



Original Research Article

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

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Abstract: The present study adopts a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach that is constructed out of Van Dijk's ideological categories framework (2012) and Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2021) model of visual meanings. It analyzes the macrostructure components, which are the headline, lead paragraph, and lead image of a news report highlighting pro-Palestinian protests in some of the American universities in the wake of the Gaza War (2023). The study adopts the report from the official website of CNN on the internet, and it dates back to the peak of the protests in 2024, May 4. The results signify that there are employments to vague, descriptive, presupposed, and implied expressions. They demonize the pro-Palestinian protests through aligning the protesting students with aggressive, criminal, and hostile frames. They present the other students and the universities as victims of the protests. The representational and interpersonal visual meanings of the lead image present the protesters through a constrained representation and distance them from the recipients. They also foreground the police officers and encourage the recipients to align with them.

Keywords: CNN, Demonization, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, Pro-Palestinian Protests.

INTRODUCTION

Conducting research projects via the multimodal critical discourse analysis approach has a reflexive analytical space. Such research projects are not constrained to a single mode or resource for communication. The multimodal critical discourse analysis is an analytical approach for investigating the implicit ideologies and the embedded power relationships in the multimodal discourses. The multimodal discourses are constructed out of two or more modes of communication, such as language, images, and sounds (Breazu, 2023).

Machin and Mayr (2012) created the naming, the multimodal critical discourse analysis. They established the approach to construct a field that can combine the theories and frameworks of multimodal discourse analysis, such as Kress and Van Leeuwen's framework of analysis the different types of images,

and the approaches and theories of critical discourse analysis, such as, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to discourse. Relying on multimodal critical discourse analysis, the current study analyzes the demonization of pro-Palestinian protests in the news reports. It analyzes a news report from the official website of CNN on the internet. The protests occurred because of the Gaza War (2023).

In light of the Israeli war crimes in Gaza, the pro-Palestinian protesters call for freedom, human rights, and dignity for the Palestinian people. They demand stop killing kids, ceasefire, stop sending the US weapons to Israel, asking the universities to divest from the military manufacturers who supply weapons and military technology to Israel. They work to cut the relationships with the universities that cooperate with the Israeli government to suppress critique and Israeli settler colonialism. They call upon naming the Israeli

military operation in Gaza as genocide, mourning the Palestinian loss of life, permitting the pro-Palestinian students to call out freely, without being punished for their opinion, and finally, ending the presence of the police on the campuses (Mimaki, 2025, p.233).

The problem of the study concerns in the way that CNN implements to demonize the protests in a latent form, which is detect and analyse, but it is very effective to the extent that do not make the recipients empathy with the protests or align with it. The study also concerns in examining the way that CNN uses to enhance and confirm the demonization of the protests through the lead image of the news report. Consequently, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the latent and underlying ideological categories of the verbal choices that demonize the pro-Palestinian protesters?
2. How do the visual meanings downscale the protesters and do no align the recipients with them?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Multimodal critical discourse analysis is an approach that was established through the integration the multimodal discourse studies and the critical discourse ones. The multimodal discourse part concentrates on the meanings and their construction in the verbal and non-verbal resources. The critical discourse side highlights the way that language follows to create ideological dimensions and implement power practices. Ideology is the conferral of monolithic representations, points of view, opinions, attitudes and evaluations of a particular group to consider another group or groups. The implementing of power practices concerns in the inability of the recipients to refute, comment, observe, or deter the ideological moves in the discourses (Wodak & Reisigl, 2016, p.25).

There a number of principles characterize multimodal critical discourse analysis. First, the visuals, such as images, photographs, and the diagrams, have the ability to generate meanings that do not present in the verbal choices. Second, the practitioners of a multimodal critical discourse analysis studies investigate the nature of the communicative work that is resulted from the participation between the verbal and visual modes. Third, multimodal critical discourse analysis aims to denaturalize and deconstruct the taken-for-granted foundation because the ideological orientations cannot be captured depending on the superficial level (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

The principles of multimodal critical discourse analysis appropriate studying a concept, such as the demonization. The demonizing discourses is not only

a monomodal practice but it can be a multimodal one. The media outlets can demonize a particular group through the verbal modes and visual modes. The moral defamation demonization even indicates a material, physical, and hostile act against the demonized group," demonization can be used to denigrate an opposed individual or group, making adherents to your own religion or viewpoint less inclined to do business with them (and possibly convert) and more inclined to fight against them" (Franklin, 2024, p.60).

Building on the multimodal nature of the demonization, Becker (1991, p.112) defines the demonization as a process of employment of symbols, language, and images to make the members of the demonizing group perceive the memebbers of the demonized group as aggressive and a source for threatening the values and norms of the demonizing group. The demonization results in legitimizing any preventive action, whether internal or external, to protect the demonizing group from the demonized one.

