Technologizing Inhumanity

A Techno-bureaucratic Discursive Practice
Abstract

By lexico-grammatically analysing a political interview in which a politician defends the government’s tough refugee policy, seven features of techno-bureaucratic discourse are identified. Within a ubiquitous semiotic of fear, political discourse can technologize inhumane practices so that it appears reasonable. Crucial to this process are the grammatical uses of the Hallidayan linguistic concepts of processes and nominals. The use and avoidance of certain processes as well as grammatical metaphor blunts agency and distances the speaker. Nominals provide the basis of a classificatory system that allows humans to be treated in certain ways according to bureaucratic processes. Finally, because democratic processes are represented as destabilizing these ‘objective’ techno-bureaucratic processes, it is implied that democracy should give way to orderly procedure.

Keywords

Techno-bureaucratic; refugees; rhetoric; discourse; processes; grammatical metaphor; nominals; normalize; critical discourse; taxonomies
Introduction

Recent Australian political history shows that foreign aggression is still a winning political formula. Australia’s decision to join George Bush’s ‘Coalition of the Willing’ in the Second Iraq War followed on from a tough anti-refugee stance that it had taken for the past three years (Henderson, 2002; Kohler, 2003). While Australia’s willingness to join every war in which the USA has been involved since World War I is based largely on the perceived need of a powerful friend, its recent ‘get tough’ treatment of refugees (at odds with its enviable record accepting Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and 1980s) needs another explanation. Australia’s foreign aggression is manifest in its Coalition of the Willing partnership, as well as its ‘get tough’ approach to refugees. While such aggression by a country that regards itself as relaxed and friendly can be attributed to the pervasive invasion myth, such a policy can also be politically dangerous. The purpose of this paper is to show how such a perverse political action as demonizing and incarcerating refugees is effectively articulated within a heteroglossic electorate. We argue that a two-part communication strategy is at work. Generally, the government creates a ubiquitous semiotic of fear built on ignorance and the demonizing of a recognizable ‘other’. The second part of the strategy is to technologize the inhumane at the quotidian level of interrogation by news and public affairs (or news analysis) programs. We are concerned primarily with the latter strategy; however, this analysis begins with a brief overview of the role of the ubiquitous semiotic.

Ubiquitous Semiotic

This concept draws on the concepts of orientalism provided by Said and of myths by Barthes. Given that this is not our central concern of this paper, the propositions are briefly stated.
Edward Said’s (1978) concept of orientalism explains how the West distinguishes itself from the East. Applied to the Australian context, orientalism would hold that the Middle East and South East Asia are historically situated as Australia’s *other* — its ‘oriental’ (Said, 1978: 2-3). Australia’s notorious White Australia Policy, which remained in some form until the early-1970s since its inception in 1901, a response to an invasion of cheap Chinese and Pacific labour, was ‘racialist’ in that it feared an ‘admixture of blood’ (Maddox, 2004: 67). This has produced the dilemma of Australia’s wishing for population growth while living in an Eastern location ‘at odds with its post-1788, colonizing heritage’ (Donnan, 1999). More recently orientalism has perpetuated the myth that Arabs need to be punished for the pain of September 11 inflicted on the West. That many of the refugees were actually escaping the very tyranny against which George Bush and Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, went to war was never acknowledged by the Australian government. [The authors acknowledge that there were some asylum seekers who were not genuine refugees, based on first-hand accounts by reliable and humane government staffers].

In considering public, political postures and parlance, what matters to the electorate is the overall semiotic. Myths in the Barthesian sense are contingent discursive forms that perpetuate values and tokens of meanings (Barthes, 1973: 109-111). One of the most important enduring national myths has been Australia’s orientalist fear. In particular, it was the traditional privilege of being white and Anglo-Celtic (Curthoys & Johnson, 1998: 99), with its distrust of foreigners, that maintained the ideology of the White Australia Policy. Essentially this has manifested itself in a ‘yellow peril’ (fear of the Chinese, in particular) from Federation in 1901, a ‘red peril’ (fear of
Asian Communism) in the post-war era, and then a ‘brown peril’ (post-Communist distrust of Arabic and Middle-Eastern peoples). This contemporary materialization of the ‘brown peril’, presupposes a signifying consciousness through the older mythologies of invasion. That these fears never materialized (although Australia was bombed by the Japanese in World War 2), they remain mythological in that they are connected to usage rather than truth, thereby discounting the content (Barthes, 1973: 110). Thus, given Australians’ ignorance of Middle-Eastern geopolitics, the government has been able to contribute to the overall semiotic of an incursion by Middle Eastern refugees as ‘orientals’ who not only have potential terrorist links, but act against the other mythological Australian characteristic of a ‘fair-go’ by ‘jumping the queue’.

