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Unveiling Manipulation: Applying van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach to Analyze Bashar Assad's Political Speeches During the Syrian Revolution

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مجلة
تبيك
للملوم التربوية والاجتماعية

المجلد الخامس – العدد الثاني – 2025م

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مركز بحثي مستقل أكاديمياً، أسس عام 2020م، يختص بالدراسات والبحوث الأكاديمية، وقضايا التعافي المجتمعي، ويعمل على رفد الحكومات والمنظمات والجهات الفاعلة بالدراسات والاستشارات المبنية على أسس علمية التي يمكن الاعتماد عليها في وضع خطط مستقبلية تسهم في تطوير المجتمعات وتحقيق التنمية المستدامة.

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معايير النشر في المجلة

1. يجب أن تحتوي الصفحة الأولى من البحث على عنوان البحث واسم الباحث أو الباحثين، والتوصيف الأكاديمي والمنصب الوظيفي، والعنوان، والبريد الإلكتروني، وتاريخ البحث. إضافة إلى اسم الباحث، وتوصيفه الأكاديمي، ومنصبه الوظيفي باللغتين الإنكليزية والتركية.
2. من أجل ضمان سرية عملية التحكيم، يجب عدم ذكر اسم الباحث أو الباحثين في صلب البحث، أو ذكر أية إشارات تكشف عن أشخاصهم، وعند رغبة الباحث أو الباحثين في تقديم الشكر لمن أسهم أو ساعد في إنجاز البحث، فيكون ذلك في صفحة مستقلة.
3. تقديم ثلاثة ملخصات للبحث؛ باللغات العربية والإنكليزية والتركية، بحد أقصى (120) كلمة لكل منها، ويكون كل ملخص في صفحة مستقلة، على أن يحتوي الملخص على عنوان البحث، وخمس كلمات مفتاحية، وبدون ذكر أسماء أو بيانات الباحثين.
4. لا تتجاوز عدد صفحات البحث بأي حال (30 صفحة)، بما في ذلك المراجع، والجداول، والأشكال، باستثناء الملاحق.
5. أنماط الكتابة وصيغتها تكون كالتالي: مقاس الصفحة (B5)، وبتباعد أسطر بقدر (1,5)، وهوامش (2 سم كحد أدنى) لكل من أعلى وأسفل وجانبي الصفحة، (شاملة الهوامش، والمراجع، والمقتطفات، والجداول، والملاحق).
6. نمط الكتابة:

• للغة العربية: Traditional Arabic حجم الخط 14

• للغة الإنكليزية: Times New Roman حجم الخط 14

7. أن يكون البحث المقدم إلى المجلة مدققاً؛ من الجوانب الإملائية واللغوية والنحوية.
8. في حال استخدم الباحث أداة من أدوات جمع البيانات، فعليه أن يقدم نسخة كاملة من تلك الأداة، ترفق في طلب النشر.

9. تعمل المجلة على تأصيل منهج البحث العلمي، وتؤكد بأن البحوث المرسله يجب أن تتكون من الأجزاء التالية:

مقدمة البحث، مشكلة البحث، أسئلة البحث، أهمية البحث، أهداف البحث، محددات البحث، التعريف بالمصطلحات، الدراسات السابقة، منهجية البحث، الإطار النظري والعملي (إن وجد)، عرض النتائج، مناقشة النتائج، التوصيات والمقترحات.

10. توثيق المراجع والمصادر، داخل البحث وفي قائمة المراجع، وفقاً لنظام جمعية علم النفس الأمريكية، سواء أكانت عربية أم أجنبية.

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Abstract

In this study, Bashar Assad's political speeches following the 2011 Syrian Revolution are examined using Van Dijk's socio-cognitive paradigm. Assad's speeches were essential in influencing public opinion and maintaining his grasp on power during the political turmoil of the Syrian revolution. The socio-cognitive method of Van Dijk provides a basis for understanding the psychological and social processes that underlie Assad's speech patterns. This approach emphasizes the links between cognitive processes, social identity, and communication. Through an in-depth examination of Assad's speeches, this study seeks to pinpoint the linguistic, cognitive, and social strategies Assad has employed to uphold his political legitimacy, shape public opinion, and silence the opposition. The socio-cognitive methodology used in this analysis adds to our understanding of the complex dynamics of political discourse during periods of revolution and sheds light on the strategies used by authoritarian leaders to maintain their positions of power and control over their domestic and global communities. The findings of this study have implications for social psychology, political communication, and the study of authoritarian regimes.

Key words: The Syrian Revolution, CDA, Van Dijk's Socio-Cognitive Approach, Discursive Practices, Assad's Speeches.

كشف آليات التلاعب: تطبيق المقاربة السوسيو-معرفية لفان دايك في تحليل خطابات بشار الأسد السياسية خلال الثورة السورية

حسام وليد شمة

ملخص البحث

يستعرض هذا البحث خطابات بشار الأسد السياسية عقب اندلاع الثورة السورية عام 2011، وذلك بالاعتماد على المقاربة السوسيو-معرفية لفان دايك. فقد لعبت خطابات الأسد دوراً محورياً في توجيه الرأي العام وتعزيز استمراره في السلطة خلال المرحلة المضطربة التي رافقت الثورة. وتتيح مقاربة فان دايك السوسيو-معرفية إطاراً تحليلياً لفهم العمليات الذهنية والاجتماعية التي تشكّل بنية هذا الخطاب، إذ تسلط الضوء على العلاقة بين العمليات الإدراكية والهوية الاجتماعية وممارسات التواصل.

ومن خلال تحليل معمق لخطابات الأسد، يسعى هذا البحث إلى الكشف عن الاستراتيجيات اللغوية والمعرفية والاجتماعية التي استخدمها للحفاظ على شرعيته السياسية، والتأثير في الرأي العام، وإقصاء الأصوات المعارضة. وتُسهم هذه المقاربة في إيضاح الديناميكيات الخطابية المعقدة التي تميّز الفترات الثورية، كما تكشف عن الأساليب التي يعتمدها القادة السلطويون لترسيخ مواقعهم وبسط نفوذهم على المستويين المحلي والدولي.

