

The representation of the Syrian conflict in the Syrian online news: A critical discourse analysis

*Kais Amir Kadhim**

Department of Management and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS, 32610 Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia

Abstract. This study investigates the usage of Syrian media tools in manipulating people's perception towards the uprising in Syria. The language of the Syrian media is analyzed using a critical discourse analysis. For this purpose, two frameworks are combined: the historical approach by Wodak (2002) and the socio-semantic network of social actors by Van Leeuwen (2008). The study particularly focuses on the way the Syrian government and the rebels are represented in the Syrian online news Cham press which is a pro-government news agency. The two research questions of this study are: (i) What are the referential and predication strategies used by Cham press in reporting the Syrian conflict? (ii) How do these strategies reflect the ideology that surrounds the representation of rebels in the Syrian news? Three hundred and ninety-seven articles were selected from Cham press based on the most relevant keywords. These articles were taken for a period of six months that is from June to October 2012 and May 2013. The study reveals that the Syrian uprising is negatively represented using terms with negative connotations like terrorism, foreign conspiracy, against the law, foreign fighters that are targeting people and responsible for the massacres that happened in the country.

1 Introduction: The Syrian Conflict

The uprising in Syria is a resemblance to the uprisings that erupted across a number of Arab countries like Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia. It is a revolution against the long term dictatorship regime. The Syrian revolution started when 35 opposition representatives were arrested in March 16, 2011 after a promise from the government to solve the problems with the opposition with peaceful resolutions as stated in the Damascus Declaration in 2008. A protest started as a call to release the political prisoners. Yet the Syrian government did not hesitate to open fire on the demonstrators. 60 people were killed in the first 10 days. After that, the number of protesters rapidly increased. They were demanding to end the state of emergency that the country declared 35 years ago, since the time of the previous president, Hafedh Al-Assad, the father of the current president, Bashar Al-Assad. The state of emergency is a condition declared by the government in cases of civil unrest.

*Corresponding author: kais.amirkadhim@utp.edu.my

It gives authorities boundless powers of surveillance and arrest (Collin Dictionary; Syria ends emergency law). After a month of clashes between the rebels and the demonstrators, President Bashar Al-Assad declared an end to the emergency rule. Perthes (2004). Yet this declaration did not bring much of an action. Therefore, the demonstrators demanded Al-Assad to step down. Since then, the Syrian uprising was one of the bloodiest in the Middle East because the government used military power to stop the rebels. Tens of thousands of people were killed. The country was severely destroyed because of the clashes between the government and the rebels (*Global News*, April 19, 2011).

2 Discourse-Historical Approach

The discourse-historical approach which started in Vienna tries to incorporate much available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive "events" are embedded. In addition, it analyzes the historical dimension of discursive actions by investigating the ways in which particular genres of discourse are subject to diachronic change. Lastly, it aims to integrate social theories to be able to explain text. On the methodical level, one of the most salient distinguishing features of the discourse-historical approach is its endeavour to work interdisciplinarily. It attempts to transcend the pure linguistic dimension and to include more or less systematically the historical and political dimensions in the analysis, theory and interpretation of a specific discursive occasion. Finally, the approach is problem-oriented and not focused on specific linguistic items. It aims to analyze the linguistic items in terms of their locations in the discourse with all the sociological and political ends embodied in it (Wodak, 2002; Meyer & Wodak, 2009). According to Wodak (2002), one of the main discursive strategies is referred to as "Meta strategy of us vs. them": the discursive construction goes in the following stages:

1. labelling social actors
2. generalization of negative attributes (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001)

3 Van Leeuwen's Socio-Semiotic Framework

This framework provides a useful analysis to newspaper articles that deal with marginalized and the silenced groups in the society who are represented in the media by the powerful agents in the way that serve the government's agenda leaving no room for the marginalized groups to represent themselves. According to Van Leeuwen's framework (2008), every social practice involves linguistic and non-linguistic actions. Certain criteria should be considered to critically understand the text: (1) Who are the participants? (2) What is the action being described and in what sequence? (3) In what "performance mode" was the action performed? (4) the eligibility of the participants, (5) "representation style" (6) "time"; (7) "location"; (8) eligibility of conditions of the location; (9) the tools and resources used in making the social practice; and (10) the eligibility of the resources.

4 Methodology

This paper will benefit from some concepts of Van Leeuwen's social actors' theory in addition to some aspects from Wodak's historical approach according to the availability of the concepts in the selected texts.

