

# Semantics of a Press Panic: The Tamil 'Invasion'

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The immigration of Tamil refugees to the Netherlands resulted in a press 'panic' which indicated the existence of a dominant consensus hostile to the Tamil 'invasion'. A semantic analysis of the discourse of newspaper stories exposes this underlying consensus. Attention is focused on the reporting of Tamil immigration in five Dutch national dailies. The article examines the ways in which the press, using its own institutional and ideological strategies, also reproduces, and thus legitimizes, the views of those in the social and political power structure.

## **The Events**

Due to increasing ethnic conflict and oppression in Sri Lanka, large groups of the Tamil minority sought refuge in other countries, primarily and at first in the South Indian State of Tamil Nadu, but soon elsewhere (Amnesty International, 1985; RIOP, 1986). Thus, in 1984 and 1985, Tamil refugees also arrived in Western Europe, mostly through Moscow and East Berlin, from where they could easily travel to Western Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands. The respective governments of these countries, which in recent years all had enacted harsh anti-immigration laws (Castles, 1984; Hammar, 1985), were expectedly anything but happy with what they saw as a new 'invasion' of Third World immigrants.

The same was true for the Netherlands, where some 3000 Tamil refugees in early 1985 sought political asylum after they managed 'illegally' to cross the German border. From the outset the Dutch authorities acted in accordance with their general policy that 'The Netherlands is not an immigration country'. Because of the insistent requests of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, they did not send the Tamil refugees back to Sri Lanka (although a few dozen were sent back during the first months), but refused to recognize them as 'real' refugees. Instead, the Tamils were categorized as 'economic' refugees, who allegedly only came to Europe and the

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Netherlands to escape poverty and to live off the social benefits of 'our' welfare state.

After a few months of bureaucratic hassle the Tamils were housed in state-funded lodgings, outside the cities, and put on a stingy BBB (bed, bread, bath) regime, instead of receiving the usual refugee welfare allowance, so as to dissuade other refugees from following their example. In this situation the Tamils were expected to wait for the political and legal decisions about their applications for refugee status. It soon appeared, however, that only a few dozen of these applications would be honoured. Insisting on individual examination of each 'case', the authorities pretended that for most Tamils there was no real personal danger in their home country. Fearing to be sent back to Sri Lanka, this decision persuaded at least half of the Tamils to leave the country again, and seek asylum elsewhere. So much for the well-known self-publicized myth of Dutch hospitality.

Soon the Tamil 'invasion' also hit the headlines of media reports. After a few reports on TV and in the press at the end of 1984, the first months of 1985 witnessed an explosion of media coverage, culminating in April and May 1985. This coverage in the daily press had all the properties of a press 'panic' (Cohen, 1980). Frequency, size, topics and style of the news reports consistently reproduced and emphasized the official government policies and decisions, while at the same time focusing on the negative aspects of Tamil immigration and residence. Without alternative sources of information the Dutch population, most of whom had never heard of Tamils before, soon responded to this press panic in accordance with the pervasive prejudices, ethnocentrism and racism, both subtle and more blatant, to which extant minority groups are also subjected (Essed, 1984; van Dijk, 1984, 1987a): the Surinamese, Turks, Moroccans and other earlier immigrants had received company.

In this article we analyse a few aspects of this panic in the Dutch press, which we assume to be similar to that in surrounding Western European countries, especially the Federal Republic of Germany (Menten et al., 1986). We focus on the semantic dimensions of the news reports as they appeared between December 1984 and May 1986. That is, we limit our attention to an account of overall topics and the local meanings of news reports. In this way we also hope to contribute to a more qualitative approach to the analysis of mass media discourse. Other results (also quantitative) of our analysis of the Tamil panic in the press are reported in van Dijk (1987c).

**Theoretical Background**

This study is part of one project among other projects carried out at the University of Amsterdam on the representation of ethnic minority groups in different types of discourse, such as news reports, textbooks and everyday conversations (see, e.g., van Dijk, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987g). These projects have the major aim of studying some basic mechanisms in the social, cognitive and discursive processes of the reproduction of racism in society. In interviews conducted in Amsterdam and San Diego it appeared that (white) people often rely on media accounts for their knowledge, beliefs and opinions about ethnic minority groups. Therefore, both in 1981 and 1985, we made a systematic analysis of the portrayal of ethnic minority groups in the Dutch press, against the background of similar analyses in other countries (Hartmann and Husband, 1974; Wilson and Gutierrez, 1985). These studies reveal that, generally speaking, immigrants and resident minorities are portrayed in terms of 'problems', whether as *causing* problems of different types (in immigration, crime, employment, housing or welfare), as is typically the case in the conservative or popular press, or as *having* problems and in need of 'help' in the more liberal press. In this way the media appear to reproduce a dominant consensus, often pre-formulated by different political, social or academic elites, but also produce their own focused, stereotypical picture of minorities, thereby contributing to and confirming the prevailing prejudices in society at large. Our study of the portrayal of Tamils in the press offers a particularly interesting example of such media processes, because it allows us to analyse the first public discourses regarding a potentially new ethnic minority group about which the public at large as yet had no knowledge nor specific opinions.

