

The Sociological Impact of ISIS's Press Releases to Jordan: A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

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Abstract

This article conducted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on ISIS's press releases as directed at Jordan in order to better understand both the sociolinguistic context which ISIS operates in and the sociological impact of these press releases. In other words, this article sought to decipher precisely how ISIS uses language to engage the Jordanian community in addition to the sociological effects of this language use. The particular press release that was analyzed is entitled "A Letter to the People of Jordan in General and the People of Ma'an in Particular".

Keywords: Sociology, sociolinguistics, terrorism, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), ISIS, Jordan.

1. Introduction

June of 2014 consisted of the expeditious advance of what was formally just another armed group involving itself in the war-torn Middle East called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹ Indeed, although ISIS had existed since 2013 - when it first expanded operationally from Iraq to Syria -² it was not until the occupation of Mosul³ that it grabbed international headlines as the new leading terrorist organization.⁴ This occupation initiated a shock to political observers who were taken back by reports of nearly half a million Mosul residents fleeing alongside the Iraqi army itself.⁵ In fact, ISIS stormed Ramadi in May of 2015 with similar results.⁶ These same political observers are now focusing their

¹*Terrorist organization*: "a political movement [a group of people working together to achieve a political goal] that uses terror [*terrorism*: the calculated use of violence (or the threat of violence) against civilians in order to attain goals that are political or religious or ideological in nature; this is done through intimidation or coercion or instilling fear] as a weapon to achieve its goals," The Free Dictionary, s.v., "terrorist organization," accessed April 9, 2015, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/terrorist+organization>.

² "ISI Confirms That Jabhat Al-Nusra Is Its Extension In Syria, Declares 'Islamic State of Iraq And Al-Sham' As New Name Of Merged Group," The Middle East Media Research Institute, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/7119.htm>.

³ Jim Sciutto, Nic Robertson and Laura Smith-Spark, "Recording: ISIS promises more fighting in more Iraqi cities," *CNN*, June 12, 2014, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/06/11/world/meast/iraq-violence/index.html>.

⁴ A day after ISIS occupied Mosul, the Soufan Group - a political risk consultancy - released an intelligence brief which reads, "ISIS has become indisputably the most effective and ruthless terrorist organization in the world." "Dictatorship or Takfirism: The New Choice for the Middle East," the Soufan Group, accessed April 9, 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-dictatorship-or-takfirism-the-new-choice-for-the-middle-east/>.

⁵ Martin Chulov, Fazel Hawramy and Spencer Ackerman, "Iraq army capitulates to Isis militants in four cities," *The Guardian*, June 12, 2014, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/11/mosul-isis-gunmen-middle-east-states>.

⁶ "ISIL seizes control of Iraq's Ramadi: Iraqi soldiers flee as armed group takes over capital of Iraq's largest province," *Al Jazeera*, May 18, 2015, accessed May 31, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/05/isil-overruns-iraqi-holdout-ramadi-150517142811552.html>.

attention, and for good reason, on Jordan - a key player in what has now developed as the 'war against ISIS.'

Events such as the above-mentioned have obvious implications for Jordan, especially given its geographic situation between both Iraq and Syria. Once playing the casual role of solely providing logistics and intelligence cooperation in the US-led coalition against ISIS,⁷ Jordan is now a full-fledged member in this coalition, having participated in hundreds of airstrikes on ISIS targets since March of 2015 alone. To add to the troubling geographic situation of Jordan between Iraq and Syria, ISIS has singled Jordan out in some of its press releases, in forms ranging from calls to arms and calls for Jordanian support. It is the aim of this study to engage in critical discourse analysis of these press releases, so as to better understand both the sociolinguistic context which ISIS operates in and the sociological impact of ISIS's press releases as directed at Jordan. In other words, this article seeks to decipher precisely how ISIS uses language to engage the Jordanian community in addition to the sociological effects of this language use.

