

**Critical Discourse Analysis of Western Newspapers' Articles on the
Alleged Arming of Syrian Rebels and the U.S. President Barack Obama's
Speech on Syria**

Assist. Prof. Jumma Qadir Hussein
College of Education for Humanities -University of Anbar
jumaqadir@yahoo.com

Assist. Instructor Khaldoon Waleed Husam Al-Mofti
College of Arts-University of Anbar
khaldonhusam@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper, based on Critical Discourse Analysis theory and structure and systemic functional linguistics, analyzes political articles of western newspapers, The Washington Post and The Guardian, and Barack Obama's speech on the Syrian issue of arming the rebel groups mainly from modality perspective. The paper uses modality frequencies and qualitative analyses to evaluate the data. The results show that the western countries' support towards human rights in the Syrian war has often belied their actions. Instead of active engagement in Syria, the US and UK have taken spectator role, with very limited inclination to help.

Key words: critical discourse analysis, systemic functional grammar, modality,

المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث تحليل المقالات السياسية للصحف الغربية الواشنطن بوست والكاردين وكذلك خطاب باراك اوباما عن الازمة السورية حول تسليح المعارضة في سوريا باستخدام تحليل الخطاب النقدي والنحو الوظيفي. وتظهر النتائج ان دعم البلدان الغربية لحقوق الانسان في الحرب السورية هو مجرد أقوال لا افعال .

حيث ان الولايات المتحدة الامريكية والمملكة المتحدة وقفت موقف المتفرج تجاه الازمة السورية مع عدم وجود أي نية للمساعدة.

الكلمات الرئيسية: تحليل الخطاب النقدي ، النحو الوظيفي النظامي ،

1. Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) refers to a particular branch of applied linguistics, and is closely associated with researchers such as Roger Fowler, Norman Fairclough, Tuen van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak (Hart,2010:3). CDA is a theory and a method of analyzing the way individuals and institutions use language. More specifically, CDA critically analyzes the relationship between language and society. It is a type of discourse-analytical research that studies the way in which ideology, and inequality are (re)enacted through texts produced in social and political texts (Van Dijk,ibid:352) cited in Hart,ibid:13). In this sense, language is seen as crucial in the reproduction of ideologies, which, in turn, is considered as central in establishing and sustaining social identities and inequalities (Wodak, 2001:10 cited in Hart, ibid:13). Thus, in CDA researchers focus "on social problems, and especially the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or dominance" (Van Dijk, 2001:96, cited in Richardson).

In this paper, CDA is used to analyze two western newspapers' - the Guardian, a British newspaper, and the Washington Post, an American newspaper - and through them the perspectives on the Syrian conflict, specifically examining the case of arming Syrian rebels with heavy or effective weapons. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, a main foundation of CDA, is applied in terms of modality to investigate the actual political stance of the West, represented by the US and UK, towards the Syrian issue, and to explore the relationships among language, ideology

and power to understand how the power of discourse is used to persuade the public in accepting and supporting certain policies.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Systemic Functional Grammar involves two components, systemic grammar and functional grammar. The former aims to "explain the internal relations in language as a system network, or meaning potential. And this network consists of subsystems from which language users make choices", and the latter aims to "reveal that language is a means of social interaction, based on the position that language system and the forms that make it up are inescapably determined by the uses or functions which they serve" (Hu Zhuanglin, 1988: 307, cited in Wang, 2010: 254).

Halliday's Functional Grammar is based on the idea that language performs two major functions, the ideational function and the interpersonal function. Both of these functions rely on a third, the Textual function, which ensures that the language used is relevant. The textual function represents the language user's text forming potential. Hence, functional grammar talks about the phenomenon that the users of a language often choose from different linguistic choices available to them when they speak or write. To this end, functional grammar provides the system of transitivity choices operative at the clause level while interpersonal function deals with meaning as a form of action in which the transmitter of language does something to the receiver of language by means of language. Textual function is the relevance of meaning with the context or it is the function of constructing a message. Ideational function relates the representation of our experience of the external world (that lies about us) and of our internal world (that of our imagination) (Alvi and Abdul Baseer, 2011:150-151).