**The Analytical Instrument**

In this paper, however, we report only fragments of this analysis and focus on the semantics of news reporting. It is well known that traditional content analysis, which is mostly quantitatively oriented, focuses on observable (countable) units; that is, on textual surface structures, such as words, sentences, paragraphs or presentation formats (size, layout) of news reports (see, e.g., Krippendorff, 1980). For large text corpora and for specific research goals, such an approach may be both relevant and appropriate in order to obtain at least overall insight into the nature of the coverage.

However, as soon as we are confronted with the structures and processes of meaning, meaning production and interpretation, news studies must probe deeper and ultimately provide systematic semantic analyses. Especially for an account of the subtle semantic processes involved in the portrayal of ethnic minority groups, such an analysis may reveal some of the underlying dominant 'ethnic' ideologies as they are (re-)produced by the media. More superficial methods of traditional content analysis are not designed to capture such subtle qualitative dimensions of discourse (see, e.g., Hall et al., 1980).

According to our own earlier work on the semantics of discourse (van Dijk, 1977, 1980), and within the more general framework of discourse analysis in general (see the contributions in van Dijk, 1985), textual meanings are analysed at two different levels. First we have the well-known level of word, word group, clause, and sentence meanings as they are accounted for in linguistic, logical or psycholinguistic grammars or theories. At this level we define, for example, conditions on meaningfulness or the referential interpretation of sentences, as well as relations of synonymy, entailment, implication or presupposition between sentences or propositions. For the study of news discourse this local or micro level of analysis is particularly relevant, because it allows us to spell out social presuppositions and other implications of news discourse which may be important elements of underlying ideologies.

Besides this analysis of local-level meanings, discourses also have an important global dimension. At this level we define overall meanings of whole texts or large text fragments, such as topics, themes and perspective, as well as overall schematic forms. Thus, a topic of a text is defined in terms of a semantic (macro-) proposition derived from a sequence of (local) text propositions by a number of formal rules or cognitive operations. The hierarchical structure of these macropropositions defines what we usually call the 'topical' or 'thematic' structure of a discourse (van Dijk, 1980). In news reports such structures are conventionally expressed by the lead, whereas the highest topic(s) of this structure usually appear in the headlines (for details, see van Dijk, 1987b).

It should be noted, though, that such an abstract semantic analysis has important cognitive and social underpinnings. After all, meaning and interpretation are not objective elements of the text itself but are assigned to it by language users in concrete communicative and social contexts. This means that social knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and ideologies, as well as personal experiences, contribute to the actual

(memory) representations of news reports by media users. These representations in turn determine (and are influenced by) so-called 'situation models' in memory, which represent the ultimate subjective understanding of the events the text is about. In other words, there are personal and social variations in both the production and the reproduction (understanding, memorization, uses) of text meanings and the models to which they give rise. That is, even the abstract, decontextualized semantic analysis of news reports is not yet adequate for a full account of actual news production processes by journalists, or for interpretation processes by the readers. Hence, the cognitive strategies of these interpretation processes must also be spelled out in a full-fledged semantic study (for details, see van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983). The same is true for a social analysis of meanings (and situated interpretations), for instance relative to social situations, group membership (gender, class, ethnicity, etc.), group relationships (power, dominance), or institutional embedding (Fowler et al., 1979; Hall et al., 1980; Kramarae et al., 1984).

Obviously, we cannot possibly deal with all these dimensions in a single article let alone for more than 400 stories in five national dailies. Therefore, our analysis must (1) be more or less informal, (2) derive macrostructures (topics) intuitively, (3) limit local semantic analysis to only a limited number of reports and (4) only summarize the most relevant cognitive and social contexts of interpretation. For formal details, and for a discussion of the theoretical and methodological adequacy of such analyses, we refer to our other work mentioned above. Similarly, after our earlier remark about the coverage of ethnic minorities in the press, we must also skip a more general discussion of the nature of news production, news structures, and news reception, which would provide a more systematic and structural explanation for the analysis of the Tamil panic in the press (van Dijk, 1986, 1987b, c).

