Representation of Syrian Refugees on CNN and Al Jazeera: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract:

Since 2011,Syria has witnessed a furious civil war that has resulted in a dangerous humanitarian crisis. Thousands of Syrians were obliged to leave Syria searching for a decent life.Some of these refugees succeeded in reaching their destination while others lost their lives.This paper seeks to investigate the representation of Syrian refugees in media discourse. More specifically, it aims to analysethe linguistic and discursive strategies employed by CNN andAl Jazeera in their representations of Syrian refugees through analyzing two articles published in 2015.It is a qualitative study that adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) drawing on the social discoursal framework of Norman Fairclough. The results revealed that there is no neutral representation, and that both channels dehumanized Syrian refugees by representing them as great masses of vulnerable people.

Keywords: *Al Jazeera; CNN;Critical Discourse Analysis; refugees; Syrian civil war.*

ملخص:

تشهد سوريا حربا أهلية شرسة منذ عام 2011 التي أدت إلى أزمة إنسانية خطيرة أجبرت آلاف السوريين على الهجرة بحثا عن حياة كريمة، نجح البعض في بلوغ وجهتهم بينما خسر الكثيرون حياتهم. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى البحث في وصف اللاجئين السوريين في الخطاب الإعلامي، بصفة أدق تحليل الأساليب اللغوية و الخطابية المتبعة من طرف   CNNو الجزيرة في وصف اللاجئين السوريين من خلال دراسة مقالين صحفيين نشرا سنة   2015. تعتمد هذه الدراسة النوعية على تحليل الخطاب النقدي باستخدام المقاربة الاجتماعية الخطابية لنورمان فاركلوف. أظهرت النتائج عن عدم وجود وصف حيادي للاجئينو أن وصف القناتين يجرد اللاجئين السوريين من إنسانيتهم من خلال وصفهم كأعداد هائلة من الضعفاء.

الكلمات المفتاحية:الجزيرة؛CNN؛ تحليل الخطاب النقدي؛ لاجئين؛ الحرب الأهلية السورية.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As a matter of fact, media has played a major role in the Syrian crisis; the various news agencies in the world showed a particular interest in what was going on in Syria. Each of the news agencies has portrayed the events following its ideology. CNN and Al Jazeera are pioneering channels in covering the Syrian crisis with its various aspects.

This devastating war led to a serious humanitarian crisis that forced Syrians to seek havens. Indeed, millions of refugees are scattered around the world, which has become one of the world's major concerns. These refugees have been represented differently by various news agencies.

The problem investigated in this study is the representation of Syrian refugees by CNN and Al Jazeera in question. For that reason, this paper seeks to answer these questions:

- Were the Syrian refugees neutrally represented?
- How were the Syrian refugees represented by CNN and Al Jazeera?

1. Overview of the Syrian Crisis

The Arab Spring, which has shaken some countries starting from 2011, caused a radical change in the Arab world's politics and social life. It started in Tunisia with the Jasmine Revolution, which resulted in overthrowing the Tunisian president, Zin El Abidin Ben Ali. Short after, it spread to other Arab countries like Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen. People in these countries demanded political, economic and social reforms in addition to democracy and freedom of speech (Cottle, 2011). After more than ten years, the situation in the countries that witnessed the Arab Spring remains critical especially in Syria, which is the subject of the current study.

The Syrian crisis can be traced to mid-March 2011 when a number of riots started from the Southern town of Dara'a and then rapidly spread to the whole country. Like their counterparts in other countries of the Arab Spring, the Syrian protesters demanded social, political and economic reforms. They also asked for removing the emergency law and for overthrowing the Syrian president, Bashar Al Assad, who has been in office since his father died in 2000 (Pradhan, 2017). The Syrian government tried to calm down the situation through introducing some reforms, but the protesters wanted more (Pradhan, 2017). Consequently, the civil demonstrations turned into a furious civil war with the government's military actions, the split opposition with its different groups, the different terrorist groups in the country (al Qaeda, al Nusra, the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic State of Iraq, and the Levant or what is commonly known as Daesh), and foreign intrusion in the Syrian local issue. Another factor that led to worsening the Syrian situation is the multiplicity of the Syrian community with various ethnic groups (Arabs, Kurds, Armenians ...) and religious sects (Sunni Muslims, Chiaa, Alawis, Druzes, Christians and a minority of Jews) (Pradhan, 2017).

