

Syria in the Mirror: Discourse Analysis of the Media Definitions of the Syrian Conflict

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Abstract

In the representation of the events in Syria since the uprising of 2011, the conflict has been given different appellatives by the media. From “Syrian long winter”, openly in contrast with the media-invented term “Arab Spring”, to “Syria’s holy war”, different definitions have been used. In this article, I apply Critical Discourse Analysis’s principles in analyzing the expressions used to define the Syrian crisis. I take into account news articles containing explicit definitions of the conflict (published by both Arab and English media outlets in 2011; before then the presence of foreign journalists in Syria was prohibited). I argue that the media’s use of language to report the situation in Syria represents a process of intentional creation of “confusion and disillusion”. By assuming the “reflective tool” about the relationship between the facts, the representation of them, and the impact on the audience, I further claim that the coverage of the Syrian situation influences and limits the understanding of them by increasing the perception of chaos.

I. Introduction

Since the uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in 2011, the situation in Syria has been given different appellatives by the international media, such as: the “Syrian long winter” (Saddy, in an Aljazeera article, 28 September 2011) in the frame of the Arab Spring; “Syrian civil war”, the place of the “fight for a Darwinian survival” (Chulov, in a *The Guardian* article, 12 March

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2015); the “Syrian Jihad” (in an *Interfax* article, 10 January 2013); and “Syria’s holy war” (Sami Nader in an *Al-Monitor* article, 28 October 2015).

In this paper, I use Critical Discourse Analysis to study the language employed by the media to define the ongoing Syrian conflict. My approach to Critical Discourse Analysis is more social than purely linguistic, since I consider it as an instrument for better understanding the events in Syria. In Discourse Analysis’ perspective, language is considered as a mirror of the “power” underneath events (Al Masaeed, 2013, 5). For the purpose of this work, this is interpreted to mean that through the analysis of the media’s representation of Syria, it is possible to deduce the media’s power in the definition of the conflict and thus gain clearer insights of the facts.

I argue that the media’s use of language to describe the situation in Syria represents a process of intentional creation of *confusion* and *disillusion*. I assume the “reflexive tool” perspective offered by Critical Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2011), and Van Dijk’s idea surrounding the “mutual relationship of conditional influence between the events and their context” (Van Dijk, 2009). In this view, I claim that the definition of the events in Syria does not only and simply reflect the Syrian situation, but also influences the understanding of the events in Syria by increasing the perception of chaos.

In order to demonstrate my argument, I combine theory and practice, as framed by Critical Discourse Analysis. The first section of this article is thus theoretical and aims to describe my approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, its tools and its application in the context of the language of the news. The second section is practical as I use Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the news articles (in the form of reports, editorials, interviews and reportage) containing definitions of the Syrian situation. With the exclusion of foreign journalist from Syria since 2012 by the Syrian government, the most significant information about the Syrian revolution is that collected in the last

months of 2011. I take into account more recent news articles posted in 2015. The selection of the news articles does not follow specific criteria, but a matter of personal choice; I have picked the articles I consider best suited to my analysis. The third part contains an analysis of the readers' comments in the selected news articles. Here, I evaluate the hypothesis deriving from the analysis that the news definitions worked to increase confusion and disillusion towards the events in Syria. Since I assume language as a socio-cognitive process (Van Dijk, 2008) and a social interaction (as will be clarified later) it is important to study how the readers have understood the Syrian events as represented in the news, and how this representation has influenced readers' comprehension and knowledge of the events. Ultimately, a discourse analysis of the media's definitions of the Syrian conflict informs how the facts reflected in the news are filtered from the overwhelming perspective of chaos.

