

The Media Prism: A Linguistic Analysis of the Presentation of Events by News Reportage

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Abstract- A newspaper in its individual survival among the mass media is supposed to be more ethical than other media because, it is the newspaper that shapes the opinion and can construct the opinions in both progressive as well as regressive ways. The analysis of the news reportage and or editorial view points supposes to reflect the way and the prism of the news medium through which it looks at the event coverage published by it.

In this paper, a closer look has been taken at one news report on a significant incident, which took place during Gaza war 2014. The purpose of the analysis is to present the way reporters treat the events by examining the thematic and linguistic structures used in the report. This paper is an analysis of the thematic structure of the report, that is, how information is organized and sequenced and what topics are upgraded, downgraded, included or excluded in the text. Also included here is an examination of strategies of mitigation, accentuation, vagueness, etc., and quotation patterns which journalists use in reporting on the incidents. In addition, the text's linguistic structures focusing particularly on the transitivity and lexical selections have been examined.

The news report was published on 29th of July, 2014 by *The Washington Post*. The report is significant since it concerns the gruesome killing of ten Palestinian children at the hands of Israeli soldiers on the very first day of Eid – the holy day of Muslims; the day which is supposed to be merry making and joyful time for children.

Index Terms- Gaza War 2014, Hamas, Israel, Critical discourse analysis, The Washington Post, News Reportage.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Gaza War: A Glimpse in the History

The real Palestinian Israeli conflict started about 60 years ago when the Israelis displaced the Palestinians from their homeland; from their towns and villages. In the beginning the conflict was between Arab countries and Israel. But the Arabic countries themselves were not independent or free; most of them were under the British or French mandate. This made it impossible to fight a real war against Israel in order to free Palestine from the Israeli occupation. Most of the Palestinians became refugees in Gaza strip, then West bank and in some Arab countries; mainly in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

In the year 1956 Israelis attacked Gaza strip and Egypt. Both England and France, who were angry with the Egyptian president Nasser because, he nationalized the Suez Canal, supported them. The Israelis occupied Gaza strip, but after a few months they were forced to withdraw their forces owing to the

Russian and American warning. In the year 1965, the Palestinians founded the (P.L.O) Palestinian Liberation Organization, which has led the Palestinian Israeli conflict since then. Fatah has been the strongest and most popular faction in the PLO.

The Palestinian resistance factions are divided into two groups ' religious and secular. The religious factions are mainly two; Hamas, which is leading religious faction, and the Islamic Jihad, which is smaller and less popular. Although there are a number of secular resistance factions in Palestine, Fatah is considered the strongest; biggest and most popular among them. Another important resistance movement is the popular front for the liberation of Palestine. The other factions are marginal and they have a relatively small effect on the Palestinian struggle and resistance.

After that some other Palestinian Factions came into existence and have participated actively in the resistance against Israel. For the PLO the main goal has been to liberate Palestine and to make the Jews living in Israel go back to their original countries, all over the world. The armed struggle began in 1965 and continued till 1993 when a peace conference was held in Madrid (Spain). Four Arab sides were present in the conference, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and the Palestinians. Both the Arab side and the Israeli side hoped that the conference would lead to real peace and the negotiations between the Arabs and the Israelis began.

But in the year 1995 Rabin, the Israeli P.M, was assassinated by a Jewish extremist and since then things have been getting worse and deteriorating between the Palestinians and the Israelis. A number of meetings and conferences have been held between the two sides but without any substantial results. These meetings and conferences were held in SharmAsheikh (Egypt), Alaqaba (Jordan) and Camp David and Annapolis (USA). The last twenty years witnessed two Palestinian Intifadas (uprising). In 1987 the first Intifada broke out and lasted until 1993 with the Madrid Peace conference. The second Intifada broke out in the year 2000 and it was called (Al Aqsa) Intifada after Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. From the very beginning of Al Aqsa intifada the Palestinians have been suffering bitterly at the hands of the Israeli forces. The Israeli forces have been conducting a series of incursions into Palestinian areas in the West Bank and Gaza Strip destroying houses assassinating people mostly civilians and razing large areas of Palestinian agricultural land. Every day a number of people are killed and wounded by the Israeli forces. Some other people are assassinated or arrested. The Israeli forces conduct daily incursions into the West Bank and Gaza Strip large areas of Palestinian agricultural land in Gaza strip and West Bank are razed or confiscated to build Jewish settlements or the