Bombs destroyed most of the Syrian cities and towns. As a result, many Syrians left the country and dispersed throughout the world. It is estimated that millions are now refugees living in terrible conditions. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than half of the Syrian population left their homes with at least 6.5 million internally displaced persons and 4.9 million refugees outside Syria (Ekman, 2017). Most of the Syrian refugees fled to neighboring countries like Turkey (approximately 3 million), Lebanon (more than 1 million), Jordan (over 640,000), and Iraq (250,000) (Alhayek, 2016).

2. Media Discourse and the Syrian Crisis

Throughout history, mass media has played a major role in conflicts and wars. The Syrian crisis is no exception, for it has attracted the attention of the world`s main news agencies that compete to gain exclusive stories. The discourse produced by the media with its various channels helped in shaping the public opinion about the Syrian uprising. In this respect, Cottle (2011) claimed that media played a crucial role in "building and mobilizing support, coordinating and defining the protests within different Arab societies and transnationalising

them across the Middle East, North Africa and to the wider world" (p. 658). Hence, media can be considered as another front in the Arab uprisings.

The Syrian crisis is the most devastating human disaster in the present time (Doucet, 2018). It has resulted in a grave humanitarian crisis in favorof coverage for media (Day, 2019). Particularly, refugees'stories are represented by different mediafrom different ideological stances. In this respect, Fairclough (1995) stated that media texts "constitute versions of reality in ways which depend on the social positions and interests and objectives of those who produce them" (pp. 103-104). Moreover, media is controlled by dominant groups'ideologiesthat frame the news; therefore,itaffects and controls the dominated groups' minds (Fairclough, 1989). Such perspectives may explain the multiplicity of versions presented by various outlets as far as the Syrian crisis is concerned. Some voices/ events are foregrounded while others are downplayed which considerably differs from one outlet to the other.

Media played a pivotal role in covering the Syrian refugee crisis through portraying their adventurous voyages and miserable situations. In this regard, Day (2019) claimed that "Media around the world has participated in infiltrating the news with charged content regarding the Syrian refugee crisis" (p. 55). Different stories about Syrian refugees have been framed by various media outlets, includingCNN and Al Jazeera, which resulted in different narratives. For instance, the story of the drowned boy,AylanKurdi, constitutes a turning point in the relation between Syrian refugees and English language media (Alhayek, 2016). The bulk of the story lies in a young toddler,AylanKurdi,who,with his parents and brother,left Syria on a boat to go to Turkey.Unfortunately, the boat sank in the Mediterranean Sea, and the boy andhis brother died.

3. Critical DiscourseAnalysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis is a problem-oriented approach concerned with social phenomena and adopting different methods (Wodak& Meyer, 2001). Its origin can be traced back to Critical Linguistics, which emerged in the 1970s. CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that draws from various social and linguistic theories, including Systemic Functional Linguistics (Chouliaraki&Fairclough, 1999).

CDA is a discipline thatis "concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (Wodak, 2001, p. 2). Furthermore, CDA is: "... a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 352).CDA studies language in terms of what is foregrounded and what is backgroundedto unveil the ideology behind it. Additionally, Fairclough (1989) maintained that ideologies are deeply rooted in the implicit meaning of any discourse, including media discourse. Hence, an ideological analysis should focus on what is implicit rather than what is explicit.

