A lexical semantics for *refugee*, *asylum seeker*, and *boat people* in Australian English
Abstract

The terms *refugee*, *asylum seeker*, and *boat people* are of particular prominence in the Australian discourse surrounding immigration policy, and are widely used in day-to-day conversation among Australians. Despite their frequency of use, a lexico-semantic study of the terms has not been carried out to date. This paper fills this gap by proposing a semantic analysis of them. The study is based on a corpus created from online comments to the Australian television programme *Go Back To Where You Came From* (Season 1, SBS 2011). After introducing the data and analytical framework – object-oriented semantics – we discuss the terms’ lexical semantics. While the discussion of immigration issues is emotionally laden, our results suggest that the default semantics of the terms do not include evaluative components. Rather, speakers tend to evaluate the agreed-upon semantic specifications differently depending on their political views. We show how each term represents a specific node in a network of concepts for translocating individuals, but may in context also be applied to neighbouring nodes that lack a lexicalisation. While the terms are seemingly used interchangeably, our analysis instead emphasises the influence of the underlying conceptual structure and the resulting constrained plasticity of nominal meaning in context.

**Keywords:** object orientation; semantic plasticity; lexical semantics; forced migration; Australia
Issues surrounding immigration and immigration policy occupy a particularly important position in Australian political discourse, and have done so since the nation’s inception at the beginning of the twentieth century (Jupp 2002). The discourse and successive governments’ attempts at dealing with the perceived problem of various types of ‘translocant’1 have in recent years become especially salient. A large increase in the number of boat arrivals in the 1999–2000 financial year renewed the discussion, and lead to a new hardline approach to legislation and regulation of arrivals (Hugo 2002), culminating in the Liberal-National Government’s introduction of the so-called ‘Pacific Solution’ (see Magner 2004). The new approach presented a new image of boat arrivals as ‘queue jumpers’ and ‘illegals’, vitriolic sentiments which were utilised (successfully) by the Liberal-National Coalition during their 2001 election campaign (Leach 2003) and adopted by the mass media in the same period (Macken-Horarik 2003). Wazana (2004: 89) notes that boat arrivals in particular were viewed as directly attacking the nation’s sovereignty, which fed the notion that Australia had a right to forcibly defend its borders. Such notions have survived to the present and are explicitly referenced in the current Liberal-National Government’s policy regarding boat arrivals, termed ‘Operation Sovereign Borders’, a strategy whose pillars are the returning of boats to their ports of origin on the one hand (Creek 2014) and indefinite offshore detention for boat arrivals on the other hand, a practice whose current iteration was commenced by the former Labor Government (Fleay & Hoffman 2014). The policy of offshore detention in particular continues to draw criticism (see Pickering & Weber 2014 for an overview of the discourse) for its implications on the mental health of those interned (Essex 2014), many of whom are children (Mares & Zwi 2015; Zwi & Mares 2015).

The terms refugee, asylum seeker, and boat people are of particular prominence in the discourse, and are widely used by politicians, journalists, activists, and in day-to-day conversation among Australians. A number of studies focus on the terms as representing categories, and on the discursive construction of translocants in various global settings (Klocker & Dunn 2003; Lynn & Lea 2003; Gabrielatos & Baker 2008; Khosravinik 2010). In the Australian context specifically, Pickering (2001: 171) finds that translocants are categorised in the mass media as members of one of three “deviant populations”: “the

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1 We introduce this term as a generic term for individuals who are undergoing the process of resettlement. Its coinage and use is motivated by the desire to avoid possible ‘semantic interference’ which results from readers’ associations of the pre-existing terms. We aim here for an impartial account, and so such associations are ideally avoided. In this regard, we are inspired by a similar practice employed in O’Doherty and Lecouteur (2007) with the term ‘unexpected arrival’, which denotes anyone arriving in Australia who is not ‘expected’ by the Australian authorities: examples of expected arrivals are migrants, tourists, people with business in Australia, diplomatic visitors, and so on. ‘Translocant’ is preferable to ‘unexpected arrival’, since the former has an advantageous generality, as it is able to refer to both unexpected and expected arrivals.
invading deviant; the radicalised deviant; and the diseased deviant”. The attitude towards and construal of categories of translocants in Australian communities (Klocker 2004) and in Government discourse (Leach 2003; Gale 2004; Every & Augoustinos 2007) is, similarly, overwhelmingly negative.

To date, a lexico-semantic study of the terms per se has, to the best of our knowledge, not been carried out. Perhaps the closest to such a study is O’Doherty & Lecouteur (2007), in which the authors, through an analysis of the terms’ use in the media, conclude that these three specific terms are used “in an apparently interchangeable way” (O’Doherty and Lecouteur 2007: 7). Indeed, general usages of the terms appear to support a view of the terms’ distribution as random:2

(1) e2-0866: [...] I cannot believe that two weeks into the life of an asylum seeker/refugee she still does not understand their plight. [...]  

(2) e2-0069: [...] I would rather pay higher taxes to fund a greater intake of boat people/refugees.

Examples (1) and (2) appear to equivocate the terms, which as a result appear to act interchangeably. Asylum seeker and refugee are juxtaposed in (1), and the author of (2) uses boat people and refugees at an equivalent hierarchical level. However, a further inspection of example data yields the following examples:

(3) e1-0085: [...] Most of us had for-fathers who did to the indeginous people what some of us are doing to ‘refugees’. Australia has an aginig population we need population growth. The amount of refugees, in particular ‘boat people’ is very small. [...]  

(4) e1-0119: [...] Stop useing refugees and asylum seekers as the bogeyman-in-the-cupboard to boost your flagging polls. [...]  

Examples (3) and (4) directly contradict the notion that the terms are interchangeable. The use of “in particular” in (3) suggests a perception of boat people as a subcategory of refugees, and hence a vertical hierarchical relation between the terms is established. Similarly, the ‘and’-coordination of refugees and asylum seekers in (4) establishes that the terms are not synonymous and at most have overlapping denotation sets. At the same time, the acceptability of the coordination indicates that one term does not merely reference a subcategory of the other, as subcategory–supercategory coding coordinations are generally

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2 For information on our corpus data and its verbatim reproduction, see Section 1.1.
considered as semantically anomalous (see the semantically anomalous noun phrase *dogs and animals*, Nickles et al. 2007: 38).

In this paper, we conduct a lexical semantic analysis of the terms *refugee*, *asylum seeker*, and *boat people*. We aim to explore the seemingly plastic nature of the terms, and to do so, we employ an approach that is still rather novel to linguistics: *object-orientation*. Specifically, we have two aims. First, we aim to describe the ‘default’ semantics of each term individually. The default semantics of a term is understood as the sense with which that term is most often associated. Despite the novelty of the use of object-orientation, this part of the analysis conforms most closely to the familiar notion of lexical analysis. Second, the goal of any robust theory of lexical meaning is to provide means to account not only for the abstracted semantics of conceptual entities, but also for the terms’ semantics as used in interaction. Section 2 thus deals with the default semantics of the terms and the cross-connected network (ontology) their underlying concepts are part of, while Section 3 documents some of the plasticity in the terms’ use, and proposes a solution to the problem this presents for semantic analysis. We conclude in Section 4, by reflecting on the advantages and challenges of the model that we have devised, and by touching on some ramifications of the results for the politicised discourse surrounding the terms.

1. Methodology and analytic framework

1.1 The data

The data used in this study form a collection of comments posted on the website of the first series of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) television programme *Go Back To Where You Came From* (Special Broadcasting Service 2011), a programme in which a group of Australians met recent arrivals to Australia, those in transit in nearby countries, and people awaiting resettlement in refugee camps, while having to live with these groups of people. The vast majority of the comments were written by viewers of the television programme, and therefore the largest volume of comments was posted in the month following the first run of the series on television in June 2011, though online access to the episodes meant that comments continued to be posted after this period. The data were collected using an automated Python script which harvested only the comments from the website (with permission of the SBS); details such as the username of the poster, date, and time of the comments’ postings were considered extraneous, and these details were summarily omitted by the script. The current version of the collection was compiled on 30 May 2012; any comments posted after this date are disregarded.

The collection contains 290,114 words in 3,506 comments. Of these words, there are 2,239 tokens of *refugee* (or misspelled variants thereof), 312 tokens of *asylum seeker*, and 241 tokens of *boat people*. Commenters were not required to login to post, and were
only required to provide a name. For this reason, the number of unique commenters cannot be tracked, and it is in principle possible (and indeed quite probable) that one commenter used a number of different names when posting. Furthermore, demographic data on the commenters could not be gathered. This anonymity, however, has allowed comments to express opinions largely free from concerns over any repercussions for making controversial or offensive statements about arrivals (see Zimbardo 1970; Ess 1996; McKenna & Bargh 2000; Douglas 2007). The comments are, in this way, a sizeable sample of spontaneously produced language, discussing topics to which the terms refugee, asylum seeker, and boat people are central. Comments are not prepared in the way that parliamentary speech is, or edited to the same degree that articles in the press are. They were, however, subject to a number of guidelines imposed by SBS so that the corporation could avoid litigation, with the effect that some submitted comments might not have been published, but instead deemed inappropriate as a result of a censorship mechanism.