*Technologizing the Inhumane*

While this general semiotic is at work, the government nevertheless has to deal with the scrutiny of the Australian media. In doing this, the Howard Government has to negotiate the discursively contested terrain. Apart from the liberal-left opposition, the Prime Minister (John Howard) faced opposition from a substantial number of conservative voters (normally pro-Howard) who were disturbed by populist politics and rough treatment of refugees; the small, but influential, Arabic and Muslim constituency; and possible international condemnation. Tactics that could be employed include grey rhetoric, strategic ambiguity, or tactical rhetoric. Gray rhetoric occurs when politicians engage in political utterances that simulate being adversarial, but which are disingenuous, perfunctory, and not necessarily persuasive (Waddell & McKenna, forthcoming), and merely contribute to what de Certeau (1985) labelled ‘the jabberings of social life’. Strategic ambiguity refers to ‘those instances where
individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals’ (Eisenberg, 1984: 230). Hamilton & Mineo (1998: 3) see it as forms of non-straightforward communication within politically charged discourses where equivocation, deliberate vagueness, and imprecise language are intentional. Speakers use intentionally ambiguous texts for addressing difficult issues because they ‘allow divergent interpretations to coexist and are more effective in allowing diverse groups to work together’ (Eisenberg & Whitten, 1987: 422). It is deliberately polysemous text. Tactical rhetoric includes those tactics such as repetition, bridging and distancing that seek to gain control during media interviews (Adkins, 1992; Thompson, 1998).

However, while the ‘technologizing’ rhetoric that we propose incorporates tactical rhetoric, particularly bridging, its strategic purpose is to normalize the government’s tough refugee policy and then to technologize the issue. A fundamental element of this is to objectify the subjective: that is, to turn profound human issues into technical issues. This is consistent with Said’s (1978) claim that the imperial narrative corresponds to the more general subjective / objective (self / other) relationship evident particularly in Western literature. The following analysis, then, can be rightly labelled as critical discourse analysis in the sense defined by Wodak (2001: 2): ‘analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language’. Of particular interest in this analysis is the way that ‘dominant structures stabilize conventions and naturalize them … [so that] the effects of power and ideology in the production of meaning are obscured and acquire stable and natural forms’ (Wodak, 2001: 3)
Methodology

In saying that this analysis adopts a critical discourse analytic approach, it is acknowledged that this is an interdisciplinary ‘field of research’ (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999: 75; Meyer, 2001). This analysis will restrict itself to a sociolinguistic textual analysis to supplement the broader socio-semiotic conception outlined above. In particular, we adopt partially Fairclough's (1995) approach to textual analysis. While Fairclough (1989: 31) acknowledges that ‘discourse cannot be reduced to language’, discourses do ‘serve certain ends, namely to exercise power with all its effects. They do this because they are institutionalized and regulated, because they are linked to action’ (Jäger, 2001: 34). Fairclough analyses discourse through close textual analysis and then relates that to the social context in which the text is produced. The textual analysis uses Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics, which is particularly useful because it assumes that the language in texts encodes the ideational ‘into processes, events and actions, classes of objects, people and institutions, and the like’ organized into ‘logical relations’; as well as the interpersonal dimensions such as ‘speaking roles ... wishes, feelings, attitudes and judgements’ (Halliday, 1978: 21-22). By assuming that language is a social semiotic, textual analysis yields for the analyst the sociocultural practices that it encodes both ideationally and interpersonally. That is, the ideational aspect is ‘the representation and signification of the world and experience’ (Fairclough, 1995: 133) which most accurately defines the discourse of a text, or its ‘way of signifying experience from a particular perspective’ (Fairclough, 1995: 135).

