontextualized in the press report:

**Extract F**

1. Q: (1) As things stand now, once (refugees) get their documentation from the UNHCR, it appears that the government is helpless.

2. A: (1) On humanitarian grounds we do not take action with the understanding that as soon as possible they should be relocated to a third country. (2) It is a transition. (3) But it is becoming a flood. (4) There are some 40,000 who have been recorded (as refugees by UNHCR and given papers). (5) It is supposed to take care of them and feed them. (6) The fact is that we are not a signatory to the convention (International Convention of 1951 on Refugees and the additional protocol of 1967). (7) We have given humane treatment to these people who have come to this country illegally. (8) It (UNHCR) should get them to a third country. (9) Otherwise, every illegal in this country will go to the UNHCR and ask to be certified as a refugee.

3. Q: (1) Has the ministry written to the UNHCR to indicate its concern about the situation?

4. A: (1) We have done that on a number of occasions. (2) We have called the agency. (3) We have spoken to it and explained our position. (4) The agency understands we have been accommodating in allowing them to operate. (5) What we are not happy about is the current state of affairs, the difficulty, the social and economic burden we face. (6) Now everybody (refugees) we ask for identity papers, they come up with the UNHCR (identity papers). (7) We don't have the international protocol cover, while the UNHCR is operating in our country with our agreement. (8) In the first place, it should not be taking people except for those who really have a problem and it should inform us. (9) At present, it doesn't inform us.

*Source*: 'Refugees "a perennial problem for Malaysia"', *New Straits Times*, 18 April 2007

**Extract G**

(1) Malaysia has accused the United Nations refugee agency of contributing to a 'flood' of immigrants who are poorly cared for, according to a report today. (2) 'What we are not happy about is the current state of affairs, the difficulty, the social and economic burden we face', he told the *New Straits Times* newspaper. (3) The UNHCR 'should not be taking people except for those who really have a problem, and it should inform us. At present, it doesn't inform us', he added. (4) Syed Hamid said Malaysia was supposed to be a place of transition, but that the number of refugees was 'becoming a flood', with the UNCHR registering some 40,000 refugees.

(5) Malaysia is not a party to international refugee conventions, and illegal immigrants are often detained and later deported to their home country. (6) However, the UNHCR can assign refugee status to applicants and assist in resettling them in another country or in voluntary repatriation.

*Source*: 'M'sia blames UN for "flood" of refugees', *Malaysiakini*, 18 April 2007

The interview foregrounds the threat of a social and economic burden faced from the UNHCR-certified refugees whose entry into Malaysia 'is becoming a flood'. The primary intention is to highlight the government's humane position with respect to the 'refugees', despite not being 'a signatory to the … International Convention of 1951 on Refugees …' and expectations for the UNHCR to meet their obligations, namely 'should get them to a third country', 'should not be taking people except those who really have a problem' and 'should inform us'.

In extract G, the headline 'M'sia blames UN for "flood" of refugees' provides an explicit ascription of agency, representing Malaysia as blaming the UNHCR for the serious problem faced with respect to refugees. The positioning of Us against Them is foregrounded in (1) with Malaysia now accusing the UNHCR 'of contributing to a "flood" of immigrants' and of not actually caring for their welfare, inferred from 'poorly cared for'. The flood metaphor is chosen to illustrate the threat they pose to us. The UNHCR is represented as blameworthy with respect to the threat of uncontrolled migration of refugees. Here, we can infer the government's feelings towards the UNHCR, that it has not fulfilled its part of the bargain. *Malaysiakini* interprets this as 'blaming' and 'accusing', which carries an accusatory tone and reflects unfavourably on Malaysia.

Sentences 2 and 3 report the minister's actual words in quotation marks with a reporting clause. This is followed by an indirect reporting which keeps close to the original. The subsequent sentences (5 and 6) create a contrast between the negative actions of Malaysia (namely 'detained' and 'deported' immigrants) and the positive actions of the UNHCR (namely 'assign[ing] refugees status' and 'resettling them'). Sentence (5) states as a fact that Malaysia is 'not a party to international refugee conventions' and is 'often' involved in detaining and deporting 'illegal immigrants', despite being deleted in the passive construction. The UNHCR is represented favourably as not only having the authority to 'assign refugee status to applicants' but also to 'assist in resettling them'. This foregrounds the dual system which ascribes the immigrants' different identities – illegals subject to detention and deportation, and UNHCR-certified refugees with a prospect of resettling.

## *Asylum seekers and refugees as victims*

When Najib became Prime Minister in April 2009, he brought in a new public relations team to create a new image for him.[1] Although foreign policy has remained largely the same, Najib is perceived to have made diplomacy and foreign policy an important part of his administration (Khadijah Md. Khalid, 2011), and to be more open and friendly. A case in point is the portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers as victims, which emphasizes their plight rather than reinforcing the dominant perception of immigration as a major problem.

