

Discourse and Manipulation in the Representation of the Russian Military Intervention in the Syrian Civil War

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Abstract

This article is concerned with exploring conflicting media positions as reflected in the discursive patterns of news headlines and leads. Using Halliday's transitivity analysis, this study examines how the Russian Military Intervention in the Syrian Civil War was socially, discursively and linguistically represented in the CNN and RT coverage of the event. The analysis examines the process of news making, role of ideology, and types of relationships between the news agencies and the political institutions in the United States and Russia. The aim is to show the discursive power of news agencies in creating different realities of the same event through language use. Results indicate that media are a political actor in the dissemination of both Russian and American views on the Syrian conflict. Although RT and CNN write about the same issue, the language choices made and underlying ideologies are different. The conflicting ideologies of both CNN and RT were highlighted by the use of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation in order to support self's ideological positions and distort other's political stances.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, Critical discourse analysis, Textual analysis, Contextual analysis

1. Introduction

In spite of the continued importance of news reporting in our daily life, issues of objectivity and credibility remain problematic. The idea that news reporting is colored with the writer's ideologies as well as the interests of the network agencies has long been a central argument in media discourse studies (Fowler, 1991). Media language, especially that of news, is a considered a good example of how language is employed to produce meanings which construct ideological representations of events and situations in the world to recipients in general whether they are viewers, listeners, and/or readers (Fowler, 1991; Le, 2006; Talbot, 2007). The main objective of this study is to investigate how media language is used for propagating specific ideologies by examining the on-line news reports on the Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War posted on the Websites of the two networks Russia Today (RT) and Cable News Network (CNN). The rationale is that the two agencies adopted different ideologies in relation to the Russian military intervention in Syria. They reflect two different political positions: the US position and the Russian position.

In the light of this argument, the article purports to explore their role in the reproduction of socio-political and ideological discourse by reporting and commenting on the same event. The article investigates how media language is used for propagating specific ideologies by examining the on-line news reports on the Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War posted on the websites of the two networks Russia Today (RT) and CNN) and how news texts employ linguistic devices at various levels in order to construct ideological representations of events and situations. In order to explore the discursive patterns within the news coverage of the two news agencies of the event, this study adopts Halliday's transitivity model within critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework. The rationale is that transitivity analysis is concerned with the social contexts and roles of textual participants and actions which will be appropriate in exploring how ideologies are framed and sustained discursively (Fowler, 1991; Halliday, 1985: 1994). Simpson (1993: 88) points out that "transitivity refers generally to how meaning is represented in the clause. It shows how speakers encode in language their mental picture of reality and how they account for their experience of the world around them, because it is concerned with the transmission of ideas, is part of the ideational function of language".

This article is organized as follows. Part 1 is the present introduction. Part 2 is a background of the study. Part 3 defines the research problem and questions. Part 4 reviews the literature concerning discourse and representation. Part 5 outlines the methods and procedures of the research. Part 6 is an analysis and discussion. This is a CDA of the selected data using transitivity analysis and a discussion of the results. Part 7 is conclusion. It gives an overall summary of the findings of the study.

2. Background of the Study

The Arab Spring uprisings of early 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt inspired major sectors in the Syrian society to revolt against the Assad's regime. The Syrian rebels called for a democratic nation and the overthrow of President Bashar Assad who refused to give up power. The regime confronted the protest with violence including lethal force (McHugo, 2015). This led

to a conflict between the rebels on one side and the Assad's regime on the other. However, Chomsky (2014: iii) argues that the conflict "became much more complicated because of intensified fighting between Sunni, Alawites, Shia, and other religious and ethnic groups, and the intervention into the conflict of jihadist groups with their own varying agendas". This political fragility resulted in one of the most brutal civil wars the world has ever witnessed (McHugo, 2015). In 2012, Syria descended into civil war and the country disintegrated. Erlich (2014) reports that the Syrian civil war has led to a proxy battle with Iran and Russia on one side, and the United States, Arab Gulf states, and some NATO members on the other.