The particular form of signification in this text is techno-bureaucratic discourse, and the perspective created maintains the myth of the invasive other for political ends. The term ‘techno-bureaucratic’ is used here to link the discursive features with those of
technocratic discourse (McKenna & Graham, 2000) and with those of bureaucratic discourse. The discourse under scrutiny is not technocratic because it does not apply to the texts produced by economic planners, strategic thinkers, scientific and social scientific experts, and the like. However, it shares with technocratic discourse some of the lexico-grammatical features, and its rhetorical purpose: namely, representing itself as ‘above the fray, as a supplier of neutral and objective “facts”’, while actually performing a hegemonic function (Lemke, 1995: 70). Instead of scientificity, however, techno-bureaucratic language employs legal discursive features. What they have in common are some of the lexico-grammatical features in technocratic discourse. One of the most important of these is the role of the nominal and nominal groups to taxonomize, to convert processes into static events through nominalization, and to define. Also of interest is the process (verb) use and human agency.

Crucial to this analysis is how the lexis is related to the epistemic foundations (Foucault, 1972) of political belief. Because lexical words (nouns, main verbs, adverbs, and adjectives) encode content (Eggin, 1994: 101), the lexis provides the greatest denotative cue or trace of the (often unstated) episteme because it generates coherence in the sense that it ‘construes the social order without referring to the system it is construing’ (Halliday & Martin, 1993: 113). In other words, we invariably taxonomize and classify our universe as we choose the lexical items to make statements about it. This is consistent with the Foucaultian (1972: 48-49) understanding of ‘the intrication of a lexicon and an experience’ in which there emerges ‘a group of rules proper to a discursive practice’ which define ‘the ordering of objects’. The grammar is based on Halliday’s (1978; 1994) sociolinguistics. The lexico-grammatical devices will be explained as they are used in the findings.
Text Corpus

The text selected for this analysis was an interview of former Immigration and Ethnic Affairs Minister, Philip Ruddock conducted by Tony Jones on ABC’s *Lateline* and broadcast on 6 June 2002 (Jones, 2002). The lengthy interview (over 3000 words) questioned Philip Ruddock about a damning UN report on Australia’s treatment of inmates of the immigration detention centres. *Lateline* is broadcast late at night and provides serious analysis of the day’s news. The portion of text spoken by Ruddock is 2169 words. This text was analysed for a number of lexico-grammatical features. The findings are presented in two stages.

Findings

The Findings are divided into an analysis of the lexico-grammar of technologizing Processes, then of Nominals, before explaining the importance of discursive control when there is insincere compliance of techno-bureaucracy with democratic processes.

Use of Processes

Process is used in the Hallidayan sense to denote verb in Latinate grammar (Halliday, 1994: ch. 5). Significantly, two features of bureaucratic discourse, passive voice and modality, are quite minimal in Ruddock’s interview. Only 24 (7.7%) of the processes are in passive voice, which would seem to negate the genre as bureaucratic text.

Ruddock uses passive voice in three types of situations. It is used when he refers to unwanted advice and deductions, erasing the agent of that advice: for example,

*but no findings have been made to that; the sorts of deductions that have been made; advice I was given (twice); what's been said in the press conference.*

Ruddock also uses passive voice when he refers to people being detained so that the agent of detaining is not mentioned: e.g.,
people who are detained (twice); they are to be detained

and when he refers to the government’s anti-refugee program or adaptations of it: e.g.,

how those changes will be implemented; an immigration program which is implemented; issues have to be addressed; steps that have to be dealt with.

Modality, which “hedges” the probability or usuality of statements, is used by Ruddock relatively little, but in a significant way. Its limited use is inconsistent with a bureaucratic genre. However, its relatively limited occurrence is significant in terms of what it does grammatically to the sentence. The usual modality devices of modal adjuncts (e.g., probably, possibly, perhaps: always, sometimes) and modal operators (e.g., might, must) are not used except in one instance:

But it doesn't lead you to a conclusion that you release people because they might be suffering depression into the community.

Despite considerable independent evidence, including that from the Immigration Detention Advisory Group [IDAG] that he appointed, Ruddock qualifies the possibility that detainees are actually suffering. Other modality devices, namely the four projections of I think and the tag, I believe, were used in the following instances:

there have been, I think, seven deaths in detention

and I think a number of them were from natural causes.

