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Countering Obliteration in Australia-Run Detention Centers

The Significance of English and Social Media in Refugee Experiences

Abstract: This reflection paper[1] focuses on the role of the English language and social media in the context of the Australian mandatory detention system. After presenting Australia's controversial border policy, the linguistic reality of detention is briefly explored to show that, on the one hand, refugees gain linguistic agency by acquiring and using English with different actors while, on the other, the 'linguascape' of detention remains embedded in broader dynamics of oppression and subjugation. The article further discusses how refugees' digital counter-discursive practices enacted on social media concurrently aim at dismantling the dehumanizing, exclusionary, and obliterating anti-refugee rhetoric that pervades political and media landscapes in contemporary Australia.

The Australian Mandatory Detention Policy

In the last decades, Europe has experienced a substantial influx of asylum seekers and refugees, primarily due to its geographical proximity to major conflict zones. The rise of the so-called 'refugee crisis' has given rise to apprehensive and fear-driven discussions in the public sphere, leading to the endorsement of "constantly evolving restrictions on migration and asylum policies".[2] Consequently, values such as humanitarianism, inclusion, and diversity have been progressively sidelined in favor of establishing a 'Fortress Europe', which has increasingly involved the militarization, securitization, and reinforced protection of European borders.[3]

Meanwhile, Australia has also been affected by the arrival of forcibly displaced individuals. In fact, despite receiving minimal coverage from mainstream media, over the past twenty years, Australia's response to incoming asylum seekers and refugees has been one of the most severe worldwide. In the early 2000s, Australia pioneered the outsourcing of the assessment of asylum seekers' refugee status and the creation of offshore detention facilities for those deemed 'unauthorized arrivals'.[4] To be more specific, the Pacific Solution introduced in 2001 and its reimplementation in 2012 dictated that individuals attempting to reach Australia by sea without legal documents would face indefinite confinement in the Manus and Nauru Regional Processing Centers, located on the respective Pacific islands.[5]

1   This paper builds extensively on the findings presented in Arianna Grasso: Digital Media and Refugeehood in Contemporary Australia; id.: Refugee *Linguascapes*.
2   Michał Krzyżanowski, Anna Triandafyllidou, Ruth Wodak: The Mediatization and the Politicization of the 'Refugee Crisis' in Europe, p. 1.
3   Cf. e.g., Zoe Holman: Where the Water Ends.
4   Cf. Suvendrini Perera: Australia and the Insular Imagination.
5   Cf. Richard Devetak: In Fear of Refugees.

As of August 2021, the Immigration Detention and Community Statistics Summary reported the transfer of over five thousand asylum seekers to Manus and Nauru. More than thirteen Immigration Detention Centers, managed by Australia, remained operational, four offshore and nine onshore. Additionally, various hotels and motels were temporarily repurposed as Alternative Places of Detention (APODs).[6] As of today, the situation persists, with hundreds of refugees being held in both onshore and offshore facilities, uncertain about when or whether they will be released.

Multiple times has this policy been defined as a "criminogenic border policing practice", which has placed asylum seekers and refugees outside the reach of international law, enabling the systematic abuse of human rights in the detention centers.[7] Numerous official reports have been released to chronicle the human rights violations occurring within the offshore and onshore detention facilities operated by Australia, as well as the detrimental effects of prolonged detention on the mental and physical well-being of refugees.[8] Simultaneously, various international declarations and treaties, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment – of which the Australian government is a signatory – have been violated in the pursuit of the protection of 'Fortress Australia'. Thirteen individuals have lost their lives due to violence, medical negligence, and suicide.[9]

Nonetheless, these controversial policies have been politically, juridically, and financially sustained by the major political parties in Australia in a bipartisan fashion.[10] Moreover, if at an initial stage these strategies of externalization and confinement were politically justified by the necessity to prevent drownings at sea and the arrival of 'illegal non-citizens' at the Australian shores, more recently, it has been argued that the detention policy has been consistently pursued by political leaders in order to secure votes and garner political consensus among Australian citizens, notwithstanding unanimous international condemnations.[11]

Colonial Legacies and Linguistic Struggles in Contemporary Australia

Numerous academics have claimed that the harshness of Australia's refugee policy has its origins deeply embedded in the legacy of British colonialism.[12]