2.1 Modality

Language serves interpersonal function. The interpersonal function "embodies all uses of language to express social and personal relations. This includes the various ways the speaker enters a speech situation and performs a speech act" (Hu Zhuanglin, 1988:313, cited in Wang, 2010:255). The interpersonal function is a form of action through which the producer (speaker/writer) would do something to the receiver (listener/reader) by means of language. This function of language is of exchanging roles in rhetorical interaction such as statements, questions, offers, and commands identified together with accompanying modalities. Hence, modality is closely related to the exchanging roles as the participants' attitude, comment, or judgment would exist through the exchange (Halliday, 1985:53).

Modality and Mood are often used to express the interpersonal function. Mood refers to the role the speaker selects in the speech situation and what role he assigns to the addressee. Modality refers to the intermediate ranges between the extreme positive and the extreme negative. It is one of the most important systems in social communication. It can express the speaker's judgment toward the topic, on the one hand, and it can show the social role relationship, scale of formality and power relationship. In English, except modal verbs, modal adverbs, adjectives, there are also personal pronouns, notional verbs, tense, direct and indirect speeches to express the modalisation (Wang, *ibid*:256).

Modality in Systemic Functional Linguistics are of two main types: *modality/modalization* and *modulation*, for example:

(1) Mary will probably work. (modality/modalisation)

(2) Fred should tell them. (modulation) (Halliday 1985:363)

Halliday (*ibid*:86) distinguishes between propositions ("information", i.e. statements and questions) and proposals ("goods-&-

services", offers and commands). In propositions, there are two scales of intermediate possibilities: *probability* and *usuality* in which modality is the expression of producer's opinion. These scales are referred to as "modality" or "modalization", as exemplified respectively:

(3) They certainly knew. (probability)

(4) It always happens. (usuality)

Under proposals, there are two scales of intermediate possibilities, *obligation* and *inclination*. Each one is indicated differently depending on the speech function. The scale of *obligation* is in command while *inclination* in offer. These two scales of *obligation* and *inclination* are referred to as "modulation" as in the following examples:

(5) You're required to be patient. (obligation)

(6) I must win. (inclination) (ibid.)

Accordingly, Halliday deals with modality as the interpersonal communicative function of language, that is, the participants' attitude, comment, or judgment about what is exchanged would perform a particular function rather than the content. This function is appropriate in a particular context in which the exchange is performed.

3. Results and Discussion

For data, articles appearing online on the Washington post and the Guardian since the Syrian conflict began were selected along with Obama's speech on Syria, delivered on 10 September 2013 after the use of chemical weapons, to represent the political aspect for the analysis. These data were analyzed using the modality aspect of Halliday's systemic functional grammar to construct modality frequencies followed by qualitative

analysis. Table 1, as seen below, presents the modality occurrence in the Washington post articles related to the Syrian conflict.

Table.1: Modality Occurrence in the Washington Post Articles

Modality Type	Modality (Modalization)		Modulation	
	Probability	Usuality	Obligation	Inclination
No.	13	2	-	1

Table 1 shows that the Washington Post 'probability', as one type of modality, has the highest number of occurrence (13) among all types of modality. The meaning of 'probability' or 'possibility' dose not primarily involves human control of events, but involve human judgment of what is likely to happen (Quirk et al, 1985:219). As such, a high number of occurrences for 'probability' indicate lack of inclination of the US to help the Syrians actively. As for 'obligation', as Table 1 shows there is zero occurrence. 'Obligation' according to Quirk et al (ibid) involves a kind of intrinsic human control of events. This suggests that the US makes no clear obligations or commitments towards helping the Syrians, in any kind. Also, the occurrence of 'inclination' is too low, again showing lack of desire for real engagement. As the occurrences are the highest for 'probability' and all other types of modality are insignificant, it can be deduced that promises for assistance and human rights protection provided by the US appear unsupported by real convictions.

Apart from what appears in the modality analysis, the following implications are found in the Washington Post's articles on the alleged support to Syria:

1-The US dodges its duty as the protector of human rights and the world policeman as observed in the following sentence from an article published in March 26, 2013.

“To most Americans, Syria looks like a mess best left to Syrians and their neighbors to sort out.”

2-The US doubts and questions its ability to take up actions to help and support the Syrians as observed in an article published in February 10, 2012. Even the title is in the form of a question.

“Can we help Syria without making things worse?” (The title of the article)

“What can the United States do? The Syrian opposition was initially leery of calling for American aid.”

3- US government shows hesitation and lack of clear strategy to act in Syria as observed in an article published in January 28, 2013.

“The Obama administration nevertheless appears stuck on Syria, unable to decide even on simple measures to help the opposition.”