In response to the political developments in Syria, the United States called for an international military intervention in Syria to overthrow Bashar Assad. Russia, however, used its veto power at the UN Security Council against the resolution (Oualaalou, 2016). Nevertheless, the United States led a coalition in Syria with no UN Security Council mandate believing that removing Bashar Assad is the best way to defeat ISIS. In order to protect its strategic interests and to support the regime of Bashar Assad, as their most important regional ally, Russia decided to intervene in the Syrian Civil War. During the Russian military intervention in Syria, the relevant international political actors whether in Russia or in the United States were trying to use the most powerful arguments to convince their citizens of the correctness of their political positions.

3. Research Problem and Questions

Discourse studies indicate that mass media have an influential part in reproducing socio-political and ideological discourse by framing different issues and representing news in a way that forms the public knowledge. In the process of news production, all meanings are socially constructed and all discourse is a social product and social practice. News also, as a form of discourse, is socially constructed. The content of news is not facts about the world, but only ideas, beliefs, and ideologies. It is evident that political ideology is inherent in the news discourse, and is reflected in the use of language. Thus, it becomes essential to analyse the language of news discourse in order to identify the underlying ideologies and to detect the linguistic strategies used to propagate these ideologies.

The article seeks to report the results of a critical discourse analysis of the headlines and leads of the news stories posted on two network websites: RT and CNN during the Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War. The rationale is that topics are usually expressed in the headlines and leads of news reports. Van Dijk (1991: 72) argues that in news reports, "a few topics at the top may summarize large amounts at the bottom". He adds that topics "summarize complex information" and "have very important functions in communication" (1991: 73). The study provides a profile of the two network perspectives of the Russian military intervention in Syria, outlining the themes used to represent the intervention and the ideologies revealed by those themes. In addition, it demonstrates how both the American and Russian news media linguistically construct ideological representations of different groups of people and different countries in a biased way, and how these representations exercise a great deal of power in shaping our interpretation of the world.

In the light of this problem, the study is concerned with addressing the following main

research questions: What are the key themes that recur throughout the headlines and the leads of the news stories given by the two networks? And what are the ideologies that underlie these themes?

Other related questions to be addressed also include the following.

- 1- What are the linguistic structures through which the major ideologies of the two networks are expressed?
- 2- What is the difference between the ideologies exhibited by both RT and CNN?
- 3- How do the different ideologies embedded in the two networks' discourse contribute in creating different representations of the same event?

4. Literature Review

Numerous studies have extensively discussed the role of language as a mode of representation in constructing different images of reality. Thomas and Wareing (2000: 45) assert that “since the early 1970s, linguists have been interested in the relationship between how a story gets told, and what that might indicate about the point of view that it gets told from. This level of language use is called linguistic representation”. Fairclough (1995) asserts that the analysis of the representation in a text comprises “what choices are made- what is included and what is excluded, what is made explicit or left implicit, what is foregrounded and what is backgrounded, what is thematized and what is unthematized, what process types and categories are drawn upon to represent events, and so on”. Different approaches have been adopted in the investigation of media discourse including both quantitative content analysis methods and non-linguistic qualitative methods. The focus of this study, however, is on the linguistic approaches that have been developed within critical discourse analysis CDA.

One of the earliest applications of CDA to media discourse is that of *Language and Control*. Fowler (1979: 1) investigates the social, interpersonal and ideological functions of linguistic constructions. He states that “language usage is not merely an effect or reflex of social organizations and processes; it is a part of social process. It constitutes social meanings and thus social practices”. In this way, the main trend in media discourse studies was concerned with power relations in media discourse and how recipients are influenced by the ideologies embodied in discourse. In his analysis of the *Times* and the *Guardian* reports about police shootings of blacks in Zimbabwe in 1975, Trew (1979) argues that transformations of discourse in news reports reproduce ideology of British society in which agents of the state maintain order and control, and public violence and demonstration pose a threat to the civil order and must be suppressed. He identifies several linguistic devices including the use of passive referred to as passivization in order to eliminate the linking of the agents with the killing so that only the effect of what they do is left and the abstract nouns ‘rioting’ and the ‘loss of life’ remain. Lexicalization transforms demonstration into ‘riot’ and shoot into ‘die’.