II. A Social Approach to Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis is "the study of language in use" (Gees, 2011). It pays attention to the "details of language" (2011, 4) such as grammar structures and vocabulary choice. Gees clarifies that there are various approaches to Discourse Analysis, each of them not valid *per se*, but according to its specific purpose (Gee, 2011, 5). My perspective is social rather than purely linguistic, as I consider Discourse Analysis as a way to critically understand events through the scrutiny of the language used to represent them. In this sense, the details of language are not only and simply productive of meaning, but also productive of social power. As Van Dijk observes, "Critical Discourse Analysis is primarily interested in social conditions of language and specifically in questions of power" (Van Dijk, 2009, 4). Language is always productive of social interaction and mutual influence in a given context, direct in case of oral (conversations) and indirect in case of written forms (texts). In the latter, which is the focus of my analysis, the context is restricted to "style", and the interaction is a procedure of "interpretation" (2009, 116).

The details of language can be caught if a text is analyzed in relationship with its context. Such approach is notably defined by Halliday (1989) "Social Semiotics", is a method to define the science of signs not as an isolated (as in the work of Saussure) or psychological oriented science (as in the work of Chomsky) but as a generally social structured system of meanings. In Halliday's view, the first word "Social" stands for the social context and the second one refers to the (social) meaning of the text itself. Halliday defines the social context through a very effective metaphor: "a bridge between the text and the situation in which texts actually occur" (Halliday, 1989, 5).

Halliday's linguistic theory of social semiotics is a common point of reference for other scholars who have written about language as a social structured process and product. Fairclough (1992) identifies three phases in this kind of analysis: firstly, to study the linguistic structure; secondly, to analyze the superficial content and all the aspects that link a text to its context; lastly, to find the internal and very often implicit, hidden meaning. The last step is the most "critical", since a simple text becomes a discourse as a social practice (Fairclough, 1992).

The analytical "bridge" between the text and its social context, then, is the capacity of finding the social structures that determine the discourse as a social practice in the textual configuration and vice versa. An important tool for this is the "reflexive tool", as defined by Gee: "saying reflects context and context reflects (is shaped by) what it is said (Gee, 2015, 85).

I apply this principle to my study in the context of language of the news. The critical linguist Roger Fowler (1991) uses the method of Critical Discourse Analysis in the news language. In particular, he focuses on the creation of the news as "representation of the world in language" (Fowler, 1991, 4). In his view, the process of construction of events in the news is subjected to selection and transformation (1991, 25).

One step in the process of transformation is the translation of institutional concepts into “personal thoughts” in a style used in interpersonal communication, with the intent of “narrowing a gap” between institutions and people (1991, 20). This creates a sense of “reciprocity” between the writer and the reader, although they have extremely different roles in the reception of the news. The journalistic strategies have to do with the fixation of the “normal style” in order to create consensus in the public (Fowler, 1991, 33). This is one media strategy to influence the perception of the public on the represented events.

Fairclough (1989) analyzes the process of media reception. His aim is to study “what social resources are drawn upon in the reception and interpretation of media, and what other domains of life media messages are linked or assimilated to in interpretation” (Fairclough, 1989, 195). A more recent approach describes the process called “the influence of presumed media influence” (Gunther and Storey, 2003). It is evident that it is a double, and reflective (to use Gee’s word), effect progression: “unlike the persuasive press inference, the process of presumed influence operates through perceptions of media impact rather than through perceptions of media bias” (Gunther and Storey, 2003, 635).

The theory on media impact has its roots in a very effective assumption: the “third-person effect” (Davidson, 1983). It is extremely significant for Discourse Analysis, since it is useful to show that the use of language influences the perception of the news. The use of the third person creates a sort of mediator between the message and the audience. As a consequence, from such a point of view, public opinion is not directly influenced, but it is influenced because “others” (third- persons) think it will have an impact on the audience” (Davidson, 1983, 1).