The American media coverage of the pro-Palestinian protests in the wake of the Gaza War (2023) is clear evidence of the demonization through the media. Since the beginning of the protests, the media outlets have not concentrated on the demands of the protesters and their humanitarian motivations behind the protesting movement. The American media outlets deal with the protests as a political conflict issue and an aggressive, anti-Semitic, provocative of instability, implemented hidden agendas, racial event that warrants heightened security measures (Karame, 2025, p.63).

Practically, CNN can demonize the pro-Palestinian protests in a multimodal manner. Its reports on the internet usually have verbal and visual aspects. The historical investigation indicates that CNN is in a possible position to practice demonization. CNN has proved on more than one occasion that its coverage concerning the Palestinian cause aligns with the Israeli officials and it allocates more time for them than that of the Palestinian officials. It always presents the Israeli people as victims and deals with the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories as a normal issue. It frames the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian resistance under a conflict between two equal powers (Bouzaid, 2003, p.120).

METHODOLOGY

The current study follows a multimodal critical discourse analysis methodology. It depends on constructing a multimodal analytical framework that is effective in analyzing the headline, lead paragraph, and the lead image. The headline, lead paragraph, and the lead image are the components of the

macrostructure of news report. They have a crucial importance and a central role in placing the rest of the information in the report. They are also the components that attract the major attention and convey negative and bad attributes to the members of the demonized group and positive and good attributes to the members of the demonizing group. Finally, they present the overall meanings of the report (Van Dijk, 2011, p. 398).

The verbal side of the multimodal framework model adopts the ideological categories of meaning structure, namely, actor description, implication, presupposition, and vagueness, from Van Dijk's (2012) framework of categories of ideological analysis. The visual side of the model adopts the representational and interpersonal meanings from Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2021) framework of the grammar of visual design.

According to Van Dijk (2012) meaning is a core structure that is used in the discourses to present premises and opinions. The premises and opinions are

used to present negative evaluations of the members of the Outgroup and present positively the temperaments, activities, and aims of the members of the Ingroup. The ideological categories subsumed under meaning are actor description, implication, presupposition, and vagueness. Actor description concerns about presenting negative descriptions of the members of the Outgroup and positive ones for the members of the Ingroup through aligning with them and emphasizing their positive attributes and downscaling their negative ones.

According to Van Dijk (1995) the use of implications provide implied meanings that focus on the biased presentation against the members of the Ingroup the non-impartial presentation against the members of the outgroup. The implications can be triggered through the verbs of modality, the passive constructions, word order, the nominalization process, when verbs turned into nouns, and the synonyms. The presuppositions present meanings that contradict the truth under the premise that they will be taken for granted. Table 1 presents the different types of presuppositions.

Table 1 Different Types of Presuppositions and Their Triggers (Sawada, 2018, p.39)

Seq	Presupposition Type	Triggers
1	Existential	The possessive constructions, the definite noun phrases, the definite proper nouns, common nouns, and common noun phrase, where the centre of a group of words is a common noun.
2	Factive	the information after the verbs: know, realize, regret, and be with aware, odd, and glad.
3	Lexical	after the verbs: 'stop', 'start', continue and 'late
4	Structural	after the Wh-construction
5	Non-Factive	after 'dream', imagine, and 'pretend'
6	Counterfactual	with if conditional counterfactual
7	Iterative	after the incremental adverb 'more'

Vagueness is an overall term that combines all the vague expressions and words, such as the quantifiers like a lot, the adverbs like very, and the verbs and nouns like hurry. Concerning the visual analysis, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021, p.47) see that the representational meaning is the meaning that can analyze the images in terms of the relationships between the depicted elements or the represented participants within the image.

According to Aelbrecht (2022, p.556) the most important structure in the representational meaning is the narrative structure. The processes of narrative structure signify the aspects of depicted life and the way in which they have presence inside the image. They signify the aspects of reality through the depicted unfolding processes of change, transitory and spatial arrangements, actions, and events. The narrative processes are classified into action and reaction processes. The action processes realize the relationships between the represented participants depending on the vectors. There are many forms of vectors, such as the outstretched arms, bodies, limbs, and the gestures. The reaction processes take place through the gaze and the eyeline.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021, p. 117) allocate the dimensions of the interpersonal meaning to investigate the nature of the relationship that the producer of an image wants to make with the recipients through the represented participants. The image act and gaze dimension contains sub dimensions, the offer and demand. The offer indicates that the represented participants keep a distance from the recipients because they do not look at them and avoid interacting with them. The demand indicates that the gazes of the represented participants direct to the recipients and they aim to make a direct connection with them.

The second dimension is the social distance. It is about the perspective that the overt part of the body of the represented participant create distances that have communicative values. The presence of the face and head of the represented participant indicates an intimate distance. The presenting of the head and shoulders signifies a close personal distance. It also the distance of the represented participants' privacy and the friendship with the recipients. If the image concerns in making a relationship, which is based on the casual discussion with the recipients through the waist up or the far personal distance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021, p.63).