Commenters entered their comments on the webpage in plain text format and comments could not be formatted; for this reason, nonstandard use of punctuation and capitals as well as of other devices for effect were common. The general level of spelling was poor throughout the comments; this was taken into consideration when analysing the data, particularly with regard to nonstandard spellings of each of the three terms in question (e.g. refuges, refugies, asylum-seeker, asylumseeker, asylum seeker, boatpeople, boat-people). Comments retain their nonstandard punctuation, capitalisation, and spellings, and will be reproduced verbatim throughout this paper. Each comment has a unique identifier of the form ‘eX-NUMBER’, with ‘X’ indicating the episode number within the first series of the programme and ‘NUMBER’ listing the running number within the comments on this particular episode.

1.2 Analytic framework

The analytic framework used for this study is inspired by computer science. While rigorous approaches to linguistic semantics have been predominantly of a logical (see, e.g., Montague 1973, 1974; Portner & Partee 2002; Gutiérrez-Rexach 2003) or functional (see, e.g., Jackendoff 1990, 2002) nature, the approach to semantic analysis taken in this paper

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3 McKenna and Bargh (2000) suggest that the anonymity inherent in communications over the Internet generates the conditions for a reduction in users’ self-awareness, leading to the deindividuation of users. Deindividuation, according to a study carried out by Zimbardo (1970), can lead to both positive and negative behaviours that the individual would not otherwise exhibit (with Zimbardo focusing on negative behaviours). This can lead to negative behaviours such as flaming and hatespeech (see Ess 1996; Douglas 2007).

4 Both the Hansard corpus of Australian parliamentary transcripts and articles from the popular press were considered initially; they were found, after a cursory exploratory analysis of the data, to be unsatisfactory, due to a lack of spontaneous language production.
deployed the third highly successful computational programming paradigm, object-orientation. Schalley (2014: 160) explains why the object-oriented approach appears promising:

Human perception filters reality and creates structured mental representations, models that are reduced in their complexity to relevant aspects of a situation. Meanings are such models: relevant recurring aspects of specific situations are selected and categorized. This results in semantic representations of a conceptual nature. [...] Modeling languages from computer science [...] are targeted at formulating models of reality as well [...]. Both software models and semantic representations thus aim at representing conceptual structures, and aim at doing this as efficiently, rigorously and intuitively as possible.

The capturing and representation of conceptual structures is of utmost relevance for the semantic description and discussion of semantic plasticity in this paper, which is why the object-oriented approach has been chosen. In this approach, ‘objects’, the entities under discussion, are categorised into ‘classes’, categories that are each defined by a number of features. If an object shares certain features with another object, then it is placed in the same class. Within the object-oriented approach, relevant features can be of the following different types:

(a) characteristics, the ‘attributes’ of the object. For instance, attributes of a car include (but are not limited to) colour, number of wheels, type of transmission, and so on. For instance, for the car passing by on the road next to our office building, these attributes have the values ‘maroon’, ‘4’, and ‘automatic’.

(b) relationships to other objects. For instance, said car entertains a spatial relationship to the road by being ‘on’ the road (i.e. having contact to the road and being supported by it).

(c) behaviours. For instance, said car is moving while passing by.

(d) interactions (‘communication’ with other entities). For instance, said car is steered by its driver, who hence ‘interacts’ with it.

The encapsulation of this information in the definition of objects (and their classes) parallels the one found in conceptualisation, where entities are conceptualised together with their characteristics, relations to other entities, behaviours, and interactions with others.

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5 The notions of ‘relationship’, ‘behaviour’ and ‘interaction’ (as introduced in the following) are understood very broadly here and include non-volitional and reactive instances.
One of the benefits of an object-oriented approach is that the dynamic behaviour of a given object can be modelled very explicitly, rigorously, and intuitively. The dynamic behaviour of an object is the process by which an object passes from one state into another or performs an action. This can be understood in light of the features that are described above. For instance, if a car loses a wheel, it has changed its state (the attribute ‘number of wheels’ has a new value of, e.g., ‘3’), and this can be reflected in an updated specification of the car. If a car moves, it performs an action. For the purposes of this paper, such a dynamic modelling will prove essential, even though we are dealing with the ‘static’ semantics of nouns, for it allows us to describe the process of state change that appears to be fundamental to the use and interpretation of the terms in question.\(^6\) While an object-oriented semantic approach has so far been mainly used for verbal meaning (see, e.g., Schalley 2004; Schalley & Kuhn 2007; Slavcheva 2011; Benz 2014; Schalley 2014), we argue that it allows invaluable insights into nominal semantics as well.

In order to devise and represent our object-oriented semantic analysis, we deploy the graphical Unified Modeling Language (UML) as our tool (Object Management Group 1997–2016). UML is a general-purpose modelling language used for “specifying, visualizing, constructing, and documenting the artifacts of software systems […] and other non-software systems” (Object Management Group 2001: 1-1). The UML formalism includes a rigorous syntax (notation) and formal semantics for its modelling concepts.\(^7\) UML comprises a number of notation techniques that combine graphical, two-dimensional elements with linear textual constructs. It allows for both structural (i.e. static) and behavioural (i.e. dynamic) modelling. An example modelling of a state-transition system (‘state machine’) including decision and merge points (depicted by diamonds) is given in Figure 1, representing the dynamic behaviour of a cooling system: 15 minutes after the state \textit{Idle} has been entered, the temperature is measured. If it is below 30 degrees Celsius, the system goes back into \textit{Idle} (doing nothing), otherwise it starts cooling and continues until the temperature is less than 30 degrees Celsius, at which point it will go back into

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\(^6\) For a general overview of the main characteristics of object-orientation, see Armstrong (2006). Besides dynamic modelling and encapsulation, another important feature of object-orientation is inheritance. Inheritance constitutes a vertical relation between a more general element and a more specific element, with the latter being fully consistent with the former (i.e. inheriting the former’s characteristics, relationships, behaviours and interactions), while adding additional specifications. In particular, classes can inherit from one or several other classes, thus allowing the establishment of not only taxonomic/hierarchical orders but more complex inheritance networks.

\(^7\) A detailed introduction into UML cannot be provided in this paper due to space limitations. However, both syntax and semantics are formulated in the UML specification, together with well-formedness rules for the modelling concepts. The latest specification is available on the UML Resource page (Object Management Group, 1997–2016).
Idle. Passive states are displayed as a rectangle with rounded corners (e.g. Idle), active states where objects perform an action with convex arcs on the sides (e.g. Cool).

![State Machine Diagram](image)

**Figure 1** An example state machine for a cooling system (Schalley 2004: 128).

As we will see in the following, a state machine will form the foundation for our semantic discussion. Specifics of these and further UML modelling elements used throughout the paper will be addressed as and when needed.

## 2 Semantic analysis

In our semantic analysis, we used the *Go Back To Where You Came From* corpus data to determine the most prominent features of each of the terms. From these individual analyses, certain features were found to be common to the three terms. The most important of these features are two attributes that were either assigned to or denied individuals: *legitimacy*, and *authorisation*. The former refers to an individual’s claim to asylum, and the latter refers to an individual’s right to enter a specific country under a humanitarian programme. We discuss these terms in greater depth below. These two attributes were used as a basis for the core component of the object-oriented model of the semantics of the terms. What results is a core state machine that dynamically models how individuals change states as certain features are altered. It was found that an individual’s position in the state machine (that is, which state that individual is in) predicts which term will be used to refer to that individual. Based on this shared dynamic model, we were then able to identify precisely how the three terms differ in their standard usage.

We present this core state machine first, in Section 2.1. We emphasise that the core state machine represents *speakers’ conceptualisation of the ‘translocation’ process*, rather than the reality of the process itself. The conceptualisation of this process was determined after thorough observation and careful analysis of the data, and the usages of the three terms therein. The process of translocation is treated as a series of stages of determination, wherein certain attributes are granted to individuals who undergo the process at different stages of the process. These stages are rendered as states in UML. Section 2.2 comprises a
closer look at the two most prominent attributes that the three terms share, and how they appear in the data. Note that the modelling is representative of how speakers *speak* of the process – this may (and, indeed, appears to) be divorced from the reality of the situation. In Section 2.3, we then show how the terms’ semantics link into the core state machine (and hence the process modelling), outlining which semantic components in the dynamic model are prototypically referred to by each term. Furthermore, we extend the terms’ semantics beyond what is reflected in the core state machine, adding other archetypal features that are reflected in the data. Following this, we take a static view onto the model and summarise each terms’ semantics in a static, categorical representation in Section 2.4. Both dynamic and static representations allow us to clearly show that the semantics of the terms, and therefore the concepts typically underlying the terms, are not interchangeable after all, but rather closely related to one another. It also becomes clear that a number of related concepts are not lexicalised at all and hence the question arises what speakers do when they want to refer to these. This question is addressed in Section 3, where we document examples in which speakers ad hoc coerce and modify the in situ meaning of the terms.