#### The Corpus

For our analysis we collected all news reports, background articles, editorials, columns and non-editorial opinion articles that appeared in five Dutch national dailies, viz. *NRC-Handelsblad*(NH), *De Volkskrant*(VK), *De Telegraaf*(TG), *Trouw*(TR), and the Amsterdam daily *Het Parool*(PA) (for ease of reference in this English text we henceforth omit the definite articles 'de' and 'het'). Socio-politically, *NRC-Handelsblad* and *Telegraaf* might be categorized as a conservative quality newspaper and a conservative popular newspaper,

respectively (functionally comparable to the London *Times* and *Daily Telegraph*, respectively). *Volkskrant* (functionally comparable to the *Guardian*) caters to the younger and more progressive readers. *Trouw* is the, relatively liberal, newspaper of Christian-Democratic readers, whereas *Parool* vacillates between a moderate social-democratic stance and a more conservative popular style. *Telegraaf* is by far the biggest seller (about 700,000), whereas subscriptions to the other newspapers range between approximately 125,000 and 173,000. Together these five dailies serve about 2 million readers, which is half of the reading public of a population of 14 million (the other half reads other national dailies, such as *Algemeen Dagblad*, or regional dailies).

Between December 1984 and May 1986 these five newspapers published 424 articles about Tamils, occupying nearly 100,000 cm<sup>2</sup> of editorial space. The quality press published about 100 items during these months, whereas the popular press featured between half and two-thirds of this number. This difference is in line with the usual attention given to 'ethnic affairs' in the quality and popular press. During the first period, however, in which the number of articles doubled each month (reaching some 100 in April 1985, alone), the Tamil coverage was much more extensive than that for other ethnic minority or refugee groups.

### **Topics and Actors**

As a first practical and traditional step in the semantic description of the Tamil coverage we established the occurrence, frequencies and sizes of certain major topics. For practical reasons we here focus on the general topics that were covered during the first four months (January-April 1985). This analysis showed that among a few dozen main topics, four received special emphasis: the flight from Sri Lanka to Europe; the 'illegal' immigration to the Netherlands; the discussion of the refugee status of Tamils; and the various 'problems' associated with their reception, housing and welfare.

The results of our quantitative analysis (see van Dijk, 1987c, Chapter 4) suggest that the conservative press is primarily interested in topics that also concern the authorities, for example, the situation in Sri Lanka (whether Tamils are safe there), the 'illegal' immigration to the Netherlands, and the status of the refugees. The reception topic appears to be covered more or less equally by all newspapers. Overall, the two major topics are the refugee status and the reception of Tamils. In other words the press primarily defines the immigration of

Tamils in terms of political and social 'problems', as seen from the point of view of the Dutch government and the (white) majority population. Frequency, size and distribution of the coverage, as well as the relative consensus about the major 'problem' topics, provide first indications about a general press 'panic'.

The analysis of actors and actor roles is part of this overall study of dominant topics. As we might have expected, we found that Tamils were the most frequent actors in the news reports, followed by the government (ministries, agencies), the cities and the refugee organizations, and finally the police and the courts. If we examine the space allocated to the description of their actions, however, the government alone accounts for half of the actors and receives twice as much news space as the Tamils; moreover, whereas the government is quoted in 43 percent of its occurrences, Tamils are quoted only in 17 percent. Literally, then, for the media, minorities have little to say. Their speaking role is taken over by the (Dutch) refugee organization, as is usually the case in news about minority groups (Downing, 1980).

### **The Headlines: Defining the Situation**

Undoubtedly the most prominent feature of news discourse is the headlines, which express the top of the semantic macrostructure, programme the interpretation process and generally provide a (subjective) definition of the situation (van Dijk, 1980, 1987f).

After the overall assessment of topics and actors, headline analysis allows a first, more qualitative, step in a macro-semantic analysis: What topics tend to be expressed in the headlines? What inferences can be drawn from their structural form or style? What specific contributions to the negative portrayal of Tamils find their initial formulation in the headlines of the daily press?

The major topic, expressed in 96 (23 percent) of the 424 headlines, dealt with various actions of the authorities. About half of these were about the government's decisions or actions taken by cabinet ministers or their agencies, such as refusing entry or asylum, expulsion and generally 'keeping Tamils out'. Two typical examples are given below. We have translated them as literally as possible, so as to keep the stylistic flavour of the Dutch texts; the frequently used term, 'Justice', refers to the Department of Justice, or the judiciary in general.

(1) JUSTICE EXPELS 4 TAMILS TO FEDERAL REPUBLIC (NH, 10 January 1985).

(2) MILITARY POLICE SEND ILLEGAL TAMILS BACK (NH, 4 March 1985)

The ideological implications of these headlines are complex and may appeal to different sections of the reading public: on the one hand 'toughness' of the authorities, and on the other hand 'lack of hospitality'. More important, however, is that the refugees are associated, from the outset, with the police and the judiciary, a first step towards the formation of well-known prejudices.

