

Bias in media discourse: Media Coverage of Palestine's Membership in the United Nations

Rim Ezzina

Higher Institute of Languages of Gabes
University of Gabes, Tunisia

Abstract

This paper analyzes news articles and more precisely a textual analysis of the coverage of an international event which is the Palestinian membership in the United Nations as seen from the CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera. Relying on a combination of functional grammar and critical discourse analysis, this study investigates the discourse of each network regarding the Palestinian and Israeli people to demonstrate that news is (or can be) socially constructed and that reality in the press is more about opinions and propositions than facts.

Keywords: Media discourse, Critical discourse analysis, Functional grammar, Transitivity.

Introduction

A major role of the critical analyst as stated by Fairclough (1995) is to help the reader become aware of the tools used by powerful groups in society to exercise their control through discourse. In fact, the language we are exposed to as listeners or readers is the product of control and domination issued by broadcasters and journalists to shape their views. Starting with the microanalysis of grammatical features of the text, the analyst arrives at its macro analysis of social discursive practice.

1. Review of the literature

1.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

As stated by Fairclough & Wodak (1997), critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA) refers to the use of linguistic tools in order to uncover the opacities in the discourse which contribute to the exercise, maintenance, and reproduction of unequal power relations. CDA is hence an interdisciplinary analytical approach that attempts to disclose how language is used, manipulated, and abused in the exertion of power Widdowson (19981).

Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p. 271-280) also offered eight foundational principles for CDA. These principles will be developed in the next sessions. These principles are as following :

- CDA addresses social problems
- Power relations are discursive
- Discourse constitutes society and culture
- Discourse does ideological work
- Discourse is historical
- The link between text and society is mediated
- Discourse analysis is interpretive and explanatory
- Discourse is a form of social action.

1.2. Transitivity in the Systemic Functional Grammar

Systemic Functional Linguistics appeared with Michael Halliday who developed a new modal of grammar. According to Halliday (1994), systemic Functional Linguistics (hence SFL) is a functional theory with a new perspective to the study of language. Moreover, Halliday (1994) stated that 'language is a network of systems or interrelated sets of opinions for making meanings' (p. 15). Thus language is systemic. This theory is functional in the sense that it focuses on the functions and meanings of language, and this fact distinguishes SFL from other models. In other words, the functional approach to grammar can be distinguished from other approaches by the focus on the communicative and social aspects of language.

As stated by Wilson (1990), in studying media discourse, the objective of critical linguistics is to go beyond the description of language to the examination of the role of language in creating and maintaining political and social ideologies. Critical linguistics as stated by Fairclough (19992), based on systemic functional grammar, assigns much attention to the vocabulary and the grammar of the text because it provides different process types and associated participants as options, and systematic selection of a particular process type may be ideologically significant.

2. Methodology

2.1.Data description

The three media outlets which will be analyzed in the present study are CNN which stands for the Cable News Network, BBC stands for British Broadcasting Company, and Al Jazeera The corpus of this study is adopted from the online archives on the websites of CNN and BBC and Al Jazeera English. The CNN corpus is retrieved from www.cnn.com, the BBC corpus from www.bbc.com, and the AL Jazeera corpus is adapted from www.aljazeera.com. The first criterion for selecting CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera is the fact that these news channels are popular and engaging in global news. In addition, these networks are accessible and available to a large audience across the world. Behind the popularity between the three networks, the difference in the stands is another reason for the selection.

2.2.Analytical tool: The UAM Corpus Tool

The UAM Corpus Tool aims at the annotation of text corpora. This software is retrieved for free and is available at <http://www.wagsoft.com/CorpusTool/> . It makes it possible for the user “to annotate a corpus of text files at several linguistic layers, which are defined by the user” (O’Donnell, 2008). These texts can be annotated at many levels: document level, semantic-pragmatic level, and syntactic level (e.g., clauses, phrases, etc.).

This software attempts also to address the linguists’ growing interest in the examination of linguistic patterns which cannot be effectively explored through simple “concordancers” (O’Donnell, 2008, p. 13).