I think two were from falls

I think in terms of the number of incidents

One was a Tongan, I believe

Each of these refers to a death in custody. The presence of these hedges only when speaking of detainee deaths is important because it depreciates the gravity of these
events. Quite clearly, the Minister would have or should have known the exact number and type of deaths, given his obvious grasp of detail elsewhere. Thus it seems reasonable to infer that the minister intended to devalue the sadness and tragedy for political reasons.

The Hallidayan understanding of the transitivity system is that it construes the world of experience into a manageable set of six process types (Halliday, 1994: 106).

The text contained

3 behavioural processes: e.g., suffer depression

79 material (action) processes, of which

11 are concrete: e.g., simply abdicate, you release people, children should be separated

68 are abstract: e.g., changes will be implemented, we maintain, we’ve been pursuing.

65 verbal processes: e.g., You’ve just argued, if you’re saying to me, I take advice

54 existential processes: e.g., The fact is, It is, I’m not, That’s the point

53 relational processes: e.g., It is not possible, Woomera is inappropriate

56 mental processes: e.g., I think, I believe, I don’t know, we take the view

The notable features of this basic analysis are the minute number of behavioural processes (< 1%), which represent physiological and psychological behaviour, and of concrete material (3.5%) processes, which represent physical activities of doing. This means that the text is bereft of physical and psychological behaviour expressed in
process form. Given that he is speaking of human trauma associated with placing probable refugees in detention and their acts of self-harm, one might reasonably infer that the Minister's language is carefully chosen to avoid conveying sympathy or concern by him or the Government. Looked at more closely, of the three behavioural processes (i.e., outer manifestations of inner workings), two are about suffering, although one of those is modalized (might be suffering).

Verbal processes are ‘symbolic relationships constructed in human consciousness and enacted in the form of language, like saying and meaning’ (Halliday, 1994: 107). The presence of a significant number of verbal processes (21%) points to the time-wasting and anaesthetizing process of outlining statements by various agents in the debate. Apart from the six imperatives (Look) which act as bridging devices “to terminate the relevance of further challenges” (Adkins, 1992: 43; Greatbatch, 1985), the verbal processes state that he heard, was advised or informed, [had] written, take[s] advice, put[s] the proposition. Because these are procedural, not substantive, they direct the answers away from the essence of the interviewer’s questions. In this exchange, Ruddock casts himself away from the agency of his action:

TONY JONES: In this case, aren't you the ultimate competent authority?

PHILIP RUDDOCK: No, I'm not. I take advice in relation to these matters, and the advice comes from the relevant state authorities — the departments of family and community services around Australia.

Instead of ‘listening’, a clear verbal process, Ruddock uses a grammatical metaphor (‘Take advice’), renders the potential action into a nominalization (‘advice’), and makes himself the receiver of the action (‘I take’), not the doer. In fact, he does take advice (or should), but, as the Immigration Minister, is the ultimate authority who uses that advice to effect his authority. Thus the grammatical construction sets out to
The grammatical metaphor limits the agency of the verb and blurs action. Martin (1992: 16) explains that the device produces a semantic content ‘requiring more than one level of interpretation’. Thus, when *He departed because of bad conditions* (the congruent structure) is rendered as *Bad conditions led to his departure*, two levels of interpretation are needed: the metaphor of leading (*led*) and the action itself (*departure*). This grammatical action tends to construe experience as ‘things’ (nouns) rather than processes, and does not require conjunctive relationships using *because*, *although* etc. (Martin, 1992: 406-407). This text contains 18 grammatical metaphors. The most commonly occurring are those used when speaking of forming a view (4); judging and deciding (4); and stating a proposition (5). Thus when Ruddock speaks of forming a view it occurs as: *We take the view; came to the view; I've never taken that view; we took the view; views that only came from*. When reporting on judgments and decisions, Ruddock speaks of *taken the decision; conclusions they've come to; lead you to a conclusion; It doesn't come to that conclusion*. When stating a proposition, Ruddock says: *make the point (twice); point we made; point I made; the point I would make*. The effect of these grammatical metaphors is to distance the speaker from the phenomenon in question. Thus, when using a grammatical metaphor to ‘take a view’, Ruddock in the following instance does not actually state that the UN investigative team were welcome to visit the Australian detention centre:

> Well, we took the view that if they [UN investigative team] wanted to come, we would give them an opportunity to look at the facilities and explain the operations to them.