CDA as an interdisciplinary approach that covers different areas, like media discourse (Blommaert, 2005). The latter aims to investigate power relations and ideology in media. There are various approaches to study media discourse,includingFairclough'ssocial discoursal framework thatrelates textual analysis to social analysis; i.e., it links text to context. Additionally, it studies both linguistic and semiotic aspects in media discourse (Fairclough, 1995).

Wodak and Meyer (2009) summarised the major principles of CDA in the following points:

>•It is problem – oriented, interdisciplinary and eclectic.
>•It aims at de-mystifying ideologies and power relations through systematic scrutiny.
>•Critical Discourse Analysis researchers also attempt to make their own positions and interests explicit while retaining their respective scientific methodologies and while remaining self-reflective of their own research process. (p. 3)

These principles clearly illustrate the uniqueness of CDA as drawing from a variety of social and linguistic disciplines. Furthermore, it puts ideology in the centre of its research.

II. Methods and Materials

This study is based ontwo news articles,as the core data,derivedfrom the official websites of CNN and Al Jazeera. The articles were published on September 4th, 2015. They tackle the issue of Syrian refugees, focusing on one story of a drowned toddler, AylanKurdi, who lost his life onhis way to Turkey. The motivation behind selecting these articles in particular lies in the story they covered to raise the world's awareness about the issue of Syrian refugees, demonstrating the power of media in exerting pressure on governments to take action.

The framework adopted to critically analyse the selected articles is Fairclough's Social Discoursal Approach, which is based on three dimensions: textual analysis, discursive practice and socio-cultural practice. Since there is no complete CDA and one can select just some elements to make a comprehensive investigation (Fairclough, 1995), lexicalization and reference, predication, and intertextuality are the main aspects chosen in this study.

The units of analysis in the chosen articles are the headlines and the news story. Headlines present the gist in the article as they "summarize the summary in one clause or sentence"(van Dijk, 1988, p. 226), and they attract the reader's attention. After that, the text and semiotic aspects in the articles are analysed.

III. Analysis and Discussion

1.Analysis of the Headlines

The headlines of the selected articles are:

CNN: Syrian toddler's dad: 'everything I was dreaming of is gone'(Fantz&Shoichet, 2015)

Al Jazeera: Drowned refugee Aylan's father: Let him be the last

> Father of boy whose body was found on a Turkish beach says he wants the world to see the plight of refugees. (Al Jazeera, News Agencies, 2015)

Al Jazeera's headline is relatively long as compared to CNN's; it contains a lead thatsummarisesthe article's story and that provides more details to the audience.Both headlines foregrounded the child's father's voice.

The drowned boy is referred to as 'Syrian Toddler' by CNN, and he is described as 'Drowned refugee Aylan' and 'boy whose body was found on a Turkish beach' by Al Jazeera. The word 'toddler' denotes that the child is too young for such a dangerous adventure. Al Jazeera, on the other hand, stresses the fact that he is a refugee who lost his life before reaching his destination. Additionally, the child's father is named differently; CNNnamed him'dad' while Al Jazeera labelled him 'father'. The word 'dad' differs from 'father' because it entails the meaning of responsibility, protection and guidance, whereas 'father' is more oriented towards biological factors. Such lexis can be interpreted as CNN's implicit blame on the child's father for not protecting his son who is still a toddler. Hence, according to CNN, the father assumes responsibility for what happened to his child while Al Jazeera seems more neutral in this regard.

Concerning the chosen quotes, CNN has selected a quote indicating the child's dad's hopelessness; however, Al Jazeera's quote indicates the child's father's hope to terminate the Syrian refugees'suffering. In the lead in Al Jazeera's article, the father made a call to the world to help refugees.

2. Analysis of the News Texts

2.1.Naming and Reference

One important aspect in news discourse is the way people are named; the choice of particular names and attributes can be ideologically-based. Richardson (2007) believed that "The way that people are named in news discourse can have significant impact on the way in which they are viewed" (p. 49). Therefore, the way Syrian refugees are referred to in the news

determines the way people view them. In the articles under investigation, Syrian refugees, including the drowned child and his father, are named differently.