وتبرز نتائج البحث أهميتها في ميادين علم النفس الاجتماعي، والتواصل السياسي، ودراسة الأنظمة السلطوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثورة السورية، التحليل النقدي للخطاب، المقاربة السوسيو-معرفية لفان دايك، الممارسات الخطابية، خطابات الأسد.

Manipülasyonun Sırlarını Ortaya Çıkarmak: Suriye Devrimi Sırasında Beşar Esad'ın Siyasi Konuşmalarını Analiz Etmek İçin Van Dijk'in Sosyo- Bilişsel Yaklaşımının Uygulanması

Hussam Waleed Shamma

Özet

Bu çalışmada, Beşar Esad'ın 2011 Suriye Devrimi'ni takip eden siyasi konuşmaları, Van Dijk'in sosyo-bilişsel paradigması kullanılarak incelenmiştir. Esad'ın konuşmaları, Suriye devriminin siyasi kargaşası sırasında kamuoyunu etkilemede ve iktidardaki konumunu korumada hayati öneme sahipti. Van Dijk'in sosyo-bilişsel yöntemi, Esad'ın konuşma kalıplarının altında yatan psikolojik ve sosyal süreçleri anlamak için bir temel sağlar. Bu yaklaşım, bilişsel süreçler, sosyal kimlik ve iletişim arasındaki bağlantıları vurgular. Esad'ın konuşmalarının derinlemesine incelenmesi yoluyla, bu çalışma, Esad'ın siyasi meşruiyetini korumak, kamuoyunu şekillendirmek ve muhalefeti susturmak için kullandığı dilsel, bilişsel ve sosyal stratejileri belirlemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu analizde kullanılan sosyo-bilişsel metodoloji, devrim dönemlerinde siyasi söylemin karmaşık dinamiklerini anlamamıza katkıda bulunur ve otoriter liderlerin iktidar konumlarını ve iç ve küresel topluluklar üzerindeki kontrollerini sürdürmek için kullandıkları stratejilere ışık tutar. Bu çalışmanın bulguları, sosyal psikoloji, siyasi iletişim ve otoriter rejimlerin incelenmesi açısından önemli sonuçlar doğurmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Suriye Devrimi, Söylemsel Uygulamalı Analiz (CDA), Van Dijk'in Sosyo-Bilişsel Yaklaşımı, Söylemsel Uygulamalar, Esad'ın Konuşmaları.

1. Introduction

Language has historically been thought of as an abstract structural entity that can be autonomous and socio-culturally noncontingent (Heller, 2011). In other words, the main focus of linguistics has been on the sentential level alone, neglecting all other contextual components that exist outside the scope of language (Langacker, 2013). According to Noam Chomsky's generative theory, language is seen as "a set of elements...which are combined together by a series of rules or procedures" (Mitchel, Myles & Marsden, 2013, p. 8), and as such, it needs to be analyzed and researched accordingly. In developing his theories of Universal Grammar (UG) and the Innateness of Language, Chomsky's main argument is based on his painstaking research "of word and sentence structure" (Pinker, 1995, p. 24), deeming social and cultural factors negligible.

Being a pure form of grammatical, mental knowledge unaffected by social factors, such as the purpose of communication, the relationship between speakers and larger socio-cultural contexts, Chomsky's Generative Grammar was criticized for ignoring linguistic performance and focusing only on linguistic competence, as is the case with many theories at the time (VanPattern & Williams, 2015). Others, like Dell Hymes and John Gumperz, lean toward a more pragmatic and performative approach, believing that linguistic items are part and parcel of the sociocultural context and are implicitly mesh with and cannot be separated from such a context, as only together can meaning be built. Chomsky's linguistic inquiry is the formal structure of language syntax isolated from socio-cognitive contextual settings and super-linguistic components (Angermuller et al., 2014). However, a text's sociocultural, cognitive, and even historical,

contexts cannot be separated from it. According to Fairclough (2009), a text is more than just words on paper; it is rather a collection of several genres and multimodal semiotic techniques, including interviews and audiovisual communicative acts. He dubs such connections and associations of the text to other genres and other texts as 'Intertextuality' and 'Interdiscursivity'.

According to Gee (2018), the various linguistic preferences a speaker or writer chooses are what we refer to as "language-in-action" or "discourse" (p. 3). It is a discourse that ushers into and highlights the point intended to mean what it means by the selected linguistic units within a specific context (Brown & Yule 1983) and not mere isolated syntactic and lexical structures. When we speak or write an utterance, we tend to, consciously or unconsciously, select certain lexical items and syntactic structures out of the limitless linguistic choices to make an intended specific point (see Grice, 1989). What we mean by discourse is saying or writing things in specific ways by specific individuals with a specific time, place, and audience in mind. As a result, linguistic, paralinguistic, and/or extralinguistic speech in a hospital, for instance, must adhere to different rules and patterns than discourse in a court or classroom.

Rarely do discourses continue in their current form; rather, they move through a reformation process where older discourses are replaced with more contemporary ones (Gee, 1999). What is permitted to exist, have significance, and validity, as well as what is prohibited and unconsidered, may not remain the same over time (see Foucault, 2005). This is mostly the result of top-down processes that include the decision-making of individuals in positions of authority, which in turn plays a key role in shaping one's cognition through

various linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic systems that affect perception and understanding. According to Van Dijk (1993), these top-down procedures are typically carried out with the assistance of religious and educated leaders of an epistemic community who enjoy particular access to social institutions and public discourse for the ultimate purpose of mind engineering and cognition manipulation. Hence, critical discourse analysts examine and analyze this sort of political speech for emancipation and resistance purposes .

2. Literature Review

Words are the key discursive weapon that is manipulated by people in power in a way that misleads and deceives the masses so that they can maintain their social position and prevail social injustice. With the advent of the digital age and disguised democracy, military and physical force are not as effective as the linguistic signs in mind engineering and manufacturing consent of the people. Therefore, political leaders and the symbolic elite tend to use the power of words to persuade their audience of their political campaigns and ideological projects. The crucial role that political speech plays in forming people's attitudes and political stance as well as affecting their actions cannot be understated, especially when it is delivered by influential politicians.

