

In the name of God



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Department of English language and literature

MA. Thesis
The Reflection of Iran's Nuclear Issue in BBC and CNN:
A Critical Approach

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ABSTRACT

This investigation examines the representations of Iran and the West concerning the reflection of the Iranian nuclear issue by BBC and CNN within a highly critical period in 2010 and 2011. The significance of this period lies in the fact that it coincides with the heat of nuclear negotiations, further sanctions and the inception of fresh economic reforms taking place in Iran. Benefiting from the principles of CDA and SFG together with some gained insights into the world of the mass media; this study attempts to identify differentiated representations of Iran and the West concerning the Iranian nuclear issue.

By the same token, in investigating the news items from these news corporations, the major analytical instruments which have been employed for the textual analyses are transitivity and lexical cohesion, which attempt to efficiently unravel the, more or less, implicit preferential representations concerning Iran, its nuclear issue, and the West. By means of analyzing the headlines and their full-text stories separately, the results of this study seem to indicate that both BBC and CNN attempt to represent Iran as being highly active in its global concern-rising, doubtful, and clandestine nuclear program. Following the same veins, within these same news items from the same news centers the West, on the other hand, has been depicted as a powerful cooperated global coalition that is totally concerned about the international peace and Iran's global nuclear threat.

In the end, this thesis attempts to interpret and justify such representations by taking account of the politically-shaped world of the mass media and their role in bringing about particular conceptions and mentalities.

Keywords: The news media, Critical Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Grammar, Transitivity, Lexical cohesion.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CL	Critical Linguistics
CNN	Cable News Network
SFG	Systemic Functional Grammar

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Discourse, society, and the media

Definitions of discourse abound which are all proposed by various scholars and prominent figures such as Fairclough, Van Dijk, and Wodak. According to Fairclough (1989), discourse constructs the social identities of individuals along with their knowledge systems and beliefs and following Wodak (2002), it is a special form of “social behavior” which should be investigated in terms of its historical contexts and in relation to other human disciplines. Within the same domain, Van Dijk (1998) believes that discourse is a socio-cognitive phenomenon which is mediated by cognition in its never-ending interaction with society. However; a common concept to all such definitions is that discourse constantly mirrors the inner mentalities of individuals as well as their socio-cultural norms, values, and identities. The affiliation of discourse and society, as Weiss and Wodak (2003: 13) put it, is so strong and undeniable that both of them, inevitably, bear significant amounts of influence upon each other and it paves the way for the ideological, cultural, and societal colorings to exhibit themselves within the discursive practices of individuals. Identifying such manifestations of the socio-cultural together with ideological factors in discourse has been the subject of various investigations by numerous discourse scholars (Wodak, 1989; Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993, 1998; Chouliaraki, 2000).

The explorations into the depths of discourse concerning specific issues all, more or less, share some common ground; that is, they all attempt to investigate discourse in light of its societal contexts as well as the power relations and asymmetries present in societies. Along the same veins, when it comes to this issue of studying discourse in relation to society and power, there are different approaches and tools for this purpose, which are inclusively known as the interdisciplinary enterprise of critical discourse analysis or CDA, and it is the major theoretical and analytical framework in almost any critical investigation of the relationships between discourse, society, and power.

The analytical and theoretical applicability of CDA also lends itself quite well to the world of the mass media whose discursive practices and ways of coverage have been the subject of numerous studies for many years concerning discriminations in race, ethnicity, and culture (Lecouteur, 2008: 667). A particular perspective held upon a specific issue on the part of the media surely is a convenient topic to be researched whose results and findings may have quite further fruitful insights into the realms of discourse, media, and society.

By the same token, this investigation aims to argue that the mass media which are viewed as highly “complex institutions” in our contemporary lives, (Thomas et al, 2004), mostly tend to represent the world and its realities in specific modes and manners. All such deliberate representations are congruent with their dictated socio-political economy which greatly shapes their worldviews and perspectives. Following the same veins, when a politically controversial problem such as the nuclear issue of Iran gets coverage by two media centers whose relevant states are not on friendly diplomatic relations with Iran, it seems that conducting a thorough investigation concerning their modes of representation would be quite significant.