6   Cf. Department of Home Affairs: Immigration Detention and Community Statistics Summary.
7   Michael Grewcock: Our lives is in danger, p. 70.
8   Cf. Doctors Without Borders: Australia's Detention of Refugees and Asylum Seekers.
9   Cf. ibid.
10 Cf. John Minns, Kieran Bradley, Fabricio H. Chagas-Bastos: Australia's Refugee Policy, p. 2.
11 Cf. Michael Grewcock: Our lives is in danger
12 To some, Australia's mandatory detention policy is intertwined with the historical legacy of colonialism and the subsequent White Australia Policy, a legislation that effectively stopped all non-European immigration into the country and contributed to the development of a racially insulated white society (for an extensive discussion, cf. Sonia Magdalena Tascón: Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Australia). To others, it is strictly interconnected with the foundation of Australia, which was established as a penal colony during the British

While it can be argued that colonialism historically began with the arrival of the First Fleet to Botany Bay (Sydney) – which transported the first British settlers to what is now known as Australia, it is indisputable that it has stretched until the present, while taking the form of practices of otherization, discrimination and exclusion. In this regard, Omid Tofighian suggests that the systematic violence generated through border politics in contemporary Australia are components of a colonial ideology that has perpetuated the displacement, dispossession, and repression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the past centuries.[13] As a matter of fact, containment policies, such as the establishment of mission, reserves, and station to enclose Aboriginal people during colonial times as well as the recent implementation of detention centers throughout Australia and the South Pacific area to confine asylum seekers and refugees, have consistently been operated across different spatial and temporal scales against an inside / outside Other.[14] Overall, this containment logics has been viewed as a defensive measure to protect the cultural, social, and linguistic integrity of Australians and the Australian nation.

The latter is evident not only in the history and geography of Australia at large but also while considering the linguistic policies operating inside detention in the past years. To begin with, individuals seeking asylum under the mandatory detention policy have received minimal or no assistance from Australian authorities in learning English, arguably with the aim of "safeguarding against false hopes among detainees"[15] who aspired to be resettled in the country (or, one could argue, in other English-speaking nations like the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, or the United States). Reports from Save the Children and Amnesty International have indicated that within detention facilities, English language classes have been sporadically provided, or when provided they have been affected by substandard teaching and learning conditions, insufficient access to educational materials, and inadequately equipped facilities. Additionally, there has been a shortage of qualified teaching personnel, leading to a high incidence of illiteracy and truancy among learners.[16]

Moreover, the management of asylum seekers and refugees in offshore and onshore detention facilities has implicitly led to a form of *segregational multilingualism*, where individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds have been compelled to coexist within the confined space of detention without sharing a common language.[17] The latter has frequently meant the linguistic and social isolation of detainees, which has been further exacerbated by the structural challenges and systemic violence encountered by refugees attempting to acquire proficiency in English in detention, i.e., the abusive and discriminatory behaviors

Empire. In Omid Tofighian's words, "the prison is inseparable from Australia as a nation, the nation's origins as an offshore prison which multiplied into many similar sites" (Omid Tofighian: Introducing Manus Prison Theory, p. 11).

13   Cf. Omid Tofighian: Introducing Manus Prison Theory.
14   Cf. Kate Coddington: The Re-Emergence of Wardship; Alison Mountz, Kate Coddington, R. Tina Catania, Jenna M. Loyd: Conceptualizing Detention; Sonia Magdalena Tascón: Refugees and asylum Seekers in Australia.
15   Scott Morrison: Operation Sovereign Borders Update (22 October).
16   Cf. Amnesty International, Refugee Council of Australia: Until When?
17   Cf. Arianna Grasso: Refugee *Linguascapes*.

and the consequent mental and physical deterioration of potential participants in English language courses.[18] The precarious nature of the learning environment has, as a result, hindered refugees from establishing meaningful communication not only with fellow detainees but also with the broader international community, meaning refugee advocates, activists, legal representatives, journalists, who could shed light on the detention regime, provide psychological support, and offer legal protection to detainees.[19]