4.1 Data Collection

The data were collected from the *Cham press* online archives. *Cham press* is a Syrian online news agency that shows its support to the Syrian government. The reason behind selecting *Cham press* is because it is pro government agency; supporting Assad action against the demonstration. Furthermore, the news itself were written in Arabic then translated into English. originally in Arabic. Textual analysis can be used as a tool to systematically explain social contradiction and social change (Fairclough, 1995, p.15). The selection of articles is according to the most relevant keywords to the Syrian conflict like: terrorists, armed groups, gangs, government agents, gunmen, heroes, soldiers etc. 397 articles were selected in total; and the period from June-October, 2012 and May 2013 were considered the timeline of the Syrian Civil War. The articles were selected randomly as analyzing all the articles will be redundant repetition.

4.2 Research Design

This research will benefit from two strategies: referential, and predication strategies. The referential strategies include:

- (i) **Inclusion and Exclusion:** these criteria refer to the way social actors and activists are presented in the text explicitly or implicitly, partially or fully depending on the ideologies aimed in the text.
- (ii) **Activation and Passivation:** refer to the representing of the social action either with reference or without reference to the social actors depending on the ideologies aimed in the text.
- (iii) **Genericisation and Spacification:** this is a clear criterion that distinguishes the language tools used for representing immigrants and citizens.

4.3 Data Analysis

The process of analysis will undergo the following procedures:

- (i) Describing the theme addressed in the extraction
- (ii) Explaining the sentence structure and detecting 'activation' and 'passivation'
- (ii) Identifying the social actors with reference to vocabulary and grammatical components
- (iv) Explaining the ideologies behind the representation

The following sections describe the findings and the discussion:

4.3.1 Representing the Government as victorious in the street battles:

- A. (*The army cleaned al-Quneitra Street and the surrounding areas from the mercenary terrorists and killed large numbers of them.*)

(*Cham press, 18-09-2012, Terrorists killed in Aleppo and Damascus countryside...Infiltration attempts foiled in Homs*)

The news article of the extraction (A) is describing a series of clashes between the government army and the rebels but the incidents are reported by one of the government's news agency "*Cham press*" and; therefore, from the government supporters' point of view. In addition to the clashes, the article informs that the army destroyed a number of trucks and cars loaded with weapons belonging to the rebels. According to the BBC Online (2013), during the month of September 2012, there wasn't any record of attempts to resolve

the conflict between the rebels and the government. The only record is a number of confrontations between the army and the rebels. (Syrian profile, 2013).

In terms of sentence structure, the lexical word ‘the army’ is in the position of the subject of the sentence and the doer of the verb ‘cleaned’, while the rebels are referred to as ‘mercenary terrorists’ in the position of the goal of the action ‘cleaned’. This is *Metonymy*. *Metonymy* is a kind of substitution to the names used to refer to participants (participants) with names that imply different connotations to “objectivate” social actors (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 57). Therefore, ‘the army’ is given an active role in the sentence ‘activated’, while the ‘mercenary terrorists’ are given the passive role ‘passivated’. The subsequent sentence phrase joined by the conjunction ‘and’ adds another verb ‘killed’ and treat the rebels as the recipient of the action of killing in ‘*and killed large numbers of them*’. This time the rebels are referred to as ‘large numbers of them’. The reason behind this sentence structure is to show the power relation between the two rivals. ‘The army’, which is the government representative, is always activated to show that the government is in control of the situation, and is the most powerful rival.

In terms of the representation of actors in the context given, the government is referred to by its powerful force - ‘the army’. It comes in a singular collective noun to show unity of the group. On the other hand, the rebels are referred to as ‘mercenary terrorists’. Firstly, ‘mercenary terrorists’ are negative adjectives used very often by *Cham press* to refer to the rebels. The reason behind the very frequent reference of ‘terrorist’ is to legitimize any action taken by the government against the rebels. This is a form of Predication. According to Wodak & Meyer (2001), Predication is to give the social actors stereotypical or evaluative attributions with negative or positive traits in a linguistic form to give an implicit or explicit predicate. Secondly, the adjectives ‘mercenary terrorists’ come in a plural form to show that the rebels are not one in unity like the army. This is to give an indication that the rebels are distracted gunmen who are not united by an objective or action. Therefore, the negative attributes in that plural form ‘mercenary terrorists’ makes the act of rebelling look like a random form of violence rather than an uprising in the whole country. In addition, the rebels are referred again as the recipient of the action of killing in “*and killed large numbers of them*”.