1.2. Purpose of the study

Today within the world of the mass media and press, the issue of partiality and preferential orientations together with manipulated or distorted representations of certain issues, seem to be most often regarded as something quite usual and ordinary. The ideological directions, power, and socio-economic factors along with political orientations all appear to drive the mass media towards particular paths, all in close association with the values that such factors often produce, or are possibly affiliated with.

Within the same domain, this study attempts to investigate the news coverage of BBC and CNN, two globally-known news agencies, concerning the nuclear issue of Iran. Bearing this goal in mind, I will draw upon the principles of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in general, and those of the Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG) in particular. According to Li (2010: 3445), studies of various discourse scholars like Van Dijk (1993) and Fairclough (1995) have, to different degrees, indicated that the news media can be considered as both a site and a process of social interaction and ideology construction which can affect the structure of social thinking and knowledge. Along the same lines, since the Iranian nuclear program has for so long been under the spotlight by the most widely-known media and news centers throughout the globe, a thorough investigation of the discourse types employed by only two of such news media (BBC and CNN) which have extensively covered the issue, each according to its ideological perspectives, will be of linguistic and theoretical value as well as political significance in understanding the nature of their discursive practices concerning the same issue.

Regarding the world of the mass media, Sheiholislami (2001: 1-2) has pointed out that some media critics like Chomsky (1989) and Hackett (1991) believe that the mainstream media do not always reflect the reality, rather due to their "economy", "concentration of ownership", "institutional constraints", "news production practices", and so on, they may not objectively represent the world, and especially in the case of international events and stories, their news reports and coverage are most often in line with the foreign policy of their countries.

With respect to these different ideologies and orientations that the media are believed to adopt, the issue of power seems to be the ultimate goal as well as the driving force in picking up particular ideological values. Following Fairclough (1998), since power is closely associated with politics, and politics manifests itself within language, it can be concluded that there would be an ever-existing link between language and power as well. Regarding such a link between politics, power, and media, Jackson (2005) as quoted by Atawneh (2009: 26) has pointed out that by the use of power:

Governments often make demands on the media to serve what they define as the national interest. They stage media events, frame the issue, and articulate positions that are, in essence, pure propaganda. Thus media can play a most influential role in forming received opinion; they constitute the main means by which politicians, governments, and institutions communicate with the public.

Such power exercises on the part of the governments in general and media centers in particular, can lead to various types of racism, preferential orientations, manipulated news coverage, and radical directions and associations. According to Teo (2000: 7-8), such "new racisms" may not be quite observable, rather they are more "subtle, covert and, hence insidious" when compared to the "old racism" and, hence, in order to locate traces of it, one has to go beyond the actual text and print as it is woven deep into the fabric of the

discourse flow, intangibly bearing certain ideological values and driving the public towards adopting specific conceptions.

In this regard, the nuclear issue of Iran is a politically controversial problem within the international scene and this investigation attempts to delve into the texture of some relevant news reports from BBC and CNN. The analysis of the relevant news texts from these news networks aims to identify the orientation(s) adopted by these news centers concerning the Iranian nuclear program which is hoped to further shed light on their potential ideological colorings.

1.3. Iran's nuclear issue¹

Iran's interest in nuclear power began more than thirty years ago, during the Pahlavi's regime, when Iran sought to establish a full-fledge nuclear power industry with the purpose of producing 23,000 megawatts of electricity. To achieve this goal, Shah wanted to buy nuclear reactors from the US and the Western Europe, but Washington did not approve the sales without conditions restricting Shah's freedom of action to use such resources. The size and some of the objectives of this nuclear program of Iran, raised questions in the United States concerning its proliferation risk, and it also raised doubts regarding developing nuclear weapons.