annexation wall. Israeli forces usually shell the Palestinian residential areas killing and injuring a number of civilians. From time to time a number of Palestinian houses are destroyed as part of the continuing campaigns of retaliation against the families of Palestinians accused of involvement in the attacks against Israeli targets. The Israeli forces usually impose a partial or total siege or closure on Gaza Strip and the west bank. As a result of the Israeli Policy and aggression the Palestinian people have been suffering from very miserable and bad conditions. More than 70% live under the line of poverty and more than 60% are unemployed. People suffer from shortage of necessary goods such as food and clothing. Gazans live in a real prison since they can't travel abroad because the crossing points are closed.

The Israeli policy in West Bank has caused a great suffering and misery for the Palestinians. In addition to the curfew, which is usually imposed on the cities and villages, there are hundreds of Israel military checkpoints throughout the West Bank. These check points separate the West Bank cities and villages from each other and cause big problems and suffering for the people.

A dramatic and painful incident happened in the summer of 2007. Hamas controlled and dominated Gaza Strip by force and as a result Gaza Strip has since then been separated from the West Bank with the Palestinians having two political entities; a government in Gaza and another one in Ramallah. This has really weakened the Palestinians cause both locally and internationally. The moment Hamas started controlling Gaza, things started to take a different scale as Israel considered Gaza, as a threat due to Hamas dominance over it. Being led by Hamas Gaza suffered three tragic wars one in 2009, 2012, and 2014. My concern in this study is the 2014 war as it was the longest and the most tragic one and it is still affecting people in Gaza on a daily basis.

1.2. Journalism: Role of News Paper Reportage

News as per Fowler's (1991: 4) is basically a practice of making social reality and this process is dynamically produced, transmitted and imbibed in and through language. This understanding resonates with view that news is a depiction of the world in language; for language is a semiotic encryption, which foists a structure of values, social and economic in origin, on whatsoever is represented; and hence unavoidably news, like any other discourse, constructively patterns that of which it speaks. News is a representation in this sense of construction; it is not a value-free reflection of 'facts'.

Possibly the most crucial means of media impact comes from the language of news that requires the frames and linguistic structures qualifying individuals of a social group to convey and express their opinions about their proximate environment and the remote world 'out there'.

Ours is a highly mediated, a multifaceted world, in which the news media are abundant and dominant sources of knowledge-sharing, ways for setting of agendas and windows for the shaping of opinions. Moreover, the media play a substantial role in the diffusion and inculcation of a social group's values, beliefs and ideologies, and at the same time they are profoundly pivotal in constructing, influencing or challenging how one social group – in a broad sense – perceives, relates to, and represents 'other' social groups (Amer, 2008)

1.2.1. Journalism: Ethical Considerations

The notion and treatment of "news" as discourse representation could not be more evident than in reading a news item about a high-impact political event say, a Palestinian attack against Israelis or an Israeli army incursion into occupied Palestinian territories in news coverage of the war by The Washington Post (hereafter the WP), the British daily *The Guardian*, the Palestinian newspaper *Al-Ayyam* or the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* etc. What we would see in these papers are surely different and probably competing 'representations' of the same reality; each representation has its specific frames, meanings, structures and conditions of news production and reception.

Pondering into the nuances of language of newspapers as discourse representation, the representation has been viewed following Hall (1997), as "the production of meaning through language" (p. 16), and this meaning-production practice is socially and culturally conditioned because meaning "does not inhere in things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice – a practice that produces meaning, that makes things mean" (p. 25). Minimizing the risk of redundancy, it is important to accentuate here that news texts do not constitute transparent, objective carbon copies of the reality 'out there', but they are often the product of overlapping socio-economic, cultural, ideological, and personal dimensions and contexts. Again, another quote from Fowler (1991: 10) drives the point that:

"Anything that is said or written about the world is articulated from a particular ideological position: language is not a clear window, but a refracting, structuring medium. If we can acknowledge this as a positive, productive principle, we can go on to show by analysis how it operates in texts".

