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Faculty of Literature and Foreign Languages

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Title:

**A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Images of
Iranians in Western Movies**

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Master of Arts (MA) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

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In the Name of Allah,
The All-beneficent,
The All-merciful

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own sincere work and it has not been submitted, either in the same or different form, to this or any other university for a degree and it is by no means plagiarized.

Mohammad Reza Amirian

June, 2012

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ABSTRACT

The significant role of the media, in general, and the movies, in particular, in disseminating information and creating images of the real life by use of the language as a powerful social tool is totally irrefutable. Although critical analysis of the movie discourse is a fashionable trend among critical discourse analysts, there is a paucity of research on movie discourse in Iran. Besides, the increasing number of the anti-Iranian movies produced in the last decade and the growing tendency among EFL students to watch American movies, have established the need for conducting a research to investigate the images of Iranians represented in the Western movies. Thus, the present study employed Van Dijk's framework (2004) to analyze a number of anti-Iranian movies using Critical Discourse Analysis techniques. In doing so, two movies, *Not Without My Daughter* (1991) and *Iranium* (2011), were selected for an in-depth analysis to identify and uncloak their ideological manipulations and misrepresentations. The results of the study revealed that the dichotomy of In-group favoritism vs. Out-group derogation is a very effective discursive strategy at the disposal of the movie makers who have used language as a weapon to attack Iran by representing a distorted and unrealistic image of the Iranians' history, culture and ideologies. The findings of the present study suggest that the adoption of a critical discourse analysis perspective by EFL teachers is a necessity to improve the students' critical reading and writing abilities. It is also incumbent on the curriculum developers to design and develop the required materials in order to raise the students' critical awareness as well as their language skills and proficiency.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Discursive Structures, Derogation, Euphemization, Ideology, Manipulation, Power

Chapter 1

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

WE AND THEY

Father and Mother, and Me,

Sister and Auntie say

All the people like us are We,

And everyone else is They.

And They live over the sea,

While We live over the way,

But would you believe it?

They look upon We

As only a sort of They!

Rudyard Kipling

1.1 Introduction

The role of the media as a very significant participant in everybody's life is truly incontrovertible. Leaving in a world without the media is like living in an isolated island where people cannot communicate with the rest of the world. The development of communities in a large part depends on the flow of information. The modern human beings are totally immersed in media; from the TV shows they watch every day, to the music they listen on the radio and to the newspapers, magazines and books that they read each day. Among these various and diverse types of the media, movies can be regarded as one of the most favorable and dominant types that have fascinated people from all walks of life. In the past,

there were only limited options for watching movies; people could either go to the movie theaters or stay at home and watch TV. But in recent years there have been marvelous developments in the world of media, especially in the film industry. Watching movies online on the Internet or the use of high-technology devices, such as smart phones and tablets, has become a very common pursuit for youngsters. However, in this global village it is the media which has become the main source of information, and its power to instill and inculcate ideas into people's minds is a controversial issue.

Therefore, it is not surprising for the cumulative body of research that has been done to investigate and analyze the role of the media and its effects on people's lives especially the utmost attention paid to the study of media discourse in recent years. The multidisciplinary nature of discourse has prompted many researchers from different disciplines including linguistics, semiotics, pragmatics, sociology, anthropology, psychology and mass communication to focus on the language under the general title of Discourse Studies which was traditionally called Discourse Analysis (DA). As the dominant norms of scholarship require, the discourse analysts have always engaged in social discourse analysis in a "distanced and disinterested way, trying to be objective" (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 21). However, in the case of media discourse, having a critical approach is a necessity; that is, the scholars need to be more actively involved in topics and phenomena they study to make their social and political position explicit; they have to take sides, and "actively participate in order to uncover, demystify or, otherwise, challenge dominance with their discourse analyses" (ibid., p. 22). Accordingly, the work of the scholars is mostly "issue-oriented than theory-oriented" and the

analysis of discourse, its description and theory formation “play a role especially in as far as they allow better understanding and critique of social inequality, based on gender, ethnicity, class, origin, religion, language, sexual orientation and other criteria that define differences between people” (ibid., p.23). That being the case, the ultimate goal of the scholars can be considered to be scientific as well as social and political which has resulted in the development of the social analysis of discourse into a Critical Analysis of Discourse.

1.1.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

In recent years, the critical approaches to text and talk have attracted a large number of discourse analysts who “beyond observation, systematic description and explanation”, have decided to include one more step in their analysis, and “see the discourse analytical enterprise also as a political and moral task of responsible scholars” (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 23). They claim that the analysis of discourse using an objective and ‘value-free’ approach is not always separable from engaging in social, cultural or political critique and state that:

One can no less study racist discourse without a moral position about racism than a medical researcher can study cancer or AIDS without taking a position about the devastating nature of such diseases, or a sociologist can study the uprising of exploited peasants without being aware of the nature of their oppression and the legitimacy of their resistance (ibid., p.24).