The closing years of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of numerous analyses of media discourses and how the use of language in serious media constitutes the roles upon which people base their claim to exercise power and thus language is a reality constituting

social practice (Fairclough, 1988, 1995a, 1995b; Fowler, 1985; Van Dijk, 1998). In his critical analysis of media discourse, Van Dijk (1995) focuses on the relationship between discourse and power and how dominant groups use discourse forms in order to impose their own ideologies and how recipients are manipulated to form or confirm the representations imposed by the media.

The implication is that media discourse has the social power to influence recipients and shape their ideological beliefs. Kim (1992), however, argues that news is constructed and framed by the culture and society wherein news is produced. The news media from different countries construct different news texts because the linguistic and semantic structures of news are influenced by the cultural and ideological contexts of these countries. Similarly, Brookes (1995) argues that media discourse is in large influenced by the social attitudes and the culture of the people where discourse is produced. In his critical discourse analysis of news on Africa in the British press, he indicates that there is a stereotypical and dominant discourse in reporting on Africa by constructing stereotypical distortion of African groups as different, deviant and inferior, and that this is achieved by naturalization of western ideology of western superiority in the representation of Africa. Brookes (1995: 448) points out the role of this discourse in the reproduction of power relations and in maintaining western hegemony and concludes that this discourse reproduces the racist perceptions of Africa and Africans in western society which “plays a central role in the perpetuation of existing power relations of western superiority and dominance over Africans”.

There is almost an agreement on the role of media discourse in making recipients believe in given ideologies and constructing public knowledge (Talbot, 2007; Van Dijk, 1995, 1998; Wodak, 2004, 2015). In *Bad News from Israel*, Philo and Berry (2004), investigate the BBC news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how this coverage relates to the understanding, beliefs and attitudes of television audience. They conclude that the audience's response to the images of the war between the Palestinians and the Israelis are affected by “what they know and understand of the relationships which underpin events and the manner in which such events are contextualized when they are shown” (Philo & Berry, 2004: 258). In her recent book *The Politics of Fear*, Wodak (2015) asserts that media and political discourses have played a significant role in increasing the popularity of populist right-wing politics with some parties reaching the very top of the electoral ladder after being just marginal parties for long in Europe.

In this context, CDA is concerned with analyzing and exploring ideologies embedded in different discourse types including media discourse. In other words, the function of CDA to reveal both explicit and implicit forms of ideologies within discourse with the purpose of helping media consumers recognize hegemony relations. Van Dijk (1993: 252) argues that CDA is “primarily interested and motivated by pressing social issues, which it hopes to better understand through discourse analysis”. In this sense, critical discourse analysts should be social and political scientists; they should be social critics and activists. Accordingly, “it requires true multidisciplinary, and an account of intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture” (1993: 253).

5. Methods and Procedure

In order to address the research questions mentioned above, this study pursues a critical discourse analysis of the online news output produced by RT and CNN. It reports on a critical discourse analysis of the selected headlines and leads posted on the websites of the two networks RT and CNN during the Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War. This covers the period starting from September 2015 when the Syrian regime officially requested Russia's military help against rebel and jihadist groups up to March 2016 when Russia announced the withdrawal of its main forces from Syria. In order to understand the ideologies adopted by the two agencies concerning the event, the websites of the two agencies were browsed and news concerning the event was collected.