Despite its efficiency, the UAM CorpusTool is not an end itself. To put it clearly, this software allows extracting the processes but it does not offer the techniques and methods needed to accomplish the objectives of the investigation. Hence the use of the qualitative analysis together with the quantitative analysis will be necessary to accomplish the objectives of the study.

3. Data analysis

3.1.Process types finding

The following table shows the distribution of processes in the corpus under study.

Table 1. Process types distribution in the corpus

Network	Process types					
	Material	Mental	Relational	Verbal	Behavioral	Existential
CNN	58.91%	9.15%	14%	13.25%	0.85%	0.69%
BBC	59.37%	6.72%	10.54%	18.07%	1.68%	1.28%
Al Jazeera	59.58%	6.75%	16.35%	10.98%	1.38%	1.15%

According to this table, for the CNN and Al Jazeera networks, there is a tendency to use the material process type followed by the relational and the verbal process. For the BBC, the material process type ranks first, followed by the verbal and then the relational process type. As stated by Li (2010), the analysis of transitivity structures in the news targets two major types of representational processes used in the clauses: relational and actional processes. While relational process type establishes a relation between two entities or between an entity and a quality, the actional process type represents the relationships perceived in the physical world and the world of thought and perception, signifying events and situations. Therefore, studying the actional processes enable us to investigate how the events are presented and how participants are defined and distributed. In other words, this analysis points out to “who does what to whom”.

Table 2 displays the type of verbs allocated to the three major participants: Palestine, the US and Israel.

Table 2. Verbs associated with participants

Network	Al Jazeera	CNN	BBC
Palestine	Preside, replace, govern, continue, suggest, refuse, perpetuate, gain, hold, raise, try, get, go back, dispatch, sign, make, move, come	Invite, debate, go, face, join, commit, led, choose, enter, participate, vote, pursue, warn, snatch, live, apply, arrive, produce, start, bring, obtain, try, launch, obtain, control, run, criticize, legitimize, do, meet, wait, return, lob, maintain, look, hold, make, raise,	Present, submit, seek, pursue, participate, led out, fail, abandon, form, back up, continue, do, use, go, protect, violate, make, deposit, urge, delegitimize, take, control, throw, seek, launch, prepare

		begin, record, manage, control	
US	Grant, veto, go, oppose, renew, condemn	Work, engage, support, meet, stand, issue, block, oppose, continue, exercise, welcome, vow, reiterate, wave, make, give, fail, forge,	Veto, oppose, secure, use, stop, cut, urge
Israel	Support, celebrate, go, oppose, dismantle, suspend, end	Occupy, push, fail, prevent, move, withhold, show, try, stop, take down, give, strength, kill, support, treat, manage, accuse, hurl, prepare	Fired, offer, hold, oppose, occupy, form, reject, describe, live, dispute, react, act, restrict, withhold, take, bring down, negotiate, withdraw

As we notice from the table, the verbs related to Palestine are not verbs of actions, that is to say, although Palestine is the agent several times, it does not have the power to act. The verbs allocated to Palestine are not verbs of actions rather verbs of events. Indeed, Palestine is portrayed as a powerless participant. Whereas, the United States is associated with verbs of actions like block, oppose, exercise, veto. The US is represented as a powerful participant in the three networks.

However, Israel is associated with verbs connoting negative images in the Western media. Indeed, in the BBC corpus, Israel is combined with verbs such as fire, occupy, act, restrict, bring down and reject. Similarly, in the CNN corpus, the verbs allocated to Israel are occupy, kill, prevent, hurl, stop, take down. Although the verbs associated with Israel are negative, they emphasize the power and force of Israel as it has the power to act.

Concerning the verbal process type which is the third frequent process in the three corpora, the following table demonstrates the verbs associated with the three major participants in each corpus.