Making the public believe something is the best approach to advance a political idea. People are misled by linguistic expressions that enclose them in cultural and social restraints that guarantee their collective consent and subjugation and preserve the status of political leaders, being the supreme elites of the social structure (Herman & Chomsky, 2008). The common people end up imprisoned inside one of the numerous inevitable, socially constructed caves, to

use Plato's term, as a result. Since states, especially authoritarian ones, can distort reality, manufacture the consent of the populace, and polish the despicable deeds of their leaders, it is crucial that every nation or ideological group ensures the development of an effective multi-modal media system. For instance, these ideological channels, particularly Syrian ones, have viewed demonstrators and the revolution as terrorists and anarchists who serve some international agenda and as global conspiracies with the aim of overthrowing leaders and destroying nations when the Arab Spring waves of protests flooded the streets, and later turned into armed groups defending themselves against their despotic governments. The dictators in charge of the governments, however, give the impression that "everything is going well under [their] rule" (Baysoy, 1996, p. 5), and, simultaneously, spread their hidden agendas and shape the opinions of their audiences through the monopoly of linguistic representations disseminated and broadcasted through public discourse and social institutions .

Political ideologies give their adherents a social identity that makes them feel special due to their diversity in tenets, conceptions, and worldviews; this may strengthen their adherence to their ideology by creating a sense of togetherness. Since their ideologies conceal their "real relationship to their world" (Loomba, 1998, p. 25) and make it nearly impossible to live outside of their ideological spheres, those people who are infused with fervent solidarity and doped with mythical rewards promised through religious and political linguistic representations and who are willing to sacrifice their precious lives are cut off from reality and unable to draw conclusions on their own. The foundation of the true believer's unmatched fortitude is his capacity to "shut his eyes and

stop his ears” to truths that do not deserve to be seen or heard, Hoffer surmises (1946, p. 65). For socio-psychological and existential reasons that strengthen their social identities, an ideology’s mental frameworks captivate its adherents and force them to commit their entire lives to it. Due to the cognitively constrained design of their inculcated minds, individuals are unable to develop alternative worldviews proposed by opposing ideologies or even attempt to comprehend their perspective.

By critically, cognitively, and socially analyzing the political discourse (interviews, speeches, etc.) of the ruling elite and their socio-cultural context, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) explores the relationship between discursive practices and people’s actions, present and future. This sheds light on the underlying ideologies of political discourse. In other words, CDA tries to highlight how people’s minds are managed through text and talk and expose general social structures like political institutions and their hegemonizing impact on various social activities. However, only those with the “power over”—typically the political leaders in charge of a nation or even the entire world—can create a new worldview or uphold an existing one that has already become institutionalized in the people’s minds. This is seen as a hierarchical structure where political leaders differ in their ‘communicative power,’ or easy access to the media and other multi-modal systems, to hegemonize and influence people’s political attitudes (Fairclough, 2009). According to Fairclough (as cited in Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002), by dismantling political discourse and by bringing out the discursive behaviors that they unwittingly engage in as well as the social inequality and elite dominance in their own societies, a critical analyst can

increase the public's awareness and contribute towards their cognitive emancipation. That being said, in order to deconstruct and reveal the hidden political ideas concealed within Assad's political rhetoric, this research uses the methodology and analytical techniques of Van Dijk's approach in critical discourse analysis.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Given its roots in Roger Fowler's textual linguistics, CDA is perhaps one of discourse analysis's (DA) most significant and extensively explored fields (Widdowson, 2004). CDA aims to expose the internal system that controls the masses' thoughts and manipulates their behavior in order to maintain the position and hierarchy of the dominant stratum through (non-)linguistic means, and hence, addressing the urgent social wrongs of power relations and social inequalities that the analyst observes. It does this by concurrently referencing social theory and linguistic theory (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). According to critical discourse theorists, texts do not exist 'unsponsored,' and the language preferences and prosodic elements chosen by authors and speakers are inevitably a reflection of political ideologies and power dynamics (Qianbo, 2016; Sajjad, 2015). Instead of focusing only on the language's semiotic system, critical analysis additionally examines audiovisual images and other supra-linguistic components (for example, non-verbal gestures) that establish the discursive features and methods of the meaning-making process .

CDA is a 'transdisciplinary,' 'multidisciplinary,' and 'interdisciplinary' field of study (Fairclough, 1992; Reisigl & Wodak, 2017; Weiss & Wodak, 2003), covering nearly all social domains and disciplines the analyst deems necessary

for the analytical treatment. The multidisciplinary nature of CDA aids in achieving a thorough and all-dimensional understanding of the discourse production and consumption process within its situational setting, providing analysts with the tools necessary to critically analyze and address the social injustice or political discourse under study (Catalano & Waugh, 2020). In other words, CDA is a critical viewpoint that may be used in conjunction with any field within “the social sciences and the humanities” (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 96). In the micro-analysis of texts and talks and their connection to the meaning-making (semiosis) process, Hussein (2016) claims that CDA is also based on Functional Linguistics and Critical Linguistics approaches. In order to critically examine and demonstrate the relationship between discursive practices and their influence on social behavior, the analyst’s endeavor is rarely an easy one because it requires bringing together a variety of disciplines to dismantle political discourse. To achieve the ultimate goal of critical discourse analysis, this explanatory critique of texts and talks aims to increase people’s awareness of the discursive practices that permeate their societies, and hence, reinforce social inequality and the dominance of the ruling elite (Fairclough, 1992; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; Catalano & Waugh, 2020).

3.1 Van Dijk’s Socio-cognitive Interface

One of the most intriguing theories in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach (1993) asserts that cognition acts as an intermediary between discourse and society, which are not directly interconnected. Some cultures’ collective cognitive characteristics of values, underlying ideologies, and core beliefs are significantly influenced by socially

and politically powerful gatekeepers who hold both material and discursive authority. The viability and 'godliness' of these same powerful sources that are in command of the discursive process (creation and dissemination), it turns out, are in turn impacted by the production and consumption of these same discourses. The connection between discourse, cognition, and society is in question when it comes to Teun van Dijk's (2008) critical model of text and talk analysis. Van Dijk makes the claim that there is some sort of mediation between social actions and discursive practices, emphasizing the significance of cognitive dimensions in the creation and comprehension of the textual components of communicative events (Angermuller et al., 2014).