Therefore, starting from the proposition that there are often disparate and sometimes-conflicting representations of the same social reality, critical discourse analysts zoom their analytical gaze on the way a specific representation is produced and legitimized. This is often done through an analysis of both the linguistic manifestations integral to such a discourse representation and the wider contexts within which this representation is produced.

II. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The Rationale Of The Study, "The Media Prism: A Linguistic Analysis of the Presentation of Events by News Reportage", accounts for conclusion(s) drawn on the basis of analysis of various parts of the newspaper Report and its coverage aiming at confirmation of the construction of legitimate actor(s) and its alignment for prejudice(s), towards any of the actors in Gaza war, within its representations.

This study interests not only to give an account of what journalists actually stated, rather attaches more to identifying the meanings and forms which journalists employ in constructing and evaluating political actors and their violent actions during the war. A special attention has been to how linguistic structures help contribute to the legitimation or delegitimation of political actors and their actions along with their potential effects on the way readers are positioned to comprehend the war and how stereotyping has been constructing as the resultant of the process of nomenclature.

III. METHOD AND APPROACH

Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), an analytical framework has been worked out, which is fashioned keeping in view the Fairclough's (1992) and van Dijk's (1991, 2001) CDA models. The analytical framework aspires at (1) inspecting discourse meanings by the way of investigating topics and propositional meanings communicated in the texts, (2) examining surface structures through analyzing certain syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic features of the texts and (3) connecting the forms and meanings of the newspaper discourse to their ideological, political, cultural and institutional contexts in order to locate the study goals well.

Based on this analytical framework, the main topics, which emerged from the data analysis and are dominant throughout the whole text corpus has been recognized. Data analysis involves examining propositional content and key textual properties such as lexical and syntactic selections, metaphors, presuppositions, intertextual traces of other voices and discourses and patterns of exclusion, inclusion, mitigation and emphasis.

In addition to looking at the whole text corpus, not any op-ed was selected for given to the main objectives of the study those can be treated as third person ideas outside the WP family and two news reports and two editorial write-ups by the editorial board reflecting the personal views of the WP, for a detailed critical discourse analysis. Since news headlines occupy a prominent role in news reporting, a transitivity analysis of news headlines about violence in order to determine how headline editors generally define and evaluate the violent acts of Palestinian and Israeli actors has been provided besides news reports and the editorials.

Finally, the findings of (inter)textual analyses have been bonded to the processes and contexts of news production and reception, which relate to how the WP covers the War. These involve political and cultural contexts, economic factors, news gathering routines and editorial policies which are basically invisible to the readership but are comprehended in the linguistic and other semiotic choices journalists make in their texts.

Therefore, the analysis of editorial discourse on any event needs to account for both the textual choices adopted and the social constructions and the cultural climate in which an editorial discourse is embedded.

IV. ANALYSIS OF THE NEWS REPORT

On 29th of July 2014 The WP published this news report. The news report analysis focuses on the way an important incident is constructed including the linguistic resources available to the reporter in her/his representation of actors and their actions.

A significant research into the reports available has been made to finally choose the present news report. In this news report The WP is reporting the killing of 10 Palestinian children on the first day of Eid-ul-Fitr, one of the most important Muslim festivals celebrated all over the world after fasting for one whole month the month of 'Ramadan'. Since, the day of Eid-ul-Fitr, being festive in its nature, is supposed to be the happiest day and if parents lose their kith and kin on this day; it is of course painful. Nonetheless, the WP has reported this as the following:



Screenshot: the News Report obtained from online, the WP – July 29, 2014.

This incident was so important that it captured the front-page headlines of various newspapers released on July 29, 2014 with a big typography banner headline reading 10 Palestinian children killed. The way news papers treated this news headline with large style and size, which was stretched across the front page, may indicate that the headline's editor wanted to

emphasize and magnify the offensive not only to show that 10 children were killed.