Table 3. Reporting verbs in the corpus

Participants	Network		
	CNN	BBC	Al Jazeera
Palestine	Ask, respond, tell, say, note, claim, confirm	Imply, insist, ask, argue, declare, call, say	Hint, request, ask, say, indicate, declare, tell, repeat, claim, insist, proclaim
Israel	Say, address, announce	Say, continue, indicate, speak, negotiate, add	Say, argue, insist, claim
US	pledge, promised, say, vow, declare, press	Say, repeat, vow, pledge, note, indicate,	Call, vow, say

		tell	
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The analysis of the reporting verbs associated with different participants reveals that it is clear that the verbs associated with Palestinian leaders in the Western media are less powerful than those in Al Jazeera. Verbs like say, ask, tell do not denote a strong voice for Palestine. While the verbs allocated to the US and Israel are much more powerful. Verbs such as declare, vow, pledge (swear) are more energetic and effective.

The kind of verbal processes accompanied by Palestinian participants are rather neutral in CNN corpus like say, tell. While in Al Jazeera corpus, there is a high density of verbs like insist, declare which foreground the insistence of the Palestinian authority to apply for full membership in the United Nations. The same verb 'insist' occurs with Israel in Al Jazeera corpus to show verbal opposition between both sides. In other words, while the verb shows the insistence from the Palestinian side to defend their membership, it also shows the Israeli opposition to such membership.

3.2. Findings related to the Agency

Transitivity, as an analytical tool, enables one to identify the participant who plays an important role in a particular clause and, the one who receives the consequence of the former's action. Put differently, a transitivity analysis of clause structure can reveal who is mainly given subject (Agent/Doer) or object (Affected/ Patient) position in a clause. This section is devoted to the results related to the participants' roles in the three selected networks.

A major finding for the agency in the CNN corpus is that several times the US is associated with another participant in order to show that the US's goal is to maintain a good relationship with both sides: Palestine and Israel. In addition, this fact shows the important role of the Obama administration in pushing the peace process and enhancing the negotiation process.

This finding conveys the desire of the US to show that it has good relations with both sides and that the Obama Administration is trying to find a solution to spread peace in the world.

This also highlights the assumption that the American media try to show that Obama organizes his social world more on a collective than on an individual basis. Indeed, the American president is trying to build a relationship of solidarity between the United States and the world.

In the CNN corpus, the focus is on foregrounding the power, of the United States and the Obama Administration, to decide on important actions in crucial times and situations such as the situation of Palestine, in the conflict with Israel, and in its membership in the UN. Power relations are manifested at the political and international levels. This is highlighted by the representation of the USA as a powerful country in the world which has the right to establish order and peace in the Middle East. The American media represent Hamas, "the main face of Palestine", in a negative way in order to justify not only the position of the US towards

Palestinian membership in the UN but also the illegal Israeli actions. Moreover, Hamas is referred to as terrorists who commit violent attacks, and this representation serves as a pretext to generalize this assumption all over the world. In addition, the aim behind these representations is to impose a view of the US and its allies as standing for 'good' and opposed to the other part as standing for 'evil'.

Another finding regarding agency is that in the CNN corpus, the instances where Palestine is an actor have no direct goals, in other words, Palestine acts but doesn't affect as its actions are not powerful. While the US is depicted as an actor and a sayer, the participant whose actions can affect others, that is to say, the more influential participant.

4. Discussion

Concerning the networks' fairness in reporting the Palestinian membership in the UN, this study examines whether or not media coverage is biased by the political attitude of key participants in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The bid outlines a symbolic step toward international recognition of a Palestinian state. This event is seen as important in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As stated earlier, the objective of conducting this study is to determine the differences in media coverage of the Palestinian bid for statehood at the UN among the selected networks. The reactions to this bid were different. The US and Israel opposed the move and argue that this move to the UN is a unilateral action claiming that the Palestinians should obtain statehood through direct talk and negotiation with Israel.