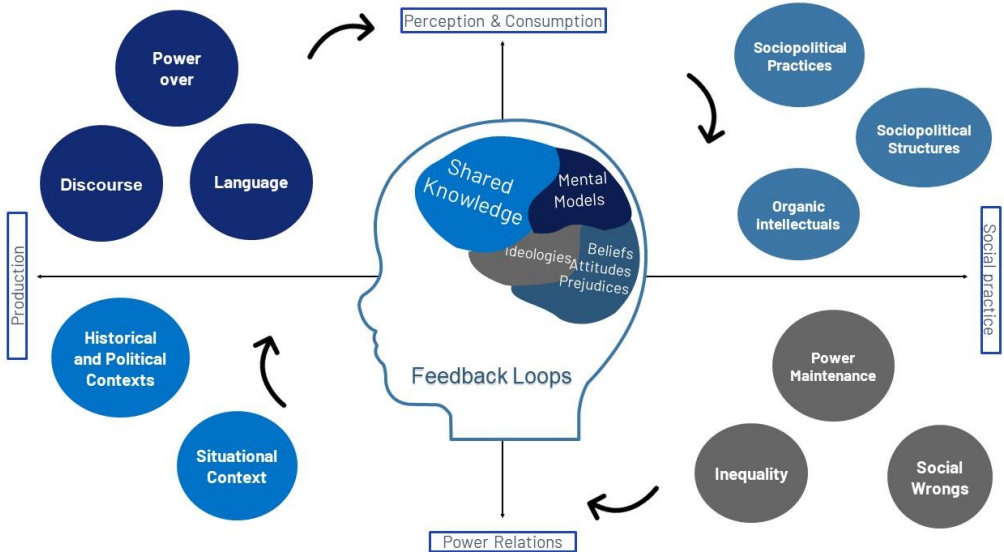
Van Dijk (2003) asserts that both short-term memory (SM) and long-term memory (LTM) must work together to absorb and interpret spoken communication. The mind associates the semiotic (non, para, and supra) linguistic elements of the situational event with the previously learned, general (personal and collective) information that is stored in our LTM (semantic and episodic). Syrian outlets and networks, for example, that are governed and directed by the oppressive state apparatus unavoidably promote, propagate, and celebrate a political declaration made by Bashar Assad, the nation's most powerful individual. In addition, images and quotes from textbooks, as well as Assad's political, social, mental, and even physical existence on screens and in public institutions, where a giant portrait of him hangs in each room, dominate the collective mentality of the Syrian people. Accordingly, through social media, the internet, and everyday speech, people are frequently exposed to specific linguistic and nonlinguistic preferences—whether positive or negative—and

their meanings, which instill in the populous a particular perspective of reality that is seen as the ultimate 'common sense'.

Van Dijk's critical analysis is based on micro and macro examinations of political speeches, just like Wodak's and Fairclough's. It entails investigating the fundamental levels of syntax, phonology, semantics, as well as the thematic and topical nature of texts, while also taking into account the social context, the participants' general cognition and common knowledge of the outside world, as well as the production and reception of communicative events (Al Khazraji, 2018). In Van Dijk's paradigm, unlike other critical discourse strands, the importance of cognition in bridging the gap between the social and the discursive practice cannot be emphasized enough. As a result, depending on their prior knowledge, past experiences, and contextual milieu, speakers, listeners, writers, and readers are ready to generate and receive texts in specific appropriate ways, as opposed to other ways (Widdowson, 2004). Our ability to interpret and comprehend these textual and contextual units is a result of the neurobiological propensity to connect the linguistic units we come across in texts and conversations with our own personal experiences. To put it another way, this association happens as a result of the mental (cognitive) representations of the social environment that were previously stored in our memory and that are pertinent to our communication actions being activated. Hence, syntactic structures like 'Assad or we burn the country' are capable of evoking mental images, representations, and memories of past personal and collective events that occurred decades ago, during Hafez Assad's tenure,

alongside their current associations and meanings within the contemporary situational and cultural context .

Figure (1) The Socio-cognitive Interface of Producing & Consuming Political Discourse



Van Dijk (2001a) asserts that because critical analysts are more susceptible to bias, they must be politically active. Advocates and practitioners of CDA are, in fact, engaged in a full-scale intellectual war against the symbolic elites who have exclusive access to public discourse and power to create and mold the public’s cognitive consensus. Political leaders frequently employ a variety of verbal ploys and nonverbal clues associated with distinct mental images from real-world social interactions in order to elicit a response from their audience that is either fearful or respectful (Charteris-Black, 2011). This is due to the fact that practically all of them are aware of how effective rhetorical techniques (such as positive self-representation and negative other-representation) used in their discourse can be. The critical analyst attempts to

discredit political leaders' statements in order to reveal their ideology and raise public awareness of emancipatory aspirations .

4. Method

In order to analyze the political speeches given by Assad during the 2011 Syrian revolution, this qualitative study applies the theories and methods of CDA. The three-part Van Dijk model for examining political discourse; political actors, the audience for whom the political speech is intended, and the political speech itself, serves as the foundation for this study's methodology. Selected political speeches by Assad will be collected for the study and subjected to linguistic and discursive analysis.

The analysis of the targeted speeches is broken down into yearly events during which Assad made several speeches tailored to the occasion's specific circumstances. However, there will be one main speech under scrutiny delivered by Assad in 2011. The selection of fragments from this speech is based on the recurrent macro-themes that encapsulate the main points raised by Assad throughout the overall speech. Other speeches delivered by Assad on various occasions since the revolution will be cited within the text under the main theme discussed during the analysis.