Ng and Bradac (1993) outline common practical strategies used for influencing the public and for presenting the event in a partial way. They include:

- Permutation is the use of too many words and synonyms to explain an idea, and it often communicates a sense of anxiety;
- Initialization is stressing the first word to give it more importance and to neglect or ignore the other words;
- Generalization is made by the use of particular formulas (e.g., “many people say”);
- Nominalization and passivization are a way to transform the logical appearance of the sentence (a verb is transformed into a noun and an active form into a passive);
- Identity switching is interchanging personal pronouns and their referents, very often in order to mask responsibilities or merits;
- In-group specific common ground is showing a shared common knowledge for the coordination of the social interaction and identification between the speaker/writer and the audience (adapted from Ng and Bradac, 1993).

With this brief description of the method of Discourse Analysis and its application, I now proceed with the practical task of doing Discourse Analysis. I aim to show how the theoretical tools and strategies described above are used in the language of the news. The analysis of the news articles as discourses (text with a form of social interaction) is helpful not only for determining the way in which they are assimilated by the audience, but also for understanding the events and, even more so, the evaluation of them by the writer.

In particular, the interest of this case study is in the analysis of strong-impact news articles containing definitions of the ongoing Syrian war. I assume that the media definition of the events in Syria, on the one hand, is a reflection of

the situation in Syria, according to the media style of representation. On the other hand, the media representation influences the comprehension of the events and transforms them, to use Fowler's word (Fowler, 1991).

III. Doing Discourse Analysis: The Media Definitions of the Syrian Conflict

(a) *Syria at the Beginning of the Uprising (2011): Civil war or "One Family"?*

As Phillips (2015) points out, accepting the political science definition of civil war being 1000 combat deaths a year combined from each side, in Syria it started "sometime between August 2011 and January 2012" (Phillips, 2015, 358). Since the early period in mid-2011, the Syrian revolution has been presented by the media as a "civil war" because of its cruelty without a clear definition of the war sides. I believe that this works to increase confusion and pessimism in the understanding of the events.

For instance, in his editorial for *Aljazeera*, Fehmy Saddy (28 September 2011) compares the Syrian uprising to the "Arab spring", defining it the "Syrian long winter". It is an interesting metaphorical construction, diametrically opposed to the well-known metaphor of the "Arab Spring": on the one hand, the adjective "Syrian" stands for the national configuration of the revolution; on the other hand, "long winter" stands for the violent nature. It is significant to notice that Fehmy Saddy explicitly speaks of "civil war", referring both to violence and to the internal general "disintegration" of Syrian population in the very beginning of the editorial:

Syria passes today through the most critical crisis in its modern history. It is not about who will remain in power or who will succeed the present regime. It is about the existence of Syria itself as a political entity. States, just like people, are born and can die. Modern Syria was created after World War One, and the present crisis presents the risk of its disintegration into small and separate entities with foreign

dominant powers. It is ironic that the Baath Party which promotes Arab unity would be the party that presides over the disintegration of a once united and strong Syria (Saddy, in an *Aljazeera* article, 28 September 2011).

Interestingly, in four years' time, the risk of a partitioned Syria is becoming a concrete possibility. Many analysts are predicting such a future for Syria nowadays¹. Could it be a "self-fulfilling prophecy"?²

Certainly, for the time of Saddy's article the tone is clearly apocalyptic: it is conveyed by the presence of the superlative adjective "most critical", referring to the whole Syrian modern history. Besides, the presence of terms such as "existence", "risk", and the repetition of terms such as "crisis" and, above all, "disintegration" stress Syrian internal socio-political divisions. Nevertheless, there is no mention to the distinct sections of the fragmentation.

A judging statement follows, introduced by the significant adjective "ironic", which highlights the ambivalent nature of Baath's policy. In Fehmy Saddy's comment, the ambiguity of the Party is expressed by the diametrical opposition between the elements: "Arab unity", "united and strong Syria", on the one hand; "disintegration", on the other.

The latter term is highly metaphorical and pessimistic, since it does not only mean the internal division between different entities of Syrian society, but it also stands for the destruction of the idea of Syrian unity itself. The reference to the creation of Syria as a modern nation, which is "born and can die", in post-World War One period, makes the future of Syria even more precarious. Even though it is true that nations are modern ideological imaginations³, the fate of nations, unlike that of people, is not always death.