In this sentence, the reluctance to allow the UN team to investigate is made relatively opaque by using a grammatical metaphor as a projection leading, by way of a
qualifying clause (‘If …’), to the decision that the team would be allowed to visit. However, it is where this locution is used to deal with the phenomenon of refugee suffering that the opaqueness is more significant. Consider the following:

PHILIP RUDDOCK: Well, I simply make the point that the issues in relation to behaviour in detention have to be addressed as issues requiring proper treatment and care for the people who are detained. But it doesn't lead you to a conclusion that you release people because they might be suffering depression into the community. It doesn't come to that conclusion.

In this statement Ruddock uses a grammatical metaphor, make the point, to introduce his statement. This is a projection leading into a paratactic statement about dealing with refugee distress (in the form of suicide, self harm, and depression). This distress is renamed as ‘issues in relation to behaviour in detention’, a bureaucratic noun-phrase devoid of the empathy implied in, say, ‘trauma victim’. This vague noun-phrase becomes the subject of the passive verb ‘have to be addressed’, so that it is transformed into another noun-phrase ‘issues requiring proper treatment and care’. This re-named phenomenon then becomes the implied subject in the next sentence ['it’]. This whole proposition (needing treatment and care) is not something that would ‘lead you’, Ruddock says, to setting them free. It is the proposition that wouldn’t lead you, not the actual suffering. Thus instead of saying The government does not believe that the fact that refugees are suffering is sufficient reason to set them free, Ruddock’s use of grammatical metaphors (make the point; doesn't lead you to a conclusion; doesn't come to that conclusion) and re-naming of suffering as ‘issues’ effectively detaches him and the government from any causation.

Agency is also blurred when potentially powerful processes (verbs) are nominalized and the verb function is taken by a verb-to-be acting as an existential process. Although, in one sense, statements such as There have been suicide attempts and
there have been seven deaths state that some fact exists. But, in another sense, it could be said that such a usage turns an action (suiciding and dying) into a nominal and in this way the unpleasant activity of people dying is de-activated.

Role of Nominals

As with technocratic discourse, nominals play an important role in techno-bureaucratic discourse. Three such roles are identified.

It is now evident that the minister can dull any acknowledgement of detainee suffering by nominalizing the action of suiciding (rendered as suicide attempts and the more ambiguous deaths). Self-mutilating is understood as an attempt to bring attention to themselves in the belief that it will help obtain a release. However, the nominal has other significant roles in techno-bureaucratic discourse. The nominal or nominal group¹, provides a crucial element of the technocratizing process because, in science and technology, the foundation of all processes (actions, relations), is the classification of the object and its relation to other objects. Ruddock’s justification presented below details the implied classification criteria for his calculative technology. From this classification system the appropriate logic for dealing with the people and things so classified is devised. The detainees are classified first as those who are without lawful authority. In fact, under international covenants to which Australia is a signatory, people claiming refugee status are not without lawful authority until such time as they are proved not to be refugees. Their ‘otherness’ is then asserted because they come from outside the borders, and so challenge the public interest, clearly implying that they not a part of that public. Later, in the interview,
Ruddock labels them as an *arbitrary group in detention*.

**PHILIP RUDDOCK:** *No, no, put it in context. If people turn up without lawful authority, they are to be detained. What other approach are you going to take other than to release people into the community and simply abdicate entirely the possibility of being able to manage and control your own borders and have an immigration program which is implemented in the public interest?*

Thus, nominals clearly provide the foundation for the Minister to act upon certain groups of people in certain ways according to their classification.