The close social distance emerges through depicting the whole figure, and the recipients are not in a companionship with the represented participants because they are just items within the frame of the image. The depicting of a whole body and there is a space around means the far social distance and the represented participants are not a people to elicit sympathy and identification with them. The last distance is the public one. It is the distance, which the producer of the image employs to make the represented participants strange, where there is no visual motivation make the recipients interact with them. This distance occurs when there is a shot for the whole body of at least four or five people (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2021, p.125).

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021, p.133) the dimension that is interested in the dynamic setting of the camera and its relationship with the represented participants is the perspective and camera angle perspective. Table 2 presents the details of the dimension.

Table 2 Perspective and Camera Angle and Generated Meanings (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 137).

Type of Camera Angle	Generated Meanings
Oblique horizontal angle	The represented participants are not part of the recipients' world and the recipients do not need to make a relationship with the represented participants.
Frontal Horizontal Angle	The represented participants are part of the recipients' world and the recipients can identify with the represented participants.
Back View	Detachment between the world of represented participants and the world of recipients.
Low Angle	The represented participants are in a superior position compared to the recipients.
High Angle	The represented participants are in an inferior position compared to the recipients.

Data Analysis

The report was published at the peak of pro-Palestinian protests, 2024, May 4. The headline is: "More than 2,100 people arrested on campuses since pro-Palestinian protests began. Here's what you should know".

CNN staff constructs a complicated headline by employing vagueness, actor description, and presupposition. The first discursive blow delivered by the headline to demonize the pro-Palestinian protesters is using the vague numerical quantifier "More than". This expression contributes to frame the protesters in a biased manner in front of the recipients by signifying that a larger number than 2,100 protesters are under arrest. This move in the headline overstates the negativity of the protests and the beginning of a securitized lens through which the protesters are viewed.

The headline enhances the negativity of protesting activities through employing "people" instead of the actor descriptions, such as students or protesters. This actor description indicates that those outside the university usurped the protest position, and this contributes to the delegitimization of the protest within the universities. To intensify the framing of the protest as a security event, CNN places the structural presupposition after "what" to attract his attention to the information about the protesters as people under legal arrest and the related news, like the reasons behind the arrest and the criminal acts.

The lead paragraph is:

"More than 2,100 people have been arrested on college and university campuses across the nation since April 18 as schools prepare for spring commencement ceremonies, according to CNN's review. The first demonstrators were detained at Columbia University two weeks ago".

The lead paragraph reemploys the vague expression "more than 2,100" and the actor description "people". This language does not introduce new piece of information and its main goal is to enhance the criminal-based nature of the protest inside the universities and to confirm that they are events warranting the presence of security focus. The lead paragraph also employs the implication through the passive constructions in "have been arrested" and "the first demonstrators were detained. They imply that the pro-Palestinian protesters have a criminal identity, and the lead paragraph reposes the implication by utilizing the expressions 'the nation' and 'spring commencement ceremonies' as victims of the pro-Palestinian protests. The desired perception of the readers could have been different if they had known that the detentions and arrests occurred due to the installation of some tents on the campuses.

Visual Analysis

The representational meaning of the lead image depicts a pre-confrontational moment that occurred between the police officers and the protesters in the course of the removal of the pro-Palestinian protesters' tents at UCLA campus in Los Angeles on 2024, May 2. It builds on a visual legitimization of the coercive power perspective. The police officers constitute the most salient representation and that stems from their number, sharpness of focus, and their space, compared to the protesters, thereby rendering them as attractive participants to the recipients.

Figure 1 Lead Image of CNN News Report



The image represents the police officers through a transactional reaction narrative process towards the protesters. The police officers also conduct a transactional action process towards their tools, and these processes reflect their preparedness and discipline. On the other side, the image trivializes the pro-Palestinian protesters because the two protesters are depicted through a bidirectional transactional reaction process, as if they do not realize the seriousness of the situation.

The dimensions of the interpersonal meaning impose a relationship of authority-aligned recipient positioning. The image reflects the institutional weight and robustness, because the police officers have the largest proportion of the offer acts in the image act and gaze dimension. The close social distance of the police officers conveys their

stereotypical identities as men who are professionally immersed in their tasks. The police officers are also depicted through a low angle. It situates them in a power position compared to the recipients and makes them more receptive and compliant with the security-based solutions. The modality markers, specifically the representation of detail and the illumination

enhance the momentum of the police; by contrast, it marginalizes the protesters as ineffective actors.

CONCLUSION

The vague, descriptive, presupposed, and implied verbal choices demonize the pro-Palestinian protests. The headline works to prepare the recipients to accept the protesters as aggressive and criminal individuals that threaten the security and stability of the universities. The lead paragraph intensifies the criminal-based nature of the protests without presenting any objective and rational discussion about the protests that is distant from the security frame. It presents the pro-Palestinian protest as a persistent criminal-like activity through referring to a historical extent concerning the arrests. Concerning the lead image, the representational visual meaning allocates a salient space to the police officers. The representational meaning introduces the calmness and readiness of the police officers in the face of marginality, regression, and weakness of the protesters. The interpersonal visual meaning constructs a close relationship between the police officers and the recipients. The lead image works to position the police officers as deserving of respect and appreciation from the recipients.

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