The analysis is limited to the headlines and the leads of the news stories. Headlines and leads are selected to be the data of analysis because of their importance in representing the principal topics of the news stories. The rationale is that they summarize the news involved. Furthermore, headlines and leads are attractive to the reader and take him/her immediately into the heart of the report. The article draws upon theories from critical discourse analysis and media discourse studies in order to analyze the representation of Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War. This study adopts transitivity analysis, one of the tools within the systemic functional grammar (SFG) theory developed by Halliday for interpreting discourse (1985, 1994). The rationale is that SFG considers the context as indispensable in the study of clause structure. SFG focuses on what language is doing in a particular moment, with whom and to reach what purpose. In this context, Fowler (1991) indicates that media discourse provides so many examples of the ideological significance of Transitivity. Therefore, it can be claimed that SFG is an appropriate methodological framework for the critical analysis of the elected data.

Transitivity is a fundamental and powerful linguistic tool for the analysis and interpretation of spoken and written texts since it is the foundation of representation. Within the discourse domain, transitivity is the way the clause is used to analyze events and situations. It has the facility to analyze the same event in different ways. According to Halliday (1985: 53), "transitivity plays a key part in the ideational function of the clause. The ideational function of a clause is concerned with the transmission of ideas"; the role of the ideational function is to represent the patterns of 'experiences' or, in the broadest sense, 'processes', which typically include 'actions or events of consciousness and relations'. Simpson (1993: 104) explains that "the transitivity model provides one means of investigating how a reader's or listener's perception of the meaning of a text is pushed in a particular direction and how the linguistic structure of a text is pushed in a particular direction and how the linguistic structure of a text effectively encodes a particular worldview". In the analysis of media discourse via transitivity, events and actions are described with syntactic variations that are a function of the underlying involvement of the participants in the discourse situation.

The study provides a profile of the two network perspectives of the Russian military intervention in Syria, outlining the themes used to represent the intervention and the ideologies revealed by those themes. In addition, it demonstrates how both of the American

and Russian news media linguistically construct ideological representations of the same event, and how these representations exercise a great deal of power in shaping our interpretation of the world. Through a detailed analysis of the linguistic structures used in the news, the study provides some insights into the ideological use of language and how language plays an important role in sustaining these ideologies through using various linguistic strategies such as: positive-self representation, negative-self representation of the other, manipulation, and criticism of Them' policies.

6. Analysis and Discussion

In its coverage of the Russia military intervention in the Syrian civil war, RT stressed that the process aimed at fighting terrorism and paving the way for peaceful settlement. It was also clear that RT stressed the idea that the Russian intervention, unlike the US-led coalition in Syria, is legitimate since it was officially requested by the Syrian government. In his comment on the US intervention in Syria, the Russian foreign minister Lavrov implies that the US intervention in Syria will lead to sufferings.

1- Wherever US used force bypassing UN, countries suffered – Lavrov to RT

The US-led coalition is bombing Islamic State in Syria with no UN Security Council mandate or invitation by Damascus. Historically, whenever Washington used force with no UN consent, they did great harm, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told RT.

To support this argument, RT reports one of the Syrian President aides as saying

2- Russia will succeed where West probably didn't want to – Assad's aide to RT

A Syrian presidential aide has praised Russian air support in the fight against terrorists, slamming the West's "ineffective" airstrikes. Media adviser Bouthaina Shaaban told RT she believes Russian intervention will help stabilize the situation in Syria

In this way, RT tends to portray a positive image of the Russian position and a negative one of the American one. Seo (2013) indicates that the discursive choices tend to highlight the concepts of positive-self presentation and negative-other presentation. This is referred to by Van Dijk as the manipulation of discourse (2006). The headline attributed to Lavrov emphasizes negative topics about *Them*. In the same way, headline No. 2 emphasizes positive/negative topics about *Us/Them*. The news is manipulated in order to represent positive topics about *Us* (Russia) and negative topics of *Them* (the United States).