The second type of headlines focuses on the next stage of immigration: reception, housing and welfare. Some headlines express sympathy with the plight of the Tamils (for instance, when they are exploited by a landlord), but most emphasize the 'problems' for the authorities, especially in housing. Later, disputes between the government and the cities get more attention, which again emphasizes the notion of 'difficulties'. Generally, the authorities are portrayed in an active helping role and the Tamils in a purely passive role.

(3) CABINET DECIDES TO RECEIVE TAMILS IN SPECIAL ACCOMMODATION, (VK, 9 March 1985)

(4) AMSTERDAM CAN NO LONGER HOUSE TAMILS (TG, 21 March 1985)

The third topic cluster focuses on the reaction and resistance by the Tamils to the decisions of the authorities. The upshot of these headlines is that Tamils are ungrateful: they refuse to be relocated, are not satisfied with the BBB regime and even go to court to fight expulsion.

(5) GROUP OF TAMILS REFUSES TO LEAVE AMSTERDAM (NH, 2 April 1985)

(6) HUNGER STRIKE OF 19 TAMILS (PA, 20 April 1985)

The initial headlines about the Tamils are of course about their flight from Sri Lanka and their immigration to the Netherlands (20 headlines). We have seen, however, that instead of being defined as 'informal' refugees their entry is consistently framed as 'illegal' (15 headlines). Also, their arrival in vast numbers (see below) is an important feature of these early reports:

(7) SOBER RECEPTION PUTS END TO TAMIL INVASION (TG, 20 April 1985)

(8) THOUSANDS OF TAMILS SMUGGLED INTO THE COUNTRY (TG, 27 April 1985)

The opinion of the authorities, that many Tamils are not 'real' but 'economic' refugees, also appears in quite a number of headlines, and matches the implications of the story that Tamils are here merely to profit from our 'welfare paradise' and protest against their thrifty



treatment. Only 18 headlines of 224 focus on the problems of the Tamils themselves, in their own country or in the Netherlands.

A syntactic analysis of the surface expression of actor roles in the headlines (see Fowler et al., 1979; Sykes, 1985) confirms these findings: Tamils often occupy sentential 'topic' positions in the headlines but usually only as passive actors, not as active agents, unless they appear as 'negative' agents, for instance, in acts of 'illegal' entry, protest, resistance or crime (for instance, when they set fire to their lodgings).

We conclude from this analysis that the vast majority of the headlines are about what the Dutch authorities do, focusing on their refusal to admit Tamils, to grant them refugee status or to give them welfare, on the one hand, and on housing and otherwise 'helping' them, on the other hand. Complementary are the headlines about Tamil reactions, but these seem predominantly to highlight the elements from which a dominant message of 'ungratefulness' may be (and has been) inferred. Finally, association (even as victims) with fraud, illegality and exploitation, further emphasizes the dominant negative message. Overall, then, the headlines define the immigration and presence of Tamils as a problem. This is perfectly consistent with what has been found for the coverage of other immigrating or minority groups, both in the Netherlands and other European countries, and also reflects current government practices. There is not a single headline that welcomes the presence of a new group of citizens, or emphasizes the possible contributions of this group to 'our' culture and economy (many Tamil immigrants have experience in advanced education and are professionals).

### **Thematic Structures**

When we turn to the thematic structures of the articles themselves we may expect that, although there may be 'biasing' titles, most articles will be mainly about the topics as expressed in the headlines. Analysis of the thematic structure of half of the articles, for example those (191) published in the crucial first four months (January to April 1985), shows that this is indeed the case. Most articles (two-thirds) feature the topic of the refugee status of Tamils, and/or their housing or reception generally. Also in size, these two topics occupy the largest parts of the reports (each about 20,000 cm'). In the first few weeks especially, the flight story and the situation in Sri Lanka appear as major topics (each appeared in a third of the reports), whereas during these first few months the reaction and protest themes appear in only 18 of 191 stories.

Interestingly, not all topics of the articles of these first four months appear to be equally fit for headline treatment. The refugee status topic shows up in the headline in about 65 percent of the articles, whereas housing does so in 82 percent of the cases. Whereas the situation in Sri Lanka appears in 52 stories, it hits the headlines in only 12 stories. Protest and action, however, nearly always make it into the headlines: of 18 reports that feature a protest topic, 17 express that topic in the headline. This confirms the general tendency of news about minorities, that violence, protest actions, and problems are treated as most important, and hence to be signalled, whereas background information (such as the situation in Sri Lanka) hits the headlines less often.

A few weeks after the first reports about Tamils, the press focused on a number of topics that also prominently appeared in the headlines, such as the recurrent topic of border running. This both associated Tamils with doubtful practices (even as victims), such as fraud, and emphasized the ‘illegality’ of their status:

- (9) Profitable traffic suspected in people from Sri Lanka  
ASYLUM SEEKING TAMILS DID NOT TAKE REFUGE (*VK*, 17 January 1985)  
(10) CRIMINALS CASH IN ON TAMIL EXODUS (*TG*, 19 January 1985)

As is the case with the topic of exploiting landlords, this focus on ‘malafide’ travel agents did not always express empathy with the problems of the Tamils, but rather a concern about illegality – that is, about a violation of norms and values.