Concerning the child's father, both articles alternate between the father of a Syrian toddler,Abdullah Kurdi, Abdullah, and Kurdi. Referring to him as a father by both channels foregrounds his character as responsible for his son's safety.

As far as the child is concerned, he is referred to as a two-year-old Aylan and the toddler by CNN. Al Jazeera, on the other hand, refers to him as Aylan, a three years old, and a Syrian toddler. Both channels chose names focusing on the child'syoung age.

The Syrian refugees are referred to differently across the two outlets. In the CNN article, they are named 'hundreds of thousands of people', 'migrants', 'Syrian refugees', 'people', and 'desperate men and women'.Al Jazeerarefersto them as 'refugees' and 'tens of thousands of desperate people'.Importantly,in CNN,the term 'refugee' is used just twicewhile the term'migrant' is used six (06) times. These labels are different, for the former stands for people who are forced to live their homeland, generally because of wars, whereas the latter term does not embody the meaning of force asmigrantswillingly migrate in search for a better life. Based on this distinction, itcan be concluded that through grouping the Syrian refugees with other migrants in this article, CNN does not see the need for Syrians to leave Syria. Al Jazeera, on the other hand, used the term refugees, instead.

Additionally, both channels portrayed the Syrian refugees as victims focusing on their massive numbers and their lack of power and will, using expressions such as 'hundreds of thousands of people' and 'thousands of migrants' inCNN, and 'the biggest movement of people'and 'huge influx of refugees' in Al Jazeera. Theseexamples fall under the category of massification whereby media coverage focuses on the number of refugees, portraying them as "a multitude of indistinguishable individuals" (Chouliaraki&Stolic, 2017, p. 1164). The second category, according to Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017), is passivation wherein media coverage focuses on the vulnerability of refugees, showing them as "bodies-in-need" (p.1164). Examples of passivation include 'desperate men and women'and'71 bodies' in CNN, and 'desperate people' in Al Jazeera.Both categories lead to "the dehumanization of refugees", though (Chouliaraki&Stolic, 2017).

2.2.Predication

Predication is an important feature of textual analysis; it is used to attribute values to people and actions. People can be characterized in terms of "quality, quantity, space, time" (Reizigl&Wodak, 2001, p. 54). The two articles included a considerablenumber of predicational strategies thatare used to represent the refugees, their voyage to Europe, in addition to Kobane, the city of the Kurdi family.

In describing Syria, CNN used the phrase 'a country eaten up by war'. The adjective 'eaten up' explicitly describes the Syrian civil war thatspread over the whole country.However, Al Jazeera'sarticle has not explicitly described the situation in Syria, but it implicitly connotes that it is devastating. Europe is described as 'a safe home' by both CNN and Al Jazeera.In describing the voyage to Europe, CNN used the adjectives 'dangerous, overcrowded deadly'.

In the chosen articles, refugees are specified with respect to quantity and quality. Indeed, predication is used to underestimate and dehumanize Syrian refugees; no positive characteristic is attributed to them. Richardson (2007) maintained that predication can be employed "to criticize, undermine and vilify certain social actors" (p. 53).The Syrian refugees are described as 'desperate' by both CNN and Al Jazeera. They are also specified in terms of quantity focusing on their great numbers.

In the CNN article, the following examples are found:

• … hundreds of thousands of people fleeing violence, who have flooded Europe, want – a safe home.
• trains packed with Syrian Refugees

Through using the words 'flooded and packed with', the journalists dehumanised the Syrian refugees, for they are quantified and their personal characters are not taken into account. Additionally, utilizing the verb 'flood' by media to depict refugees "reinforces the stereotype of refugees as potentially threatening, uncontrollable agents" (Tsakiris, 2021, para. 9). Therefore, CNN consideredrefugees dangerous people who migrate to Europe in huge numbers.