¹ See also Rabinovich (2014) and Phillips (2015).

² See also Merton (1948).

³ On "imagined" nationalism see also Anderson (1991).

On the other hand, for the BBC Doucet (26 September 2011) in her reportage presents a more optimistic interpretation of the Syrian uprising (Doucet, in a BBC article, 26 September 2011). Opposed to that of the reporter for *Aljazeera* is the metaphorical presentation of the Syrian population as “one family” as in the title of the last section of the report. The metaphor is in contrast to the possibility of a Syrian disintegration and civil war. Doucet reports the voices from the streets of Damascus and its famous Naufura coffee shop, in which “The city's only traditional storyteller still holds court, recounting epic Arab tales of ancient conflicts and heroes of old” (*Ibid.*). This sentence is highly evocative, since it is metaphorical, but it is substantially obscure.

To begin with, the real subject is masked by the metaphorical and general figure of the “traditional storyteller”. Therefore, the content of the stories (the object) is *generalized* by the plural forms “epic Arab tales” and “ancient conflicts”, but above all, by the use of “old” as substantive. It can include the recent past as well as the history of Syrian origins. This sentence introduces the opinion of Shadi Rashid al-Khallah: “All Syrians are one family and we have a good future,” effused storyteller Shadi Rashid al- Khallah when I asked him about Syria's current story” (*Ibid.*). The name of the metaphorical figure is here revealed, but the metaphorical definition of him as a “storyteller” masks his true identity.

However, at the end of her piece, the journalist seems to partially distance herself from the reported voices about Syrian unity and the popular support to the Syrian President such as: “We love Bashar al-Assad” or “Everyone loves the President”. This position is expressed in the last sentence: “But it's a story that's still being written and is still hard to tell” (*Ibid.*). The initialization of “but” serves to overturn the situation and to present the critics of the author towards the previous ideas. Here the overturning is partial, since it questions the certainty of the reported opinions, not their contents. It is testified by the repetition of still and the use of the present continuous.

(b) *The “Syrian Autumn” after the “Arab Spring” (2015): Syria’s “Holy War” or “Syrian Jihad”?*

In another *Aljazeera* article (Sengupta, in an *Aljazeera* article, 15 March 2015) the transformation of the category Arab Spring is particularly evident. Firstly, the metaphorical expression “fallen leaves”, typical of autumn is intentionally oppositional to “Arab Spring”. From the title, we can guess that the exacerbation of Syrian case contradicts the idea of the “Arab Spring”:

Indeed, by several accounts, the immediate goals of the citizens of the Arab Spring countries, particularly Syrians, are no longer as lofty as choosing between continued tyranny and freedom or between dictatorship and democracy (*Ibid.*).

Then there is the explanation that “security” has taken the priority. The adjective “lofty” clarifies that democracy was an aspiration rather than a concrete demand. This can be seen as a way to reverse the hopes of the Arab Spring as the disillusion of Syria.

In the media's view, the level of inhumanity reached in Syria in the last four years has increased the distance from the target of peacetime. For instance, Syria has been defined as “The worst country in the world”, in which there is the “fight for a Darwinian survival” (Chulov, in a *The Guardian* article, 12 March 2015). The image effectively conceives the embryonic, Hobbesian stage⁴ in history of humanity in which Syrians are living.

What is misleading in this representation is the emphasis on the failure of the Arab Spring in Syria. Napoleoni (2015), for one, in her study on the rise of Islamic State, notices that this extremist group aims to represent an “alternative” to the failed Arab Spring (Napoleoni, 2015, 5). To deny the Arab Spring in Syria, with all its freight of positive values such a democracy, justice and equality, might end to reinforce the proposal of the Islamic State.

⁴ See also Hashemi (2013).