The process of criminalization is most explicit in the popular *Telegraaf*, which reaches approximately 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> million readers. The racist portrayal of minorities in this newspaper takes a blatant form where new (black) refugees are concerned. This means that the well-known prejudice proposition, ‘They profit from our social system’, is heavily topicalized in its stories about Tamils:

- (11) Refugee trick admitted  
TAMILS SEEK ASYLUM EVERYWHERE TO GET EXTRA ALLOWANCE (*TG*,  
4 March 1985)

This headline covers a story about the expulsion to West Germany by the police (a fact not topicalized in the headline), and about police allegations of ‘large-scale’ welfare fraud, ‘everywhere’, for which, however, no proof is provided. Even if Tamils did apply for refugee status in several countries they will hardly get double allowances because welfare benefits require presence in the country. The

*Telegraaf*, however, blatantly states that, ‘The refugees illegally enter the country by secret routes or hidden in trains or cars in order to profit – once they are registered as official refugees – from the much higher allowances in the Netherlands in addition to the assistance they receive in West Germany.’ Thus, the newspapers confirm the negative opinions of ethnic groups held by many readers (see the papers in Hamilton, 1981, and van Dijk, 1987a, for a discussion of the cognitive operations involved in this process).

### **Local Semantics**

Although the global structures, such as topics, undoubtedly have a major role in news processing by the readers, the local structures may also contribute important details to the portrayal of Tamils. Here, stylistic phenomena such as lexical choice and syntactic formulation of underlying actor roles, and a number of special semantic properties, such as presuppositions, implications or associations, play a strategic role in the description and evaluation of the new citizens. Obviously, it makes a vast difference whether the Tamil refugees are pictured, on the one hand, as persecuted victims of an oppressive government, as people fleeing a civil war, or generally as people who deserve our sympathy or pity, or, on the other hand, as terrorists who are themselves to blame for the situation in Sri Lanka, as kids of rich parents, as people who illegally enter the country, or as refugees who merely come here to live out of our pockets. We have seen that, thematically, the stories tend to favour the second category of typifications. How are such categorizations – and their evident possible consequences for ethnic attitude formation and ideological transformation and legitimation – ultimately grounded in the local meaning production of the reports themselves? What inferences can be drawn from such local semantic specifications about the attitudes or ideologies of the reporters or their newspapers? For brevity’s sake we focus on the analysis of a few central concepts that both at the global thematic level and at the local level contribute to a negative overall portrait of the Tamils.

### **Illegality and Fraud**

The first predicate the Tamils received when they entered the Netherlands was that they were ‘illegal’. During the first few months all newspapers regularly featured headline ‘definitions’ that unambiguously assigned this evaluation:

(12) JUSTICE SENDS ILLEGAL TAMILS BACK TO WEST GERMANY (TR, 19 February 1985)

Although entering the country without the required documents is undoubtedly illegal, the extraordinary emphasis on 'illegality' of course, serves several ideological functions. Whereas many refugees by definition will not have travel documents, the press ignores this aspect and focuses instead on how refugees 'break the law'. In this way, again, Tamils become associated with deviance and crime, and emphasis is placed on their probably 'fake' refugee claims. This focus is sharpened by concrete 'eye witness'- type descriptions of illegal entry:

(13) Through secret roads or hidden under train seats many of them avoid border control (TG, 10 January 1985)

In this way, illegality is further associated with secrecy, frontier running and other forms of organized crime. Opinion articles and letters to the editors confirm that the public picks up such preferred readings: refugees break the law. At the same time, such readings confirm existing prejudices about minorities in the country. In other words, from the outset the portrayal of Tamils follows the prejudice schema already established for other minorities (see van Dijk, 1987a, for details). The crucial consequence of such interpretations is of course that by immediately defining Tamils as 'illegals' the press formulates a crucial reason for their expulsion, and at least one negative point of view in the decision procedure about their applications for refugee status.

Similar processes are at work in the local semantic construction of 'fraud':

(14) CRIMINALS PROFIT FROM EXODUS TAMILS  
... there is increasing suspicion that criminals successfully cash in on the anxieties of the Tamil people .... Indications are accumulating that the fast growing stream of Tamils has become an easy prey to a slick organization (TG, 19 January 1985)

We have already suggested that such fragments should not primarily be understood as empathy with the plight of the Tamils. We indicated above that the context of these and many other passages rather suggests that refugees did not come here in the usual way (hence the use of the widely used term 'jet refugees'), and that they are associated with dubious practices. Emphasis on later criminal investigations into such trafficking also suggests that the real interest of the press is the fascinating topic of (organized) crime, and hence the violation of our norms and our country. Initially, then, the Tamil immigration is perceived to be 'fraught with fraud'.