### 2.1 The semantic core: The claim

Common to all forms of translocants is that their aim is to be able to settle in Australia (given the context of this paper) and that, in order to do so, they have to claim asylum. The processing of asylum claims is something that is discussed often in the corpus; examples (5)–(7) exhibit instances that are fairly typical of how claims for asylum and the process of assessing them are represented.

(5) e3-0502: The thing which has always amazed me the most about this entire topic be it migration, refugees, boat people (whatever you wish to call it), is the fact that some 90-95% of all illegal migrants arriving in Australia are found to be legitimate refugees and permitted to stay.[…]

(6) e1-0662: […] If these people are allowed to continue entering here the way they are, it wont be long before we end up like the UK sinking fast, whilst our people unnecessarily so. STOP NOW. An excellent programme highlighting just how many are arriving and swamping us.

(7) e1-0098: This is a call to provide more resources to process those in detention centres. Put more staff on and speed up the process!

Based on observations of the data, this claim process appears to be a two-step process. Translocants – individuals who are undergoing the process of resettlement, i.e. who are or intend to become arrivals – first need to be deemed legitimate (“found to be legitimate refugees”, as formulated in example (5)), and secondly need to be authorised by relevant authorities to settle in Australia (as expressed by “permitted to stay” in example (5), or by
the commenter’s use of “allowed to continue entering” in example (6), for instance. Overall, claiming asylum is perceived as a time-consuming process (see example (7)), which is in line with our dynamic process model of the core state machine below. As described above, we refer to the two steps of this process as legitimacy and authorisation, and will use the Boolean attributes isLegitimate and isAuthorised in our modelling below. 8

These attributes describe the outcome of ‘assessments’ or ‘tests’ conducted on individuals that are predicated on the following questions:

- **isLegitimate**: Does the individual have convincing and compelling grounds for being granted settlement (i.e. in our context, humanitarian reasons)?
- **isAuthorised**: Has the individual received approval from the authorities to enter the country and settle (in the Australian case the relevant authority is the Department of Immigration and Border Protection)?

If one of these attributes takes the value true, the individual to whom the attribute applies has passed the relevant test of that attribution. So, for instance, if an individual has the attribute isLegitimate = true, that individual has undergone the test for legitimacy and has been determined to be legitimate. The same is the case, mutatis mutandis, for isAuthorised. The tests for legitimacy and authorisation occur in the order indicated above: an individual may only be granted authorisation once s/he has passed the legitimacy test. In other words, the concomitant attribution of the values isLegitimate = false and isAuthorised = true is not possible. This is clear if we hypothetically consider a case where a claimant could be admitted to settle in a country (e.g. Australia) without a compelling reason. Such a case would only be conceptually possible if either an error was made in the authorisation decision or if the individual deceived the decision making authority about their legitimacy. Note that these two attributes are not the only attributes that are given to translocations; we will examine more in Section 3. But these are the most prominent ones in the data, and considerations of the legitimacy and authorisation are found in discussions of each of the three terms. It is for this reason that their determinations form the fundamental constituents of the state machine, which in turn is used as a basis of

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8 Attributes represent features and have the following syntax: name ': ' type-expression '=' value-expression. For example, the number of students in the semantics course can be described as studentNumber : Integer = 27, if there are 27 students in the course. Attribute values can remain underspecified, e.g. an attribute studentNumber : Integer can be defined generally for all courses, with the value being specific to individual courses only (such as the semantics course). The attributes isLegitimate and isAuthorised under discussion are both of the type Boolean, which means that they can only take true or false as possible values.
the terms’ default semantics (see Section 2.3). We can thus describe the core state machine (or state-transition system), as modelled in Figure 2.

![Figure 2 The core claim state machine](image)

We have two top level states, the composite **claim** state – representing the claim process – and the simple** settle** state – representing the translocant’s goal. On initiating the claim process, the **claim** state is entered, via the initial pseudostate (denoted by a small filled circle). Following this, the individual’s legitimacy is first determined. While this assessment is not finalised, the individual (or ‘object’ in UML terminology) finds themselves in the passive state of waiting for determination. If it turns out that `isLegitimate = false`, the **claim** state is exited. If `isLegitimate = true`, the object is passed on into a state of waiting for their authorisation to resettle. Accordingly, the decision point in the figure either (i) transitions the object out of the composite state (shown by the final state, a circle surrounding a small filled circle, which indicates that the enclosing state is completed) and hence aborts the claim process, or (ii) moves the object into the subsequent passive state, **waitForAuthorisation**. While in this second passive state, the object waits for the second step in the process to complete. A similar decision point for authorisation then either leads to the completion of the claim process as well (in case of a negative assessment), or the object is authorised (`isAuthorised = true`) and directly transitions into the **resettle** state.

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9 In reality, this state is composite in itself, but this is irrelevant to what appears to be speakers’ conceptualisation at this point and hence not reflected in the model.

10 Arrows indicate transitions in the model. In this case, the initial pseudostate is transient and left as soon as it is entered. This is a graphical shorthand for clarifying the default entry point into a composite state.
The core model thus makes explicit that:

a. Individuals have to be legitimate before they can be authorised. The dynamic modelling as presented here thus reflects that the combination of \texttt{isLegitimate = false} with \texttt{isAuthorised = true} is not possible as characterisation for any individual. Moreover, the framework is capable of explicitly modelling that the attribute \texttt{isLegitimate} has to have a value before any value is assigned to \texttt{isAuthorised}, which corresponds to speakers’ conceptualisation.

b. The claim process ends in the final state of the \texttt{claim} state, and the final state can be reached after each decision point. This coincides with the conceptualisation that if any of the attributes’ values is \texttt{false} (i.e. an individual is either not legitimate or not authorised), the claim process ends and the claimant was unsuccessful. Not specified in the core model is what happens to such unsuccessful claimants, in line with speakers’ conceptualisation.

c. Successful claimants are taken straight into the \texttt{resettle} state, thereby indicating their success in reaching their aim of settling in Australia.

### 2.2 ‘Legitimacy’ and ‘authorisation’: A closer look

We will now turn to the comments in the corpus in order to have a closer look at the two prominent decision points, and hence the attributes ‘legitimacy’ and ‘authorisation’ that appear to be common to the semantics of all three terms under discussion, as will be presented in more detail in Section 2.3. This will not only substantiate the results of our analysis as presented in the previous section, but will also shed light on more specific details showing up in the conceptualisations.

Both legitimacy and authorisation are referenced in the comments as being determined by some authority. These authorities take different forms. The determinant authority behind \texttt{isLegitimate} appears to be a social force, where compelling reasons for entering the country are moralistic rather than strictly legal. Differing notions of moral justification are presented in the comments in (8)–(11).

(8) e1-0105: […] But we do need to have a fair and equal process by which we accept immigrants. Coming by boat is queue jumping as there are thousands of people trying to come through the correct channels and are missing out as a result of those who jump the queue. […]

(9) e1-0368: […] it would be a nice thing if they could get in line with others but these are people in life threatening situations. (If they are not legitimate refugees the system will screen them out.)
(10) e1-0678: [...] We’re aware of the pestolence and violence faced in most third world countries and while we may feel very sad for them you have to face the fact that Australia…. indeed the rest of the free world cannot financially or environmentally accept 170 million (albeit legitimate) refugees. [...]

(11) e2-0761: [...] those who come on boats, pay money to smugglers, throw away there documentation so that they cannot be identified as whatever they were at home, and then expect to be granted ‘refugee’ status and re-settled, I don’t think so! [...]

(8) appeals to the perceived immoral act of not waiting one’s turn, and instead ‘jumping the queue’ by travelling directly to Australia by boat, instead of via a recognised refugee camp, for instance.11 This is one of the reasons why boat people, as we will see below, are deemed illegitimate by a majority of the commenters. Also present in the comments is the notion that legitimate claimants are fleeing from a genuine threat to their safety, as shown in both (9) (“life threatening situations”) and (10) (“pestolence and violence”). (10) and (11) furthermore make a clear distinction between legitimacy and authorisation, indicating that not all legitimate translocants can actually be accepted (i.e. authorised) due to financial and environmental reasons (10), and that the granting of “‘refugee’ status” and being resettled are two different processes (11).

While legitimacy is moralistic, authorisation is spoken of as a legal or bureaucratic process. The authority given mandate for determining authorisation is that which has jurisdiction of the settlement location: in the present case, this is the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection. That authority for permanent settlement is conferred by a legal authority is very clearly expressed in (12):

(12) e1-0941: […] What gives the right to jump the legal refugee’s cue? Just because they can afford it? […] But we have official authorities with set-up rules for decide who is eligible to come. [...]
show, it is precisely this state machine that can be used to distinguish the terms: individuals undergoing the claim process may be referred to differently depending on how they are positioned within the state machine depicted in Figure 2. Moreover, additional features are needed for a semantic specification that clearly distinguishes the three terms. Based on example data, this section serves to make explicit the positioning within the claim state machine and to identify the additional features. This will lead to a modelling of each term’s default semantics.