As far as the Islamic takeover in the Syrian conflict is concerned, in an interview with Charles Lister, author of the book “The Syrian Jihad” (2015), the title of the book represents the headline of the news article (Lund, in a *Canergie* interview, 24 November 2015). This works to transform the opinion of one into a general definition of the Syrian situation.

In parallel, this is also the case of the expression “Syria’s holy war” pronounced by the Russian Orthodox Church’s public affairs department Vsevolod Chaplin and reported, for instance, by *Al-Monitor* as a headline (Nader, in an *Al-Monitor* article, 28 October 2015).

Both the definitions “Jihad” and “Holy war” have a complex religious dimension respectively in the Islamic and Christian tradition. The former term can be translated as ‘struggle’ and here it refers to the fight for the implementation of the Islamic State in Syria. It is a form of semantic restriction, since the word *jihad* has different connotations in Islam: it can refer either to the internal struggle for personal accomplishment with Islam or to the external fight for the establishment of Islam⁵.

During the interview, there is no mention to the different meanings of the word, neither an explicit definition, which is taken for granted. On the contrary, it is implicitly referred to the evolution of the revolutionary movement in Syria. The passage is worth quoting: “evolution of a protest movement into a thriving but chaotic insurgency. That’s the background context I use to tell the story of how jihadists from outside Syria sought to establish themselves within that emerging revolutionary context” (Lister in an interview for *Canergie*, 24 November 2015). The clear expression “from outside Syria” contrasts with the combination of words “Syrian plus Jihad”.

On his part, the author of the *Al-Monitor* article compares “Syria’s holy war” to the Crusades by stressing the peril of their recurrence: “awareness of the

⁵ On the definition of jihad see also Sell (2007).

deep and still raw wounds they left behind” (Nader, in an *Al-Monitor* article, 28 October 2015). The violent nature of the situation in Syria is still an important component to define the events as it was for the definition of the civil war in 2011. In this case, it is stressed by the image of the “deep and raw wounds”.

However, the new element emerging from these two more recent definitions “Syria’s holy war” and “Syrian jihad” is the religious dimension, both in a Christian and in an Islamic sense. In the *Al-Monitor* article there is also the quotation of a statement by the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt: “The Islamic State [IS] cannot be confronted with a Christian IS” (Jumblatt quoted in *Al-Monitor* article, 28 October 2015). The use of the syntagm “Christian IS” creates a sense of confusion: it is a contradiction in terms since “Christian IS” should be transcribed as “Christian Islamic State”. There is no need to explain why the syntagm does not make sense.

Moreover, the association of the war of religion with Syria by the use of the genitive (Syria’s holy war) and the adjective “Syrian” for jihad concretely works to denote the Syrian conflict as religious. This is a media construction and transformation, because in the original statements the two terms jihad and holy war are not explicitly linked with Syria. In fact, in the interview, the author describes the jihadist groups as coming “from outside Syria”. At the same time, in the original quote by the Russian Orthodox Church’s public affairs department, Vsevolod Chaplin, there is no reference to Syria. In fact, his integral statement is: “The fight with terrorism is a holy battle and today our country is perhaps the most active force in the world fighting it” (Chaplin quoted in an *Al-Arabiya* article, 30 September 2015). Therefore, the use of the expression “Syria’s holy war” is a reversed generalization or particularization since the general “fight against terrorism” is reduced to a definition for the Syrian conflict. It is a form of syllogic construction or derivation created by the news article.

IV. Responses from the Audience and Results of the Analysis

One tendency of the media that has emerged from the analysis of the selected articles is the creation of confusion and disillusion in representing the events in Syria. In the perspective of the news language as an influential social process of interaction between the news creators and the news recipients (as shown in the theoretical section) the final task is to evaluate how the media representation impacts on the readers of the selected news articles.

As deriving from the “reflexive tool” of Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2011, 85), I claim that the understanding of the audience very often reflects the understanding offered in the representation of the events. The reflection, however, does not produce an exactly symmetrical and acritical comprehension in the reader.