Though, the WP treated the headline in the same way as shown above in the screenshot. Although very clear, styled large but the way it reads the headline is totally ambiguous as, "Netanyahu warns Israel to prepare for long Gaza conflict, as at least 10 more are killed." A very clear semantic ambiguity can be

seen in the headline. Since the reader encounter such a headline, which consists of two clauses, the first tells about Israeli prime minister warning Israel to prepare for some long conflict in Gaza and the next clause talks about 10 more dead. And this kind of ambiguity in both clauses of the headline makes readers understand different news than the reality itself.

Reading the first clause one feels that the offensive is taking place by the Palestinian actors and Israel needs to be cautious. Likewise, the second clause provides misleading news of killing of ten more 'people' as if more killing took place before not by Israel but even by the Palestinian actors. One more thing to take into consideration here is that they didn't even mention the identity of the dead, whether they are Palestinian or Israeli, men or women, children or adults and so on. With this kind of ambiguity of this news headline, the readers will not be able to understand the news from the headline.

Thus the headline does not show hence conceals the actual agent or a direct agent for the offensive of killing. Furthermore, the construction of the second clause of the headline is in passive voice and is a dependent clause. The passivation and relational dependency in the clause reveals that the editor has chosen a style to conceal the direct agent. In fact, the ten children were killed as a result of Israeli offensive that also on the eve of Eid-ul-Fitr.

Now let's take a look at the first paragraph of the report which reads:

"Israel will press its air and ground offensive in the Gaza Strip, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday, preparing his country for a longer and bloodier campaign and dashing hopes that the three-week-old conflict would end soon."

The paragraph consists of three clauses. In the very first of this paragraph one can see that the first clause reads about future plans of Israel and so does the second one but the third one reads about the present situation. In the first clause i.e. *"Israel will press its air and ground offensive in the Gaza Strip"* the editor chooses to the future tense which entails that something against Israel has happened already and so Israel needs to increase air and ground offensive. It symbolizes Israeli anger and hence speaks about the Israeli plans as an affirmation has been given by the Israeli Prime Minister, which can be read in the second clause, *"Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Monday"*. Further, it talks about preparation for, *"longer and bloodier campaign"*.

The editor's choice to adopt the comparative degree *long* and *bloody* induces presupposition among the audience that something long and bloody has already happened and now preparation for *longer* and *bloodier* is going to happen, however the actor here is concealed and can't be figured out. Finally, it reads about dashing of the hopes for ending the conflict. Hence the backgrounding of the Israeli agency is clear as seen in the paragraph.

The second paragraph reads the rejecting of appeals for an immediate cease-fire from the US, the UN and others by the Israeli PM. The rejecting of the appeals is cited for two different reasons. One is that Israel wants to keep the offensive going on unless it neutralizes all the tunnels through which Hamas infiltrates Israel. The other reason cited as the protection of Israeli citizens and its children. Though, this paragraph hints on Israel being the agent of the action but it tries to substantiate its offensive with the reasons cited. The line that reads, *"the tunnels,*

he said, have the sole purpose of destroying our citizens, killing our children." This line invokes human ethical concerns for their children and thus justifies the statement. However, this statement conceals the death of Palestinian children killed by the Israel. In this way the WP obviously shows its prejudice towards the Israel and reports in a way as if it reports for the justification and advocacy of their offensive.

Netanyahu's justifying statement can be taken as a word play creating and endorsing a myth of security concerns. The words used by him while defining the tunnels are a nice word play that arrives at the myth of security concern. For instance, tunnels (= Hamas tunnels) sole purpose (= only motive) in his statement, *"the tunnels have the sole purpose of destroying our citizens, killing our children"*. The security concern can be treated as a myth as this type of security is at the cost of the lives of Gaza people and their children.

The newspaper has reported this 'myth' in support of the justification for the Israeli attacks on Gaza people and their children. This statement of the prime minister also takes a levy on striking stereotypes on Gaza's resistance groups. As the phrase 'sole purpose' used in the statement can be taken as a stereotyping token for Hamas for it conveys the image of Hamas as some blood thirsty group who want to destroy the otherwise 'peaceful and peace loving Israel'.