Within the US approach of negotiations with Iran, proliferation concerns were quite central, but during Carter's presidency (1977-1978) a new round of nuclear negotiations resumed and Shah reached an agreement with the US. According to that agreement, Iran's consumed fuel had to be reprocessed in the Western Europe, and the Western Europe was obliged to return the reprocessed material in the form of fabricated fuel. After the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran's nuclear relations with the West disappeared, but the apprehensions of a nuclear Iran in the Middle East did not vanish with the shah's overthrow and the West again exercised pressures against Iran's nuclear activities and programs. Now Iran emphasized its full rights to benefit from a nuclear industry and the US enmity towards the Islamic revolution significantly increased Iran's interest in establishing a nuclear industry. Since the Islamic revolution, Iran has been strongly emphasizing its full rights concerning a nuclear industry, and in this regard, significant progress been made, but despite Iran's acknowledgement that its activities are all peaceful, the West constantly keeps pressures on Iran to relinquish its nuclear program and believes that Iran's intentions towards nuclear power are not within the limitations of NPT (non-proliferation treaty) and Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons as well.

1.4. Significance of the study

In this study I will attempt to investigate the social and ideological powers of language according to the grammar of transitivity as well as lexical cohesion that are parts of Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG), which itself relates to the wider realm of critical discourse analysis (CDA).

The significance of this study lies in the fact that the period of collecting the sample data (the second six months of 2010 and the first whole month of 2011), coincided with new rounds of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the West, and also a phase of further economic sanctions against the Iranian nation occurred simultaneously, all with the purpose of forcing Iran to abandon its nuclear activities. In addition to these factors, the economic reforms themselves which took place within the same period in Iran and the

¹ This part is exclusively based on this website: WWW.Thebulletin.org, accessed in March 2011.

cutting of certain subsidies on the part of the government were also considered as a mediating factor in the quality of news coverage of the aforementioned news agencies. The political along with the economic contexts of the news items, therefore, seem to be quite tentative and critical and, hence, this investigation can be both linguistically and politically valuable in this period (2010 to 2011).

According to Messner and Distaso (2008), as quoted by Catenaccio, et al (2010: 2-3), within the realm of media, "News is not just what others speak or write about, but also what the media themselves speak and write about; what makes an event worth reporting is that it has been reported on before." On the basis of this quotation, it can be concluded that, as mentioned before, news agencies do not always mirror the reality; rather sometimes the media themselves put a voice into the very texture of their news coverage practices. Along the same veins, in order to put the significance of this investigation in lay terms, it has to be noted that the above-mentioned political and economic factors and issues within the period of data collection, all appear to have the potential to act as determining points in making BBC and CNN reopen new rounds of news coverage, but from slightly different perspectives concerning Iran in general, and its nuclear activities in particular, especially when it has been "reported on before" and now potentially with the purpose of adding new fuel to the already lit up flames.

In order to further depict the exact nature of the media discourse, it is worth mentioning that there are many factors which have the potential to influence the media discourse together with their ideological strategies and orientations. The discourse of the media when deeply looked into surely has much to offer in terms of various types of ideological orientations and political directions. Such orientations, either explicitly or implicitly, attempt to form the public opinion and drive the public towards adopting particular conceptions and impressions about specific issues.

Within the same domain, Manli (2010: 7487-8) has pointed out that:

There is no doubt that the ubiquity of information communication between the advanced industrial countries and developing countries shows that the former largely dominate the information flow. Associated Press of America, agence France-Press, Reuters, and United Press International provide the whole world with international news reports that consist 80% of the total...It is also self-evident that they play a critical role in international public opinions...During the 2004 war in Iraq, the journalists from not only the western countries particularly the United States and Britain, but also other countries... have given coverage from their independent perspectives and enunciate many voices... to ensure the world audience have access to different alternative sources of information.