In terms of transitivity analysis, we have a *process* in the two examples above. In No. 1, the headline refers to the sufferings of the countries where the United States used force with no mandate of the Security Council. The *participants* in the clause are the United States and countries. There is a correlation here between the sufferings of countries and the use of force by the United States which refers to the circumstances here. In the lead, we have the *agent* (the US-led coalition) and the *affected participant* (Syria). In example No. 2, Russia is the *agent* and the *participant* is Syria again. However, the *process* here refers to the Russian success and effectiveness in Syria. In headline No. 2, the message is clear: "Russia will

succeed”. The agent is Russia; it is the doer of the action and the process here is the success of the Russian efforts in Syria and this meaning is reinforced in the lead of this news. According to the speaker, the “Russian intervention will help stabilize the situation in Syria”. In this clause, the agent is the Russian intervention, the process is the stability of the situation, and the affected here is Syria. This is contrasted to the “West’s ‘ineffective’ airstrikes”. The implication here is that RT tends to give a contrasting image of the US-led coalition and the Russian intervention. By means of indirect comparisons, RT reflects the political ideology of the Russian government: the US-led coalition comes with UN Security Council mandate or invitation from the Syrian government and it is ineffective. The Russian intervention, on the other hand, is legitimate and effective. The *Us-Them* representation is clearly foregrounded in the above two examples.

In the two examples above, RT uses *material processes* in reporting the news: “The US-led coalition is bombing”, “whenever Washington used force”, and “Russian intervention will help stabilize the situation in Syria”. The objective is to foreground the effect of the actor on his goals. In other words, in describing the US-led coalition, RT tends to foreground the destructive role of the actor/agent on the goal/participant (Syria) and the effective role of the actor/agent (the Russian intervention) on the goal/participant (Syria).

Reports from CNN, in turn, stress the idea that the Russian intervention is merely to support the Bashar Assad regime. There is also a clear message that Russia kills civilians in Syria.

3- Putin: Russian airstrikes in Syria aimed at helping al-Assad regime

Vladimir Putin just confirmed what many suspected -- that Russian airstrikes in Syria are meant to bolster President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

4- Hundreds of civilians killed in Russian airstrikes in Syria

Russia's air campaign in Syria has killed hundreds of civilians and caused massive destruction in residential areas, according to a report released Wednesday by Amnesty International.

In examples 3-4, the purpose is not merely to report. CNN tends to give a negative image of the Russian intervention in Syria. It reflects the US and West ideology that the Russian intervention is just to support the Assad regime and it kills Syrian civilians. In example No. 4, the agent is clear and defined. This is ‘Russia’s airstrikes’. These killed civilians and caused massive destruction. The affected participants here are the civilian Syrians. This meaning is foregrounded by the use of the *material process* expressed in ‘kill’. The implication is that the Russian military intervention is of a materialistic nature and considers no human values. RT, on the other hand, reports it differently.

5- Over 1,600 terror targets destroyed in 1 month of Russia's Syria operation

6- Syria would be fully under ISIS control if not for Russia – Serbian president

In example No. 5, RT asserts that the Russian airstrikes target and kill terrorists, not civilians. It also highlights the Serbian President’s saying that Syria would be fully under ISIS control

if not for Russia.

In examples 1-6, it is also observed that lexical selection in the headlines and leads reflects clearly the difference of political stance of each news agency. According to RT, the Russian intervention is linked to achieving stability fighting ISIS while it is linked to destruction and killing civilians according to CNN. The implication is that both of the two agencies are concerned with forming the public knowledge of their audience and recipients. According to RT,

7- Russian airstrikes kill over 100 ISIS militants as Syrian army advances inside Palmyra

Syrian government forces aided by allied militia units have advanced further into the ancient city of Palmyra with heavy support from Russian airstrikes that killed 100 Islamic State militants over the past 24 hours.

The use of the noun phrase NP 'Syrian government' in the lead is an indication that it is the formal authority and acknowledged representative of the Syrian people. This is opposed to the word 'regime' used by CNN in referring to the Assad's government. CNN tends to remove any legitimacy from the Assad's rule in Syria. According to CNN, The Assad's regime is illegitimate since it is involved in killing the Syrian people.