4.1 Model of Analysis

Van Dijk's socio-cognitive technique is used in the current study to draw on a variety of cognitive strategies and linguistic insights. In his speeches, Bashar Assad skillfully uses this mentally deceptive language and discursive strategies to reflect his ideological position and purposely mislead the domestic and international public. Politicians and other powerful figures employ an assorted

bag of different strategies to create a binary opposition between 'Them' and 'Us' so that positive self- and negative other-(re)presentations can be readily ingrained implicitly or brought up explicitly. Such strategies can include the following:

4.1.1 Lexical manipulation

Each language has an almost limitless bank of vocabularies from which speakers and writers select specific sets of lexical items through which they express their minds and opinions about the world. Words are considered one of the most explicit ways of expressing one's ideology and opinions about people or situations (Van Dijk, 1998). The term terrorism, for example, is one of the most derogatory and pejorative terms used in political discourse to describe and categorize opponents or sources of political, or otherwise, threat. This term is way too loose with no consensus whatsoever on its meaning or definition; thus, political leaders use the term to delegitimize 'Them' or 'the other' on the pretext of being terrorists or supporters of terrorism (Guelke, 2006).

4.1.2 Syntactic manipulation

When we speak or write an utterance, we tend to, consciously or unconsciously, select certain word order and syntactic structures out of the limitless linguistic choices to make an intended specific point (see Grice, 1989). Texts/talks are composed of sequences of syntactic chunks in such a way as to highlight certain parts the writer/speaker believes to be prominent and to de-emphasize other parts that are less prominent. These various syntactic units are glued to one another forming one coherent whole, expressing local and global meanings that serve certain ideological thinking. Through selecting a specific

word order, speakers/writers might present important information first, stressing positive self-traits or negative other-traits (Van Dijk, 1998). Moreover, the use of certain syntactic phrases such as the passive constructs or nominalizations, for example, allows language users to leave out information that might be negative about 'Us' or positive about 'Them,' thus, reinforcing certain mental images in their audiences' mind in a way that serves their interests .

4.1.3 Semantic/pragmatic manipulation

Carrying out even the simplest conversation requires interlocutors to use shared knowledge and social skills that exist outside the scope of lexical items and syntactic structures required to construct meaning (Gumpres, 1982). That is, when we perform any speech act, we depend on a repertoire of personal, prior knowledge, assumptions, implications, presuppositions, and collective knowledge to make coherent propositions and reach certain conclusions. The following strategies are examples of semantic and pragmatic manipulation that influence the interpretation of speeches/texts:

4.1.3.1 Implications. Speakers or writers tend to implicitly leave out information or

explicitly point out information in a way that serves their own interests. Sometimes, they assume that speakers, due to their shared cognition and contextual knowledge, can infer specific meanings without directly referring to them by other propositions that are explicitly stated and are associated with these implied meanings (Van Dijk, 1993). All of the propositions that already exist cognitively in the recipients' mental models and that do not exist

linguistically in the text/talk, Van Dijk (2000) contends, "are called the 'implied' meaning of a discourse" (p. 46).

4.1.3.2 Contrast and polarization. Political leaders spare no occasion to employ the

power of words to contrast the great good people benefiting under their rule to the great evil of their opponents once they are in charge of people's affairs (Charteris-Black, 2005/2011). All of the world's inequalities, oppression, alienation, and even annihilation can be ascribed to the model of 'Us' vs. 'Them', which is used by political leaders and rhetoricians for persuasive purposes and in order to justify their political actions to their local and international audiences. This binary opposition of the privileged (Us) and unprivileged (Them) becomes clearer when ingroups compare and contrast their great achievements and resilience to the failures and vulnerability of outgroups (Van Dijk, 2000).

4.1.4 Discourse-structure manipulation

This includes the overall skillful management and implementation of critical discourse rhetoric. The following strategies are some examples of discursal, and structural strategies employed by speakers/writers:

4.1.4.1 Disclaimers. This strategy shows ambivalent feelings about an outgroup

helping speakers save their faces and seem neutral and objective in negatively characterizing others or positively characterizing themselves as if they are merely stating facts (Van Dijk, 1993). Such discursal moves begin with what Van Dijk (2000) calls an "Apparent Negation against another group, while the rest of the discourse may say very negative things about the other" (p. 50).

Mainstream politicians utilize disclaimers to deny a negative trait like being called racist or dictators meeting civic demonstrations with utter violence and steer the viewers/listeners towards the problematic presence of the Other that threatens the safety of the country and the people's lives. This, in turn, activates prior mental images, or schemata, negatively associated with the outgroup which was previously mediated and propagated by social media and news networks sponsored by the government.

4.1.4.2 National self-glorification. Political discourse, especially presidential one

is laced with examples of nationalistic glorification and chauvinistic statements that present the speaker as a patriotic and parental figure who knows better, provoking the national emotions of his/her recipients and presenting himself/herself as the people's hope and savior in the development and growth of their countries. This is particularly evident in the rhetoric of Western political figures such as Barack Obama, who lauds America as "the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth" (Inaugural Address on the 20th January 2009), emphasizing its role as the epitome of democracy and freedom, with citizens enjoying rights that others elsewhere do not .

4.1.4.3 Religious allusion.

Political leaders tend to manipulate the masses by flavoring their political discourse with religious quotes from the scripture or other religious resources. This use of religious language furthers the bond between the speaker and the recipients who, accordingly, are more willing to believe the speaker's words and take them as self-evident truths. As is the case with the rest of the linguistic and

discursive preferences of the speaker, the religious ones should be contextualized and hence consistent with the speaker's implied cognitive and ideological socio-cultural context .

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Assad's Speech delivered in March 2011 in the People's Assembly

In his first appearance after the early uprisings in 2011, Bashar Assad delivered his speech to the Syrian people who were patiently waiting for him to relate to the then-current situation. This speech was delivered shortly after the uprisings began on March 30, 2011, in the hall of the People's Assembly. It was targeting Assad's domestic audience: the members of the assembly and the Syrians watching from home. The Syrians were expecting Assad to call for some kind of political reform like ending the Ba'ath monopoly of power altogether or at least punishing the authorities who had arrested a group of children and tortured them for writing antiregime graffiti on the walls of their schools. Instead, he expressed his pride in belonging to his country and people, trying to sound like he was very understanding of his people's needs and wants, and kept maneuvering and blaming it all on close and distant countries that were scheming this conspiracy against the country. He marginally mentioned the need for reform, underscoring the importance of unity against such fabricated-abroad conspiracy.

