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A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of the Demonization of pro-Palestinian Protests on the BBC News Online

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Abstract: The current study makes use of a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach to analyse the media practices present in the coverage of the BBC to the pro-Palestinian protests in the UK universities in May 2024. The multimodal critical discourse analysis approach engages in denaturalise and analyse the biased practices against the pro-Palestinian protests, which are the ideological aspects and power relations, that are implied in language and visual images. The study uses an eclectic model. The study analyses the headline and lead paragraph through employing some of Van Dijk's (2012) categories of ideological analysis. It also investigate the lead image of the report through visual meanings of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021). It concludes that the demonization of the pro-Palestinian protests occurs through presenting the protesters as a source of threat and in a situation of a confrontation against the UK institutional authority. The BBC report also demonizes the protest through diminishing the protesters' symbolic meanings and keeping them away from the audience.

Keywords: Demonization, Ideology, Language, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, Power, Visual Images.

INTRODUCTION

The critical discourse analysts consider that multimodal critical discourse analysis as a significant turning point regarding the methodologies of critical investigation of communication. Multimodal critical discourse analysis does not restrict to language-directed analysis, but it works to conduct a multimodal analysis that is directed to investigate the intentions of the creator of a text concerning the choices of language, visuals, sounds, materials, and other semiotic modes (Brookes & Wright, 2024).

The current study adopts a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach to present an in-depth analysis for the macrostructures of the coverage of the BBC News Online

about the pro-Palestinian protests in the UK. The reason behind resorting to a multimodal approach because of its effectiveness in analysing the written and visual ideology and power. The critical characteristic of multimodal critical discourse analysis indicates the validity of the multimodal methodology to investigate the critical concepts of discourse, such as ideology, discrimination, and racism in the press, social media, and television news (Breazu, 2023, p. 18).

The appropriateness of a multimodal critical methodology for analysing the practices of the demonization in the current media is indisputable. The media context of the demonization depends on employing particular symbols, language, and images to depict in a misleading manner, members of a certain

group as aggressive and threatening to the norms and values of the demonizing group (Taylor, 1992, p. 52). The vision of the current study works on highlighting that the BBC demonizes the pro-Palestinian protests implicitly and subtly through employing a multimodal approach that is based on an eclectic model. The eclectic framework of the current study combines some of Van Dijk's (2012) categories of ideological analysis and Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2021) framework of the grammar of visual design.

The BBC considers the pro-Palestinian protesters as a threat that requires a formal mobilization and a deterrent act. The BBC also provides a non-objective coverage of the protests through representing editing evaluations and present them as quoted ones. It also works on perceive the protesters negatively by the audience. These points represent the written-based problematised sides.

Visually, the BBC represent the protesters through a partial perspective that does not present all their beliefs concerning the rights of the Palestinian people in revolution and freedom. It also imposes meanings that do not make a direct communication between the viewers and protesters and keep them away from each other, and it marginalizes the visual presence of the pro-Palestinian protesters. In the light of the aforementioned problematised sides, the study aims to address the following questions:

1. How does the structures of the headline and lead paragraph employ a selection of ideological linguistic categories to demonize the pro-Palestinian protesters?
2. What are the intended power relationships that the BBC aims to convey?
3. What are the roles of the representational and interpersonal meanings in diminishing the pro-Palestinian protest?
4. How does the compositional meaning marginalize the human presence of the pro-Palestinian protesters?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

The critical characteristic of multimodal critical discourse analysis indicates the validity of the multimodal methodology to investigate the critical concepts of discourse, such as ideology, discrimination, and racism in the press, social media, and television news. In the light of the previous, the standard definition of the analytical field is:

An approach to investigate how semiotic resources like language, images, and photographs work together to create meaning. It is an intersection of multimodality studies, which focuses on the meaning making of verbal and nonverbal resources and critical studies, which emphasize revealing the ideological and power relations behind certain linguistic and visual strategies (Tan, Zhang, and Dai, 2025, p.40)

Multimodal Ideology and Power

The major theoretical foundations of multimodal critical discourse analysis approach; namely, the critical discourse studies approaches and the visual discourse

studies, share a common perspective concerning ideology and power. For the critical discourse analysts, the embedding of hegemonic identity narratives and portraying discourse through a specific aspect, with the disability of the receivers to refute, comment, react, note, or evaluate this aspect; due to the control of access or the subtle process of embedding, are examples of the unequal power relations (Fairclough, 2006).