Sengupta’s piece (“The fallen leaves”, art. n. 4) is fully commented by the readers. There, the metaphor “fallen” works to present the Arab Spring as a “finished event”, as described by Fowler in the process of construction of the news (Fowler, 1993, 21). In general, the public confirms the tendency to consider the Arab Spring in Syria a finished business with disastrous consequences.

Terms such as “concern”, “mess”, “chaos”, “violence” and “destruction” are frequently used by the readers. Some consider the prospect of democracy and tolerance of the Arab Spring a “falsity”, stressing that there were “no expectations” regarding a positive outcome of the revolutions. Clearly, there is the impression that the Arab Spring is a double edged sword, turning back against the Middle East, expressed by the sentence: “The Arabs are pissing into the wind they are making” (In a comment posted to *Aljazeera* on March 15, 2015 by “Seanote”).

One reader's voice is different in the chorus of the comments on that article. The commenter Piergiorgio Moro still believes in a future of "solidarity, equality, justice, and freedom" for the Middle East. His opinion is worth quoting:

Yes, the initial wave of revolutionary energy has been defeated by a combination of government repressions, reactionary groups (often backed by reactionary governments), and inexperience of many of the activists in relation to the nature of the state and its ability to adapt and strike back. Nevertheless, the situation is still unstable and we will see new, tougher progressive groups emerge (In a comment posted to *Aljazeera* on April 28, 2015 by Moro).

The comment reflects the generalization of the groups and of the dynamics involved in the Arab revolutions. However, it shows an historical awareness that the news is often intentionally missing to pack and deliver the events by using the "de-historicizing strategy" (Eagleton, 2007, 59).

Furthermore, Lynch, Freedon and Aday (2014), in their analysis of the tweets on Syria, observe the "fall of the Arab Spring" discourse in Syria after 2012 in the social media, as well. They argue that: "As peaceful protest gave way to insurgency and civil war, Syria became less "Arab springy" and more of a sectarian, transnational civil war with primary impact on its geographical neighbors" (Lynch, Freedon and Aday, 2014, 2). The view surrounding the negation of the Arab Spring emerged particularly after the exacerbation of the Syrian uprising.

Where the responses on the fall of the Arab Spring in Syria are generally a reflection of the dis-illusionary influence of the news, the responses of the readers of the articles on "Syria's holy war" (art. n.6) and "Syrian jihad" (art. n. 7) confirm the perception of confusion. In particular, two comments are interesting: "Do not see how the declaration by the Russian Orthodox Church

leads to a Christian IS? Seems a total non-sequitur” (In a comment posted to *Al-Monitor* on November 2015 by Len); and “fundamentalist Muslims have been waging their "holy War" (so-called) are now offended when similar terms are thrown back at them? What's good for the goose is good for the gander” (in a comment posted to *Al-Monitor* on October 2015 by Jim Carreiro).

The first comment expresses perplexity and communicates the difficulty to understand the combination “Christian IS”, a contradiction in terms as also noticed during the analysis. The second comment, which connects “holy war” to Muslim fundamentalists, is an instance of the confusion surrounding religious terms. Holy war, in fact, in the article is commonly referred to the Christian tradition, not to Islam.

This could explain that the use of strong-impact religious definitions by the media is not helpful to understand the events in Syria. On the contrary, it makes the situation in Syria even more chaotic. In fact, one reader of “The Syrian Jihad” speaks of “widespread misunderstandings” of the numbers and the facts in Syria (in a comment posted to *Canergie* on Decembers 2015, 13 by Ravan).

I suppose that a devoted focus on the specific case of Syria is necessary to study and to understand the Syrian conflict. However, the way of transforming Syria into an adjective or as a point of reference for religious violence, as in the media representation, appears as misleading. The language of the news, rich in associations and in generalized expressions, is not helpful to gain a clear view of the events. However, if seen through the lenses of a critical approach, the news still represents an important instrument to reflect on the Syrian chaos.

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