4.3.2 Representing the Government as the Guardian of People.

(B) “*The armed terrorist groups could not survive more than 6 hours behind the walls of Yalda town in the Damascus countryside as the brave soldiers of the Syrian Arab Army cleared the whole area of hundreds of terrorists who were provided with various advanced weapons.*”

(*Cham press*, 13/09/2013, *Security and calm back to Yalda town in Damascus countryside*)

The article is describing the ending and aftermath of the clashes between the army and the rebels in the town of Yalda which is located on the southern outskirts of Damascus. The article starts by informing that the clashes took six hours and hundreds of armed rebels were killed. Then, the article refers to the families of the town who went back to their houses when the clashes were over. By reference to extraction (B), there are two social actors identified: ‘the army’ who was referred to as ‘the brave soldiers of the Syrian Arab Army’; Then, the rebels who were referred to as ‘the armed terrorist groups’, and ‘hundreds of terrorists’. In this regard, the rebels –as in extraction (A) above- are described in

association with terrorism in ‘the armed terrorist groups’ which is according to Wodak an example of predication in her self-other-schema, because the rebels are labelled in this adjective that bare a negative trait and they are referred to accordingly. In addition, according to the data, the word ‘terrorist’ refers to any armed force other than the government army. There is no mention of lexical words like ‘resistance, rebels, activists, etc.’ which might give the act of rebelling a positive or neutral trait. This type of reference as explained in extraction (A) is used to make legitimate any kind of action taken by the government against the rebels. Also, they are referred to in a plural form in ‘the armed terrorist groups’ to indicate that there is no unity among the rebels. The important social actor’s representation is the army itself. The army in this extract is referred to as ‘*the brave soldiers of the Syrian Arab Army*’ the adjective of bravery is used with the army men. The use of the adjective “brave” is to represent the army men in a heroic manner. The writer wanted to add the spirit of patriotism through the use of the adjective ‘*brave*’

4.3.3 Representing Rebels as Foreign Fighters Rather than Local Rebels.

(E) “*Hazim M. described ...blasted the ongoing killings and destruction by the armed terrorist groups, which consist of gangs and killers, Calling on Libyan and Arab fighters not to enter to Syria because of the ongoing... there is never a popular revolt.*”

(A *Libyan terrorist: Arabs and Africans fighting in Syria gangs and killers, Champress, 16 July 2012*)

The article in general is reporting of an interview in *Libya Now* agency with the Libyan fighter, Hazim M., who participated in the Syrian revolt. In terms of representation of social actors, the social actors in this text are: *Hazim M.* and *the armed terrorist groups, which consist of gangs and killers.* Hazim M. is one of the foreign fighters belonging to the Syrian rebel group. In line with the previous articles, the Syrian rebels are referred to as, “*armed terrorist groups*” which is a form of predication that involves negative connotations as explained earlier. Similar to the previous articles analyzed, the rebels are given an active voice in association of violent acts like “*killing and destruction*”. This time, the rebels are further identified with “*gangs and killers*”. Therefore, only the rebels are included in the above text.

Yet, the statement “*there is never a popular revolt*” supports the government’s point of view. Although the *sayer* of the statement as a “verbiage”, according to Haliday’s functional grammar, is one of the rebels, yet the statement belongs to the Syrian government. The statement is used as a justification to support the government, and not the rebels because it says that the revolution is not popular, since it refers to the popularity among the Syrian citizens. The statement that the Syrian citizens do not welcome the revolution makes the revolution illegitimate. Yet the reality is that the foreign fighters do not constitute more than 20% of the rebels which means that 80% of the rebels are from the Syrian citizens. In addition, the statement here is not quoted from Hazim M., but it is rephrased by the writer.

4.3.4 Representing Revolution as a Foreign Conspiracy

In *Cham press*, there are many evidences in *Cham press* where the government blames rebels for receiving foreign military aid, like in the following example:

(F) “*DAMASCUS– Information Minister Omran al- Zoubi said that what is happening in Syria is a massive conspiracy and an aggression using barbaric tools whose elements are*

obvious, stressing that Syria is facing a terrorist, Wahabi and Takfiri mentality and an extremist culture in various guises and under various names.”

(Cham press, 03-09-2012, Information Minister: Syria facing massive conspiracy and terrorist, extremist mentality... solution is purely Syrian)

The interview of the Information minister in the extraction above reveals Al-Assad’s point of view of the foreign conspiracy in Syria. The writer named some of the terrorist organizations as tools for the foreign conspiracy against Syria. The use of the term ‘terrorist’ to describe the groups mentioned in the extracts (*Wahabi and Takfiri*) is to make the readers think that the rebels are only the *Wahabi* and *Takferi* groups. There is no mention either of the total number of those groups’ members or on the source of the information. It is meant to make a random generalization to make the whole revolution look like a terrorist action. Therefore, the information is not accurate.