The analysts observe power as a symmetric relationship between the social actors relating to the difference in social positions and the nature of the relationships with the social group. Ideology is the motivation behind the disseminating of the discursive unequal power relations. Ideology is a one-sided perspective and it encompasses "a worldview, a system composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes, and evaluations which are shared by members of a special social group" (Wodak & Reisigl, 2016, p.26).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021, p.44) view the ideological dimensions in visual images also as a one-sided view. For them, the relationship between ideology and visual images takes up a domain because there is an intended perspective to call the others upon and behave according to it. Furthermore, the power relationship of an image also intends to make the viewers as passive participants. There are dimensions that can practice particular power relations with the viewer. One can argue that power is an abstract concept, and this is true, but there are concrete and tangible practices, such as hegemony, where the powerful person can reflect this through many relations such as coercion, consent and formation. (Buckely, 2013, p. 137).

Principles of Multimodal Approach

Machin and Mayr (2012, pp: 9-10) state that multimodal critical discourse analysis has a number of principles. Multimodal critical discourse analysts investigate effectiveness of the visuals, the images, photographs, and diagrams, in adding meanings where the verbal components do not mention them. The image can foreground particular information while the text seeks to conceal them. They study the participation, which results from the common labour between the visual and verbal sources because they can come together to produce meanings. The critical multimodal practitioners seek to denaturalise representations on other modes of communication. They aim to reveal the kinds of ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in the images as well as in the texts that will also serve the ends of revealing the kinds of power interests buried in them.

Demonization

Franklin (2024, p.61) institutionalizes demonization as one of media tools, "the term demonization is used metaphorically to refer to propaganda or moral panic directed against any individual or group". As a propagandistic tool, the demonizing group depends on deploying the conspiracy theory or what David Brion Davis called "demonization of the establishment", "With

this attitude, which can be seen in conspiracy paranoia, is not only is the demonized individual evil or degenerate, he is part of an all-powerful secret organization" (Taylor, 1992, p.52).

Some writers refer to demonization as a practice to justify violence, as a struggle between the demonizing group and the demonized one, and as a source for instilling fear from the other, but also as a multimodal practice, which employs the verbal, visual, and the other symbolic means:

Demonization refers to the use of language, symbols and images which depict a group as aggressive, physically menacing and threatening to the values and norms of the demonizing group, which instil fear and create negative emotions, and which therefore legitimate any action, internal or external, to protect the demonizing group from the demonized (1991, p112).

Demonizing and Demonized

The extension of the practical side of the demonization is under the behaviour of a demonizing group towards a demonized one. The demonizing group does not concentrate on stripping the human capacities and features from the demonized group, but sees evil as the motivation for which these capacities and features work. The demonizing group works on a demonized representation of the essence and intentions of the demonized group. It grounds demonization in the religious, cultural, and political beliefs of the demonized group. It puts the religion and the political beliefs of the demonized group in an inferior position. It also sees the demonized group capable and its danger is more acute (Giner-Sorolla et al, 2012, pp.169-171).

Palestinian Cause and the BBC

Critical discursive studies pursue prominent institutions, such as the well-known media agencies worldwide, to examine the insightful techniques of communication that contribute in transmitting the goals of the underlying ideologies. The BBC is a news channel with the highest viewing and listening ranks in the UK and is internationally famous. It also spends hours to cover the Palestinian cause from its own perspective. Overwhelmingly, the BBC legitimizes the Israeli occupation through interdiscursivity. It uses religious expressions with meanings carrying more importance to the Jews than the Muslims and Christians, for instance, using the Temple Mount instead of Haram al-Sharif. Concerning the lexicalization, the BBC avoids using '*occupation*' to describe the Israeli settlements in the territories of the Palestinian Authority and only uses it if it is in a direct statement quoting the Palestinian officials. It also uses '*terrorism*' and its connotations instead of resistance in its prejudice against the Palestinians (Timotijevic, 2022, p. 272).