In July 2011, Australia and Malaysia signed a bilateral agreement which enabled Australia to send to Malaysia 800 asylum seekers it had intercepted arriving by boat, where these 'boatpeople' could have their asylum claims heard and processed over a period of four years. Australia would in return accept 4000 UNHCR-certified refugees from Malaysia for resettlement. On 31 August 2011, the Australian High Court ruled that the agreement was not legal on the grounds that Malaysia was not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, and Australia had no right to remove asylum seekers whose refugee claims had yet to be determined by Australia.

To legitimize the 2011 asylum swap deal, asylum seekers and refugees were represented as victims of human trafficking, which was complemented by the construction of human traffickers as villains and the Malaysian government as hero. In contrast to the statements made during his time as Deputy Prime Minister (extract B), this representation has appeared to be more positive and sympathetic. Here, we see the way context and different political agendas can account for the shift in representation, which could also be attributed to the Prime Minister's efforts to give himself and his government a new image.

During Najib's trip to Australia in October 2011, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published his article on the Malaysian–Australian asylum deal which presents Malaysia, and in particular the 'Malaysian solution', in a favourable light (see extract H). It contains elements of counter-argument and self-promotion in positive evaluation. Some of the content is restated in the Malaysian press for the consumption of the local audience (extracts I, J and K). The article reads:

**Extract H**

**Paragraph 1**

(1) Where you or I see a man, a woman or an innocent child, people traffickers see only one thing – money. (2) They target the vulnerable and the desperate and exploit them without mercy, taking advantage of people financially, physically, often even sexually.

**Paragraph 2**

(3) The sheer heartlessness of the traffickers was demonstrated in the most horrendous manner last December when the man responsible for taking almost a hundred migrants to Australia abandoned his charges in a leaking, overcrowded boat with an engine that was about to fail. (4) Dozens drowned when the boat struck rocks off Christmas Island. (5) At least five children and three babies were among the dead.

**Paragraph 3**

(6) None of us ever want to witness such scenes again, which is why my government worked with Prime Minister Gillard to develop a means of stopping the people traffickers – what became known as the 'Malaysian solution'. (7) Over the past few months, a great deal has been written about both the solution and Malaysia itself, much of it ill-informed and based on politics rather than sober analysis of the facts …

*Source*: 'People trafficking a trade in human misery that must be stopped', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 October 2011

The focus here is on the victimization of the immigrants by the traffickers which causes the Malaysian government to take a moral stand, and a new course of action to protect the immigrants from their oppressors. The extract is divided into three paragraphs with interrelated themes: victimization of the immigrants, exemplification of the victimization, and the solution to the problem – namely the 'Malaysian solution', which is used to provide the moral legitimation for the Malaysian government to work with the Australian Prime Minister. The headline 'People trafficking a trade in human misery that must be stopped' makes moral evaluation overt and legitimates the decision to 'develop a means of stopping the people traffickers'.

In paragraph 1, three groups of social actor are activated – 'I' and 'you' implicitly depicted as the good Us in relation to the bad Other ('people traffickers' and 'they') who are the victimizers, and the good Other ('the vulnerable and the desperate', 'them' and 'people'), the victims. The good Us and the bad Other are both activated as agents of seeing. But the contrast is noteworthy: 'you or I see a man, a woman or an innocent child', which represents them as human beings, and 'people traffickers see . . . money', which objectifies and dehumanises them. The traffickers are attributed three actions represented as affecting 'the vulnerable and the desperate': the actions of targeting, exploiting and taking advantage of. The severity of the action of exploiting is emphasized by the phrase 'without mercy' and the severity of the action of 'taking advantage of people' is foregrounded by three adverbs of manner – 'financially', 'physically' and 'sexually'. Najib represents his own words as facts, committing himself completely to the statement: 'Where you or I see a man …' (1), 'they target … exploit, taking advantage of people …' (2).

Paragraph 2 draws on a narrative genre to represent the traffickers as the bad Other, exemplified by the capsized boat incident. In Sentence 3, the traffickers are described as heartless, and 'their sheer heartlessness' is demonstrated in the manner the migrants were treated by one of them – 'abandoned his charges in a leaking, overcrowded boat with an engine that was about to fail'. Note the underlined words that depict the unseaworthy condition of the boat, which explains why it capsized. The victims are represented as being at the man's mercy, and the manner in which they are referred to as 'his charges' reinforces the power he has over them. The heart-wrenching narrative builds a strong case in support of the government's decision to work with 'Prime Minister Gillard to develop a means of stopping the people traffickers', which Najib calls the 'Malaysian solution'. In (6), 'None of us' forms a collective group which underlies 'our' supposed

consensus about not wanting 'to witness such scenes'. Note the contrast between 'my government' which backgrounds Najib's agency and 'Prime Minister Gillard' with agency nominated, individualized and titulated.