Text 1: The Conspiracy Myth

أتحدث إليكم في لحظة استثنائية تبدو الأحداث والتطورات فيها كامتحان لوحدتنا. هو امتحان تشاء الظروف أن يتكرر كل حين بفعل المؤامرات المتصلة على هذا الوطن وتشاء إرادتنا وتكاتفنا وإرادة الله أن ننجح في مواجهته في كل مرة نجاحاً باهراً يزيدنا قوة وثقة.

[I address you at an exceptional time whose events and developments seem to be a test to our unity. It is a test that is frequently given by the connected conspiracies in this country. However, each time, due to our unity, solidarity, and Allah's will, we brilliantly succeed in confronting it [this test] in a way that increases our strength and confidence].

أتحدث إليكم بحديث من القلب تختلط فيه مشاعر الفخر بالانتماء إلى هذا الشعب بمشاعر العرفان والتقدير لما أحاطني به من حب وتكريم بمشاعر الحزن والأسف على الأحداث التي مرت وضحاياها من اخوتنا وابنائنا. وتبقى مسؤوليتي عن السهر على امن هذا الوطن وضمن استقراره...في الوقت الذي يعمل فيه أعدائنا كل يوم بشكل منظم وعلمي من أجل ضرب استقرار سوريا. طبعاً نحن نقر لهم في اختيار الأساليب المتطورة جداً فيما فعلوه ولكن نقر لهم بغبائهم في الاختيار الخاطئ للوطن وللشعب حيث لا ينجح هذا النوع من المؤامرات.

[I give you from the heart a speech full of feelings of pride in belonging to this people and feelings of gratitude and appreciation for its engulfing love and honor mixed with feelings of grief and regret about the past events and the perished victims of our brothers and sons. My responsibility remains to keep a watchful eye on the security of this country and to ensure its stability...while our enemies are daily working in a systematic and scientific way in order to attack the stability of Syria. Certainly, we admit their fine choice of selecting highly

advanced methods in what they did; however, we admit their stupidity in wrongly selecting this country and people where this kind of conspiracy does not work].

وأد الفتنة واجب أخلاقي ووطني وشرعي، وكل من يستطيع أن يساهم في وأدها ولا يفعل فهو جزء منها، و"الفتنة أشد من القتل" كما جاء في القرآن الكريم. فكل من يتورط فيها عن قصد أو غير قصد فهو يعمل على قتل وطنه وبالتالي فلا مكان لمن يقف في الوسط. فالقضية ليست الدولة بل الوطن، والمؤامرة كبيرة ونحن لا نسعى لمعارك. الشعب السوري شعب مسالم وودود، ولكننا لم نتردد يوماً في الدفاع عن قضايانا ومصالحنا ومبادئنا.

[Nipping sedition in the bud is a moral, national, and legal duty, and anyone who can contribute to the nipping of the sedition and does not is deemed a part of it. "Sedition is more serious than killing," says the glorious Quran. Those who are involved, voluntarily or involuntarily, in it are willing to kill their homeland; hence, there is no place for those who are in the grey. The case is not the government but rather the country. The conspiracy is big, and we seek no battles. The Syrian people are peaceful and friendly, but we have never hesitated to defend our causes, interests, and principles].

5.2.1 Discourse-structure manipulation

5.2.1.1 National self-glorification. The speaker from the outset of the speech identifies himself as one of the people and for the people, trying to legitimate his role as a representative of the whole country—its joys and sorrows. His self-presentation is couched in phrases like 'My responsibility remains to keep a watchful eye on the security of this country,' implying that because he is the responsible leader and devoted father carrying the weight of guarding this country alone, the Syrian people may have confidence in him. He

may create sentiments of respect, dependability, and even blind and unquestioning allegiance in the audience by starting and even establishing his speech on the metaphor of the father figure since, as a parent, he knows better. Furthermore, by portraying himself as the father of the Syrian people, Assad uses the metaphor of the nation as a family (Charteris-Black, 2004; Charteris-Black, 2011), which aids in the activation of mental images of protection and security associated with the family. In addition, being the father of the family, he would not hesitate to do whatever it takes to protect the family from the evil 'Other' he constructs in his speech.

On August 1, 2021, in honor of the Army's Birthday, Assad addressed the armed forces. He extolled the army's accomplishments and victories in preserving the nation's security and stability. Since this speech is addressed to the Syrian Armed Forces, Assad's selection of its lexical and syntactic features should, of necessity, intend to glorify and even sanctify the achievements, sacrifices, and unflinching courage of his army in facing his opponents. He describes the army as being 'the guarantor of their security and stability, the defender of their honor and dignity.' After restoring vast lands from the rebels, with the help of Russia and Iran, Assad commends the achievement of his army in defeating the enemy and prevailing against terrorism. He moves on to brag about his 'military institution, the factory of heroic men and the birthplace of blessed fighters' who are even supported by God himself, hence the word 'blessed.' He moves on to say that the Syrian soldiers are the epitome 'of heroism, sacrifice and redemption.' Assad's national narrative, in general, is meant to emphasize his regime's successes, achievements, and virtues while downplaying

or ignoring its failures, shortcomings, and vices. It also serves as a platform for promoting his own image as a national hero, while reinforcing his regime's legitimacy and authority.

5.2.1.2 Disclaimers. Assad utilizes positive lexicalization to depict the Syrian People as being 'peaceful and friendly' who hate violence and wars. He, however, with the use of the coordinating conjunction 'but' underscores the fact that the Syrian people will not tolerate any threat or attack by the conspiratorial enemy. By so doing, he dispels any negative association with his potential military and political action that will later meet the peaceful demonstrations that demand freedom.

Assad has been denying his violent approach to the Syrian revolution since day one of the early uprisings. In order to avoid being described as a dictator and enemy of democracy and in order to legitimize his alleged self-defense against the acts of terrorism, Assad in a speech delivered in July 2015, his first public speech in a year, said, 'We did not seek war, but when it was forced on us, the armed forces confronted terrorists everywhere'.