In this view discourse can be used in everyday contexts to build power and knowledge and “for the development of new knowledge and power relations, and for hegemony” (McGregor, 2003, p.13). According to Luke (1997), using Critical

Discourse Analysis (CDA) is inevitable for describing, interpreting, analyzing, and critiquing social life reflected in discourse. Critical discourse analysts are mainly concerned with studying and analyzing written texts and spoken words to identify the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and prejudice and reveal how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced and transformed within specific social, economic, political, and historical contexts (Van Dijk, 1988). They try to shed light on ways in which the ruling forces in a society construct versions of reality that best suit their interests. Supporting the victims of such oppression and encouraging them to resist and transform their lives is the main aim of CDA scholars (Foucault, 2000). Therefore, the primary objective of CDA is to disclose and unmask the hidden ideological assumptions embedded in the words of the speakers and writers to overcome the various forms of 'power abuse'. It aims to systematically investigate the obscurities between discursive practices, texts, and events and wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes and it strives to explore how these opaque relationships play a role in maintaining the power abuse and hegemony. In fact it "draws attention to power imbalances, social inequities, non-democratic practices, and other injustices in hopes of spurring people to corrective actions" (Fairclough, 1993, p.147). For this reason this study enjoys the use of Critical Discourse Analysis techniques to examine power relations, ideological manipulations, and hegemony in the discourse of Western movies and documentaries produced in recent years with a focus on anti-Iranian movies to detect their discursive structures which usually lead to ideologically based prejudices and stereotypes against Iranians throughout the world.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Media today have become an integral part of life in modern societies. Development of new technologies, computer and entertainment industries including the film industry has encouraged “a titanic struggle among some of the largest corporations in the world for control of a consolidated information industry” (Hamelink, 1997). Hollywood which is often used as a metonymy for American cinema is the birthplace of some of the biggest film production companies including Warner Bros. Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Universal Studios, Paramount Pictures and Columbia Pictures who have been in charge of the production of the most famous blockbusters of all times. This symbol of movie industry has had a profound impact on the modern societies since the early 20th century. As a matter of fact, “not only does Hollywood have a negative impact on society, but it is also becoming an obsession with people living normal lives all around the world” (Miller, 2007). This obsession has become even epidemic in some Western societies. People, especially the adolescents, follow the celebrities lead on TV shows and movies and try to look like them both physically and morally. The ideal body image presented by the motion pictures is skinniness and it is no longer appropriate to have curves or extra weight. The society’s attitude toward smoking has changed over time; James Dean, the cultural icon and the famous movie actor of the 50s, is an exemplar. He “was usually pictured with dangling smokes and was considered an incredibly hot actor, a sex symbol adored by women and a trendsetter that men wished to be” (Kelly, 2010). More important, Hollywood films and music videos promote sex

which damages the moral values and leads the very young astray. The above-mentioned negative effects are only a handful of what is really happening in the real world due to the dominance of the cinema and the movie productions among the adolescents.

The situation is different for Iranians. First, there is a great tendency, nowadays, among EFL students as well as their teachers to increase their exposure to the foreign language by watching movies, sitcoms, TV series, talk shows and documentaries. Students try to watch as many movies as possible in order to boost their listening ability and, at the same time, enjoy the contents of the films, most of which are not suitable for their age. Second, the media representation of Iranians in the West is totally distorted and stereotypic. After the Iranian revolution of 1979 followed by the break-down of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War, Muslims including Iranians suddenly emerged as the arch-enemy of the West, especially the Americans. As a matter of fact, American leaders felt the need to have a new enemy in order to justify their hegemony over the world. They portrayed Iranians to the Western people, who at that time could hardly find Iran or any other Middle Eastern country on the map, as terrorists and barbaric, cruel savages with no civilization,. This situation was aggravated after the declaration of 'war on terror' by George W. Bush administration after the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center complex in New York City. America started a war against Afghanistan and Iraq, two neighboring countries of Iran and the "axis of evil, to shut down al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations" (Noah, 2003). These military attacks were accompanied by a full

