Out of Africa: Sudanese refugees and the construction of difference in political and lay talk

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Abstract

Over the last ten years, more than 20, 000 Sudanese refugees have resettled in Australia and have been granted permanent residency. This new cohort of refugees has entered Australia via the federal government's offshore component of the Refugee and Humanitarian Programme, sanctioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Although there exists a cluster of discourse analytic work that examines debates surrounding asylum seekers that arrive by boat (often labelled as 'illegal immigrants'), there is a dearth of discursive psychological work that analyses how humanitarian refugees are constructed in political and everyday talk. This thesis addresses that gap by examining how humanitarian refugees, entering Australia under the auspices of the government, are represented and accounted for in public discourse and conversation. Employing a critical discursive psychological approach, this thesis analyses political interviews and lay talkback radio calls, to examine in close detail some of the manifold rhetorical practices that speakers deploy when constructing and advancing arguments that represent Sudanese refugees as ostensibly 'different'.

The first Chapter of this thesis introduces previous critical discursive research on refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, The United Kingdom, Spain and Canada. This literature suggests that refugees and asylum seekers are accounted for as 'illegal'; as constituting a 'threat' to the nations they seek refuge in, and as 'deviant'. These representations are argued to question the legitimacy of refugees' claims for asylum, and thereby justifying punitive policies of exclusion. I also discuss how preconceptions of the nation-state underpin

much of the discourse of delegitimation and threat instantiated in the reviewed research.

Chapter 2 provides an overview[1] of the methodology employed in this thesis. Employing a 'synthetic' (Wetherell, 1998) critical social psychological approach, I delineate how I came to chose this epistemology and discuss some of the assumptions it holds in relations to language. I also discuss the institutional settings and data that the four analytic Chapters give attention to.

Chapter 3, the first analytic Chapter, analyses political interviews with the former minister for Immigration and Citizenship of Australia, Kevin Andrews. Specifically, I examine how *causal attributions* function to build arguments that justify a reduction in the humanitarian quota for Sudanese refugees. This Chapter reformulates the traditional social-cognitive approach to causal attributions, and treats causality as a discursive resource: as a matter for speakers and hearers to orientate to and deploy for rhetorical purposes, functioning to attribute blame for 'integration problems' squarely on Sudanese refugees themselves. The close links between language, and its role in constructing justifications for punitive immigration policy, is well illustrated here.

In Chapter 4, the second analytic Chapter, I examine how speakers on talkback radio orientate to what I have coined, 'sympathetic' formulations, when complaining about *and* defending Sudanese refugees. I argue that *sympathy talk* constitutes a rhetorical resource that both assists speakers in the management of their identity (i.e. as reasonable, and 'not racist') when they are advancing pejorative representations of Sudanese refugees and as a device that

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[1] As each analytic Chapter stands alone as individual manuscripts, they each carry with them their own methodology section. Therefore, this Chapter comprises an overview of the rationale for the methodological approach.

can be invoked to critique arguments deemed prejudicial. I also advance the argument that 'sympathy' talk signals a wider ideological practice that has implications for Sudanese refugees in relation to their social identity and positioning. By analysing at the interactional and ideological level, this Chapter highlights how linguistic resources can be subtly shaped, serving the rhetorical aims of the speaker.

Chapter 5 examines the structure and function of *narrative devices* in callers' accounts of Sudanese refugees. This Chapter shows how the production of first-hand 'witnessed' events regularly use devices that present a speaker's account as a compelling, veridical report, and not motivated by some pre-existing grudge against Sudanese refugees. Furthermore, I show how such narratives are imbued with various normative evaluations that do important work in legitimating punitive action against Sudanese refugees. I discuss the role of 'contrast devices' when building arguments that impute how Sudanese refugees are, in essence, different to previous immigrants and other long-settled Australians.

In Chapter 6, the final analytical Chapter, I provide a review of the literature pertaining to *'psychological essentialism'* and its role in prejudiced and racist beliefs. Much of the existing work on psychological essentialism has attempted to attribute essentialism to an internalised, cognitive phenomenon. I provide discursive examples from the corpus that illustrate the contextually contingent nature of essentialist rhetoric, and its highly nuanced nature in rationalising why Sudanese refugees are problematic.

Chapter 7 charts an overview of the core empirical findings, and discusses implications of the four research Chapters. I also comment on how future research could elaborate and build upon these findings, integrate and

augment socio-cognitive accounts of prejudice and racism, and provide further

insights into the way everyday talk constructs accounts and representations

that legitimate stratification and inequality in society.

Declaration

I, Scott Hanson-Easey, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institute of higher learning, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

All work contained in the submission was initiated, undertaken, and prepared within the period of candidature.

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Date.

Publications

Work contained in this thesis had been published elsewhere:

Hanson-Easey, S., & Augoustinos, M. (2010). Out of Africa: Refugee policy and the language of Causal attribution. *Discourse and Society 21(3)*, 1–29.

Hanson-Easey, S., & Augoustinos, M. (2011). Complaining about humanitarian refugees: The role of sympathy talk in the design of complaints on talkback radio. *Discourse and Communication, 5(3)*, 247-271.

Hanson-Easey, S., & Augoustinos, M. (In Press). Narratives from the neighbourhood: The discursive construction of integration problems on talkback radio. *Journal of Sociolinguistics.*

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