DIRTY TALK:
A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF
OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE CRIMES

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in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Law

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Faculty of Law
University of Technology Sydney
CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Elyse Methven

Signature of Student: Date: 02 March 2017

ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethics approval for this research was granted by the University of Technology Sydney (HREC UTS 2011–498A).
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP.................................................................II
ETHICS APPROVAL...................................................................................................II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .............................................................................................III
TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS.................................................................................... IX
ABSTRACT.................................................................................................................. X

CHAPTER ONE  A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE CRIMES.1
  1.1 INTRODUCTION......................................................................................................1
  1.2 SITUATING THE THESIS ..........................................................................................4
  1.3 THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE ....................................................18

CHAPTER TWO THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.......................................................23
  2.1 INTRODUCTION......................................................................................................23
  2.2 WHY CDA? ..........................................................................................................23
  2.3 SELECTION OF SOURCES ....................................................................................24
  2.4 CRITICAL DISCORSE ANALYSIS ..........................................................................28
  2.5 METHOD: THREE-DIMENSIONAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ..................................31
  2.6 POWER AND IDEOLOGIES....................................................................................38
  2.7 INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH .........................................................................43
  2.8 CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................48

CHAPTER THREE THE UNWIELDY PATH OF OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE CRIMES ....49
  3.1 INTRODUCTION......................................................................................................49
  3.2 THE FIRST OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE CRIMES IN AUSTRALIA ................................51
  3.3 NSW AND QUEENSLAND VAGRANCY ACTS .....................................................54
  3.4 WESTERN AUSTRALIAN OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE CRIMES FROM 1849 .............56
  3.5 DIRTY WORDS AND THEIR CONTAINMENT .....................................................58
  3.6 THE SLIP OF PAPER ............................................................................................60
  3.7 DIRTY WORDS, DIRTY PEOPLE ..........................................................................64
  3.8 SEPARATION AND PURIFICATION ......................................................................67
  3.9 ‘UNLADYLIKE’ LANGUAGE ..................................................................................69
  3.10 ENFORCING AUTHORITY ...................................................................................71
  3.11 PLUS ÇA CHANGE...............................................................................................75
  3.12 CONCLUSION .....................................................................................................77

CHAPTER FOUR LEGAL ANALYSIS OF OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE CRIMES ..........78
### TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1849 Act</td>
<td>Vagrancy Act 1849 (NSW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849 Ordinance</td>
<td>Police Ordinance 1849 (WA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851 Act</td>
<td>Vagrancy Act 1851 (NSW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861 Ordinance</td>
<td>Police Ordinance 1861 (WA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902 Act</td>
<td>Vagrancy Act 1902 (NSW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Critical discourse analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIN</td>
<td>Criminal infringement notice or penalty notice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Code (WA)</td>
<td>Criminal Code Act 1913 (WA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP Act (NSW)</td>
<td>Criminal Procedure Act 1986 (NSW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEPRA</td>
<td>Law Enforcement (Powers and Responsibilities) Act 2002 (NSW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSWLRC</td>
<td>New South Wales Law Reform Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Act</td>
<td>Police Act 1892 (WA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCIADIC</td>
<td>Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO Act (NSW)</td>
<td>Summary Offences Act 1988 (NSW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO Act (NT)</td>
<td>Summary Offences Act 1978 (NT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO Act (Qld)</td>
<td>Summary Offences Act 2005 (Qld)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SO Act (SA)</td>
<td>Summary Offences Act 1953 (SA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VGOO Act</td>
<td>Vagrants Gaming and Other Offences Act 1931 (Qld)</td>
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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses criminal justice discourse as it relates to offensive language crimes in Australia. Across Australia, and elsewhere, it is a crime to use offensive, indecent or obscene language in or near a public place. These crimes are governed by broadly drafted provisions that allow police and judicial officers significant discretion in determining offensiveness. Although offensive language crimes can theoretically target a multitude of words and phrases, in practice, the laws are used to police and punish a small selection of swear words.

Provisions that circumscribe offensive speech have a linguistic dimension. This dimension has been under-theorised in previous scholarship on the topic. Accordingly, my thesis places language at the centre of offensive language crimes, by interrogating how such crimes are represented and legitimised as a particular discursive formation within the criminal justice system. My thesis asks two questions: Firstly, how is offensive language represented in criminal justice discourse? Secondly, how are offensive language crimes legitimised in criminal justice discourse?

I employ a distinct approach to these questions by employing critical discourse analysis (‘CDA’) as my primary methodological tool. CDA is not strictly a ‘method’, but rather, a loosely grouped body of work that views language as both shaping and shaped by society. Analysts works from the premise that we cannot neutrally represent reality. Instead, we construct (and reconstruct) reality, including social identities, subject positions, social relationships and systems of knowledge and belief, through language. I use the phrase ‘criminal justice discourse’ to describe socially constructed ways of signifying reality, through language, in the criminal justice system.

My thesis situates its linguistic analysis of offensive language crimes in broader social, political and historical contexts. I draw into the frame linguistic research on swearing, and literature relating to metaphors, purity and disgust. The thesis structure is based on the following themes: language interpretation in the courts; swearing, danger and disgust; context; objective standards; and power, order and authority. These themes are derived from my doctrinal analysis of offensive language crimes and ideas that inform and legitimise the criminal punishment of swearing.

My thesis reconceptualises how offensive language is interpreted in the criminal law. I extend existing scholarship by highlighting how criminal justice discourse creates and entrenches power inequalities, augments judicial discretion, ignores difference and promotes unfairness. I demonstrate how discourse shapes perceptions about things, people, ideas and words that are deemed ‘out of place’ and worthy of criminal sanction.