media support and a full-fledged attack on Islamic countries especially the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Therefore, it seems necessary for the Iranian language learners to develop a critical approach toward movies and exercise caution in selecting them. They need to learn how to increase their grasp of reality and face the distortions and fabrications and this would not be possible, unless they are introduced to the techniques and procedures of manipulation and misrepresentation. As a result, this study can guide both English teachers and students in their selection of the movies and shed some light on the hidden discursive structures and ideologies embedded in their discourse.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The advent of media coverage in today's world and the hegemony of the elites over the flow of information who use language as a powerful tool to promote their ideologies and support the legitimacy of their power have made it necessary for the EFL learners to master effective reading and writing skills to identify the subtleties and intricacies of discourse production and comprehension. In doing so, recognizing the semantic features as one of the prominent aspects of any language is of paramount importance to differentiate between the neutral, negative (derogatory) and positive (euphemistic) applications of words. Using CDA to scrutinize the semantic manifestations of seemingly synonymous words reveals their underlying connotations and unmask the discursive structures of various discourse, together with their socio-political effects. Moreover, CDA

practitioners strive to draw the attention of the recipients of such language to hidden ideologies of the discourse and make the point that the lucid features of the language are nothing more than the “tip of the ideological iceberg” (Van Dijk, 1997, p.22). Critical analysts of the texts, therefore, attempt to create a sensitivity and consciousness about the invisible fabrication, misinformation, and manipulation, misdirection and misinterpretation exercised by some writers and speakers.

The findings of the present study in the area of CDA, including the disclosure of the ideological implications of the discourse of certain movies, can be presented to the field of applied linguistics including pedagogy, and specifically curriculum and material development to develop materials that raise the students’ critical awareness as well as their self actualization and creativity. First, in the realm of pedagogy and curriculum development, teachers need to reconsider their techniques and procedures of selecting and using the mass media, especially movies, to equip their students with the basic skills of critical thinking. Second, the educational system needs to be completely reformed in the “preponderance of language usage and the somewhat invisibility of language use” (Rahimi & Sahragard, 2006, p.4). In other words, the semantic, pragmatic and functional aspects of language are rarely taught to the students and the result is “a multitude of students with good theoretical knowledge about language but a few of them apparently have a good comprehension of semantics and the hidden messages in the language” (ibid.).

1.4 Objectives of the Study

Considering the paucity of research on movie discourse in Iran and the increasing number of the anti-Iranian movies in the last decade, this study aims at investigating the images of Iranians in the Western movies. The researcher seeks to uncover the discursive structures embedded in the discourse of such movies and reveal the ideological manipulations and power relations invisible to the naked eyes. CDA techniques, proposed by Van Dijk's (2004) framework, have been utilized to scrutinize the language of those movies that represent a distorted and stereotypic image of Iranians to the world. Within this framework, the study focuses on investigating how *Us* and *Them* as social groups are represented in the *euphemization* and *derogation* procedures in the discourse of the Western movies. The primary objective is, therefore, to familiarize the audience with the techniques and procedures used by the producers of such movies to manipulate and misrepresent the truth; so that the listener/reader would be competent enough to detect the biased and exploitative language and develop a critical approach toward the movies.

1.5 Research Questions

According to the above-mentioned objectives, the focus of this study can be summarized in the following research questions:

- 1- What strategies, discursive structures, and moves have been utilized by the producers of these movies to construct, disseminate and naturalize the anti-Iranian sentiment?
- 2- What are the discursive manifestations of ideologies and how are they achieved in the selected movies?
- 3- What are the cultural and racial stereotypes of the Iranians represented in these movies?

1.6 Definitions of Key Terms

In this section the key terms of the present study, along with their definitions, are presented. It should be noted that some of these terms appear throughout the study recurrently, while others have been mentioned only a few times.

Discourse

Discourse is usually defined in linguistics as ‘language above the sentence’. Of course it is not that simple; according to Widdowson (1995) text is the linguistic object (e.g. the words on a page in a book, or the transcript of a conversation) whereas discourse is the process of interaction/ interpretation that produces meaning from language. In speech discourse comes first, and produces a

text; in writing text comes first, and readers produce discourse from it. In other words the reader makes sense of discourse partly by making guesses based on knowledge about the world. From this standpoint a better definition of discourse than ‘language above the sentence’ might be ‘language in use’; language used to do something and mean something, language produced and interpreted in a real-world context.

Discursive Structures

Discursive structures are statements which are ideologically loaded and groove or channel the audience into certain positions, attitudes and viewpoints. And as John Frow (1985) has noted “the discursive [structure] is a socially constructed reality which constructs both the real and the symbolic and the distinction between them” (p.200).

Derogation

Derogation is defined as “the discursive device through which the *Others*¹ supposedly mundane and negative properties are magnified and brought to the surface” (Van Dijk, 2004, p.16).

¹ This concept was first introduced by Edward Said (1979) in his well-know book, *Orientalism*.