Another, important techno-bureaucratic function of the nominal is to render unpleasant events and actions in bland terms. This is because it is important that potentially harmful or injurious outcomes are diminished. In the following extract, a refugee’s act of *self-harm* (mutilation, attempted suicide) becomes an *incident report*. That is, the human trauma becomes an act that is recorded (in a *report*) for acting upon within the bureaucratic guidelines of constraint:

*The number of incident reports, and they're not just involving Woomera, were something of the order of 230 over 90,000 detention days.*

Now objectified as *incident reports*, the Minister then assuages concern with ‘objective’ data, presumably intended to show that the situation is not as grim as pro-refugee advocates would have us believe. However, although the interviewer certainly could not have done the necessary calculations on the spot, the figures are, by any measure, alarming. Given that there were, on average, 350 inmates (using the minister’s own figures), then almost two-thirds of them, on average, were self-harming or attempting suicide.
A third important role of the nominal group in the technologization process, dependent on the classification system detailed above is procedural language. For example, Ruddock states:

*Woomera is the only place where we've been able to institute an alternative detention model for women and children.*

In this way, the detention process is no longer denoted as a political issue because it has been normalized by the *systems* and *processes* that are set in place. The issue now is an organizational management one: *models* of control within an existing institution. In another part of the interview we learn that the private security company that services the centre has *a very comprehensive code of behaviour outlined for the running of the detention centres*. Bureaucratic processes are in place to ensure that contractors *meet the conditions*. It is important that uncertainty is reduced because this limits the capacity for completing the task.

However, democratic processes clearly upset the orderliness of these bureaucratic processes:

*it is because people like the arbitrary group in detention and others expect that there will be an opportunity for decisions to be reviewed and like there to be systems of appeal that you have uncertainty in our system*

In other words, the democratic legal processes of review and appeal made available to the ‘arbitrary group in detention’ (now less even than putative refugees) upset the ‘system’ by producing uncertainty.
Furthermore, given that there is a control process, the detainees have to behave: If they don’t, they become issues to be addressed. This is evident in Ruddock’s statement that:

issues in relation to behaviour in detention have to be addressed as issues requiring proper treatment and care for the people who are detained.

It is important to acknowledge that alternative discourses are available to the minister. For example, a medical discourse could be used. When traumatized refugees are held in remote detention centres (actually prisons) it is likely that they will display symptoms of psychological stress, even psychosis. However, even the relatively ‘objective’ discourse of medicine could arouse sympathy for the refugees.

The logic of action within the ‘system’, then, is clear. The refugee issue is not an issue of humanitarianism, but of managing and controlling your borders from those who fail to meet the defined category:

the fact [is] we're a sovereign government that's entitled to take decisions in Australia's interests and for the protection of our community, and we do.

Ruddock is implying that those who identify another duty, the duty of care to other citizens of the world, according to this form of calculative logic, do not respect the sovereignty of a nation protecting its community: in effect, they are traitorous. Clearly, refugees are not and will not be part of this community so defined.
Insincere Compliance of Techno-bureaucracy with Democratic Processes

Because power in a democracy needs a mandate and a system of checks and balances, Minister Ruddock needs to maintain apparent compliance with this democratic procedure, even though the procedure is subverted. His insincere compliance is achieved in three ways, two of which involve the power of the minister to designate meaning.

One way is to claim that the checking process has exceeded its mandate. Arbitrary ministerial power might be limited by an advisory group and by an external agency (the UN). However, there are clearly limits for his advisory group, an organizational mechanism ostensibly designed to make organizations more responsive. For Ruddock, this group clearly exceeded their role (their mandate, their remit) when they drew attention to the deeply disturbing features of the current system.

And their mandate, their remit, is to look at whether or not the detention environment we have here is arbitrary. It is not arbitrary.

Their role, to identify ‘whether the detention centre system we have here is arbitrary’ has already been determined by the minister. But, of course he can justifiably say that it is not arbitrary because there is a regime of classification and procedural action that is well documented. When the independent report delivers a negative judgement, then the report itself can be categorized as relatively less important because he has the authority to so define, or classify, it (apart from the techno-bureaucratic ploy of deferral). Of the damning report, Ruddock says:

I think that the comments today were fairly superficial and certainly don't reflect a detailed consideration of all the issues. But when they do report comprehensively, I'll look at it to see whether there are improvements that can be suggested.
This response frames the report in such a way that it must, regardless of its findings, accommodate the system created by the minister. He will ‘look at it’, the report, in the dismissive manner one might reluctantly agree with one’s partner to ‘look at’ an unpromising clothing item with no intention of buying it. In agreeing that there might be ‘improvements’ in the next report, Ruddock clearly implies that the present structure will remain intact.