By the same token, the selected news centers in this study (BBC and CNN) are among the agencies referred to by Manli and, as he has pointed out, they have their own specific "voices" within the international gateways and this fact further contributes to the significance of this investigation. That is to say, this thesis attempts to look into the discursive practices of two highly famous news agencies which publicize their news at a global scale.

1.5. Research Questions

In order to investigate the ideological orientation(s) of the selected news media in this investigation as well as showing how they might form the international public opinion towards Iran's nuclear issue, I will attempt to answer two questions:

1. With respect to the nuclear issue of Iran, how does the structure of transitivity reveal the ideological orientation(s) of BBC and CNN? And,
2. How is the notion of lexical cohesion patterned within the texture of the relevant news?

1.6. Definition of key terms

Within this investigation there exists some key terms which bear most of the informational load concerning discourse analysis and its various approaches as well as its analytical tools and powers. A better understanding and view of the approaches and techniques used in this study would surely help to elucidate the nature of discourse in general and that of my investigation in particular. Here, I have attempted to offer some short but to-the-point definitions of some of such terms, however; within the next part these concepts and terms will be extensively explained and elaborated.

- a) *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*: It views language as a tool which mirrors the social structures and processes and, to different degrees, reconstructs them as well. CDA believes that there is an undeniable connection between discourse, ideology, and contexts of the society which, more or less, influences different context-sensitive social uses of language.
- b) *Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)*: It seeks to offer a unified view of language by a combination of structural, semantic, and pragmatic theories of discourse. It sees language as being definitely functional which aims to make meaning that is affected by the social and cultural contexts.
- c) *Transitivity*: It is a semantic concept related to SFG which focuses on the main verbal group of the clauses and attempts to determine the exact type of the processes at work and identify the participants involved in them.
- d) *Lexical cohesion*: It is about the semantics in discourse, that is to say; it looks at the relationships of lexical items with one another which ultimately contribute to their overall coherence.

Chapter Two
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Overview

Since my whole investigation lies within the realm of CDA and SFG in general, as well as media and political discourse in particular, in this section, I will attempt to provide a brief overview of CDA covering its origins, evolution and the main tenets together with its major directions. For this purpose, first of all, a general overview of SFG will be offered and then, I will turn to a discussion of CDA along with its major approaches which usually include those of Van Dijk, Wodak, and Fairclough, all with the purpose of shedding more light on the nature of discourse along with its connection(s) to cognition and society as well as power.

By the same token, the discourse of the media which is the pivotal point around which this study revolves will be also scrutinized and its significance in ideological constructions together with its role in specific adoptions of particular conceptions by the public will be explored. Towards the end of this section, the mass media's connection and interdependence with the realm of politics will be also briefly reviewed.

2.2. Theoretical background

2.2.1. An overview of SFG

According to Blommaert (2005: 22), a desire for the incorporation of “social semiotics” into a grammatical theory highly inspired Halliday to develop his systemic functional grammar (SFG). Halliday himself (1994) in his introducing of SFG and with regard to its underlying motivation has pointed out that;

The aim has been to construct a grammar for purposes of text analysis: one that would make it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English. (Cited by Butler, 2003: 468).

SFG attempts to offer an overall view of how language functions, how meaning is constructed and conveyed as well as keeping an eye on the broader societal contexts which have an ever-present potential to affect language and its use. According to SFG, as Thompson (2004: 242) has put it forth, within any clause an inherent part of the meaning lies in the relationship(s) held between the clauses, and the grammar used within language also bears significant amounts of influence upon the constructed meaning. To put it another way, SFG assumes a “grammar of meaning” (Li, 2010: 3446), which consists of clusters of interrelated possible options in terms of a systematic network of choices from which speakers, on the basis of contextual factors, pick up certain selections to express different wordings and expressions.

These selections made on the part of the speakers are almost always the unconscious choices dictated by particular linguistic and extra linguistic factors which ultimately lead to