2.3.1 Refugee

An individual is generally referred to as a refugee if they have successfully passed the legitimacy test. This is evidenced by (13), where the reference to “desperate conditions” posits a morally justified reason for the individual to have left (“fleeing”) their location of origin, and therefore for claiming asylum, i.e. entering the claim state.

(13) e1-0456: I can see that the intention of this program is to educate people about why and how people become refugees and about the desperate conditions they’re fleeing from. […]

In terms of the claim state machine (Figure 2), referents of refugee have thus transitioned beyond the first decision point, with the isLegitimate attribute returning the value true. However, it is generally left rather vague who is in a position to determine individuals’ legitimacy. Comments such as in (14) and (15) appear to suggest that everyone can form their own opinions and needs to “get an understanding”, resulting in strikingly differing assessments of translocants’ legitimacy by different speakers at times.

(14) e1-0066: It is good to understand the Refugees life situation all over the World. How difficult and horrible life they all pass through, as a human being we have to share what the mother earth offered to us. […]

(15) e1-0519: I hope this program is shown in schools throughout Australia, to help balance the constant misinformation from the popular media. Then the Raquels of this world may get an understanding that refugees are real people in desperate situations.

Other comments such as in (16) and (17) make reference to the process offered through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), although this does not appear to play a crucial role in people’s understanding of legitimacy.

(16) e3-0495: I arrived as a refugee through UNHCR process. […]

(17) e3-0503: […] Surely Australia can be more proactive and work closely with the UNHCR to offer more displaced people opportunities to come to Australia. […]
The value for the isAuthorised attribute is generally not determined for refugees yet, as the comments in (18) and (19) evidence.

(18) e2-0265: […] Article 31 of the Refugee Convention (to which Australia is a signatory) recognises that refugees have a lawful right to enter a country for the purposes of seeking asylum, regardless of how they arrive or whether they hold valid travel or identity documents. […]

(19) e2-0471: […] Their action has contributed to how these poor people became refugees. If the government TREATED all people the same and allowed them to enter the country by processing their visas ASAP Just as they did for all the white South African, or the white eastern european, during their civel war, perhaps then we wouldn't be spending millions to stop the current dark skin refugees, and there will be no job opening for people smugglers. […]

(20) e2-0802: What was your feeling when the refugee camp asked you “what do you do in Australia?” your reply was a proud “NOTHING!” If these refugees enter Australia, they will work and pay taxes and feed you and your 11 dogs. […]

(18) identifies that refugees do not have to have authorisation or prior approval to entering Australia. (19) comments that refugees do not generally already have “their visas” processed, thus indicating that authorisation has not taken place yet, and (20) describes refugees as being in a pre-settlement position (“If these refugees enter Australia, …”). Hence, in the term’s default semantics, referents are considered to be in the waitForAuthorisation state which directly follows the determination as legitimate translocant.12

2.3.2 Asylum seeker

Asylum seeker appears to behave as the most general of the three terms under discussion. It is often contrasted to the notion of immigrant. This is evident in the following three examples:

(21) e3-0399: […] And they are NOT keeping out others – asylum seekers are not part of the same queue that immigrants who have “filled out their paperwork” are. […]

(22) e3-0012: […] My door is open for any immigrant or asylum seeker that is prepared to live a decent productive life.

12 It needs to be highlighted that this only applies to the default semantics of the term refugee. As we will see in Section 3.1, a value for isAuthorised may be assigned in specific cases of semantic plasticity.
Asylum Seekers do not leave their country due to choice. People seek asylum because they fear for their safety and life in their home country. They leave by whatever means they can. [...]

(21) very explicitly draws a distinction between the referents of asylum seeker and immigrant (“not part of the same queue”). More implicitly, asylum seeker is contrasted with immigrant through the additive or-coordination in (22) (“immigrant or asylum seeker”), indicating that the underlying concepts at most overlap, but that none of them is subordinated to the other in any way. In particular, the coordination shows that the terms are treated as being situated on the same level of generality (compare the oddity of cats or kelpies, which is due to kelpies being a more specific term than cats). Furthermore, (23) subtly proposes that, in contrast to immigrants, asylum seekers do not leave their country volitionally (“due to choice”).

The individuals’ legitimacy is referred to in (23) instead, proposing that they subjectively “fear for their safety”. However, no stance is taken whether individuals are in fact morally deemed legitimate. That is, for asylum seeker, the value of the isLegitimate attribute remains underspecified. With regard to the state machine in Figure 2, referents of asylum seeker can essentially be positioned anywhere within the claim state. In other words, they are deemed asylum seekers as long as they are in the process of claiming asylum, and hence the term’s default semantics covers essentially two main possibilities, modelled by the two only non-transient, passive states: (i) legitimacy has not been determined yet (the individual is in the waitForDetermination state), or (ii) the individual is legitimate (isLegitimate has the value true) and the individual is in the waitForAuthorisation state.13

The second case (ii) corresponds to our analysis of refugee in Section 2.3.1. Therefore, asylum seeker initially registers as superordinate term to refugee. Speakers are in line with the UNHCR in this case, who say: “Not every asylum-seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum-seeker.” (UNHCR, 2006: 4). In other words, anyone who has been in the claim state and hence at least in the waitForDetermination state at some point in time, has been an asylum seeker.

Yet, as touched on above, such a subordination relationship between the two terms would render coordinations such as refugees and asylum seekers (as evidenced 33 times in the corpus) and asylum seekers and refugees (as evidenced 18 times in the corpus) highly problematic. The existence of a relatively high number of such coordinations is a strong

13 Neither the value false for isLegitimate is possible, as in that case the claim state is automatically exited (i.e. people cease being asylum seekers), nor is it possible that authorisation has been assessed, as any decision on the value of isAuthorised will lead to the object leaving the claim state.
indication that there is an additional semantic specification that ensures that the concepts underlying the two terms overlap at most, but are not in a subordinate relationship to one another (see Nickles et al., 2007: 38). This specification appears to be constituted by asylum seekers already having ‘set their eyes’ specifically on Australia, while refugees are by default conceptualised as awaiting authorisation without “cherrypicking” their future host country:

(24) e1-1143: I believe there are genuine refugees who have fled their countries from fear of murder or persecution. I am sorry for them. They are to be found in camps just across the border in neighbouring countries. That is where Australia should be taking its refugee intake from. Illegal immigrants to Australia are people cherrypicking where they would like to live from the point of view of economic advantage. They should not gain priority by doing this, over people who wait patiently for resettlement.

In other words, refugees are conceptualised as individuals passively undergoing the claim process (“wait patiently”, as in (24)), while asylum seekers are more proactive and try to influence the location of their resettlement (“they are CHOOSING”, as in (25), or as the compound asylum seeker itself indicates, actively ‘seeking’ asylum).

(25) e1-0369: Umm doesn’t it state that a genuine refugee must seek asylum in the NEAREST NON-HOSTILE COUNTRY.... which is clearly not Australia.... it could be Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt... the list goes on... therefore these people are NOT GENUINE ASYLUM SEEKERS.... they are CHOOSING to come here for various reasons (family here etc) and we barely have the infrastructure and resources to maintain our own population... and YES that goes to people who come by PLANE too

In (25), the commentator clearly marks their respective evaluation through the attribution of genuine to refugee and not genuine to asylum seekers.14 Generally, the term refugee has, for above reasons, positive and empathetic connotations, which does not apply to asylum seeker. The adjective genuine appears in the corpus more than three times as often with refugee than it does with asylum seeker. One group of commentators appears to experience proactivity as a threat, potentially as it might come with a loss of control over who arrives, and when they are allowed to do so. Reinterpreted as choice, proactivity is negatively connotated through the attribution of, e.g., economic or family reasons rather than

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14 We originally expected that attributions (e.g. through the use of adjectives) occurring in conjunction with the three terms under discussion (such as genuine refugee, illegal boat people) were likely to change or overwrite semantic specifications of the nouns. A close analysis of the data, however, has revealed that this is not the case. In contrast, attributions tend to highlight or reinforce specifications that are already part of the semantics, or add evaluations of existing specifications.
humanitarian necessity. As a result, the notion of *not genuine asylum seeker* is coerced into that of *illegal immigrant* (see (24)), of a person who chooses to come for non-humanitarian reasons and does so without authorisation.