4.3.5 Rebels are Portrayed as Responsible for the Massacres in the Country.

(G) “PROVINCES- Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist groups committed two horrible massacres against a number of families in the towns of al-Shumariyeh and Taldo in the countryside of Homs province, in escalation of their crimes that comes usually before the Security Council sessions on Syria and this time in coincidence with the announced visit of the UN envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan.”

(Cham press, 26-05-2012, New massacres by al-Qaeda-linked terrorist groups against families in al-Shumariyeh and Taldo in Homs countryside

In this extract, the government is naming the rebels as, “*Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist groups*”. There is no evidence in the text to verify whether this group is linked to Al Qaeda or not, but linking the group to Al-Qaeda gives the group a negative image and labelling them as ‘groups’ implies distraction and less unity. In this context, those groups are said to commit a number of massacres against civilians. The victims here are called ‘families’ rather than civilians to gain the sympathy of the readers. In order to convince the readers that the rebels are responsible for the massacres, the writer further added that there is a rhythm detected in the timing of actions of the rebels which is “*usually before the Security Council sessions on Syria and this time in coincidence with the announced visit of the UN envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan.*”. This statement is used as the only evidence to claim that the rebels are responsible for the massacres.

4.3.6. Representing Rebels as Against the Law.

(H) “The Assembly also approved the draft law on demobilizing state workers or employees and depriving them of their wages, salaries and pension rights if charged with committing terrorist acts, joining terrorist groups or providing support to them.

(Chm press, 28-06-2012, People's Assembly approves draft laws on combating terrorism)

On the other hand, *Cham press* repeatedly called the government's men as the force of law to give them more credit. The government's men have been called as 'law enforcement' in more than thirty articles in our data. Yet, the definition of terrorism is not clear. Terrorism is defined as any help or support given to the groups against the government. Therefore, it makes no distinction of peaceful or militant, internal or external, organized or scattered groups. There is also no list of the groups that are considered terrorists and the groups that are not. This is because, to the government, all groups fall in one basket leaving no space of any opposition to the government.

4.3.7 Representing Revolution as Business

In a few articles of our data, *Cham press* keeps referring to the presence of smugglers and external sources of money being paid to the civilians to help the rebels. For example:

(I) "He said that they agreed with Amoun to make each delivery of weapons in exchange for SYP 35,000, adding that they also smuggled journalists and militants into Syria in exchange for various sums of money, with them transporting weapons and individuals to Amoun's house in Jusiye or to a school occupied by Amoun and his group."

(*Cham press, Lebanese terrorist confesses to participating in smuggling weapons and militants to Syria and committing acts of terrorism, 10-09-2012*)

The use of verbs like 'agreed', 'make delivery', 'smuggled' are all associated with illegal business making the revolution look like a form of mafia business. This is because the verb 'smuggling' and 'agreed' indicate a form of secret, dirty business. The irony lies in the idea of 'smuggling journalists'. These journalists are seen in this contexts as part of the weapons against the government. Therefore, the writer used the word 'smuggled' with various objects that the country does not allow, including journalists. Yet the government does not admit that it is preventing freedom of speech; yet, it lists journalists as part of the illegal objects like 'militants'. Yet, the writer is referring to the source of information '*Lebanese terrorist Mohammad Hussein Fares*' who is referred to as 'he' in the abstract above in order to give more credibility to the information. On the other hand, the government also receives militant support from Russia and Iran but it is not referred to as smuggling but as 'support or help' and not mentioned anywhere in the data. This is because the government allows itself to import weapons from the outside yet prohibits rebels to do so.

4.3.8 . Rebels Force People to Support Them

The government keeps referring to people as the passive entity which falls between the rebels and the government's men. This is supported by the following extract:

(J) "Fares said that they opened fire on citizens to force them to join them against the government or leave the area, with the terrorists continuing to open fire for nearly 90 minutes."

(*Cham press, Lebanese terrorist confesses to participating in smuggling weapons and militants to Syria and committing acts of terrorism, 10-09-2012*)

In extract (J), 'they' refers to the rebels. The rebels are associated with a material process, '*opened fire*'. The object is 'citizens'. This statement is made to make the rebels look like terrorists to the readers and to show that without the influence of guns, people

would not have supported the rebels. Similar to the previous examples, *Cham press* gives negative connotations to the rebels and represents them negatively. In contrast, the government punishes anyone who helps or even supports the rebels as the previous example (E) shows yet it is not considered as a force to support the government. These contradictions of actions and statements have become the signature of the government.