Data Selection

The study analyses a news report from the BBC Online News that was written by Hazel Shearing and Ashitha Nages in May 9, 2024. The report was about the situation of the pro-Palestinian protests in the UK universities. Commenting on the topic of the report, in the wake of Gaza War in 7 October 2023, intense protests have erupted, demanding for the termination of the Israeli siege on Gaza, providing humanitarian aids for people in Gaza, and a ceasefire. The Israeli army have killed more than 33, 000 Palestinian people in the first six months of war only (Karame, 2025, p.58).

Model of Study

The constructed model of study analyses the macrostructures of the online news reports; namely, the headlines, lead paragraphs, and the lead images. The macrostructures are the structures that represent the overall meanings of a text, and they are centers for the most important information. Cognitively, the readers also derive macrostructures from the textually expressed propositions. Such macrostructures are defined in terms of an (hierarchically) ordered set of (macro-) propositions that are derived from sequences of textually expressed propositions, so-called episodes; by means of recursive macrorules (deletion, generalization and construction) (Van Dijk, 1987, p.272).

The study employs the model of the ideological square of Van Dijk to analyse the power relationship in terms of meanings that headline and lead paragraph aim to impose on the receivers. The strategies of imposing are emphasise positive information about Us, emphasise negative information about Them, de-emphasize negative information about US, and de-emphasize positive information about Them. (Van Dijk, 2012, p.34). It also makes use of consensus, implication, fallacy, and counterfactual to analyse the ideological practice of written language. The categories of ideological analysis are adopted from Van Dijk (2012, pp: 48-65).

According to Van Dijk (2012, p.50), the legislation of the parliaments and the information of news are produced in structures that are governed by the majority force and consensus. They are bipartisan and consensual values to represent the group unification, cohesion, and solidarity (We) the ingroup against (Them) the outgroup. Furthermore, implication means, "something implied or suggested as naturally to be inferred or understood" (Galzier, 1998, p.610). What is interesting in the categorical work of Van Dijk (2012) concerning the implications is that various semantic and syntactic triggers can result in implied meanings. The implications come out through the *verbs of modality* (p.39), *passive construction*, *word order*, and *nominalization* 'verb turned into a noun' (p.42), and *synonymy and paraphrase*.

Fallacies commence logic and reasoning via the procedural errors. They are procedural errors in reasoning or logic leading to unsound conclusions.

Finally, the inserting of a counterfactual argument allow the people to introduce absurd and negative consequences on alternatives that they have not been reported by anyone and they are represented in terms of warnings and advices. They can be triggered through different linguistic markers, namely, if constructions, suppose, as even, at least, without, or besides.

The visual analysis is built upon the framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2021) visual meanings. The representational meaning pertains to the description of events and states in the world through the visual elements and the relationships between what was depicted. It contains two main structures, the narrative and the conceptual. Narrative structures include what the viewers can categorize as aspects of reality. It has action and reaction processes. The depicted participants represent the action process by employing different vectors; thus, mouths, eyebrows, wrinkles, gestures, bodies, limbs, and the outstretched arms. The vectors of the reactional processes are formed by an eyeline, meaning that, by the direction of the glance of one or more of the represented participants (2021, p.62).

Images in many times, tends to express the essence of the represented participants, as in the utilisation of conceptual structures, which represent the participants in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essences. There is a primary use for the symbolic conceptual structures in the online news report. Symbolic structures mean that the participants are endowed with identity-related elements that are more enduring in the viewer minds. (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021, p.255).

The interpersonal meaning of the images means that there is a particular nature for the relationship between the viewers and the represented participants depending on the visual dimensions. The visual dimensions are image act and gaze depending on a demand act when the participant looks directly to the viewer or an offer act when the participants do not communicate with the viewers. Social distance dimension depending on depicted part of the participant's bod. Perspectives and camera angle dimension depending on the selected angle of the camera, and modality depending on a number of markers like the representation of details (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021, p.158).