8- Russian airstrikes in Syria may have killed dozens of civilians

Russian forces have faced a series of allegations of striking civilian areas since they began bombing parts of Syria last month in an effort to bolster the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a close ally of Moscow.

In example No. 8, CNN links the Russian airstrikes to the killings of innocent Syrians and imply that the Russian intervention is merely to support the Assad regime because he is an ally of Russia. The use of the word 'regime' in referring to Bashar Assad reflects the US political stance that 'Bashar must go' because he lost his legitimacy.

In the same way, RT raises doubts about the role of Turkey, an ally to the United States and a member within the US-led coalition in Syria. RT accuses Turkey of supporting terrorism and smuggling activities in Syria.

9- Turkey 'protects & supplies' Al-Nusra camps at its border – Syria's YPG to RT

Jabhat Al-Nusra terrorists have pitched their camps right next to the border and receive regular supplies from the Turkish side, Syrian Kurdish forces told RT's Lizzie Phelan, who travelled with YPG to investigate suspicious activity there.

10- Shutting off smuggling through Turkey-Syria border key condition for ceasefire in Syria –Lavrov

Ending smuggling across the Turkish-Syrian border is a key condition to make the ceasefire work in the Syrian conflict, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has said, stressing that he sees no reason to stop the Russian counter-terrorist operation.

In Example No. 10, the two NPs in the headline and the lead 'Shutting off smuggling

through Turkey-Syria border’ and ‘Ending smuggling across the Turkish-Syrian border’ make it granted that Turkey is involved in smuggling activities. This is given information. In this way, the concern of the two agencies is not merely to report. They exercise power over the recipients to form their public knowledge and impose their own ideologies. In other words, the two agencies adopt discursive practices whereby they produce and deliver their own ideologies.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how the Russian Military Intervention in the Syrian Civil War was socially, discursively and linguistically represented in the CNN and RT coverage of the event. The analysis examined the process of news making, role of ideology, and types of relationships between the news agencies and the political institutions in the United States and Russia. The data were analysed linguistically using transitivity analysis within the CDA framework. The main findings of this article can be summarized as follows.

Transitivity is an essential tool in interpreting discourse as it attempts to study and investigate the minute details of the linguistic structures in the light of the social and historical context of the text. It works then to display the potential meanings of texts and the intended meanings of the participants in discourse. It also gives more insight into the comprehensibility of media discourses and discourse analysis in general. Transitivity is thus a reliable method for uncovering the relationship between language and ideology.

The transitivity analysis and CDA of the selected data indicate that there is a close relationship between linguistic structures and socially constructed reality. Language is one of the effective means by which mass media construct and analyse what we call reality. Thus, we can claim that language plays an important role in shaping our understanding of various events due to its role in constructing these events (Schaffner & Wenden, 1995).

Mass media are used to manipulate their readers’ perceptions in order to reflect certain foreign policy positions. Analysis also shows that conflicting media and political positions are reflected in the discursive patterns of news headlines (Seo, 2013).

News discourse is not objective, but highly ideological. The news coverage of the two agencies in relation to the Russian military intervention in Syria is socially constructed. What is represented as reality is more about opinions and propositions than facts. This agrees with Fowler’s (1991: 101) argument that “anything that is said or written about the world is articulated from a particular ideological position”.

Media is a political actor in the dissemination of both Russian and American views on the Syrian conflict. Language is not neutral but a highly constructive mediator (Fowler, 1991). The analysis of the selected data indicates clearly that in their coverage of the Russian military intervention in Syria, the two news agencies RT and CNN tended to exercise some sort of institutional power over the recipients to form their public knowledge and impose their own ideologies. They used discursive practices in the production and delivery of reports and

news to construct the ideological power of media and political institutions. News and reports are not merely used to perform an informative function. These are used in order to exercise discursive and social power over the audience and recipients. Both RT and CNN defended the ideologies they supported using positive-self representation and negative-other representation.

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