*The Star* and the *NST* reproduce the article verbatim for Malaysian readers with the headlines 'War on human trafficking must continue' and 'People trafficking must be stopped', respectively, which evoke moral values and make it imperative to stop human trafficking and continue 'the war against it'. The leads in *The Star* (extract I) and the *NST* (extract J) articles read:

**Extract I**

People trafficking trades in human misery and must be stopped, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak wrote in his opinion piece, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

**Extract J**

Much of what has been written in Australia about the Malaysian Solution is ill-informed. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak sets the record straight.

In both, the Prime Minister is titulated using his full title 'Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak' to legitimize what is said by reference to personal authority. *The Star* reproduces the title of Najib's article verbatim and identifies the source of information, namely Najib's 'opinion piece, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*'. The *NST*, on the other hand, focuses on the ill-informed reporting of Malaysia and the Malaysian solution (extract H, sentence 7), leaving Najib to set the record straight.

In contrast, the article published by *Malaysiakini* entitled 'Talk of the devil!' was scathing in its evaluation of Najib's article, described as 'a self-praising article allegedly authored by him'. The predicating phrase 'self-praising article' portrays Najib as boastful and 'allegedly' casts doubt over the authorship of the article. Najib's claim ('the prime minister of a progressive liberal nation') is textured with the authorial account and extracts from a report to represent a different reality, an effect of the relations set-up between them. The article reads:

**Extract K**

(1) The most fundamental falsehood in the article was the phrase describing him as 'the prime minister of a progressive liberal nation'. (2) Progressive? Liberal?? (3) With an Internal Security Act that permits imprisonment without charge or trial? (4) With police so politically compromised that they are effectively stand-over men and security guards for the regime? (…)
(5) This claim contrasts starkly with the US State Department's 'Trafficking in Persons Report 2009' in which, of 173 countries surveyed, Malaysia was ranked in the 'worst of the worst' 17 along with such vicious abusers as Burma, Chad, Cuba …
(6) The report stated that 'Malaysia is a destination, and, to a lesser extent, a source and transit country for women and children trafficked for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation, and for men, women and children trafficked for the purpose of forced labour'.

(7) The report also referred to a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee finding in April 2009 that Malaysian immigration officials had sold refugees for US$200 per person to traffickers operating on the Thai border, and extorted ransoms of US$575 from adult refugees in return for their freedom.

*Source*: 'Talk of the devil!', *Malaysiakini*, 2 November 2011

Extract K aims to challenge the claim that the country Najib leads is 'a progressive liberal nation'. Two different voices (Najib's, and the report writer's) are incorporated into the news report and their interconnection is clear. Najib's attributed voice is included in the authorial account which rejects the claim and represents it instead as 'the most fundamental falsehood in the article'. The author includes 'the US State Department's "Trafficking in Persons Report 2009"' to substantiate his assertion and give it some kind of legitimacy. This framing casts the Malaysian government in a negative light, which is the opposite of what Najib intended to achieve.

The author's rejection is followed by four rhetorical questions linked together to express implicitly what he actually feels, namely that the claim is false. The first two questions, 'Progressive? Liberal?', serve to challenge the claim, and the subsequent two questions (3 and 4) present covert assertions for which no answers are sought.

The rejection of Najib's claim rests on hard evidence attributed to a reliable source. The report represents as a fact an extremely unfavourable image of Malaysia (Sentences 5, 6 and 7). Malaysian government officials are the actual oppressors or villains who 'sold refugees' to the traffickers and 'extorted ransoms … from adult refugees in return for their freedom'. Refugees are the victims not only of traffickers, but also of government officials.

Notice the strategy of direct and indirect reporting to invoke evidence and 'the implicit claim to faithfulness to the original' (Fairclough, 2003: 51). By referring to findings from a survey conducted with 173 countries and from 'a US Senate Foreign Relations Committee' on Malaysia's track record on human rights issues, in particular trafficking, the author represents his assessment of Malaysia as objective and according to standards set by the international community. This information questions not only Najib's claim of a government with moral values, but also by implication the 'real reason' for Malaysia's proposal for a collaborative effort with Australia (extract H, sentence 6).

In summary, the mainstream newspapers reinforce the government's representation of refugees and asylum seekers as victims of traffickers through the verbatim reproduction of Najib's article, which explains the need for the Malaysian solution. In contrast, *Malaysiakini* calls into question the validity of Najib's words in the article. The negative representation of Najib and the Malaysian government sharply contrasts with the hero representation presented both by the government and the mainstream newspapers.