The second way that Ruddock maintains insincere compliance is to determine those with/out the appropriate knowledge to speak and participate in the process. Again this is a techno-bureaucratic device designed to maintain power relationships. Consider this passage:

_I’ve heard their advice, and I’ve looked at the practical issues in relation to the way in which we should deal with Woomera._

_And I’ve made a decision about how those changes will be implemented._

_And I have written today in fact to IDAG, advising them that we treat the advice they have given seriously and explaining to them the practical difficulties in implementing the advice they have given._

Of lexico-grammatical interest here are the conjunctive clausal relationships and the adjectival use of the word _practical_. Conjunctions create ‘intersentence relationship’, or cohesion (Martin, 1992, p. 19). The conjunctive relationship is established through the coordinating conjunction, _and_. However, although grammatically the conjunction joins paratactic clauses, or equal clauses (thus creating a narrative), the semantic relationship is hypotactic. Crucial to this semantic relationship is the use of _practical_ because this categorizes the bureaucratization of detention centre phenomena. More specifically, there are _practical issues_ and _practical difficulties_. To take the first occurrence of _and_ in the text above, Ruddock sets up an adversative relationship between _their advice_ and _practical issues_. The second _And_ ostensibly presents a
narrative (made a decision). But clearly the decision is anaphorically related to the categories in the prior sentence. Implicitly, the Minister is not going to be impractical (having looked at the practical issues), hence his decision is, by definition, practical.

The third *And* is additive in the sense that it continues the narrative (wrote to IDAG), while the fourth *and* introduces the reasoning for his decision to reject their advice.

The advice, we infer, has been rejected because it failed to fit the ‘practical’ category created in the first sentence. By technologizing inhumane practices as practical actions and processes, the system takes on a life of its own in no further need of ethical or humanitarian considerations. The minister agrees to make some changes, but not to fundamentally alter the logic of the system.

The third way that Ruddock maintains insincere compliance with democratic procedure is to create apparent choice for the detainees. In response to the question:

TONY JONES: Yes, but the question here and the question that is being focused on by your own independent advisory group, the questions being focused on by the UN, is what happens to people when they're in that detention environment and particularly children. They're saying they're exposed to a culture of endemic self-harm that is damaging for many people there, including the children. That is the argument coming from your own independent advisory group.

Ruddock says (after an exchange)

PHILIP RUDDOCK: … *If the proposition is that children, for their own psychological and state of mind, should not be in detention, and the competent authorities form that view, they can be removed tomorrow.*

However, the techno-bureaucratic process sets up a definitional structure that makes such a choice for freedom virtually impossible for a caring parent. This is because the children cannot be accompanied by their parents in open society because their parents have to remain in detention. Thus a parent is faced with the treacherous choice: the child can be freed if the parent relinquishes them or they can remain together as a family in the prison. Thus the minister can confidently state that his advice is that
... when faced with the choice, and it is a choice, of in the community [sic] but without family or in detention with family, the decision has always been to date that they should remain in the latter situation.

Technologizing Inhumanity

Technologizing discourse has the strategic purpose of normalizing the government’s tough refugee policy and then to technologize the issue. Crucial to this outcome is objectifying the subjective by rendering people and human issues as technical issues. The technologizing discourse has a special strategic role in the government’s political campaign because it is set against the mythological background of the feared Other.

However, the political expression of a politics of aggression feeding these myths cannot be overt. The problem for politicians is that they are discursively circumscribed in an age of ubiquitous news and public affairs and, hence, they cannot candidly demonstrate a politics of aggression under such scrutiny. In other words, they cannot actually say racist things or that “we want war”. The key to Bush and Australian Prime Minister Howard’s success in going to war was the repetition of a mantra, “Weapons of Mass Destruction” (WMDs), while creating the circumstances for the inevitability of war by moving soldiers into the Middle East, then claiming that ‘we can’t bring them back now’. Thus, the process of justification alters temporally. The intended action begins as a May Be, as in ‘Australia may declare war on Saddam Hussein without United Nations approval’ (English & Farr, 2003). This becomes an Is: ‘Howard phones Camp David and says war is going well’ (Grubel, 2003). This becomes a Was, which leaders hope will be positive: ‘John Howard claimed
triumphant vindication for Australia’s participation in the Iraq war...declaring it had ... liberating an oppressed people’ (Barker, 2003). However, when outcomes are negative or ambiguous, governments have a way of disassociating from the past by projecting to the future. This is especially evident in the phrase ‘to move on’: ‘Australians had “moved on” ... no longer interested in ... Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction’ (Overington, 2003).