**Crime and Drugs**

It comes as no surprise that the negative portrayal of Tamils in terms of illegality and fraud finally goes all the way to straightforward crime, and especially the crime most often associated with minorities: drugs. Obviously the new Tamils have hardly had the opportunity to plan and commit crime, so what happens is that the fear of their 'liability' to crime is repeatedly expressed in the press. Most notably, rumours and allegations of 'links with the heroin scene' – actively as dope smugglers in order to pay their air fares, or passively as potential victims of dope peddlers – soon enter the stories. This association with real or potential criminalization is the closing and most persuasive link in the traditionally negative media portrayal of minorities, in the Netherlands, the UK, other Western European countries and the USA (see, e.g., Hall et al., 1978). This is how the press subtly brings in the crime angle without straightforward accusations:

(15) According to the City of Amsterdam these wandering groups are at great risk to end up in criminal or drug circles because of lack of money (PA, 14 February 1985)

Again the presentation strategy seems to be full of empathy, showing concern for the Tamils, whereas the real 'fears' amount to the projection of stereotypes and prejudices about the special inclinations, liabilities and drug-related crimes of minority group people.

**'Economic' Refugees**

Whereas the semantic implications of the topics we discussed above undoubtedly contributed to the negative portrait sketched of the Tamils by the Dutch press, no topic cluster is as explicit, unambiguous and dominant as that of the Tamils being 'economic' and not political ('real') refugees.

From the beginning, in January 1985, the authorities did not only make it clear that this group of 'uninvited', 'irregular' and even 'illegal' refugees was not welcome, but the officials of the Justice Department also repeatedly emphasized that they had reasons to believe that many of the Tamils only came here to take advantage of our social welfare system and not because of their fear of persecution in Sri Lanka. The government therefore consistently refused to grant political asylum to the Tamils as a group, despite the declarations by the UNHCR, Amnesty International and other organizations that Tamils in Sri Lanka were collectively real or potential victims of state

oppression. Individual examination of each case would allow the authorities to outwardly present itself as 'fair', while at the same time deciding negatively in most individual cases. This proved to be the case: in the autumn of the same year it became obvious that only a few dozen individual Tamils (out of an estimated 3000) would be recognized as refugees.

The newspapers have faithfully reproduced and legitimated this policy of the politicians, and in their own way helped to produce a broad public consensus about this 'definition' of the Tamils as 'fake' refugees. The stories examined above, about illegal entry, fraud and crime, are only supporting media strategies to convey persuasively this prominent feature of Tamils being 'fake' refugees. Dozens of headlines and local passages show how this dominant definition gets its media formulation. The routine strategy is to highlight official pronouncements. Representatives of the Department of Justice are repeatedly quoted as saying, for example:

(16) In talks with them there is no question of political motives. In that case we are led to think of other motives, economic ones in the broadest sense of the term (NH, 17 January 1958)

(17) Trapped Western governments are increasingly convinced that some of the Tamils ... did not leave Sri Lanka because of political reasons .... From the first interrogations it appears that stories about the persecution they suffered hardly stand up (TR, 18 January 1985)

The very choice of 'trapped' for the Western European governments shows that according to the speaker for the Department of Justice, 'we' are the victims of this 'invasion', and not the Tamils. After a few weeks of emphasizing the 'economic' nature of the Tamil refugees, the press and the public routinely use this evaluation of the situation. That is, no longer does the press simply report what the authorities think – allegations that anyway are based on hearsay, wishful thinking and individual stories, and not on hard evidence about the situation in Sri Lanka – but itself adopts this viewpoint in its own newsgathering routines, interviews and independent assessment of the Tamil immigration. The newspapers soon draw the inevitable conclusion from their own reporting:

(18) The point of view of Amnesty International can hardly be maintained .... As far as the Tamils are concerned, we should quickly separate the wheat from the chaff and those who have come to the Netherlands only because of economic reasons should actually be expelled (NH, 16 April 1985)

Apparently, both for the authorities and for much of the press, the discussion about the refugee status of the Tamils has only one major goal: formulating the arguments in such a way that a face-saving case can be made for throwing them out.

