

Self-representation in the Aboriginal public sphere: A case study of historical news writing

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Abstract

Cultural Advice: This talk uses the names and images of First Nations people who are deceased. It also references dis-preferred language that today would be considered offensive, including in the title of the analysed newspaper.

In this talk, I explore the linguistic construction of self-representation in one significant historical publication: the first national Indigenous Australian newspaper written and edited by First Nations people – *The Australian Abo Call: The Voice of the Aborigines* (published in 1938, the year of the 150th anniversary of invasion). The newspaper was founded, edited and largely written by Yorta Yorta man J.T. (Jack) Patten, and presented the case for Aboriginal Australians to the broader community. It is claimed to be one of the first examples of Aboriginal writing being used to influence public opinion and policy. Thus, this newspaper stands as an example of the Aboriginal public sphere.

The study combines corpus-assisted discourse analysis with the discourse-historical approach to position the finding within the relevant historical context. This approach assists the researcher in understanding the unique position that the newspaper held in the journalistic and historical context of early 20th century Australia, and further informs the linguistic analysis. The linguistic analysis proceeds from inductively identifying group-based identity labels to categorizing these labels in terms of their positionality in relation to 'Self' and 'Other'. Concordances of these identity labels are then qualitatively examined using transitivity analysis, focusing on their referents, position in the clause, and associated processes. The transitivity analysis is then mapped onto semantic category analysis, which reveals how First Nations people present themselves to audiences most typically (most frequently), and how they connect to audiences through discourses of activism.

The results suggest that the newspaper was a site of political awakening directed at both Indigenous and white Australians, calling on the former to mobilize, on the latter to listen, and on both to act. However, the analysis also shows that this activism sits very much within the dominant Western/Colonial frame, reflecting the historical settler-colonial context of the period in which this newspaper was published. The study also has broader implications for corpus-assisted discourse analysis, by indicating the insights we gain when we move from the study of 'Other'-representation in mainstream newspapers to the analysis of 'Self'-representation in community-led publications.

When

Friday, 10 March
4:00-5:30 pm AEDT

Where

Quad Seminar Rm S204
(Oriental Room),
The University of Sydney
Zoom ([link](#))

More information

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This event in the Sydney SFL research seminar series is presented by the Sydney Corpus Lab.

To find out more, visit

<https://sydneycorpuslab.com>