"Petaling street almost Malaysian"- A discourse analysis of news on illegal immigrants

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Abstract

This paper explores ideological representations of illegal immigrants present in six Malaysian newspapers. The discourse analysis shows specific lexicalization and the one-sided relationship between the government of Malaysia and illegal immigrants. The Malaysian government is repeatedly positioned as the savior of the nation and agent who verbalize actions through the use of lexical items such as “implementing,” and “door-to-door checks.” Secondly, the lexi-grammatical analysis reveals binary oppositions such as “violence vs. peace” and “citizenry vs. non-citizenry.” This study lends support to the claim that political institutions exert influence and power through discursive spaces in media discourse.

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1. Introduction

Previous studies have presented us with a broad view of racist discourses in the European and African contexts. They include Brookes’s (1995) study that reported a stereotypical, naturalized, and dominant discourse on Africa. Using a comparative analysis of two British newspapers with different ideological stands, linguistic analysis with regard to the kinds of lexical items, metaphors, and the relationship between participants and themes was employed. The study has revealed that features of the discourse are combined to produce specific meanings, constructing the racist description of Africa and its inhabitants. As this is one of the evidences concerning ideology and power embedded in media discourse, linguists are still left with the question of whether this ideological construction frequently occurs as a discursive discourse across cultures. The present study, which

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involves the Malaysian context, aims at addressing this gap by looking at how illegal immigrants are represented by certain political influence in 61 newspaper headlines.

2. Background

In addition to Brookes’s (1995) study, a critical discourse analysis looking at the issue of power and minority could point to the works of Van Dijk (1987) and Wodak & Matouschek (1993). Van Dijk (1987) discussed that much of the Whites’ talk draws on a rhetoric that emphasizes the differences between Whites and the ethnic, racial or cultural other. One of the ways, according to him, was through the use of lexical items. Lexical items signifying the movement of large amounts of water are also conventionally used to talk about immigrants, for example, the nouns- “wave” and “tide” and the verb “inundate.” It can be argued that a conventional metaphorical use of expressions relating to the movement of water and flood in particular, is in part a discourse on immigration. In addition to Van Dijk (1987), Wodak and Matouschek (1993) have also looked extensively at racism discourses directed at migrants in Austria. These discourses, as revealed by their studies, however, were produced primarily by native speakers of German.

3. Research questions

The following research questions were formed to specify the goals of the present study:

- What are the macropropositional contents which frequently occur in Malaysian newspaper headlines?
- What are the linguistic devices employed in writing the newspaper headlines?

4. Methods

Newspaper headlines from six major Malaysian newspapers, namely The New Straits Times (NST), The Star (TS), Daily Express (DE), Bernama (B), Aliran (A) and The Malay Mail (MM), dating from 2007 through 2010, were chosen for the study. Three former three newspapers are pro government major newspapers. What differentiates them is that the NST is a major English newspaper while TS is owned by the Chinese government party. DE, however, is the largest pro government circulation daily newspaper for the people in Sabah- a state which is located in Borneo. Newspaper B is the Malaysian official news agency, while MM is the daily tabloid from Kuala Lumpur. Newspaper A is a news site of Malaysian reform movement claiming to offer quality news analysis.

Initially, 65 newspaper headlines were chosen randomly through online websites because they were easily obtained. However, after a detailed examination of the headlines, 4 headlines were eliminated because they focused on how illegal maids were made legal in the context of Malaysian families. Since the aim of the study is to explore the dominant discourses of illegal immigrants in Malaysia, the newspaper headlines on illegal maids were excluded from the analysis. Appendix A lists all 61 headlines gained from six newspapers.

4.1 Procedure

In order for the researchers to examine the macropropositional content, two important steps were taken. Firstly, the topics or propositional content of all 61 headlines were analyzed using Statistical Procedures for Social Sciences 17.0 Version (SPSS 17.0). In addition to using SPSS 17.0, the macrorule of generalization was used in order to position the propositional content of the news texts contained in the headlines onto broader macropropositions, as suggested by Fairclough & Fairclough (2012) and Machin & Mayr (2012). Thus, if the headline of DE14 reads, “24-hour patrols against intrusions,” it falls under the macropropositional content of
“Malaysian government ensures safety from illegal immigrants.” Secondly, the headlines were lexico-grammatically analyzed. This is to identify the generalized stylistic choices used in giving ideological representation of events and experiences. These stylistic choices include, but are not limited to vocabulary and grammar.