## Discussion and conclusion

Thematically, there are two contrasting representations of refugees and asylum seekers: a major problem that has to be dealt with, and victims that need help – each

representation reflecting different interests and fulfilling different agendas. Different voices and different aspects of the original text are incorporated into a new text through direct and indirect reporting and attribution to foreground different ideological positions. Our analysis shows that the grammatical and lexical potential of language that the writer exploits to present certain aspects of reality reflects the position he takes up with respect to the issues raised and propositions made.

Political elites use the mainstream press as a legitimation of policy decisions and denial of legal status. Their voices dominate the news texts, and are strategically incorporated into them to form a kind of dialogue with other texts on the same theme. The primary aim is to represent to the public the ideological orientation that the Malaysian government at the time subscribes to, which reinforces the perception of refugees and asylum seekers as a problem and explains why the government is reported to have been taking a tough line. Although different social actors are brought into the text, any dialogue appears to be restricted to the writer and the relevant political leaders. The voices of the refugees and asylum seekers and those speaking on their behalf are significantly absent.

The representations of asylum seekers and refugees as illegals contribute to ascribing them criminal qualities, which provides the reason for 'keeping them out'. Criminalization is reflected in the choice of words related to the punishment for breaking immigration laws, including 'taking action against', 'detained', 'deportation', 'arrest' and 'sent back'. Two things are happening here. First, by identifying asylum seekers and refugees as 'illegals', they are being conflated into the more threatening and problematic illegal immigrant category, which explains the need to defend ourselves.

Second, securitizing refugees and asylum seekers as threats is a strategy used to legitimize the action of keeping them out of the country and sending them home (Ibrahim, 2005; Pickering, 2004), which explains Malaysian restrictive immigration policy and the government's somewhat antagonistic attitude towards them. This exclusionary practice is no surprise. Malaysia has not ratified the UN Refugee Convention and has quite consistently maintained its position of considering all asylum seekers and refugees as illegal immigrants. The political leaders make claims to the authority of the government and the laws of the country, and thus state that sovereignty has priority over international law (e.g. extracts A and B).

The non-government news websites represent refugees and asylum seekers as victims of circumstance and those in authority, reflecting more empathy with the problems they face. Operating within permissible bounds, they are critical of the government's actions, challenging the detention of refugees and asylum seekers and representing their decisions to seek refuge as justifiable (extracts C and D). The voices of the political elites are textured together with authorial accounts and the UNHCR in particular to cast the government in a different and more negative light.

Interestingly, Najib's opinion article published in Australia represents the government in a more favourable light. It foregrounds the plight of the refugees, namely that they are victims of human traffickers needing our help, which explains why he proposed to collaborate with Australia to solve this problem (extract H). The contrast between the heroic self and the villainous Other is foregrounded. The Malaysian government is activated as having an ethical responsibility to protect the asylum seekers and refugees who are passivated as victims without any agency. However, parts of his text which are

recontextualized in *Malaysiakini* represent a different image of Malaysia (extract K). The refugees are still the victims but Malaysia is now represented as the bad Other, a claim legitimized by a report cited to persuade text consumers to accept it as true. The texturing of Najib's voice and the authorial account is not favourable to the Malaysian government – the latter challenging the claim of the good Self with counter evidence from a report, which emphasizes the implicit claim to faithfulness with it using quotation marks and specific attributions.

In conclusion, the analysis shows how the newspapers represent asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia through recontextualized elite voices and other aspects of the original text, one of the techniques used in news reporting to create distance from the truth claims of the report. The political elites, sometimes nominated with honorification (namely *Dr*, *Datuk* and *Syed*) and affiliation (namely *Home Minister*, *Deputy Minister*, *Foreign Minister* and *Prime Minister*), express their views from the national perspective, centring on the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', with them being depicted as a bad Other or a good Other depending on the context. The analysis of their voices shows how social actors are represented through role allocation and through the use of discourse strategies, including nomination, predication and agency.

Grounded in CDA and drawing on Van Leeuwen's Social Actor Network model (2008) and Reisigl and Wodak's discourse-historical approach (2009), selected extracts from news reports were analysed to show how texts from the original source are drawn to construct some aspect of reality about asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia which is not necessarily neutral. Here, elite voices play a key role in maintaining and legitimizing representations of asylum seekers and refugees as illegals, threats and victims, which simultaneously suits the needs of the text producers and keeps in line with the contemporary political agenda. This kind of critical research exemplifies how differences are established and unequal power relations perpetuated.

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## Note

1. 'From the people behind Tony Blair, a "cool" Najib', *The Malaysian Insider*, 19 September 2011.

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