CNN generally adopts a pro-Israeli position, Al Jazeera, on the other hand, seems to take a defensive position toward Palestinians. The two positions are in line with what is commonly believed about the positions of the two networks in the conflict. In fact, CNN is believed to take the Israeli side like most American media because of pressures from pro-Israel lobbying (Mersheimer & Walt (2007)). Al Jazeera, on the other hand, is believed to position itself as a pro-Palestinian (Zayani (2005)). In the case of the BBC, it is generally believed to take a more balanced stance toward the conflict.

Accordingly, the fact that the American Network CNN reflected a pro-Israel bias is not surprising considering the close relationship between the United States and Israel. Indeed, as stated by Chomsky (1999), the United States is at the political center of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The US is not only the mediator between the two sides, but also it has a close relationship with Israel with diplomatic and military support that includes large amounts of annual aids as illustrated by Telhami (2002): "America is a key player in the Arab-Israeli issue.

The American commitment to Israel often pits the US against all others in international organizations." (p.178). The move to the United Nations is enhanced by the failure of the peace process and the 'two states solution' which is regarded by the Obama Administration as being the best way to achieve agreement between the two sides. The problem within this solution is the boundary between the two states which is still a point of dispute.

As far as the US involvement in the conflict, in late 2012 the US devoted extensive efforts to block the General Assembly resolution upgrading Palestine's status to that of a "non-member observer state." The effort failed, leaving the US in its usual international isolation on November 29, when the resolution passed overwhelmingly on the anniversary of the 1947 General Assembly vote on partition. As stated by Mersheimer (2007,p 5): "how the US should advance its interests in the Middle East, and how Americans and the rest of the world should think about the influence of the pro-Israel lobby because the Middle East is a volatile and strategically vital region and America's policies toward that region will inevitably have extensive repercussions."

They also maintain that the real reason why American politicians are so deferential is the political power of the Israel lobby. The lobby is defined as a loose coalition of individuals and organizations that actively works to move US foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction. Moreover, Mersheimer &Walt (2007) state that Israel is a vital strategic asset for the US. Indeed, it is said to be an indispensable partner in the 'war on terror, and that there is a powerful moral case for providing Israel with unqualified support because it is the only country in the region that shares the values of the US.

However, while the findings overall support three different orientations regarding this issue, viz. that CNN sides with a position of refusal on this bid, the BBC with a rather neutral position, and Aljazeera with a favorable position, it would seem that the question is more complex than that. Indeed, as will be shown below, there are also areas which are shared between the three channels; there are cases where CNN tries its best to show neutrality; there are also instances where Aljazeera 'ducks back', probably not wanting to get into what might sound as a defying position to the US; and there are certainly cases where the BBC shows some sympathy with the Palestinians, without altogether making it so flagrant that the Israeli side would take it very negatively.

5. Conclusion

This study relies on detecting linguistic features that allow for mystification in the three networks corpora. Concerning the application of transitivity analysis, the results show that in the three networks, CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera tend to use the material process type more than the other types. The dominance of the material process over other processes and consequently, the dominance of actor and participants' roles over any other role is clear in the study.

The findings of this study confirm previous studies on media coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. While similarities exist between the networks, significant differences were detected to show bias. When it concerns the American network, the findings confirm previous research mainly that the CNN coverage reflects a pro-Israel bias. Indeed, the CNN coverage shows a clear ideological line and on the one hands attributes responsibilities to the Palestinians, on the other hand, justifies the Israeli actions. This position has as objective to convince the American public of the Palestinian's responsibility for the violence that will prevail out of the unilateral move towards the UN.

The BBC coverage was found to be relatively moderate and balanced. It seems that BBC's coverage was more objective. This may be because its target audience is more international and does not support either side. BBC, thus, attempted to provide more balanced coverage of both sides and in doing so to promote a more neutral stance on the issue. The neutral position of BBC reflects the UK government's distance and neutrality regarding the conflict and the UN resolution itself.

Aljazeera demonstrated a clear position against Israel with a coverage conveying a pro-Palestinian bias. Again this is not surprising because Al Jazeera's perception of Palestinian as victims of Israeli aggression is prevailing across the Arab world.

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