Compositional meaning is the meaning that gives overall meanings and logic to the presence of representational structures and interpersonal dimensions through some visual systems. Information value system includes specific informational values, which are existed as results of the placements of represented participants in the spatial syntagms of images. Framing system pertains to the system that a producer of an image uses to highlight and create elements to disconnect between the visual elements, the given and new, the represented participants, distinct groups and identities of people, or

life acts. It interrupts the harmony to create distinct units concerning people and objects, and stresses individuality and differentiation. Salience is the compositional system that realizes the disparate affordances of the represented participants to attract the attention of the viewers (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 182).

Data Analysis

The **headline** of the report is:

"Universities UK says protests may require action"

The construction of the headline is short but complicated. The BBC employs three critical categories, the **consensus**, **implication**, and **fallacy**. The consensus occurs through the nominal structure "*Universities UK*". It makes the opinion look like a unified institutional voice. The structure assumes that the characterization of the protests from an implicitly negative perspective, as an event that requires actions, occurs through a unified institutional voice. This metonymy erases any internal diversity because it looks like a formal statement issued by an institution of the UK universities.

The noun phrase "*protests may require action*" triggers an **implication**. It implies, through foregrounding the noun, "protests", that now it is the time of taking or initiating an action against the protests. It does not imply that, taking actions against the protests, it is just a conditional evaluation depending on the steps of the protesters. The implication contributes in putting the protests in a definite suspicious position without giving any additional real, not paraphrased, information that can represent the protests at least neutrally in front of the readers, or placing them in a possible defence position. The analytical detail, 'now it is the time of taking an action against the protests', is the meaning that is processed immediately in the minds of the readers before the other meanings. The use of the verb of modality, 'may' implies that this evaluation is based on a careful scrutiny.

The BBC works on consolidating on the readers' side that the pro-Palestinian protests are a suspicious and problematic activity, relying on the opinions of highly regarded institutions and characters. The consolidation of the BBC proceeds through employing the *advercundiam* **fallacy**. The BBC describes the protests as the main and direct entity that may be faced by particular procedures, and represents this description as meaning quoted from an authority. In reality, the president of Universities UK did not say that the protests may require action, but he said that the universities may need to take action. Besides, the taking of an action is not an immediate, near, or possible one, but it is a conditional one as it is stated by the lead paragraph. The BBC *suppresses the information* that shift the representation of the protests from a negative and accused evaluation to an objective and conditional one.

The **lead paragraph** is:

"Universities "may need to take action" if protests against the Israel-Gaza war interfere with life on campus, the president of Universities UK has said"

The lead paragraph is partially fair to the pro-Palestinian protests because it provides information that are able to exclude the negative impressions of the protests in the headline which are about that the protests in a direct manner, requires action. From another side, the lead paragraph employs a **counterfactual** construction in "*if protests against the Israel-Gaza war interfere with life on campus*". The counterfactual construction denotes that the protests are in a path that disturbs the university life. The protesters did not declare anything related to the aforementioned path, and at the same time the president of Universities UK did not say the 'interfere with life on campus' part, and it is just a paraphrase the bold part of paragraph two in the report:

Prof Dame Sally Mapstone said there should be no presumption universities would clear protest encampments but **all students must be able to take**

their exams and graduate.

The counterfactual construction presents the pro-Palestinian protests, as the specific antibody for all the manifestations of life on the campuses, and not only specific details.

Visual Analysis

Reviewing of the **representational meaning** of the image in Figure 4.1, results in a **narrative structure** represented mainly by the **reaction processes**. In the centre, there is a bidirectional transactional reaction process realized by three protesters who have their own discussion. On the left side of the background, and on the right side of the foreground there are transactional reaction processes, where the book, the computer, and the tablet are the phenomenon, 'goals', of the eyelines

Fig. 4.1

The Lead Image of the BBC Report



The old man on the left side of the foreground characterizes a non-transactional reaction, and he looks like someone, who observes the state of the encampment. The protesters who realise the narrative processes lack the factors that can create communicative focuses because all the protesters are depicted in a way that makes their glances and eyes not clear, and does not present the obvious facial expressions.