4.3.9. Rebels Target People

Cham press again portrays the rebels as violent as in the following extract:

(K) *“An armed terrorist group attacked the town of al-Ghassanyeh in al-Qseir area in Homs countryside. Five citizens were martyred in the attack. A source in the province told SANA reporter that the terrorists also kidnapped 17 citizens from the town, adding that the relatives of the kidnapped persons fear that the terrorists are planning to kill them.”*

(*Champress, Crackdown on terrorists continues in several provinces, 05-09-2012*)

In this extract, an unspecified source of information, ‘a source’, has given the news of the rebels attacking the town of *al-Ghassanyeh*. The rebels are referred to as ‘armed terrorist groups’ to employ violence, danger and evil adjectives to the rebels. Furthermore, the use of the material process ‘attacked’ is used because the writer wants to reiterate that the rebels are the culprits who fire innocent citizens. There was no mention of any kind of resistance from people because, as in most of the extracts, the people are seen as passive recipients of the rebels’ actions. Thus, the use of verbs like ‘attacked’, ‘kidnapped’, and ‘planning to kill’ are all violent actions associated with the rebels. Yet, the government’s role is absent and the people’s action is absent. Citizens were killed by the rebels according to the writer, but they gain the support of the readers as the writer used the term ‘martyred’. Yet, earlier in the article, the government’s men were clearing several areas from rebels *“The armed forces targeted the terrorists in the areas of al-Halk, Sheikh Said, al-Nayrab, Bustan al-Qasr and Hanano in Aleppo, killing scores of them and destroying their DShK-equipped cars.”* There is no evidence as to who did the attack on *al-Ghassanyeh* because according to this scene, both the rebels and the government’s men were in action.

4.3.10. Government Portrays Itself as a Peaceful Government

As *Champress* portrays rebels as violent, evil, unlawful and terrorists, it portrays the government with a positive image like the safeguards, heroes and being peaceful as in the following extract:

(L) *“Title: Al-Halqi: Crisis is in the final stage, working on reaching peaceful solution”*
“Premier al-Halqi added that the state is working on solving the crisis through field work and political, economic and social methods with the aim of stopping violence and ensuring the security and stability of the country.”

(*Champress, 17-09-2012, Al-Halqi: Crisis is in final stage, working on reaching peaceful solution*)

In this extract the government is represented by its prime minister, Al-Halaqi, that the government is trying a peaceful way to solve the problem. This statement is supported by a sense of security and peace like ‘ensuring security’, and ‘stopping violence’. The government is here portrayed as the protector with peaceful intentions. Yet, in reality the

government did not show its peaceful side because the statement above is contradicting with another statement where the government declares its rejection of dialogue with the rebels as shown in the following extract:

(M) 'They also stressed rejection of dialogue with those who got involved in killings, underlining necessity of enhancing national reconciliation.'

(*Champress, 28-06-2012, People's Assembly approves draft laws on combating terrorism*)

There is no clear definition on how the peacefulness goes in line with the government's actions and how it goes in line with the rejection of dialogue. The term 'involved in killing' is a broad term but from the evidences above, readers can assume that it refers to any force against the government because unfortunately it is difficult to know who is involved in the killing and who is not. Thus, leaving the term open and unspecified gives the government more powers and more excuses to use violence against the rebels.

5 Conclusion

This study shows that ideology has a very crucial role in manipulating the language of the media to frame the characters involved in the discourse in a particular way. In the case of political conflicts, the media becomes one of the tools to get local and international support by reporting events from a particular point of view to make one as the villain and the other as the victim. In the Syrian scene, the pro-government news agency *Cham press* has used various linguistic techniques to represent the revolution as illegitimate, to direct the audience's attention to certain events rather than others, and to view the rebels as terrorists and to gather the audience's support against the revolution. *Cham press* used terms and arguments earlier used by Bashar Al-Assad in his speeches and interviews to support the government's actions. In terms of predication strategies, the government is represented positively by the use of positive predicates to frame its position as the victorious, the protector, the saviour and the caring government. However, the rebels are viewed as criminals, terrorists armed groups, street gangs who create fear, violence, and are accused of being foreign fighters from different countries who kill innocent people. We find no reference to the local fighters, the people who support or join the rebels' army. We find no reference to the unity between the rebel's parties or their achievements against the government's oppressive treatment. The ideology is served in supporting the government for leaving no room for the other opinions. Any opposing opinion falls, in the *Cham press*'s point of view, under the umbrella of foreign conspiracy that has an unclear definition or boundary. Having the media in favour of the government and banning the international media from reporting in Syria is a way of manipulating people's minds and brainwashing the Syrian people to reduce their support of the revolution.

6 References

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