While the government successfully used the mantras of illegal immigrants and queue jumpers, the overall discursive strategy is more complex. Effectively the refugee issue is no longer newsworthy, and opposition has dissipated. So the ‘was’ is largely irrelevant now as a political issue (whereas it is an enormous issue for George Bush trying to turn the Iraq quagmire into a Was). Despite the fact that the minister who recently replaced Ruddock announced that 90 percent (8260 of 9160 arrivals in the three years to July 2002; exact figures are hard to determine as several thousand boat people were deported or moved to various Pacific sites, such as Nauru) of the boat people had been classified as genuine refugees (Morris, 2003), there was no outcry at the government’s blatant dishonesty that greatly contributed to their 2001 electoral success. The role that Ruddock had to play while the issue was politically extant (during the ‘Is’ period) was to neutralize the inhumanity of the policy. He did this by using the technique of technologizing the inhumane.

The essential elements of this discourse are derived from technocratic discourse. Technocratic discourse primarily establishes and maintains ‘a social élite, its claims of privilege and its access to power’ according to Lemke (1995: 61). It organizes the
universe in a particular way (Lemke, 1995: 76), thereby orienting the listener / reader / viewer towards a particular way of seeing the world. As well, the discourse divests certain forms of social practices of their social, ethical, political, and moral values, thus presenting their discourses as objective, value-free truth (Saul, 1997: ch. 2). In this way, there is an ‘abridgement of meaning which has a political connotation’, but depoliticizes the discourse at the same time (Marcuse, 1968: 79).

The discourse of techno-bureaucratic language with a rhetorical purpose of justifying inhumane practices is characterized by seven lexico-grammatical features, which are similar to technocratic language, but different.

1. Modalize unpleasant outcomes so that they appear uncertain or unimportant.

2. Limit the use of behavioral process words so that adverse physiological and psychological effects on or responses to victims’ plight is minimized.

3. Respond to questions requiring a justification by providing a narrative account, preferably using anaesthetizing verbal processes used in identifying things that people say.

4. Limit self-agency and blur action by using such devices as grammatical metaphors.

5. Present actions not as processes (verbs) but as nominalizations or other nominal forms.
6. Create nominal taxonomies and hierarchies so that phenomena can be categorized in a way that those with power can manipulate and admit / turn away from consideration or relevance.

7. Using these taxonomies, create a system of processes regulated by the person with the power to do so, not according to a set of principles (such as rights or democratic procedures).

**Calculative Technologies, Rhetoric, and Politics**

This paper uses an interdisciplinary Critical Discourse Analysis approach to consider political text from a semiotic, discursive, and lexico-grammatical perspective. From this, significant insights into current political communication techniques have been provided. These should be disturbing to those concerned to ensure bipartisan humane politics. Deliberative rhetoric, in the Aristotelian sense, is intended to lead to, or actively prevent, an action; in other words, it is concrete and purposeful (Remer, 1999, pp. 41-42). It should motivate others to understand, support, or care for a philosophy, policy, cause, or notion that the locutor believes will improve the human condition (Aristotle, 1991). We argue that, in its place, an insidious form of political discourse is emerging, technologizing the inhumane. A defining characteristic of this form of discourse is ‘the apparent transformation of the subjective into the objective’ (Rose, 1992, p. 153). Underlying this is an ontological universe built upon the practices and claims by ‘experts of truth’ who determine ‘concepts of normality and pathology, danger and risk, social order and social control, and the judgements and devices which such concepts have inhabited.’ (Rose, 1999, p. 30). These discursive mechanisms present phenomena to us ‘as an intelligible field with specifiable limits.
and particular characteristics’ (p. 33) that then naturalize certain activities, without ethical reference.

If we wish to preserve democracy and to maintain humanitarian values, it is crucial then that we recognize and resist the technologies that logically, through systems of classification that exclude or include, present plausible policies that appear to protect us from the mythologies about the Other.
References


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1 A nominal group is defined as a ‘noun phrase (a group of words where the main word is a noun)’ (Eggins, 1994, p. 44).