The third paragraph of the same report which reads, *"Israel's antagonist, the Islamist militant organization Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, continued to unleash deadly mortar and rocket fire, triggering air raid sirens across Israel"* has been drafted carefully by choosing certain lexical items building different phrases that define the Hamas unlike the Israel. Here it needs to be emphasized that in the previous report and throughout this report as well, the word Israel has been used as 'Israel' only and has not been served with any adjective unlike the word 'Hamas' to define it.

Nonetheless there are two phrases in this paragraph which are used for Hamas, *'Israel's antagonist'* and *'the Islamist militant organization'* to define it. The two phrases need to be analyzed for their occurrence. The structure these phrases build is that of an adjective phrase. So, the two adjectives have been served before the word 'Hamas' in order to define and to tell more about Hamas. Thus these two phrases define Hamas as the Israeli opponent who are an Islamist militant organization. Whereas Hamas has an already its political definition served in many books and literature which can be summed up as a Palestinian Sunni-Islamic organization which is governing authority of the Gaza Strip. Here I am just trying to show that the WP is prejudiced towards Israel and that is why it needs to define Hamas. This defining as an Israel's antagonist, Islamist militant organization' conveys the negative meaning of Hamas which diminishes the role of Hamas as Palestinian national.

The WP is supposed to be fair otherwise, given to the definitions of Journalism. But it chooses different words, which serve as adjectives to create or degrade the image of an organization. The lexical item, the noun militant used for the Hamas clearly shows that the WP is reporting as if being the ally of the Israel. This usage of the word *militant* clearly shows stereotyping of Hamas. Because, if Hamas is a militant organization that means Israel can be a legitimate one in whole

of the war going on. This way, the WP is legitimizing the Israeli offensive also.

Now keeping in view the above paragraphs and the content, it can be concluded that after reading about Israel's plans, their justification and the use of adjective phrases for the Hamas the WP is displaying its biasness towards Israel.

However, the next paragraph of the news report, '*In Gaza City, explosions Monday rocked a neighborhood and left at least 10 people dead, including children playing on a street, as a brief lull on one of Islam's holiest days gave way to fresh attacks and tragedy*' connects to the second part of the headline of this news report which is *as 10 more are already dead*. This paragraph reads about the explosions that rocked a part of Gaza city leaving 10 people and children dead. It misses the agent behind explosions and speaks nothing clear about the 10 people whether they are Palestinians or Israeli. Since the incident happened on one of the holiest days and it is assumed to pave way for fresh attacks and tragedy. Again the question is about the agent but the agent that will start the 'fresh attacks and tragedy'.

After talking about the number of casualties reported by the Palestinian health officials, the next paragraph reads about Hamas blaming Israeli airstrikes for the tragedy. The transitivity in the shape of material process can be has been adopted by the WP to report the agent of the action which comes out as 'Israeli air-strikes' and the human agent – Israel, for that matter. Also, the agent has been cited as an 'alleged' one which is not clear whether it were the Israeli air-strikes or not. Because the word *blame* has been used to describe the agent of the action as follows:

Hamas officials blamed Israeli airstrikes for the blasts at the al-Shati camp, also called Beach Camp. A spokesman for the Israel Defense Forces denied firing at the neighborhood and attributed the explosions to failed rocket launches from Gaza militants.

Furthermore, the claim of Hamas has been denied by the Israeli Defense Forces' spokesman and attributed the same to Gaza militants, which may be other than Hamas also. Thus the agent of the action cannot be clearly defined here. Moreover, the agent of the action as per the claim of the Israeli Defense Forces' spokesman is a material agent i.e. 'the failed rocket launches' and this phrase provides a simultaneous perception of failure of Gaza militant's action and the safe side of Israeli military. It can also be compared with the meanings of weakness and strength respectively.

The backgrounding of the agent is clearer in the next paragraph of the report in which it has been a general statement made rich enough to the audience to conclude that the offensive was an unwanted tragedy which both of the 'assumed agents' have denied. The report says both Israel and Hamas has denied the responsibility of the action.