While *genuine* has to do with the sincerety and truthfulness of individuals’ claims (see Wordnet’s (Princeton University 2010) description of ‘not pretended, sincere, true’), *legitimate* refers to the notion of being ‘in accordance with recognized or accepted standards or principles’ according to Wordnet (Princeton University 2010). *Legitimate* only occurs with the term *refugee* in the corpus, but never with *asylum seeker*, another piece of evidence supporting the analysis that *asylum seeker*’s legitimacy is underspecified. However, even though the term *asylum seeker* appears as a superordinate term to *refugee* in regards to the semantic core (with translocants’ legitimacy being underspecified), speakers in fact construe it as a contrast to *refugee*, based on the passiveness assessment: The conceptualisation of *refugees* as passive and *asylum seekers* as proactive leads to a more fine-grained modelling of these terms using the Boolean attribute *isPassive* (where *refugee* receives the value *true* and *asylum seeker* *false*, see the following Figures 3 and 4 for a detailed modelling).

### 2.3.3 Boat people

In contrast to the most general term, *asylum seeker*, *boat people* is the term that overall is the least underspecified one of the three terms under discussion. Regarding the core semantics, *boat people* carries the same underspecification as *asylum seekers*: both *isLegitimate* and *isAuthorised* remain underspecified (i.e. without a mandatory given value). Yet, *boat people* is further specified through additional attribute-values, one of which being the value *false* for the attribute *isPassive* – the same value as for *asylum seeker*. The concept lexicalised by *boat people* is thus a subordinate concept to the concept lexicalised by default by *asylum seeker*. *Boat people* are in fact conceptualised as even more proactive than *asylum seekers*, in that they are not only proactive and try to influence their location of resettlement, but are paying “fees” to “smugglers” to actually take them to the land of their choice, as indicated in the examples in (26) and (27).

(26) e1-0176: While I have found the documentary very enlightening, it strengthens my feelings that we should stop boat people from coming. Those poor people in refugee camps don’t have the chance of ever making it to Australia, as they simply can’t afford the fee paid to smugglers. Every person that arrives by boat takes one of the 13,500 spots we have available for refugees, they get that spot because they paid up and I don’t think that’s fair. …[

(27) e2-0718: […] However, the boat people who land on our shores have paid exorbitant fees (even by our own standards) for passage to another land. […]
Boat people are thus a step-up from asylum seekers in that they additionally pay for illegal services that see them arrive on Australian shores without having waited for authorisation. Unlike the other terms, then, boat people by default denotes individuals who have arrived in Australia prior to lodging their claim for asylum. This is modelled through the additional attribute of hasArrived,\textsuperscript{15} which carries the value true for boat people while being semantically underspecified for both refugee and asylum seeker.

Even stronger than for asylum seeker, boat people’s actions are perceived by many speakers as a threat to sovereignty of the nation (the “invading deviant”, Pickering, 2001: 171). In line with this, boat people are perceived as “illegal” and “criminals”, as demonstrated by the examples in (28) and (29).

(28) e2-0150: […] The illegal boat people PAY LOADS of money to get here. […]

(29) e3-0377: […] I have no sympathy for boat people, I still believe they are illegal imigrants, criminals and should be put on the first plane back to where they came from. […] Australia would not be the safe country they seek if we allow illegal boat people to take the place of assylum seekers. Or do people really not see, after all this, that there is a difference?

A very prominent notion resulting from boat people’s arrival at the country’s borders and their proactivity is their assessment as ‘queue jumpers’, who take away places of other patiently waiting refugees, as expressed in (8) and (30)–(31).

(30) e3-0512: […] We Australian can’t help all refugees and the quota is filled so quickly by these boat people. […] Send them where they started their boat journey and asked to apply for UNHCR and wait like others. Stop the queue jumper!!!

(31) e1-0411: […] They [the TV channel SBS] show you a narrow section of poor bleeding hearts and not the overwhelming majority of queue jumping parasites that are arriving by boat with no papers and their money hidden in offshore accounts claiming to be refugees, and you lot fall for it hook line and sinker. Boo bloody hoo I say, turn them round at sea, don’t let them anywhere near Australia.

Boat people thus is not only the least underspecified term but also the one that appears to carry the highest degree of negative evaluation. This is corroborated by the fact that neither of the two adjectives discussed above – genuine and legitimate – occurs with boat people in the corpus. Instead, the dominant adjective found in connection with boat people is illegal. That the term boat people is associated to fear, illegality and crime for many

\textsuperscript{15} For boat people, the dynamic modelling in Figure 2 could be extended, with an additional active state arrive preceding the claim state. This is replicated in the static modelling through the attribute of hasArrived carrying the value true, as displayed in the following Figure 5.
speakers is further demonstrated by the positive comments in examples (32)–(36), in which commentators contrast their opinions to what they perceive as wide-spread negative opinions on boat people:

(32) e1-0455: [...] I couldn’t believe how racist the Australians are and what an issue the media have made out of “boat people” a few thousand per year and they go on as if there is an invasion. [...] 

(33) e1-0594: [...] So to say boat people are cue jumpers and taking places from others in camps like they are common criminals is unjust. [...] 

(34) e1-0595: [...] This program highlights just how intolerant and prejudiced most Australians are. I always thought [...] that Australia had a legal system based on the Assumption of Innocence. It would appear that boat people are guilty until they can prove themselves innocent. [...] 

(35) e1-0718: I don’t understand to why so many Australians believe boat people are criminals... [...] 

(36) e1-0116: I wish this point had been made more clear. Arriving by boat to ask for asylum makes you neither an immigrant nor illegal. It is legal. And so it should be. [...] 

These comments at the same time show that a semantic specification of boat people should thus not comprise such evaluations, as they go beyond the pure semantics of the term. While speakers appear to agree on the attributes outlined above (such as that boat people are proactive and have already arrived), these are evaluated differently depending on the speakers’ political views. This can be clearly seen in (37), which shows how the generally negatively evaluated attributes can be reinterpreted in a very positive way – as showing “determination”, “courage” and “compassion”.

(37) e1-0120: [...] I welcome Boat People, those people who have demonstrated such determination courage and compassion.

The lexicalisation as boat people signifies another important semantic specification in the Australian context, namely translocants’ arrival by boat. This can be modelled through the attribute modeOfArrival which has as type the enumeration TravelMode.16 TravelMode provides information on what modes of travel are used by people – in our context in order to enter the country where they claim asylum. In the Australian context,

16 Technically, an enumeration is a user-defined data type whose instances are a set of user-specified named values. The possible values of an enumeration are listed in the definition of the enumeration. For TravelMode, there appear to be three potential values, land, air, and sea.
only sea and air are acceptable values due to Australia’s geographical position. In addition to the ‘arrived proactive translocant’ specification for the term boat people so far, we thus add the attribute-value of modeOfArrival: TravelMode = sea to the term’s semantic specification. While this specification is not required in terms of distinguishing the three terms’ semantics from one another, it is still an integral part of speakers’ conceptualisation underlying the term boat people and is hence included. We will see that it is also relevant to our discussion of plasticity of interpretations in Section 3.

If we look at the second component of the compound boat people next, we notice that boat people is used almost exclusively in the collective. Some instances of boat person exist, however, an example of which is the following:

(38) e2-0407: I would rather have any refugee, boat person, anybody that is willing to work for a living in this country. This young girl in this show that doesn’t work, she is on the dole, and I am paying for her! I am paying for this young ignorant bludger! I find her more offensive than any boat person or refugee.

Such occurrences are exceedingly rare: there are only four comments that include the individualised notion of boat person in the corpus. (38) is the only example amongst them that refers to persons other than the commentators themselves, i.e. (38) is the only example using “boat person” to refer to a non-specific boat translocant. While the three self-references appear to occur out of a need to reference a single person, namely the commentator (hence person not people), the example in (38) displays a rather strategic individualisation of translocants. Instead of using any of the boat people, individualisation through the notion of boat person counteracts the assumed wide-spread perception of a threatening ‘mass’ as expressed by boat people.

Finally, we observe that there are hardly any coordinations between boat people and the other two terms: There are only 7 occurrences in the corpus overall, one with asylum seekers, four with refugees and two with both (refugees, asylum seekers and (‘so-called’) boat people). We will return to the latter in Section 3. Yet, this result is in line with our analysis that (i) boat people represents a subordinate concept to asylum seeker (the prediction would be that coordinations based on the terms’ default semantics should be considered odd by speakers and rarely occurring; this is indeed the case) and that (ii) boat people is the most specific term of the three and should thus – if at all – only occur with the less general of the other terms, refugee. It is therefore overall least likely to occur in any coordinations comprising two or more of the three terms.

2.4 Static model

We are now in a position to present a static model for the semantics of each of the three terms. Each noun’s semantics is represented by an individual UML ‘class’, which, as indicated before, represents a category of objects or entities that share the same
characteristics (attributes), relationships to other objects, behaviours, and interactions. These class models – provided in Figures 3, 4, and 5 – are based on the five attributes that we have identified in our semantic analysis: \texttt{isLegitimate} and \texttt{isAuthorised} as the two core attributes that are derived from the dynamic model in Figure 2, and the additional attributes \texttt{isPassive}, \texttt{hasArrived} and \texttt{modeOfArrival}.