The neglectful approach towards enhancing the detainees' linguistic capabilities may be interpreted not just as an effort to discourage refugees from envisioning a future in any Anglophone country of the Global North but also as a continuation of broader systems of exploitation that suppress the linguistic and non-linguistic agency of otherized individuals. In other words, the juridical subordination of refugees, ostensibly implemented to safeguard Australian national borders and preserve its way of life,[20] has inevitably led to the linguistic hierarchization of these subjects in the space of detention and beyond. Interestingly, though, the restrictive linguistic policies that have been in place in the detention system starkly contrast with those enacted within Australia, where instead language policies have contributed to establishing a 'dominant monolingualism' in the country, with English being the de facto national language. This notwithstanding the 150 Aboriginal languages still spoken by Aboriginal peoples and the ever-decreasing percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and individuals using an Indigenous language at home.[21]

The (Perceived) Role of English in Australia-Run Detention Centers

While extensive documentation has been produced on the denial of refugees' fundamental rights and its consequential physical and psychological impacts, the literature has largely overlooked the infringement of refugees' linguistic rights and the strategies employed by detainees to counteract it. Acknowledging this research gap, I have elsewhere[22] attempted to explore the 'linguascape'[23] of detention and its dynamics, by focusing on the *perceived* role played by the English language in such constrained linguistic environment.[24] The study is theoretically grounded in Critical Sociolinguistics,[25] a framework that understands

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18 Cf. ibid.
19 Cf. Linda Briskman: Courageous Ethnographers or Agents of the State.
20 Cf. Anthony Burke: Fear of Security.
21 The number is believed to have dropped from 16.4 per cent in 1991 to 9.5 per cent in 2021. Cf. Australian Bureau of Statistics: Language Statistics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.
22 Cf. Arianna Grasso: Refugee *Linguascapes*.
23 Cf. Grit Liebscher and Jennifer Dailey-O'Cain: Language, Space, and Identity in Migration.
24 To achieve this research goal, the research has employed a content-analytical ethnographic approach using the purposefully constructed Refugee Interview Corpus (RIC), which consists of twelve online interviews conducted with currently or formerly detained refugees in the English language.
25 Critical sociolinguists assert that "linguistic discrimination serves as a proxy for other forms of discrimination", linking it to broader phenomena such as racism, classism,

language use as intricately woven into historical and political processes, which in turn emerge from the linguistic practices adopted by individuals and groups of speakers.[26] To put it another way, the work has sought to explore how the refugees' linguistic capital[27] is self-regulated within detention, while being situated within the broader framework of the Australian detention policy. Given the impracticality of conducting sociolinguistic fieldwork in the onshore / offshore detention centers, the investigation has relied on the metalinguistic reflexivity[28] of interviewees, through which they have reflected on their own linguistic practices and repertoires.[29] Overall, it can be argued that the English language has been appropriated by refugees to counter the material, communicative, and symbolic marginalization experienced within the Australian carceral system. Findings have further revealed the multifarious roles that English serves within detention, which form dialectical continuums of usage in various situational contexts. English has in fact been viewed and represented by detainees as a bridge language ('lingua franca'), a resistance language ('lingua liberatrix'), an oppression language ('lingua opprimens'), a socio-digital language ('lingua socialis'), and an educational language ('lingua instruens').

When employed as a 'lingua franca' or 'lingua socialis', English has fostered interpersonal relationships and transmediation communicative processes, allowing the circulation of linguistic practices between digital and non-digital contexts, e.g., through the sharing of information but also songs, poems, and arts produced between fences. In doing so, English has facilitated relational patterns that have empowered refugees to counter the regime of spatial immobility and deterritorialization imposed upon them during detention. Additionally, when being used as a 'lingua liberatrix', English has allowed refugees to contest discriminatory linguistic practices and regain visibility, political capital, and a sense of agency, e.g., when rejecting the prescribed monolingual and monocultural policies enforced in their country of origin in favor of an international language such as English. On the other hand, through their first-hand accounts, it has become evident that the lack of access to language resources and proficiency in the English language has led to the utter silencing of refugees and their subsequent invisibility within both local and global linguistic spheres. Their linguistic isolation, therefore, has

nationalism, sexism, and more (Melissa Curtin: Language and Globalisation, p. 551). Therefore, in investigating linguistic practices associated with a specific social and geographical context, scholars working in the field of Critical Sociolinguistics should always consider their connection to wider socio-political, economic, and political dynamics that establish, reinforce, and perpetuate imbalanced power relationships.