2. Methodology

This study will engage in critical discourse analysis in order to analyze ISIS's press releases as directed at Jordan. Discourse analysis "concerns itself with the use of language in a running discourse, continued over a number of sentences, and involving the interaction of speaker (or writer) and auditor (or reader) in a specific situational context and within a particular framework of social and cultural conventions."⁸ Thus, the specific situational context that this study is concerned with is the sociolinguistic context which ISIS operates in. The methodology of discourse analysis was chosen for this study because it allows discourse to be analyzed as "language beyond the level of a sentence," "language behaviors linked to social practices" and "language as a system of thought."⁹ These ways of studying discourse will help to discern how ISIS uses language to target the Jordanian community, in addition to the desired effects of this language use. They will also better enable the analysis of the sociological effects of these press releases on the Jordanian community. Critical discourse analysis, more specifically, is a sub-discipline of discourse analysis that "looks at discourse from a [socio] politically motivated level."¹⁰ Accordingly, it will be the most appropriate methodology to analyze the sociopolitical aims of ISIS's press releases as directed at Jordan. Figure 1 below illustrates an example of how critical discourse analysis will be applied in analyzing these press releases.¹¹

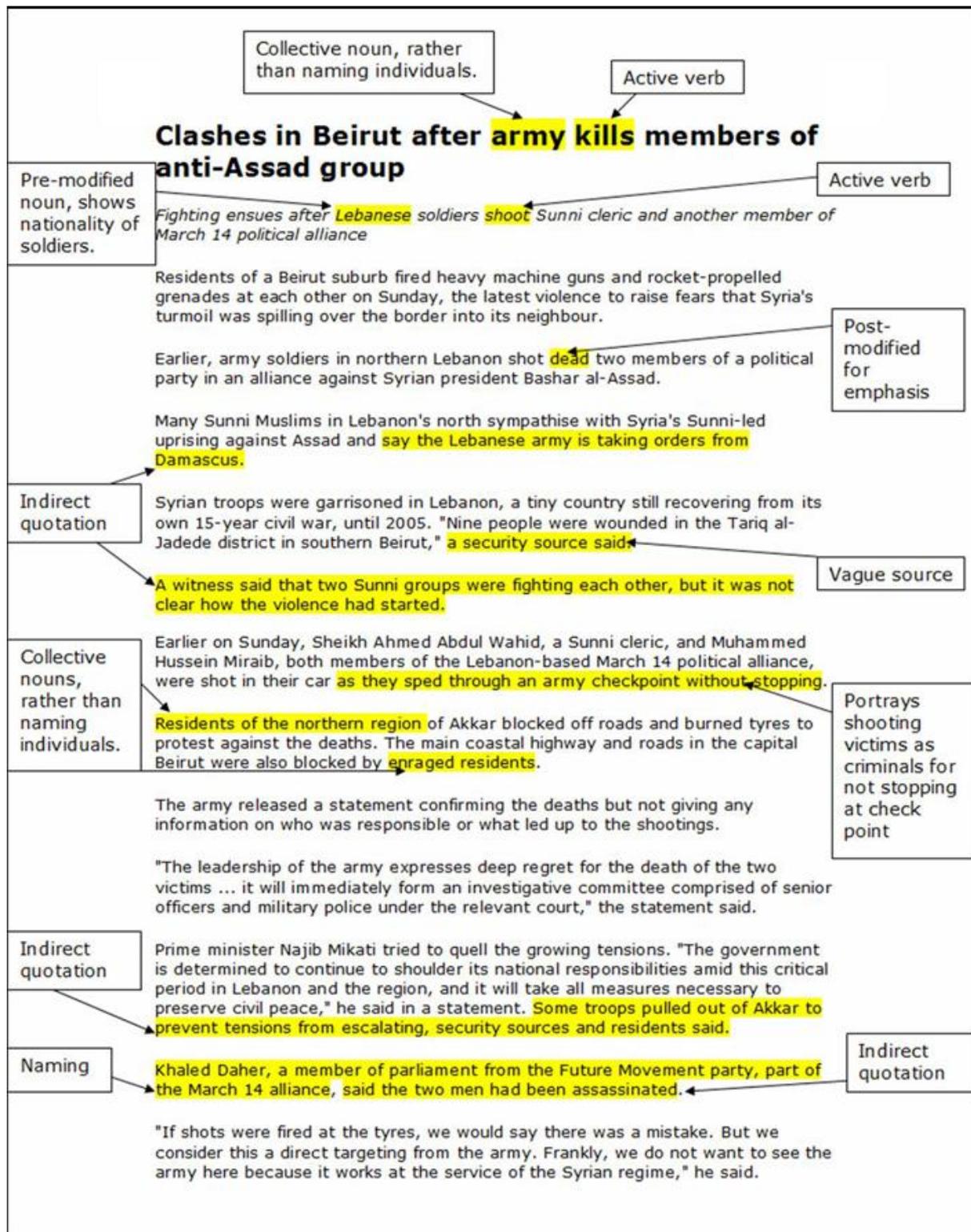
⁷ Raed Omari, "On Jordan's true role in the anti-ISIS alliance," Al Arabiya News, September 20, 2014, accessed May 31, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/09/20/Jordan-s-role-in-the-anti-ISIS-alliance.html>.