The top row in each class provides an identifier or name for the class. We have based this name on the semantic specification of the entities (objects) that fall into the class (i.e. are class instances). For instance, as refugees are conceptualised as being legitimate and passive, we have termed the underlying conceptual class \texttt{PassiveLegitimateTranslocant}. The class for boat people has accordingly been termed \texttt{ArrivedProactiveBoatTranslocant}, as boat people have arrived, are proactive and have travelled by boat (on sea). Each figure also displays the lexical item that represents the concept.

\begin{verbatim}
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PassiveLegitimateTranslocant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>isLegitimate: Boolean = true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isAuthorised: Boolean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isPassive: Boolean = true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hasArrived: Boolean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modeOfArrival: TravelMode</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3 Static modelling of refugee**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ProactiveTranslocant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>isLegitimate: Boolean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isAuthorised: Boolean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isPassive: Boolean = false</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hasArrived: Boolean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modeOfArrival: TravelMode</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4 Static modelling of asylum seeker**
\end{verbatim}
Figure 5 Static modelling of boat people

The models make it clear that for each term a different number and set of attribute values is specified. Only *refugee* has a specified value for one of the core attributes (*isLegitimate*), which for the other terms remains underspecified. In particular, this means that – while very important to the conceptualisation and situation of individual translocants and hence instances in the model – *isAuthorised* is not a semantic specification that is distinctive between the respective classes, but merely plays a role in more fine-grained conceptualisations. While authorisation is part of the core due to its importance to the claim process, it is therefore a secondary, dependent semantic specification (as made explicit in the dynamic model in Figure 2). It can only carry a value if *isLegitimate* is specified as *true*. Similarly, *modeOfArrival* is secondary and dependent, as it can only have a value if *hasArrived* carries a *true* value. This is exclusively the case for *boat people*. The three major distinguishing attributes are hence based on the notions of (i) legitimacy, (ii) passiveness and (iii) arrival. These are the ‘discriminators’ in our model, the aspects that are primarily distinctive to the specification of the classes and hence concepts underlying the terms’ semantics.

The three models also show that the three terms are not complementary in the sense that they do not cover all possible translocant concepts. Lexicalisations only exist for a small subset of all possible concepts. Figure 6 provides an indication of the wealth of other relevant concepts. Although not comprehensive in itself, it captures those concepts that play a role in everyday interactions about translocation issues (see Section 3). The non-lexicalised concepts have been specified through a systematic variation of possible attribute-value assignments. Moreover, Figure 6 puts them into an inheritance network, an ontology, together with the lexicalised ones of Figures 3, 4, and 5.

The top class (i.e. top concept) of the resulting ontology in Figure 6 is *Translocant*, with all five attributes still underspecified (i.e. no values determined). The three discriminators,
Figure 6 An ontology of translocant concepts, including those lexicalized by the three terms under discussion.
legitimacy, passiveness and arrival, create six subclasses – Legitimate/IllegitimateTranslocant, Passive/ProactiveTranslocant and Arrived/NotArrivedTranslocant. The first lexicalisation is amongst these, as asylum seeker by default represents the ProactiveTranslocant. In a second step, authorisation generates subclasses to LegitimateTranslocant (i.e. those whose isLegitimate value is true), resulting in the two classes Authorised/RejectedLegitimateTranslocant. Further subclasses are created through multiple inheritance, where subclasses combine the features of superclasses and hence inherit from more than one superclass. In particular, combinations of legitimacy and passiveness as well as of proactivity and arrival appear to be conceptually salient, following our discussion in the previous sections. We obtain the classes PassiveLegitimateTranslocant, by default represented by the lexical item refugee, and ArrivedProactiveTranslocant. The latter can be further subcategorised through the mode of arrival (with only sea and air being options in the Australian context). We thus arrive at our last lexicalised concept, ArrivedProactiveBoatTranslocant, which is by default represented by boat people. Further subclasses are also displayed, e.g. the AuthorisedPassiveLegitimateTranslocant, a subclass of the one represented by refugee. We end the ontology by combining values for all three discriminating characteristics, with for instance the ResettledPassiveTranslocant. The only class in our ontology extract that has values for all five semantic specifications is, however, the ResettledProactiveBoatTranslocant, with the notion ‘Resettled’ used as a shorthand for a positive assessment of legitimacy and authorisation as well as for the individual having arrived in the country.

The ontology thus graphically represents those aspects stated throughout our discussion:

1. Primary discriminating specifications are legitimacy, passiveness and arrival. They are independent of one another.
2. Only legitimate translocants can be authorised, i.e. authorisation depends on a positive legitimacy assessment.
3. Asylum seeker is the most general lexicalisation.
4. Boat people lexicalises a subclass of the class represented by asylum seeker (via an intermediate level, due to the additional specification of modeOfArrival). Thus, boat people can in its default meaning be seen as a hyponym of asylum seeker.
5. The concept lexicalised by refugee is positioned at a generality level between the concepts for asylum seeker and boat people. It is more specific than the first and less specific than the second, although the set of specifications is quite different from the other two.
Importantly, it also becomes clear that while the terms’ meanings are not interchangeable, i.e. the terms are in particular not synonymous, they by default represent only a small number of concepts available to speakers. So what do speakers do if they want to refer to one of the other concepts that are not lexicalised? This is what we discuss in the next section, Section 3, and the ontology in Figure 6 forms the basis for our ensuing discussion.

3 Plasticity of interpretations

Our claim in this section is that speakers are able to ad hoc shape the meanings of the three terms for locally-situated purposes. That is, if they want to refer to one of the non-lexicalised concepts of the ontology, they can generally do so by using one of the lexical items and shaping its meaning through context. This is what we refer to as plasticity of interpretations, an idea similar to what Jaszczolt has termed a ‘radical contextualist view’ (Jaszczolt 2014) for compositional semantics. In this section, we thus look at evidence for plasticity and document examples in which speakers ad hoc coerce and modify the lexical meaning of the terms. In Section 3.1, we explore the coercion of the terms’ semantics individually. In Section 3.2, we discuss the implications of plasticity for tendencies that emerge in how the terms are used by speakers. We point to additional ways to refer to concepts that do not have a term that by default refers to them, the most common being compounding and coordination. We further find that speakers will often use strategies that generate new unlexicalised concepts that are not part of the standard ontology. The identification of this practice grants us new insights into the data that we used to begin the analysis.

3.1 Coercions of the interpretation of individual terms

Plasticity involves the ‘movement’ of a term’s interpretation from its default position in the ontology of Figure 6, to represent another, unlexicalised concept of the ontology. According to our analysis, there are limits to how far a term’s interpretation is able to ‘travel’ along the edges of the ontology graph. These limits appear to be a result of the computation that is required to shift the interpretation of a term. The idea behind this notion is intuitive. The more dissimilar a particular interpretation of a term is from the default interpretation of the term, the more effort a speaker has to expend to convey the nonstandard interpretation in such a way that a hearer will correctly understand how it has altered. In more rigorous terms, the more edges a term has to transverse in the ontology to reach a target concept from the concept it references by default, the more effort is required on the behalf of a speaker and the hearer. To illustrate this, consider the concept IllegitimateTranslocant in Figure 6. If a speaker aimed to refer to this concept, they could either use the term refugee and move this term’s interpretation via, e.g., LegitimateTranslocant and Translocant (two edges upwards) down to IllegitimateTranslocant – i.e. three movement steps in the ontology – or they could use
the term *asylum seeker* and move *asylum seeker*’s interpretation from ProactiveTranslocant via Translocant (one edge upwards) down to IllegitimateTranslocant – i.e. only two steps of movement in the ontology. Our prediction would be that the choice of *asylum seeker*, given that it requires less effort through less movement, would be preferred to express the concept of IllegitimateTranslocant.

Moreover, the data suggests that there is an upper limit of two edges’ traversal when a term’s interpretation is to be moved from its default interpretation. This further predicts that the only term of the three terms under discussion that can be used to reference IllegitimateTranslocant is *asylum seeker*, given the target concept’s position in the ontology. Based on this upper traversal limit of two edges, there are then three different paths that can be taken in such a reinterpretation: downwards (resulting in more specific interpretations), upwards (resulting in more general interpretations), and sideways (either up-down or down-up, resulting in closely related interpretations at the same level of generality). In each of the following subsections, we examine these movement patterns.

### 3.1.1 Downwards

(39) e1-0092: I bought a house in Auburn, West of Sydney over 21 years ago. I’ve since moved from there to Perth, Western Australia, over those 20 years I raised my two children and it was an honour to meet many of these people. Auburn is home to refugees from all over the world.

(40) e1-0168: […] Once a refugee family has been processed and accepted by the Australian government I like the idea of Australian families volunteering to buddy a refugee family… as a community we could help them assimilate into our culture, we provide them with a new community and we can also learn from them along the way.