Throughout his political discourse, Assad cannot stress enough his unwillingness to resort to violence and war as a way to sort things out. In his speech delivered on June 07, 2016, at the People's Assembly, Assad used a similar linguistic pattern. He says that the war was never his own choice but was rather forced upon his regime by 'Them,' the opposition. It was 'They' who forced 'Us' to war, and 'We' have to protect and defend the innocent victims of this unjust and unwanted war. In order to blame the responsibility of the war on the Other, Assad uses the coordinating conjunction 'but' to negate his proclivity

towards ruthless cracking down on the revolutionary voices and ascribing all of the repercussions of the war to the opposition and the terrorists they are supporting.

5.2.1.3 Religious Allusion. Political leaders never hesitate to include references to religion in their political discourse, especially in the Middle East where religion is seen as the ultimate controller of human behavior and the moral campus of perplexed hearts that are fed on from a very early age. Political leaders often draw their references to religion from the Scriptures and other related divine resources. The use of religion by Assad at the start of his speech, "Allah's will," is intended to arouse feelings of submission because of the objectivity and divine power that are deeply ingrained in the collective cognitive understanding of the world by Muslims and Christians simultaneously (the use of the word Allah to refer to Jesus is not uncommon in Syria). This way Assad substitutes, or at least associates, his authority for/with that of God's, and hence, empowers his actions and even justifies them. Moreover, at the end of this speech, Assad directly quotes from the Quran a much-quoted verse that says, "Sedition is more serious than killing," stressing the conspiracy theory that is well-knitted abroad. Undoubtedly, the ultimate takeaway of his speech is to gaslight his audience into constructing this very concept of the conspiracy of the 'Other' in their mind and retain it in their long-term memory.

5.2.2 Lexical Manipulation

Assad's linguistic repertoire of lexical items in describing his opponents and enemies is a melting pot of strongly different negative words that aim to shape the mind of his audience and reinforce his regime's narrative in negatively

categorizing the opposition. In text (1) Assad begins his speech by stressing the importance of being united against 'the connected conspiracies,' referring to the Syrian uprisings that have demanded an end to social inequality under the rule of his sectarian and choking dictatorship. Assad routinely uses phrases with strong negative connotations, such as 'conspiracy,' 'enemies,' and 'sedition' in his speeches to portray his opponents as participants in an orchestrated plot on the nation. That is, the protestors against his rule are cast as mere enemies of the homeland who seek the destruction and ruin of Syria and not legitimate political actors with righteous demands. This way, Assad has managed to discredit and delegitimize his opponents.

On the other hand, Assad's lexical store when describing his army and allies is flavored with positivity and praise. Assad selection of words that are linked to civilization and development like 'dialogue' is meant to associate them with his actions and people in a speech given during the opening of a conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates in August 2017, so it is contrasted with the barbarity and savagery of the 'Other.' This contrast makes it easier for the audience to process the ideological data intended by the speaker. He then moves on to commend, as usual, the resiliency and strength of his army supported by his allies in 'fighting the most ferocious battles' of the century and their considerable achievements of restoring territories and 'crush[ing] the terrorists'.

5.2.3 Syntactic manipulation

From a schematic point of view, the speech is composed in such a way as to underscore certain parts and tropicalize topics the speakers believe to be more

important than others. From the outset of his speech, Assad stresses the need for unity and solidarity against the worldwide conspiracy that aims to destroy Syria and the Syrian people. In addition, he emphasizes his social identity as a responsible leader and representative of the Syrian people whose safety and security are his ultimate goal. This is reflected in his use of the pronoun 'my,' the possessive derivative of 'I' at the beginning of the sentence, 'My responsibility remains to keep a watchful eye on the security of this country and to ensure its stability,' which helps to anchor Assad as a deictic center who assigns political roles and controls social situations. Even though he does not mention explicitly the Axis of Resistance (an alliance between Iran, the Syrian regime, and Hezbollah), he refers to this alliance through the emphasis on the word 'conspiracy' and the use of the possessive derivative of the inclusive pronoun 'we' in 'our enemies,' which activates mental associations related to previous sociopolitical contexts that are connected with this same axis and its animosity towards the West and Israel, for example. That is, the enemies, the West and Israel, are conspiring against the Axis of Resistance and are now seeking to 'attack the stability of Syria' to weaken this alliance which is considered a threat to the national security of Israel and the West.

The coherence of the entire discussion is shaped by these ideological viewpoints, which imply that the war is being waged against the Syrian government because it is aiding the Axis of Resistance and pursuing Israeli and Western goals as evidenced by Assad's use of the pronoun 'we.' A mental image of the Syrian regime led by Assad himself and the axis of evil is created by the construction of the deictic center 'we' in the phrase 'we admit their stupidity,' as

opposed to the strangeness and alienation that result from the deictic periphery of 'they,' which refers to the democratic countries of the West. It is noteworthy to mention that the use of the pronoun 'we' in this example does not include the Syrian people or the country since they are mentioned directly in the same sentence later, 'wrongly selecting this country and people,' which might underlie, unconsciously, the marginalization and detachment of the Syrian people by/from the Syrian regime.

Assad's usage of parallel syntactic and phonological structures in his political discourse is very common. In July 2015, Assad delivered a speech addressing the situation of the ongoing battles on the ground. He acknowledged the significant loss of soldiers within the army and the current shortage of human resources. Despite these challenges, the army remained resilient, defending and reclaiming territories, even those under rebel control. He emphasized that these actions were a matter of strategic priorities at the time. In this speech, Assad says, 'Let them allow the opposition to be a [foreign] agent,' and 'Let them allow other countries to determine what is the appropriate system of government.' This repetitive pattern of the same syntactic structure, especially when spoken with a rising intonation, serves to attract the recipient's attention and to emphasize the idea associated with them. Similar repetitive structural forms can be found elsewhere in the text: 'Yes, they are definitely capable,' 'Yes, they are comfortably capable,' 'they are hardly capable' and 'No! They are comfortably capable.' The use of 'they' and 'capable' four times in reference to the Army's capability in defending the homeland emphasizes the point Assad is making here and may, at

the same time, presuppose doubt in the Army on the part of the people and even the regime.