⁸ M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2015), 91.

⁹ "What is Discourse Analysis?," Sheffield University, accessed April 6, 2015, <https://sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/all-about-linguistics/branches/discourse-analysis/what-is-discourse-analysis>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Example Research: Critical Discourse Analysis," Sheffield University, accessed April 8, 2015, <https://sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/all-about-linguistics/branches/discourse-analysis/example-research>.



3. Data

Special attention will be given to particular sociolinguistic signifiers in conducting Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of this press release. Moreover, special attention will be given to what the authors perceive as the desired effect of the speaker who is actually engaged in the press release.

"A Letter to the People of Jordan in General and the People of Ma'an in Particular," begins with the words (translated from Arabic) "In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful."¹² Obviously, ISIS uses this opening in order to give the impression that is approaching the listening agent from an Islamic standpoint. Such implications carry more weight with them in light of the fact that Jordan, the listener in this case, is an Islamic country. The press release (video) then proceeds with three individuals, all presumably Jordanian, who direct the press release to "*Our* People in Jordan" (italics added for emphasis), which illustrates that the speakers intend to establish rapport with the audience by indicating that the speakers themselves are Jordanian. This notion was confirmed by *Khaberni News* on February 28, 2015, when it released an article titled "Who is the Jordanian that Appears in ISIS's Letter?" In this article, it is confirmed that the main speaker of the three is Amr Al-Khalayla, who goes by the *nom de guerre* Al-Ghareeb Al-Urduny, and is from Zarqa, Jordan.¹³ One of the most striking introductory comments made by the main speaker is one in which he describes Prophet Muhammad as "the one who was sent with the sword as a mercy for all the worlds." The word *sword* used here as a signifier seeks to legitimize ISIS's violent actions. Once again, the speaker subsequently addresses ISIS's "brothers" in Jordan in general and Ma'an in particular. The speaker declares himself and the two individuals with him as soldiers of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) before stating that "regardless of the physical distance between himself [and the other two individuals] and the Jordanian people, their hearts are with the Jordanian people, and they keep track of the news in Ma'an [the cherished city of courage and sacrifice]." The following is a more direct excerpt as translated from the press release, with CDA-related comments introduced throughout:

"The truth is that we feel the responsibility to give you advice [again, here is an attempt to establish rapport], and know that there is no solution for the criminal political order [use of the signifier "criminal" attempts to cause the listener to pit sides against the government] except its destruction, and what the criminal government does in Ma'an is nothing new or unique because it's a traitor/apostate government [use of the signifiers "traitor/apostate" attempt to provide Islamic legitimacy to an anti-government stance]. It is the government that has ruled Muslims for tens of years without the Quran and Sunna. Instead, it governs the people with a secular/apostate [similar desired effect as "criminal" signifier] order. It is the government that kills Muslims, violates Muslim women, and imprisons hundreds of Muslims, and tortures them in prison and wages war against Jihad and against the Mujahideen in all spheres of Jihad. It is the government that trains people to fight the Mujahideen in al-Sham (the Levant) and to kill Islamic State. It is the government that unashamedly holds prisoner Sajeda Al-Rishawi.