Both examples (39) and (40) show the use of *refugee* for people already settled in Australia. (40) first makes explicit reference to the individuals being authorised (“processed and accepted”), thereby travelling downwards from PassiveLegitimateTranslocant (which is by default lexicalised by *refugee*) to AuthorisedPassiveLegitimateTranslocant. In a second step individuals are referred to as being resettled and hence having arrived. This is made explicit through the discourse about their “new community” and “assimilat[ion] into our culture” as well as the direct contact to “Australian families”. (39) and (40) thus provide

17 As one reviewer notes, the idea of downwards and upwards paths is reminiscent of the concepts of lexical narrowing and broadening, as for instance discussed by Relevance Theory, as well as the notion of ad hoc concepts (Carston 1997; Wilson 2003; Wilson & Carston 2007). In this paper, we represent some processes of narrowing and broadening as well as the creation of ad hoc concepts explicitly and in a rigorous way.
examples of individuals still being labelled as \textit{refugee} even though they are in fact instances of the more specific class of \textit{ResettledPassiveTranslocant} (one of the most specific concepts in our ontology). This demonstrates downwards plasticity of the term’s in situ interpretation. Similar examples can be found for both \textit{boat people} (here in both its singular form \textit{boat person} as well as its ‘standard’ form) and \textit{asylum seekers}, see (41)–(43).

(41) e1-0355: […] I am a boat person, I cannot swim, at eight years old, I travel in a leaky boat to Malaysia and spend a year in a refugee camp with my mum and brother. […] My family was accepted because we were allied with America. […]

(42) e3-0183: […] Even the lady who hated boat people because they received more government money than the mentally ill people she worked with hadn’t changed her opinion at the end of the series,

(43) e2-0194: […] And I am so sick of this attitude that an asylum seeker is “illegal” - they have not done anything illegal coming to Australia to seek asylum, whether it is on a plane or a boat!!!

In (41), the commentator refers to themselves as a \textit{boat person} while stating that their family was authorised in the past. In (42), it becomes clear that the \textit{boat people} talked about are authorised in Australia, as they receive “government money”. Both examples display downwards plasticity, with the notion \textit{boat people} now referring to the subordinate concept of \textit{ResettledProactiveBoatTranslocant}. (43) similarly displays downwards plasticity, as the individuals denoted here have already arrived in Australia, by either mode (“whether it is on a plane or a boat”). \textit{Asylum seeker} is thus used to refer to the more specific concept of \textit{ArrivedProactiveTranslocant}, which is positioned between the concept by default represented by \textit{asylum seeker} (\textit{ProactiveTranslocant}) and the one by default represented by \textit{boat people} (\textit{ArrivedProactiveBoatTranslocant}).

3.1.2 Upwards

Similarly, interpretations moving upwards in the ontology can be observed for each of these terms. Given our hypothesis, both \textit{refugee} and \textit{asylum seeker} should be able to represent the top concept \textit{Translocant} given the right context, while \textit{boat people} should not. We can indeed see this and the upwards movement in the examples (44)–(46) for \textit{refugee}, (47)–(49) for \textit{asylum seeker} and (50) for \textit{boat people}.

(44) e1-132: I’m amazed at the passion on both sides of the refugee debate that this program has generated. […]

(45) e1-0174: After seeing exactly how refugees (both legal and non-legal) are treated in Malaysia, how can the Australian Government think shipping asylum seekers back there is any sort of solution?
(46) e1-0637: […] I think we should take in more refugees, no matter what path they took to get here. […]

(44) refers to the whole topic complex as “the refugee debate”, thus deploying refugee to refer to the top concept Translocant (two steps up). Individuals referred to in (45) are ‘stripped’ of their legitimacy through the insertion of “(both legal and non-legal)” and hence the commentator refers to the superordinate concept of PassiveTranslocant (one step up). While (45) thus removes one of the two semantic values of refugee, legitimacy, (46) instead removes the other, passiveness, therefore referring to the other superordinate concept, LegitimateTranslocant (one step up as well). This is achieved by indicating proactivity through “no matter what path they took to get here”.

For asylum seeker, there is only one step up possible within our ontology. This upwards movement is exemplified by the comments in examples (47) – (49).

(47) e2-0020 […] I think it’s imperative that this show be made more accessible to the majority of Australians. Maybe then opinions would be more informed and asylum seeker policy wouldn’t be based upon aggressive and irrational populist politics.

(48) e2-0160 […] Certainly it [the TV program] had opened my eyes and made me to think about asylum seeker issues in Australia.

(49) e3-0570: […] Why is it so difficult for you to understand that asylum seekers, whether they are migrants, refugees, “boat people”, are all human beings whose basic instinct is to survive, protect themselves and their families. […]

While (47) and (48) are similar to (44) in referring to the whole topic (“asylum seeker policy” and “asylum seeker issues” in their generality), (49) is more explicit in establishing asylum seeker as a hyperonym to all other relevant terms, including not only “refugees” and “boat people” but also the very general (and in this context not discussed) term “migrant”. Thereby, the comment states that all that counts is that the individuals referred to are translocants and hence the top concept Translocant is represented by asylum seeker.

There is also a clear example for upwards movement of boat people in the corpus. In (50), the commentator indicates that “Boat People” come to Australia’s borders, be this at the country’s coastline or at other “launching pads” (presumably referring to translocants potentially arriving by plane). Thus, the mode of arrival is rendered underspecified; the term boat people refers to the concept of ArrivedProactiveTranslocant (one step up).

(50) e2-0249: There are a few issues here, I don’t believe our government can do anything to stop the Boat People from coming, our boarders are too massive, how can we patrol all our coastline, or all other possible launching pads. Boat People make up a small percent, they are desperate, and in need of help. We need to help regardless of the mode of transport the refugees use to get here. […]
3.1.3 Sideways

Sideways moving interpretations appear to be harder to come by, as the plasticity has to extend in two different directions (up and then down, or down and then up in the ontology) and hence may be more taxing conceptually (although this would have to be tested empirically). Therefore, the prediction is that it occurs less often than solely downwards and upwards plasticity. If it were to exist, we would expect it to occur with increased prominence for those concepts for which neither downwards nor upwards plasticity are possible. A look at the ontology shows that this is the case for concepts such as IllegitimateTranslocant and NotArrivedTranslocant, which cannot be reached through simple downwards or upwards movements. Indeed, corresponding examples for asylum seeker are provided in (51) and (52).

(51) e1-0086: [...] Darren is quite right when he says genuine asylum seekers would stop at the nearest ‘safe country’, like Malaysia or Indonesia

(52) e2-0262: My partner refuses to watch the show. He says ‘the majority of asylum seekers pass through countries that have signed the UN refugee and asylum act, and therefore constitute economic migrants’. What do you think?

In (51), the commentator alludes to asylum seeker referring to individuals who have not yet arrived, i.e. to the concept NotArrivedTranslocant. The movement of the interpretation of asylum seeker in this example can be tracked as follows: “would stop” indicates cessation of proactivity, moving the interpretation from ProactiveTranslocant to Translocant more generally. In addition, only those that stop “at the nearest ‘safe country’” are accepted as “asylum seekers” in this example. As this cannot be Australia (which is surrounded by ‘safe’ countries), the translocant cannot have arrived in Australia. This moves the interpretation down from Translocant to NotArrivedTranslocant. (52), in turn, proposes an identification of “asylum seekers” with “economic migrants” and hence explicitly rejects their legitimacy. In this case, the concept of IllegitimateTranslocant is referred to. Again, the movement is an up-down movement, in that “pass through countries” indicates that the “asylum seekers” are in particular Translocants, and that due to their identification as economic migrants, these translocants’ legitimacy is negated, resulting in a downwards second step to IllegitimateTranslocant.

3.2 Staking a semantic space for the terms

We began this study by suggesting that certain data in our corpus appear to contradict the idea that the terms are interchangeable. We believe that we have shown with sufficient justification that they are indeed not interchangeable. But neither is the opposite true: the conceptualisations of the terms’ underlying meanings all share a common process of determination, and nuanced distinctions between the terms arise from this process.
Together, this common process of determination for the terms, the maximum traversal limit of two edges in the ontology, and the observations of plasticity made in the previous section, lead us to claim that the terms each occupy a distinct semantic space that is represented by a subgraph of the ontology. The distinct semantic space of a term is the set of nodes that are within two edges’ transversal from the default concept node. The semantic space of a term informs how it will tend to be used by speakers, and we will refer to this distinct semantic space as that term’s scope.

Refugee is able to be coerced to represent all unlexicalised concepts that have affirmatively determined legitimacy. Rather interestingly, refugee cannot, according to our hypothesis, be invoked to represent ProactiveTranslocant, IllegitimateTranslocant, or ArrivedTranslocant (i.e. an arrived translocant without determined legitimacy). Asylum seeker has a more varied scope of possible interpretations, which include LegitimateTranslocant and IllegitimateTranslocant, PassiveTranslocant and ProactiveTranslocant, and NotArrivedTranslocant and ArrivedTranslocant. Asylum seeker may in principle also represent the concept ArrivedProactiveBoatTranslocant, thus standing in competition with boat people, which by default lexicalises this concept. Boat people can move to represent that region of the ontology which comprises concepts that feature proactivity, or arrived translocants. Note that boat people can also, with the maximal effort that appears permissible, refer to AuthorisedLegitimateTranslocant, which gives the term scope to be used to represent a concept that is generally reserved for instances of refugee.