The examples discussed in this section also show that the use of the term 'economic refugees', by the authorities and the press, should not be seen as a neutral counterpart of 'political refugees'. Rather, it is a typical example of bureaucratic jargon that dissimulates underlying meanings and implications. In its more or less neutral sense (if there is such a thing as 'neutral' meaning) it implies that refugees have no means of existence in their own country; that is, that they are poor and take refuge from poverty. However, its underlying, ideologically relevant, meaning is that such refugees come here only 'to profit from our social welfare system'. In several news reports and statements by authorities this interpretation is explicitly spelled out. The alternative reading, that Tamils come here to work, and thus may contribute to our economy, is never even envisaged. The rule that refugees, pending the decision about their status, are not allowed to work is after all hardly a condition for which they can be made responsible. And since many Tamils have a good education and professional experience there is reason to believe that many of them will find a job despite the unemployment rate in the Netherlands.

We conclude from this brief analysis of the ideological implications of the term, 'economic refugee', that such language use presupposes the well-known prejudice that minorities often live 'on welfare'. It is simply instantiated here for the new group of immigrants. In other words, the term 'economic' is a semantic and rhetorical strategy to convey ethnic prejudices through a 'technical' euphemism. It is in this way that the authorities and the press may be said to pre-formulate racist prejudice in society (van Dijk, 1987d).

This analysis is further corroborated by the extraordinary emphasis on the various details of (lack of) welfare provisions for the refugees: the BBB system, the (sometimes exaggerated) amount of welfare allowances, pocket money, and finally of course the frequent reference to the 'millions' they will cost us. The suggested reading for much of the public at large is of course that Tamils are ungrateful despite all such help. Interviews we conducted, in a poor inner city neighbourhood of Amsterdam, precisely feature such reactions of media users, who also repeat the other dominant themes of the press, even without a single Tamil in their neighbourhood. It is not surprising, in this context, that the government could expect

sufficient popular support for its restrictive immigration and welfare policies. The 'proof' of the efficiency of these policies comes later, when the media report that fewer Tamils now come to the Netherlands, and that many have left because of the many restrictions upon their stay.

### **Numbers and Metaphors**

From the first days of Tamil immigration the press took care to keep the score by producing 'factual' information about the numbers of immigrants. This numbers game is well known in reporting about immigration (see also Hartmann and Husband, 1974). It fits the more general tendency of news reporting rhetorically to enhance objectivity by providing 'hard figures' about ongoing events. However, for minorities and immigrants this numbers game has very special presuppositions and implications. The statements in absolute numbers, often accompanied by a measure of daily or weekly increases, are not merely a rhetorical ploy to stress the 'facts', but also an operation that emphasizes the very concept of 'large numbers' itself. Whether coming in by the hundreds or thousands is, as such, less important. The message is that 'large numbers' of refugees are coming to the country, a statement that would be less effective if for instance percentages of the total population would be specified or if comparisons would be made with normal emigration and immigration balances.

Despite their apparent exactness, however, numbers appear to be mostly estimates, and in the day-by-day score they vary widely (wildly). One newspaper may mention 2000 Tamils one day and 3000 the next day, and even when the same sources (e.g. the police or the Justice Department) are mentioned, there may be differences. Such differences are never explained or corrected when they appear to be wrong, which confirms our assumption that they do not primarily serve to provide exact specifications but merely function as rhetorical means to suggest factuality. The prototypical number passage reads like this:

(19) According to a speaker of the Department of Justice the stream of Tamils to our country continues unabated. The number of refugee applications is estimated to amount to 100 to 150 per week. He says that about 2000 asylum applications are being handled at this moment (NH, 4 March 1985)

This example further shows that the condition of immigration itself also becomes associated with a set of metaphorical expressions,



borrowed from the style register of various types of aquatic disaster, such as 'stream', 'flow', 'torrent' and 'wave'. The *Telegraaf* even speaks of an 'invasion', which suggests the imminent presence of a hostile foreign army. In the Netherlands, which has a long nationalistic tradition of 'struggle against the water', the 'flow' metaphors are particularly revealing and effective. The remedy against such 'tidal waves' is to build dikes, and much of the reception of Tamils can be interpreted in that metaphorical context. In order to keep them out we must build dikes, dams or barriers against the 'flow' of foreigners. *Volkskrant* (15 February 1985) speaks of a 'gigantic stream', i.e. a torrent, of Tamils that the authorities in Amsterdam can no longer handle. The number associated with this torrent appears to be 1200, in a city of more than 700,000 people that annually receives hundreds of thousands of tourists. It is not surprising that in its editorial of 6 April 1985, *NRC-Handelsblad* had to admit that the Tamils could hardly be called a 'demographic time bomb', but it hastily adds that nevertheless 'their steady influx causes concern'. Of course, the decreasing number of Tamils, once they started to leave the country again, was not documented in this careful way.