5.2.4 Semantic/pragmatic manipulation

5.2.4.1 Implications. While delivering his speech, Assad kept linking the Syrian revolution with negative lexical items such as 'sedition,' 'crisis' and more notoriously 'conspiracy,' which generate negative semantic associations for obviously political reasons. The purpose behind this is to give priority to the conspiracy theory, implying that state violence against the demonstrations supported by the West is legitimate. Since the speech is somehow lengthy and a bit complex for the layman to process and retain later on, Assad's emphasis on the conspiratorial enemy implies his intention of manipulating the masses into believing that what is happening is not a legitimate revolution with lawful demands for freedom and equality, but rather a foreign scheme that plans to attack the heart of the Axis of Resistance, Syria, and its leader. He does not state directly that this war is against the Axis; however, he implies this on various occasions in his speech.

Additionally, in his 2016 speech, Assad presented his allies, 'Iran, Russia, and China' as great nations that 'stand with the truth and support the oppressed in the face of the oppressor.' In presenting these countries as just and fair, Assad implicates that the Western and Gulf states and Turkey that support the demands of the Syrian revolutionaries are hypocrites, imperial and opportunistic, aiding the evil and terrorist opposition.

In his previous political narrative, Assad used to categorize the Gulf states as being 'backward countries' and bankrollers and supporters of fundamentalist

groups such as 'Daesh' and 'Al-Nusra.' However, in his 2023 speech addressing the earthquake, Assad adopts a less aggressive tone, appearing friendly and welcoming. This change in tone is attributed to the humanitarian assistance provided by the very same countries that were previously accused of sponsoring 'terrorism.' Additionally, Assad seeks to rebuild political ties with these countries through conciliatory statements in his speech. That is, his word choice here might imply an invitation for the Gulf states to normalize with his regime. Assad refers to these countries as 'brotherly and friendly countries' and 'our Arab brothers and our friends.' Without explicitly stating it, Assad is implicating his readiness to restore the severed ties, since the early uprisings, with these countries.

5.2.4.2 Contrast and polarization. It is very clear from this short text that the speaker draws a dichotomy between him as a responsible representative of his people and his enemies who, employing 'advanced methods,' seek the destruction of the country. This leads to a polarization between 'Them' who have betrayed the country and those who are working for the Western agenda or 'Israel,' since both are considered among the leading developed countries and hence the words 'advanced,' and 'Us' who are responsible for the safety and security of this country. This argument implies that the speaker is denying any legitimate existence of the revolution against social injustice and monopoly of the state resources, implicating that those who rebel against the Syrian regime are constructed abroad and whose main task is to destroy Syria. This narrative is fabricated to help Assad morally justify any use of state violence in his ferocious

war against the Syrian people who have revolted against his dictatorship, as well as to delegitimize any opposite groups that claim legitimacy.

In his speech delivered in January 2013 at the Opera House in Damascus, Assad has also used a similar strategy. Assad blames responsibility for the death toll, economic hardships, and the destruction of 'the infrastructure' on the opposition. He lists a number of evil and immoral acts and associates them with the 'terrorist' opposition. It is them who 'killed civilians and innocent people, assassinated the qualified and the minds, deprived children of their schools,' etc., and not the Syrian army who rather defended the country and sacrificed themselves for the safety and security of the homeland. Thus, Assad demonizes and banishes "Them" from the "We" community that owns the support and legitimacy of the people.

In addition, Assad in his 2016 speech presented the 'moderate' opposition as being 'agents' working for the West and 'traitors' who have sold out their country in exchange for 'material promises.' He then shifts his attack from the 'moderate' opposition onto the 'extremist' fundamentalist sects 'Daesh and al-Nusra' activating mental representations associated with the barbarity and savagery of these facts in his audiences' minds, especially the minorities. There seems to be, based on these rhetorical and linguistic choices in this speech, a difference between the 'moderate' and 'extremist' opposition. However, this disparity between the two is eliminated in this speech, and elsewhere in Assad's political discourse, when Assad says that the 'moderate' opposition's 'response was a public declaration of supporting terrorism and the cessation of the truce.' Thus, in Assad's dictionary, the 'moderate' and the 'extremist' are synonyms.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has employed Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach in CDA in order to critically dismantle Assad's speeches delivered during the 2011 Syrian revolution. Assad's political speeches in general, as shown in this paper, have revolved around the macrostructure of the conspiratorial enemy that aims at the fragmentation of Syria, the heart of resistance against Arabs' and Muslims' greatest enemy, Israel, and other fundamentalist factions such as 'Daesh' and 'Al-Nusra.' He negatively depicts the political situation as being a 'sedition,' a 'foreign conspiracy,' a 'wave' and a 'crisis,' negating the positive connotations of the word 'revolution' and stripping away any legitimacy of the demonstrators and opposition given to them by the term 'revolution' simultaneously. The use of the pronoun 'I' and its possessive derivatives reflects the overall egocentric tone of his speech, emphasizing, at the same time, the importance of having a national unity against outsiders who are supported by foreign agencies. Through the combined effect of a series of rhetorical and linguistic devices employed in his speeches addressed to the masses and due to the shared cognition and collective culture, socially and ideologically constructed, Assad has managed to manipulate his audience into believing in the presence of an evil 'Other' that is plotting against the country and seeking its destruction and serving Israeli and Western agendas.

The vital role of language in forming the public's shared cognition, supporting the regime's narrative, and rationalizing repressive actions has been exposed by this critical analysis of Assad's remarks. Assad tried to gain support, solidify his control, and silence opponents by evoking ideas of harmony, stability,

and religious identity. The purpose of this study was to emphasize the significance of critical discourse analysis as a methodological strategy for removing the many layers of political speech and revealing underlying power relations. Researchers can reveal the underlying beliefs, refute the prevalent narratives, and raise the public's awareness of such discursive processes. The results of this study advance our knowledge of authoritarian regimes' rhetoric during times of adversity. It serves as a timely reminder of the vital role critical analysis plays in exposing deceptive tactics and fostering more nuanced and knowledgeable public conversation.

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