Television News Discourse: 
A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of how coverage of the 2013 Australian Federal Election shaped narratives about asylum seekers

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

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STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that the work embodied in this thesis also generated the following publication:

ABSTRACT

Policy regarding people arriving by boat in order to seek asylum, was a key focus of political discourse during the 2013 Australian Federal Election campaign. Evening television news reports on the unfolding election revealed a bipartisan push for increasingly punitive approaches to the treatment of people seeking asylum. Distinctive rhetorical techniques drawing on several problematising narratives aligned with asylum seeker discourses were central to exclusionary arguments made by Australian Labor Party and Liberal-National Coalition politicians. These language strategies, coupled with tightly controlled and repetitive imagery, were communicated through mainstream television news broadcasts. Despite the five Australian free-to-air networks, Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC), Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), Network Ten, Seven and Nine having some variations in substance and style, their capacities to convey ideological and thematic coherence was sustained.

This research contributes to the field of Multimodal Discourse enquiry (Bowcher & Royce 2013, Jewitt, Bezemer & O’Halloran 2016), addressing the current dearth of studies which critically analyse both visual and verbal television news data. While close linguistic examinations of asylum seeker discourse within print media are abundant, research which examines the content and conventions of rhetorical and visual languages used in television news especially, and their roles in shaping socio-political discourses, is lacking (Bednarek and Caple 2012). As such, this research applies Piazza and Haarman’s Pragmatic Cognitive Model for interpretation (2016) and adopts a Critical Discourse Analytic (CDA) (Fairclough 2013, Machin & Mayr 2012, van Dijk 2011) framework to analyse television news reports about asylum seekers to answer the research question: How did television news coverage of the 2013 Australian Federal Election shape narratives about asylum seekers?

This project’s findings identify a broadly uniform and dominant discourse of asylum seekers that is underpinned by themes of deviance, illegality and Otherness (Hoenig 2012, Lianos 2013) and the presupposition that people coming to Australia by boat to seek asylum are a problem requiring a military solution. Visual and verbal combinations and constructions used in television news discourses of the 2013 Australian Federal Election contribute to these findings.