5. Results

This section summarizes the results of the analysis that was carried out. In order to present the results of these analyses in a consistent manner, the discussion of results are organized systematically according to the research questions posed in this study.

5.1. Research question 1

Table 1 summarizes the result of the macropropositions in which the newspaper headlines were grouped. The newspapers glorified the efforts of Malaysian government to curb the emergence of illegal immigrants through house and ferry raids, work authorization permits and immigration checks, “friendly door-to-door checks,” proposals, patrols, and establishing deadlines and databases. On the other hand, illegal immigrants were portrayed as uncontrollably and excessively violent individuals when they occupied some states in Malaysia. They were also portrayed as those who problematized immigration departments, were linked to terror links, threatened national security, and provided deviant routes and armed tactics. Illegal immigrants were also portrayed as persons who took away jobs from Malaysians when they applied to work as waiters and cashiers. Many also managed to secure other jobs previously held by the locals and traded goods illegally in Kuala Lumpur. There were also headlines stating that illegal immigrants’ rights should be established and treated equally, in that they were thought of as slaves, and that proposals to treat them humanely was put forth. In the headlines, too, illegal immigrants could not be trusted or believed in that they caused mortality and brought in hazardous goods while their boats reached Malaysia. In the news headlines surveyed, illegal immigrants were also portrayed as individuals who “stole” identity through producing fake identity cards and sidestepping...
Malaysians. Lastly, illegal immigrants were reported in cases involving land pollution and chicken-rearing businesses which were deemed unhygienic.

5.2. Research question 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-citizen vs citizen</th>
<th>Violence vs peace</th>
<th>Democracy vs repressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TS</td>
<td>DE</td>
<td>MM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal (x 6)</td>
<td>illegal (x 11)</td>
<td>illegal (x 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreigners (x 3)</td>
<td>foreigners (x 1)</td>
<td>almost Malaysian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immigration rules</td>
<td>immigrants legalise</td>
<td>fake IC’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overstayed</td>
<td>stateless people</td>
<td>street kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipinos</td>
<td>hiding using</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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Table 2. Lexical groupings in headlines in The Star, Daily Express, and Malay Mail

Table 2 highlights the result of the specific lexical items used. For the purpose of analyzing the types of lexical items and collocation used, three newspapers with the highest frequency of headlines on illegal immigrants- The Star (TS), Daily Express (DE), and Malay Mail (MM) were chosen. Each of these news headlines had at least 15 subjects on illegal immigrants. It is important to associate the level of frequency to the newspaper headlines because it will give rich information on how the lexical items construct particular ideological representations of experiences or events. The analysis of the lexicalization in the three newspapers, TS, DE and MM reveals three pairs of concepts; violence and peace, citizen and non-citizen, and democracy and repressed. It could be argued that the concepts define illegal immigrants as violent and job snatchers, having non-citizenship and that illegal immigrant are repressed. This is further contrasted with words that reinforced peace, citizen, democracy and jobless. One could argue that negative images of illegal immigrants appear to be portrayed along the lines of these concepts. Overwording can be encapsulated around the concept of being a non-citizen and citizen of Malaysia. Repetition of words such as, “illegal” and “foreigners” with the interrelated terms, for instance, “almost Malaysian,” “stateless people,” street kids,” “Filipinos,” and “overstayed” individuals support the negative interpretation of and attitude towards illegal immigrants in Malaysia. The supporting words here suggest what linguists term as collocation and are viewed as co-occurring with certain
words or meanings. This finding is consistent with Brookes (1995) who found collocation being positioned around multiplicity of words within a particular concept.

6. Interpretation and implication

The analysis presented uncovers evidence concerning some of the stereotypical and dominant discourses of illegal immigrants in newspapers in Malaysia. The linguistic analysis put forth illuminates the presence of specific lexicalization and collocation, metaphors, and the relationship between the participants and the processes. The study also lends some support to findings by Brookes’s (1995) and Widyawati’s (2006) studies on the hidden constant ideology underlying the news articles written for the public. The ideology is based upon the macropropositional content and lexical items used, in addition to constant repetition of ideas.

One of the implications of the present study on the study of discourse is that political institutions may influence and exert power to persuade readers of their intentions. Based from this study, the Malaysian government voice is overtly present, in contrast to illegal immigrants, who were seen to have been voiceless in the news items presented. Aldrich (1999) argues that the political institutions could do this through a wide array of ways and some of them include the use of specific lexical items and stereotypes. These lexical items then convey values, opinions and beliefs. Through stereotyping, these political institutions could provide images conjured up to tell the readers how they should position a particular group. In turn, these two ways are closely associated with what Hall (1982) argued for- discursive histories are the results of stereotypical ideological framework.