The identification of scopes of these terms also allows us to make some progress in devising hypotheses as to why certain terms are used in ways that suggest different connotations. We have noted that positive and negative connotations are not borne out in the semantics of the terms per se. However, since a term’s scope predicts how that term will tend to be used, the scope may also be used to predict whether the term will carry a positive or a negative connotation. For instance, the scope of refugee does not include nodes that have a negative legitimacy determination, and so the term refugee is more likely to carry positive connotations than boat people, which only has two concepts in its scope with an affirmed legitimacy property. Asylum seeker is, we would predict from its scope, more variable, as it is able to represent both legitimate and illegitimate nodes, authorised and unauthorised nodes, and those that have passiveness and arrival specifications.

We are able to see such tendencies in the usage of the terms most clearly when two of the terms are used in combination. For instance, the terms refugee and asylum seeker both have scopes that have very little intersection – only Translocant, LegitimateTranslocant and PassiveTranslocant – and furthermore each have a scope that covers a majority of the nodes that are not in the scope of the other term. It is unsurprising, then, that their coordination is common relative to the total number of coordinations in the corpus, with 101 instances in the corpus overall, since by using the
terms together, a speaker can, with only the exception of the very specific ResettledProactiveBoatTranslocant, represent the entire range of interpretations of the topic. Compare this with only 2 coordination instances of asylum seeker and boat people, the intersection of which contains far more nodes, and so a less stark contrast exists between the interpretations of the terms.

It appears, then, that speakers use the terms in ways that exploit the semantic scope of those terms to refer to unlexicalised concepts. But our analysis reveals that there is a more surprising strategy that speakers deploy: the generation of ad hoc classes (i.e., concepts) that are not part of the standard ontology. A particularly vivid example is the compound boat refugee (based on a combination of boat people and refugee), which combines the semantic specification of ArrivedProactiveBoatTranslocant (by default referred to by boat people) with a positive assessment of legitimacy as it is part of the concept underlying refugee. Examples can be found in (53) and (54).

(53) e1-0384: I really wish the Government, the Opposition, and the Media would overtly recognize and emphasize the small proportion of immigration represented by boat refugees and say openly “This is a tiny problem compared to immigration by air. […]

(54) e1-0511: […] Refugees are human beings escaping from a desperate situation. There is no orderly queue, it’s survival instinct. Why do we need to label boat refugees as queue jumpers, illegal immigrants, etc? Where is the compassion and empathy?

This compound inserts an additional concept is between ArrivedProactiveBoatTranslocant and its subordinate concept ResettledProactiveBoatTranslocant. At this level, isLegitimate is specified as true, while isAuthorised is still underspecified.

The same strategy of coordination that we observed above is used to provide a means of referring to non-lexicalised concepts. This can include two of the three terms (e.g. “refugees and asylum seekers”, see examples (55) and (56)) or all three terms (i.e.involving the coordination of refugee, asylum seeker and boat people, see examples (57) – (59)).

(55) e3-0044: I feel that their “experience” was not deep enough. Having worked with refugees and asylum seekers in Europe as well as in a camp in Africa, I know that what these people experienced in nowhere close to what refugees go through. […]

(56) e1-0119: […] Stop using refugees and asylum seekers as the bogeyman-in-the-cupboard to boost your flagging polls. […]

(57) e2-0629: [...] This is why most people put a negative spin on Refugees, asylum seekers and boat people. [...] 

(58) e1-0666: [...] Australians are a welcoming people who are highly supportive of refugees, asylum seekers & so called “boat people” & who I have no doubt are appalled that Labour hasn’t closed detention centres. [...] 

(59) c. e3-0129: What is interesting about this show is that it opens everyone’s’ eyes on what is it like to be a refugee or asylum seeker or boat people. [...] 

Our hypothesis here is that in such coordinations, the interpretation is based on the lowest common superordinate concept. In the five comments in (55)–(59) this is Translocant, the top concept, as there are no shared attribute values amongst the underlying concepts of the terms. Interestingly, coordinations involving all three terms occur, although a coordination of just refugee and asylum seeker already points to the top concept. Coordinations of all three terms are therefore semantically somewhat redundant, however, they appear to pragmatically emphasise that speakers aim to be as inclusive as possible. 

The interpretation of a coordination with and is not based on the intersection of the underlying concepts (as could be expected from a logical perspective) but on their union. This is in line with a corresponding coordination involving or, as in (59). Yet, while and coordinations appear to result in a representation of a single group comprising everyone (i.e. a class), or coordinations appear to reference individuals (i.e. the set of all instances) that can be characterised by one or more of the referencing terms. How can speakers express, though, if they want to refer to the union of separate groups of people (i.e. a set of different classes – of the group of refugees, the group of asylum seekers and the group of boat people)? The solution used in the corpus seems to be term juxtaposition (rather than coordination), although further research would be warranted. This lets us close our analysis with examples (60)–(62), that are similar to those with which we started this paper.18 

(60) e2-0507: I think this documentary really digs up, some of the views we adopt of “boat people”, “asylum seekers”, “refugee’s”. [...] 

(61) e2-0195: If these asylum seekers/refugees/boat people had white skin, or were caucasian in appearance, what would our policy be on them then? […] 

(62) e3-0009: SBS has excelled itself..this doco should be shown in all Australian high schools..do that and the country would overwhelmingly change its support for refugees/asylum seekers/boat people in a generation...as pointed out in the doco 90

18 Note, however, that this ‘several groups’ interpretation is not available if the terms are in the singular as in (1) (in which case it coincides with the or coordination).
percent of boat people are legitimate refugees and boat people account for about 1 percent of total immigration. Sadly half the country (the petty and insular half) doesn’t want to know that.

4 Conclusion

We opened the paper by citing what has been, to date, the only attempt close to a lexical semantic exploration of the terms refugee, asylum seeker and boat people in the Australian context, namely O’Doherty and Lecouteur (2007). Using a dataset of Australian media discourse, the authors concluded that the terms in question are used in “an apparently interchangeable way”. We have aimed to sufficiently demonstrate that this is not the case, but also to provide reasons as to why certain data might give the impression that it is. To this end, we examined a corpus of more than a quarter of a million words constituted of online, anonymous comments that were made on the website of a popular Australian television series which dealt directly with the issue of humanitarian migration. Using these data, we made three major claims. First, we posited a two-step claim process through which any given translocant, regardless of the term used to denote the individual, must pass before any resettlement can occur. The two steps identified were the processes of gaining legitimacy — a moralistic notion pertaining to the genuineness of an individual’s need to leave their location of origin — and authorisation — a legalistic determination of an individual’s right to enter the location of resettlement. Second, we put forth a default semantics for each of the three terms, with specific reference to the claim state machine. Somewhat unexpectedly, we found that the semantic specifications of the terms do not include speaker valuations, i.e. their meanings are not inherently positive or negative. Rather, speakers appear to agree on the terms’ semantics but beg to differ on how they evaluate the terms’ semantic specifications. Additionally, the default semantics of the three terms contributed to the development of a cross-connected network of underlying ‘translocant concepts’, an ontology that represents the wealth of possible conceptualisations in the field, out of which only three are lexicalised by default. The lexicalised concepts’ different positions in the ontology clearly showed their specific, individual meanings, and suggested that, rather than the terms being interchangeable, their meanings are distinguished in nuanced ways. Third, we suggested a mechanism by which the default relation of a term with a concept may be altered, leading to and reconciling differences in instantiated usages of the terms. This plasticity in interpretation allows for both the ad hoc linking of a term to an unlexicalised concept in the ontology as well as indicates that an ad hoc generation of additional concepts might occur, to which terms are then related in interaction.

Our analysis used an approach based on object orientation. Object orientation allows for the intuitive yet rigorous modelling of conceptual structures, in particular of
categories, with their characteristics, relationships, behaviours and interactions. This is represented through different ‘views’ on the model, including both static and dynamic models. It is possible to cater for different variation dimensions (such as the primary discriminating specifications of legitimacy, passiveness and arrival) in parallel and without a ranking, through attribute-value structures and multiple inheritance. Object-orientation was highly conducive to the analysis presented herein in that the dynamic modelling of the claim core provided for, e.g., a means to identify dependency relations between semantic specifications and hence in speakers’ conceptualisations. For instance, the model shows that isAuthorised is not allowed to be specified if isLegitimate is not, and then only in the case that the latter has the Boolean value true. The analysis we presented furthermore showed object orientation’s deftness at modelling both the default semantics and ontology of the concepts underlying the terms, while – with the same theoretical framework – modelling with great fidelity the variability of the terms’ semantics when in use and hence the terms’ plasticity in interaction. We thus believe that the potential of an object-oriented approach to linguistics should be further investigated.

References


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