It needs to be noted here that I used the term 'assumed agents' that shall mean Hamas and Israel. As both are antagonistic to each other and are the two prominent agents of the Gaza war, 2014.

Later on the news report reads Hamas statement that talks about the revenge that the occupation has to face at their hands. The word 'occupation' used by the Hamas has no elaboration by the news editor. So, it cannot be slammed over the Israel as it

hints to be Israel because it is a statement of Israel's antagonist in the Gaza.

While reading the statement of the UN Security Council that calls for a humanitarian cease-fire ahead of Eid and beyond, the report adds Benjamin Netanyahu's statement in which he rebuffs the call for cease-fire supporting his rejection statement by demonstrating insecurity of Israeli citizens. In this way the report hints at somewhat legitimacy of the Israel.

4.1 Quotation Patterns

Adding to the reporter's description of the incident, much of the text is devoted to different accounts of and verbal reactions to the incident with quotes from Israeli, American and Palestinian newsmakers. As a main component of news reportage, journalists draw on other voices and news sources as a strategy to enhance the credibility of the reportage and sometimes to convey a dramatic, vivid live broadcast of the events taken place. Bell (1991) points out that a quotation "adds to the story the flavor of the newsmaker's own words." (p. 209).

Similar to the news report on the Ground Incursion and children killing incident, the reporter in the reports rely more on Israeli sources in accounting for and reacting to the event. The sources quoted on the Israeli side are institutional, authoritative figures such as Army officials, the Prime minister and other ministers which according to (Bell, 1991) make their views more credible and newsworthy than citing individuals. There are some paragraphs, which include direct or indirect quotations from Israeli sources e.g. "They are really stressed. They have to work very hard to achieve meaningful or strategic developments," said Kobi Michael and Kobi Michael is Senior Research Fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies (JIIS)

While journalistic constraints such as access and availability of news sources may determine the type and frequency of news sources, this pattern of using senior named Israeli officials to explain the events, makes their account of events more credible compared with that of ordinary people whose objectivity and credibility may be questioned. For example, the reporter makes an effort at including the Palestinian account of the incident, in paragraphs 5, 6, 12 and 15 of this report is only included after the Israeli version of the event is well established. Further, the Palestinians' account, contrasted with official Israeli official statements, which are portrayed as being less reliable. The expected contradictory accounts from Israeli and Palestinian sides do not, however, translate into how the reporter treats the event. Rather, s/he seems to attach more weight to the Israeli official account of the incident and her own observations seem to back this account, as clearly indicated in the usage of words chosen.

4.2 Perspective and Authorial Evaluation

In addition to the reliance on direct and indirect quotes, the reporter also includes her own perspective and evaluations of the situation. Perspective refers to the viewpoint or position which reporters write from or identify with in reporting on a particular event (van Dijk, 1991). In this report the paragraphs 3, 10, 14, and 17 are particularly illustrative examples of a subjective process of foregrounding certain aspects of the situation and de-emphasizing and excluding other aspects.

For instance, in paragraph 26 of this report, the reporter makes an implicit reference to Palestinian actors in the clause “a murderous terrorist organization”. Not only does this reference suggest a negative evaluation of Palestinian actors, nevertheless also it ironically emphasizes themes of irrationality, lawlessness and inexplicable violence.

[26] Netanyahu heaped scorn on the U.N. statement, saying it focused on “the needs of **a murderous terrorist organization** that is attacking Israeli civilians and does not address Israel’s security needs, including the demilitarization of the Gaza Strip.”

V. CONCLUSION

The overall conclusive remark of this paper can be hence summed up as the Washington Post on Gaza War 2014 is biased and prejudiced in constructing and reinforcing Israeli narrative. Moreover, the newspaper has been observed tried legitimize Israel and its actions on the contrary delegitimize Hamas and Palestinian Agents and their actions. Through backgrounding the Israeli agent whenever and any violent action is taking place against the Palestinians by using passivation, backgrounding and other linguistic features that can be seen on the analysis. Finally, one can say that the Washington post needs to be more reasonable when choosing its resources to cover a newsworthy incident and to take into consideration all the angles of a certain

reportage to show the reality rather than concealing it in favor of an agent against the other.

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