26 Cf. Suresh Canagarajah: The Routledge Handbook of Migration and Language.

27 According to Bourdieu, the distribution of linguistic capital – which refers to the accumulation of linguistic competence influencing individuals' and groups' social positions within institutional and sociocultural settings – is closely tied to the distribution of other forms of capital (economic, cultural, political, etc.). Cf. Pierre Bourdieu: Language and Symbolic Power.

28 Cf. Nikolas Coupland, Adam Jaworski: Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Metalanguage.

29 Linguistic repertoires are cohesive sets of "variant codes, ways of speaking, and usage patterns" that individuals utilize for their communicative projects. The expansion or contraction of a linguistic repertoire is influenced by factors such as "process of socialization, social mobility (or immobility), gender and class interactions, institutional access, colonization (and post-colonization), and global linguistic expansion" (Marco Jacquemet: Beyond the Speech Community, pp. 2 f.).

hindered them from forming transnational support networks, questioning institutional language hierarchies, and engaging in meaningful practices of (linguistic) reterritorialization crucial for their self-legitimization.

English has also been identified as a 'lingua opprimens', signifying an oppressive language used to not only physically dispose of undesired subjectivities but also morally degrade them. In such instances, English has worked as the derisive language within the detention context, e.g., with Australian officers repeatedly mocking and bullying refugees. In this particular scenario, however, lacking a proficient command of the English language has somewhat shielded detainees from experiencing additional verbal discrimination. On the contrary, refugees have unanimously perceived the self-study of English as a means to pursue their educational aspirations and exercise their educational rights in the constrained space of detention ('lingua instruens'), i.e., when signing up and participating in language programs provided by third parties such as non-governmental organizations, humanitarian associations, and universities based in Australia. In so doing, refugees have aimed to bridge the educational gap resulting from the uneven distribution of and limited access to educational and linguistic resources between citizens and non-citizens of the Australian nation-state. Nevertheless, these competing processes continue to operate within broader dynamics of power, subjugation, and violence enacted by various institutional and non-institutional actors. In other words, English has emerged as a carrier of hegemonic ideologies and a matrix of counter-practices, which are shaped dialectically through top-down institutional practices and bottom-up social counteractions.[30]

Further research is nonetheless needed to investigate the linguistic practices enacted in the understudied 'linguascape' of detention and the ideologies embedded in the linguistic policies enforced by the Australian government within the detention network (versus the Australian country). It is also crucial to contextualize refugees' communicative practices, acknowledging the tangible and intangible effects of containment policies on linguistic competence and semiotic repertoires *precisely* as a consequence of multidimensional forms of obliteration. As a matter of fact, linguistic repertoires are not acquired in neutral circumstances but evolve as outcomes of intersecting processes wherein interactants appropriate, use, and reject specific semiotic resources. Therefore, as critical sociolinguists, we should seek to uncover the power asymmetries underlying communicative practices among individuals and social groups. A critical academic approach is in this sense essential for reflecting on, rethinking, and rediscussing refugee 'linguascapes' from a social-justice oriented perspective. Moving in this direction, the work here presented has ultimately attempted to offer a multileveled lens for investigating refugee 'linguascapes', invoking the redistribution of resources, recognition of dignity, and authentic representation of refugees' subjectivities across different settings and contexts.[31]

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30 Cf. Norman Fairclough: The Dialectics of Discourse.
31 Cf. Nancy Fraser: Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics.

Social Media and Refugees' Digital Self-Representations

Concurrently with the fabrication and dissemination of an anti-refugee rhetoric by mainstream media and political discourse in Australia – which have commonly depicted asylum seekers and refugees through processes of massification, dehumanization, criminalization, or victimization[32] – social media have growingly accounted for promising platforms where asylum seekers and refugees have been able to shape their own counter-discourses. In particular, Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) have proven as empowering technological devices, allowing detainees to engage in decolonial forms of resistance, by harnessing social media to counteract the government's punitive confinement measures and expose the structural violence of the prison system to the outer world.[33] More specifically, Twitter has been pivotal to bridge the gap between the under- and mis-representation of discourses *about* asylum seekers and refugees and the lack of *their own* discursive self-representation.