There are **conceptual structures** realized by the **symbolic structures**. The symbolic attributive processes, which are realized through the Palestinian flag, and the placard, which carries the statement, "WELCOME TO THE PEOPLE'S UNIVERSITY FOR PALESTINE", indicate the symbolic structures. The protesters are valueless without the symbolic structures, because omitting these structures and keeping the protesters only, does not direct the viewers that this is a place of a pro-Palestinian encampment. The work of **interpersonal meaning** dimensions is based on making a distance of discommunication between the protesters and the viewers, and they also work on presenting the minimal symbolic meanings.

Investigating the **image act and gaze** dimension reveals that the protesters conduct 'offer' acts. They do not make any direct connection through the glances with the viewers. The **social distance** dimension relies on the distant shots to present the protesters; namely, the shots of the **close social distance** and the **far social distance**. All these distances do not encourage a direct relationship or a close engagement between the protesters and the viewers. The old man on the left side of the foreground is depicted through the **far personal distance**, which makes him interact with the viewers as a partner in a conversation or a debate about the protest encampment, which he observes. The **perspective and camera angle** dimension acts to render the protesters as a group of 'Other' people and not belonging to the viewers because the image presents them through an **oblique horizontal angle**.

The modality dimension serves a dual function. It aligns the old man in the foreground with the headline, which prioritizes

the opinion in a solid and institutional manner. It arranges the image in a way that makes the old man the main represented participant in the foreground. He raises the sense of scrutinizing and inquiring about the protesters and their encampment, especially, he stands with his hands clasped behind his back, which denotes calmness and stillness. The image **does not present all the details**, because there is a cropping for two placards that have the slogans, "INTIFADA UNTIL VICTORY" and "FREE PALESTINE", as the image in Figure 4.2.

Fig. 4.2

The Lead Image of the BBC Report Without Cropping



The BBC excludes the 'Intifada' slogan, which remembers the world of the struggle of the Palestinian people, and which makes the pro-Palestinian protesters in the UK universities representatives of the Palestinian people's voice. It also excludes the 'Free Palestine' slogan, which calls for the liberation of Palestine from the Israeli occupation.

The **compositional meaning** emphasises the pivotal role of the old man in the foreground, and the symbolic structures. The **information value system** indicates that the old man is an agreed-upon and commonsensical element on the **left** side. He carries the connotative impact of the headline, as an evaluation belonging to tact and composure. The Palestinian flag and the sign that carries "WELCOME TO THE PEOPLE'S UNIVERSITY FOR PALESTINE", in the centre, are the attractive points, and the protesters are only participants revolving around them.

The fence is the **frameline** that separates the protest encampment from the old man and the outside world, in terms of the **framing system**. The most **salient** participants are the man on the **left**, the flag in the **centre**, and the sign. The brightness of the Palestinian flag and the sign are in a **tonal contrast** with the colour scheme of the old man

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The headline and lead paragraph carry the implied, consensual, fallacious, and counterfactual meanings. The use of consensus and implication evokes that there are an overall voice, which represent all the UK universities, calls for deterrence the pro-Palestinian protests as a real danger. The use of fallacy suppresses necessary information can convey objective and neutral image for the protesters. The counterfactual meaning contributes in raising a negative and partial coverage of the pro-Palestinian protesters as troublemakers.

The consensual meaning emphasizes positively the situation of the UK universities against the protesters, due to the presence of a solidarity indication. The implied meaning emphasizes in a misleading manner that the pro-Palestinian protests has a dangerous nature that requires an action. From the visual side, the representational does not enhance the communicative focus of the protesters because the representation focuses on emphasising the meanings of the symbolic structures. The interpersonal meaning excludes important meanings that highlight the

Palestinian cause. It also does not allow a relationship of direct communication between the protesters and the viewers. The compositional meaning confirms that the people outside the encampment, and the symbolic meanings are the main represented participants. It also marginalizes the protesters.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that the multimodal discourse of the demonization of the pro-Palestinian protests on the selected BBC report takes place through several moves. The BBC covers the protest as a threatening event to the degree that it is always mentioned with warning indications. It also emphasizes that the pro-Palestinian protests as a confrontational movement against the institutional authorities. The coverage of the BBC problematize the protests through partial contexts that do not highlight pieces of information can present the protests in an objective and neutral manner. The coverage introduces limited visual meanings to represent the protests. It also keeps the protesters away from the

receivers and represents the protesters as members of an ideological group that works against the institutional authority.

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