“In speaking about Syria in recent days, Mr. Kerry and President Obama described not a strategy for stopping a bloodbath that threatens vital U.S. interests but rather a series of excuses for inaction.”

4-The US is seen as having abandoned and betrayed the Syrians as observed in an article published in August 07, 2012.

“American, once regarded by the Syrian opposition increasingly is being viewed with suspicion and resentment for its failure to offer little more than verbal encouragement to the revolutionaries.”

5-There is criticism of the US policy of intervening in other countries and making chaos by the official media as observed in articles published in February 10, 2012 and in March 02, 2012.

“Too often, US policy has focused on removing the dictator and not on filling the void that his exit leaves behind.”

“Yet the administration remains opposed to military intervention to turn the tide against Syrian President Basher al-Assad or even to protect civilians.”

The next table, Table 2, shows the statistical analysis of the Guardian:

Table.2: Modality Occurrence in the Guardian articles

Modality Type	Modality (Modalization)		Modulation	
	Probability	Usuality	Obligation	Inclination
No.	8	3	-	6

In the Guardian articles the number of 'inclination' type of modality is higher than in the Washington Post articles. This could be an indication that the UK is more serious in helping the Syrians, and are more inclined in doing so than its counterpart, the US. The Table 2 also shows that 'probability' in the Guardian is less in number than in the Washington Post, and this could be another indication of the UK's seriousness in supporting the Syrians. However, as seen in the table, there is zero occurrence for 'obligation', just like it was with the Washington Post

articles, suggesting that the UK too feels no obligation in helping the Syrians.

Lack of obligation shown by both the US and UK in taking serious actions to help the Syrians are also supported by the following:

1- Any statements of help by the two countries appearing on mass media were exaggerated. This could have been done to save faces in front of the national and international communities, and thus appearing to promote human rights.

2- UK pledged for extra help or aid to the Syrians in spite of the suspected credibility of earlier assurances of help covertly or overtly.

The next table, Table 3, shows the statistical analysis of Barack Obama's speech on Syria.

Table.3: Modality Occurrence in Obama's Speech

Modality Type	Modality (Modalization)		Modulation	
	Probability	Usuality	Obligation	Inclination
No.	1	2	-	6

Table 3 above shows that Obama's speech corresponds with what the US and the UK mass media officially presented on the alleged support and aid to the Syrians. However, it shows that the number of 'inclination' type modality is higher in Obama's speech than what appears in the Washington Post. But, it is still similar with the two previous analyzes by having zero occurrence of obligation.

Obama appears ambivalent in his speech on Syria, giving no concrete plan of action nor guarantee that the US or its allies are serious about their alleged support. He states in his speech,

"We cannot resolve someone else's civil war,"

though he also states that the US government knows as a fact that Assad's regime is responsible for the gas attack,

"The facts cannot be denied."

Then again, he reverts to saying that the US cannot resolve other's war by force.

Also, though Obama repeatedly makes the case for not going to the war to stop the Assad regime's killing or using chemical weapons on civilians, he also suddenly shifts his stance on breaking out into wars to solve other's problems as in:

"I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria. This would be a targeted strike to achieve a clear objective: deterring the use of chemical weapons, and degrading Assad's capabilities."

But then, he completely moves to another direction of non-interference. In an answer to a question, "Why should we get involved at all in a place that's so complicated, and where" he replies,

"I agree, and I have a deeply held preference for peaceful solutions. Over the last two years, my administration has tried diplomacy and sanctions, warning and negotiations."

He, then, continues to give an excuse that "we should act because"

"Chemical weapons were still used by the Assad regime."

Obama concludes his inclination to step up actions towards helping the Syrians by saying,

"I believe we should act."

4. Conclusion

This paper used the modality perspective of the Systemic Functional Grammar by Halliday to investigate the certainty/uncertainty of the alleged support and aid to the Syrians. The modality frequencies and qualitative analyzes of the Washington Post and the Guardian newspaper articles and the US president Barack Obama's speech showed the uncertainty and unwillingness to help or to step up help despite media reports and Obama's speech to do so. This is mainly based on the fact that the obligation, one of the types of modality analyzed, had zero occurrence, giving clear indication of the false assurances and the unwillingness to support the Syrian citizens. At the same time, low frequency of inclination type modality can only mean that the US and the UK are unable to decide on simple measures to help the Syrians. The West seems more inclined to diplomatic action, but appears to have abandoned the zest to support the human rights.

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