I have identified a wide range of discourses that have aimed at offering the refugees' discursive perspectives to the digital audiences of Twitter, i.e., discourses of diversification, which have been employed to emphasize refugees' diversity, individuality, and self-determination; discourses of dignity and condemnation that have been articulated to resist discrimination and challenge illegitimate power structures; discourses of humanization that have countered dehumanizing narratives from hardline political and media circles; discourses of equality and legitimation that have sought justice while holding policymakers accountable; discourses that have highlighted the spatial suspension, temporal uncertainty, and existential vulnerability of refugees in prolonged detention settings; and discourses related to the historicization of detention, which have framed the prison system within a historical perspective through references to totalitarian regimes.[34]

Moreover, while leveraging the communicative infrastructure of Twitter, refugees have employed the typographic conventions of the platform, such as mentions, to confront the policymakers they hold responsible for their incarceration, seek public attention by reaching out to news media outlets, establish international networks of solidarity, and endorse other fellow refugees.[35] Simultaneously, refugees have creatively utilized the semiotic tool of hashtags to garner visibility and support from their audiences and condemn a state of emergency. Notably, hashtags have also functioned as persuasive slogans that have effectively captured

32   Cf. Cheryl M. R. Sulaiman-Hill, Sandra Thompson, Rita Afsar, Toshi Holdliff: Changing Images of Refugees; Scott Poynting and Greg Noble: 'Dog-Whistle' Journalism and Muslim Australians since 2001; Fiona H. McKay, Samantha L. Thomas, R. Warwick Blood: Any one of these boat people could be a terrorist for all we know; Roland Bleiker, David Campbell, Emma Hutchinson, Xzarina Nicholson: The Visual Dehumanisation Of Refugees.

33   Cf. Kate Coddington, Alison Mountz: Countering Isolation with the Use of Technology.

34   For a comprehensive discussion, cf. Arianna Grasso: Digital Media and Refugeehood in Contemporary Australia. The research has investigated what kind of visual and non-visual discourses emerged from a purposely built corpus of ca. 7000 tweets and by means of what semiotic and rhetorical strategies these discourses were constructed. The analysis has employed corpus-driven critical-discursive and multimodal approaches.

35   Cf. ibid.

public attention and promoted civic engagement in both digital and non-digital arenas, while feeding sentiments of indignation. Overall, in the face of the geographical isolation, institutional silencing and media embargos orchestrated by the Australian government to avoid accountability, refugees have acquired digital agency through these social media platforms, that is the capacity to act, advocate or speak for themselves in digital (and virtually also non-digital) contexts.

Refugees have also tapped into the in-built multisemiotic resources of Twitter to produce their visual perspectives on the platform.[36] For example, through selfies, refugees have produced their own viewpoint on the social reality experienced in detention while exerting their self-representational power within the digital setting. Detainees have also used Twitter to document the aggressions perpetrated against them and report self-harm practices and their bodily sufferings in an explicit and unfiltered way.[37] Importantly, these multimodal contents have established a moral *us* versus an immoral *they*, which has often resulted in two conflicting and irreconcilable ethical positions. Para-legal documents, such as the petitions physically signed by detainees while in detention and then digitalized and uploaded on Twitter, have also been visually represented. Resembling the pamphleteering genre, these contents have attempted to moralize the perspective of the image-recipient by presenting the social reality of refugees as ethically unacceptable.[38]

These visual elements have also illuminated the conflicting "hierarchical zones of viewing", contrasting spaces of safety / invulnerability with spaces of unsafety / vulnerability that have mirrored the broader asymmetry in power and privilege between the image-maker and the image-recipient.[39] In these opposing contexts, the mobile phone and the Twitter platform have served as a digital nexus between the two spaces, simultaneously presenting the reality of detention and prompting viewers to question their social responsibility. On the other hand, in the very act of expressing themselves (in the English language), refugee voices and perspectives have generated discourses, or better, counter-discourses that have redistributed the "political capital",[40] by effectively challenging, competing with, and dismantling pervasive exclusionary anti-refugee discourses and practices.

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36   Cf. ibid.
37   Cf. ibid.
38   Cf. Lilie Chouliaraki: The Spectatorship of Suffering.
39   Ibid., p. 5.
40   Norman Fairclough: Media Discourse, p. 182.

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