In Al Jazeera's article, these examples are found:

- tens of thousands of desperate people who risk their lives to seek safety in Europe.
- the huge influx of refugees
- a dramatic spike in the numbers of refugees

Al Jazeera also focused on the number of refugees who are leaving Syria towards Europe in search for a better life.

One striking point thatmarked the difference between the two articles is the way the city of 'Kobane' isdescribed. In the CNN article, the journalists have just mentioned that it is a Syrian city while Al Jazeera provided more details stressing that it is a Kurdish city. It is mentioned that 'the Kurdish Syrian city of Kobane' and 'the northern city of Kobane,'is a scene of heavy fighting between Kurdish forces and fighters from the Islamic state of Iraqand the Levant (ISIL) group. Hence, Al Jazeera aims to show the Kurdi family'sethnicityas a minority in Syria.

2.3.Intertextuality

BothCNN and Al Jazeerabackgroundedthe Syrian regime's voice, which is totally absent. The drowned child's father's voice is the most prominent voice in the two articles. They alternate between direct speech and reported speech.

CNN echoed Turkey's semiofficial Anadolu news agency;Aylan's father and his sister; a Canadian MP; the Department of Citizenship and Immigration in Canada;NiluferDemir, the journalist who shot the photo of Aylan; Turkey's governors' office; Human Rights Watch Deputy Director for the Middle East and Africa; the French president; some European officials and ministers;the UN high commissioner for refugees, Antonio Guterres; the UN foreign policy chief; Czech authorities; and some anonymous voices.

Al Jazeera, however, relied on seven sources only, which are Abdullah Kurdi, Reuteurs news agency, Hurriyet newspaper, Britain's Independent, the Turkish coastguard, Huffington Post's UK edition, and some anonymous voices.

The difference in the number of echoed voices can be explained by the factthat Al Jazeera focused on the story of the Kurdi family more; however,CNN gave more weight to the issue of migration towards Europe, for it did not solely tackle the Syrian refugees' problem but the problem of migration in general as well.

3.Analysis of Semiotic Aspects

CDA does not mean analysing the linguistic aspects only, but it also means a combination of both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects. The chosen articles include some semiotic aspects.

On the one hand, Al Jazeera's article encompasses a video drawn from Al Jazeera channel. The video sheds light on the tragic accident thatled to the death of AylanKurdi and his brother. It also exposes pictures of Aylanwhenfound lifeless on a Turkish beach. The video ends with making a call to the world to assist refugees.

The CNN's article, on the other hand, is rich insemiotic elements. It contains two videos thatcast the story of the drowned boy (Figure 1) and a lot of pictures that represent refugees (Figure 2).

Figure (1): Turkish authorities carrying Aylan Kurdi's lifeless body

Source: Fantz and Shoichet (2015)

Figure 1 shows pictures representing the drowned child, Aylan. They are widely portrayed in different media; they represent the body of Aylan as found by Turkish guards.

Figure (2): Human migration into Europe

Source: Fantz and Shoichet (2015)

Figure 2 depictsfour dehumanizing pictures showing refugees as unidentifiable desperate groups of people. In the first picture, for example, the refugees are assigned numbers and their faces are backgroundedas if they are criminals or animals. The numbers assigned to refugees are more prominent than the faces, calling us to visualise the pictures of slaves. All in all, the four pictures represent refugees as desperate people who left their hometown in search for a better life.

IV. Conclusion

Based on linguistic and semiotic analyses of the two articles, it is concluded that both CNN and Al Jazeera did not provide a neutral representation of the Syrian refugees. The latter are dehumanized byrepresenting them as great masses of vulnerable people who risk their lives

to find a better life in Europe.They are depicted as desperate individuals who dream of a decent life. This negative representation affects the way people view refugees and generates stereotypes. Indeed, such findings prove the powerful role of media in framing people's minds and controlling them.

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– **Appendices**

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