### **Conclusions**

The immigration of Tamil refugees to Western Europe, and in particular to the Netherlands, sparked a special type of media coverage that is usually described as a 'panic'. Our press analysis has shown that this panic had a number of characteristic features. First, it did not stand alone: due to their organized and routine contacts with the political power structure, the media largely reproduce the concomitant political panic of the authorities in The Hague. This reproduction has itself a number of well-known dimensions, such as preferred attention for, and focused selection and transformation of, political 'source texts' as data: government declarations and reports, press conferences, and statements of individual ministers or of high officials in their ministries or agencies. In this respect the media panic — particularly in the conservative press — shares in a broader sociopolitical panic of the leading power elites (van Dijk, 1987b).

Second, however, the media have their own institutional and ideological goals and strategies which allowed the political panic to become 'public', and hence effective and legitimized. They did so by allowing access to different sources, by selection, by their own investigative reporting, and especially by their own transformation of sources and the construction of a 'tellable' story.

Although we have only touched upon certain general characteristics of news production here, the press panic is composed of a number of specific factors which derive from these well-known processes. Frequency and size of coverage are the first, obvious signals of the magnification process: during the first few months of 1985 each newspaper featured dozens of news reports and background stories, sometimes a page long, about the Tamil 'invasion'. Compared to the immigration of other refugees in the last few years, this measure of attention appeared to be remarkable in its own right. Also the news discourses themselves in many ways signalled this relative importance, – through banner headlines and prominent (front page) positions in the papers for example. Some aspects of the Tamil immigration were repeated over and over again – their flight through East Berlin, their 'illegal' border crossing and the role of fraudulent agents or frontier runners. Of the many thematic dimensions of the immigration story, only a few main topics were selected, constructed and rhetorically emphasized, such as the discussion about the refugee status of the Tamils and the 'problems' associated with their reception and housing. Finally, the style and rhetoric of description further emphasized the seriousness and the urgency of the 'problem', e.g., through use of the familiar 'flood' metaphors.

In these ways the press made it clear that the Tamil immigration was to be seen and discussed as a prominent 'national issue'. The construction of a panic, however, requires that, on all these levels of news discourse, the events be formulated simultaneously as a threat or public danger. This presupposes that the Tamils, their immigration and their presence overtly or more obliquely must be qualified in negative terms. This is precisely what happened. Our semantic analysis suggests that the main thematic was constructed in such a way that the topics with negative implications were covered most frequently and most prominently: prior (and for some newspapers also later, integrated) coverage of 'terrorist' Tamil actions in Sri Lanka, the dubious detour through Moscow or East Berlin, that is through 'communist' territory, 'illegal' border crossings, and the many associations with 'fraud', were only the prelude to the main issues of refugee status and reception 'problems'. Thus, from the outset, much of the media adopted and magnified the politically dominant theme of the 'economic' nature of the Tamil immigration, or at least accepted the legitimacy of this allegation. In various semantic specifications this dominant topic conveyed a clear but

implied message to the public: the Tamils are 'fake' refugees, and have only come here to live off our welfare state. In this way a coherent semantic system was construed by the press that happened to be remarkably similar to the prevailing ethnic prejudice schemata against all existing minority groups. In other words, the press made it 'easy' for prejudiced readers simply to apply such existing prejudices in their own evaluation of the new immigrants.

This media construction of the Tamil story is further supported by the extraordinary attention to the 'problems' of reception, housing and the (non-) allocation of welfare allowances. Whereas ten years earlier more than 150,000 Surinamese immigrated to the Netherlands (an event that of course received similar coverage), the immigration of some 3000 Tamils was constructed as if 300,000 were invading the country. The numbers game that conveyed this impression was enhanced by the panic metaphors of the unstoppable deluge coming over 'us'.

In other words, at all levels the Tamils were characterized negatively and their immigration represented as a threat to the nation and the social status quo. Whence also the emphasis on 'illegal' entry and residence, the allusions to crime and drugs, on the one hand, and the assumed 'profiting' from welfare, on the other hand.

Cynically, but interestingly, some newspapers seemed to sense these implications, but either justified them by emphasizing the seriousness of the 'facts', or had recourse to the well-known racist strategy of attributive transfer. Soon they reported – as a self-fulfilling prophecy – that the public (especially the people in the poor inner-city neighbourhoods) would not tolerate more immigrants. They conclude that Tamil immigration would strengthen prejudice and racism, both against Tamils themselves and against other minority groups. In other words, we (the political or media elite) are not prejudiced, but the 'public' is.

A year after these events, both the media and leading party politicians, urged by the potentially 'explosive' (and later indeed literally explosive) situation of the Tamils, slowly began to modify their policy, and started to envisage a longer and more integrated settlement of the Tamils in the country. The social damage, as witnessed by letters to the editor and the interviews we conducted after four months of negative Tamil reporting, had, however, been done: the Tamils were henceforth defined and branded as the next group of (Black, Third World) immigrants who came here to profit from 'us' and to cause all kinds of 'problems'.

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