7. Conclusions

Although this study is limited to media in Malaysia, the study reported here provides evidence supporting the notion that the discourse of political ideologies is discursive and repetitive, as implied in Fairclough & Fairclough (2012). The newspaper headlines show specific macropropositional content and lexical items related to provide images of illegal immigrants. By way of illustration, the macropropositional content analysis illustrates how features of this discourse are combined to produce specific meanings to political voices of the government in opposition to the “voiceless” illegal immigrants. Secondly, the lexico-grammatical analysis reveals binary oppositions such as “democratic vs. repressed.” It is argued that the entrenched role of this discourse in reproducing the representations of illegal immigrants holds little possibility for challenge, especially in the discourse of media. Further research should acknowledge the contribution of the newspaper readers to gain insights into their reading newspaper headlines. This can help us as researchers and educators observe and make informed decisions on the perceived political ideology of persons in power.

References

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Appendix A. Newspaper headlines

A.1. New Straits Times (NST)

NST 1. Petty trading: No need to hire foreign workers
NST 2. Move against foreigners in “pasar malam” trade

A.2. The Star (TS)

TS 1. 48 illegals hiding in ferry compartment detained
TS 2. Raid against illegals nets RM25,000 in fireworks instead
TS 3. Foreigners take over Klang alleys
TS 4. Foreigners using Malaysia to enter other countries illegally
TS 5. Group: Allow the hiring of foreigners as waiters, cashiers
TS 6. Local help is hard to find
TS 7. Ministry to ensure they do not overstay or work illegally
TS 8. Placing local labour as a priority
TS 9. Immigration in the dark over foreign runners
TS 10. Govt to adopt KRA method to tighten rules on hiring foreigners
TS 11. Friendly door-to-door checks on illegal maids
TS 12. Immigration officers go door-to-door to check on illegal maids
TS 13. Nine foreigners with alleged terror links will be sent home, says Hisham
TS 14. Mechanism to monitor illegals, put “fear into them”
TS 15. Ensure immigration rules not violated, says DG

A.3. Daily Express (DE)

DE 1. Latest tactic of illegal immigrants
DE 2. Why mortality rate still high
DE 3. 42 illegal immigrants jailed
DE 4. Alert against return of illegals
DE 5. Illegals threat to security: State Sec
DE 6. “Many illegal Filipinos entering peninsular with fake ICs”
DE 7. Give Ops Tegas a chance
DE 8. Deportations to resume
DE 9. Op will be fair: DPM
DE 10. No plans to legalise illegals: Chor
DE 11. Cannot rely on past glory
DE 12. Proposal on stateless people, street kids
DE 13. Illegals cannot escape: Azmi
DE 14. 24-hour patrols against intrusions
DE 15. Over 600,000 foreigners
DE 16. Have illegals’ deadline: PBS
DE 17. Upko: Ops on Sabah illegals not so Tegas
DE 18. Meaningless if illegals issue excluded
DE 19. Illegals gain citizenship; Sabahan lose theirs’
A.4. Bernama (B)

B 1. National database on foreigners necessary- Hishammuddin
B 2. Action taken on local traders found leasing lots to foreigners
B 3. Foreigner management and monitoring according to sectors
B 4. Indonesian jailed two years for snatching toddler’s gold chain
B 5. Federal territories will not issue trading license to foreigners

A.5. Aliran (A)

A 1. “War on undocumented migrants” not the answer
A 2. Establishing an anti-discrimination law in an Asian country
A 3. Profiting from health testing on migrant workers
A 4. Migrant workers or slaves?

A.6. Malay Mail (MM)

MM 1. Please stop influx of illegal immigrants into Pulau Ketam
MM 2. Hellish route to better life
MM 3. Illegally boating from Malaysia to a better life, or death
MM 4. Something fishy in boat people bid
MM 5. Crackdown on foreign workers soon
MM 6. KL to get rid of illegal foreign traders
MM 7. Pudu needs more time to phase out foreign workers
MM 8. Petaling Street minus “aliens”
MM 9. Petaling Street almost Malaysian
MM 10. The Mail says: Malaysians should take up “unglamorous” jobs
MM 11. Human trafficking: Ministry cooperation with NGOs and US
MM 12. Now it’s a chicken problem
MM 13. Problem hiring locals for Petaling Street
MM 14. It’s a dilemma, says Ministry
MM 15. The Mail says: Manage migrant issue humanely
MM 16. Action taken against illegals