We ask Allah the Almighty to make firm the steps of our brothers [attempt to establish rapport] in Ma'an, and help them to meet their mark, and we tell you, our beloved people [attempt to establish rapport], that there is no solution except through Jihad [call to arms], there is no solution except through fighting [call to arms]. Beware, our beloved people, of peaceful discourse and demonstrations that dilute the true religion of Allah the Almighty and tries to restrict your Jihad to protests, demonstrations, speeches and slogans. Do not favor specific Salafi leaders or what they have to say over the Quran itself or let

¹² Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*.

¹³ "Who is the Jordanian that Appears in ISIS's Letter?", *Khaberni News*, accessed June 25, 2015,

<http://www.khaberni.com/more-143311-1->

%D9%85%D9%86%20%D9%87%D9%88%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%8A%20%D8%B8%D9%87%D8%B1%20%D9%81%D9%8A%20%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9%20%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4%20%D8%9F.

anyone divert you from destroying the government or fighting its soldiers or let anyone hold you back from participating in Jihad. So we remind you, our beloved people of Ma'an, that we are not far from you, and we will help you with everything that you need and in every way possible [attempt to establish rapport], so do not put out the flame that started in Ma'an, so that Ma'an can be a door for change [attempt to inspire], and know that Ma'an is part of Bilad al-Sham (the Levant) and that Islamic State and the soldiers of Islamic State will support you by every means available [attempt to establish rapport].

So we remind the people of Jordan, that the victory of Ma'an is a responsibility that must manifest, so support your brothers with yourselves and with money and with weapons and do not abandon them [attempt to garner sympathy for Ma'an's uprising], and we say to the Muslims in Jordan, for how long will you live in this dark shadow in which you live? People of Jordan and the tribes of Jordan, for how long will your children burn in service for the Armed Forces? So do not send your sons to be a part of the Armed Forces [attempt to dissuade support for the government in any form]. Support the Jihad and do not support the oppressor [attempt to portray the king as an oppressor, as illegitimate].

And we say to the Armed Forces, repent and come back to Islam because you have nothing to do with Islam; you are the ones that support this oppressed system and protect the Jews and prevent Jihad. Repent, soldiers of the oppressive system, because you are dead, and do not make excuses of poverty and fear of losing your paychecks because none of these things will benefit you, and if you refuse, know that you will receive nothing from us but the sword, but death, and know that we kicked America out of Afghanistan, and in Iraq and in other Muslim lands, so do not think that we are not coming, or that we are afraid of you, because we are coming to you to rule the land by Sharia [attempt to inspire fear and dissuade support for the government].

And this is a letter to the Islamic scholars and clerics who say that Islamic State rules outside of Sharia and is not legitimate: your fatwas (religious edicts) are disrupting the Jihad and are oppressive towards us and Allah the Almighty is going to hold you accountable for everything that you say [attempt to legitimize Islamic State as truly Islamic], and we say to whoever is affected by these fatwas and their words, that we beat you to the arena of Jihad and we saw nothing about what these fatwas say, except on the Al-Arabiyya news channel, and the Al-Jazeera news channel [attempt to discredit mainstream media's portrayal of Islamic State], but in reality we saw none of this, so do not be led astray by these fatwas, and we remind anyone that insults Islamic State, that you seek to justify your unwillingness to fight Jihad and your ties with this world by insulting Islamic State. Come to Islamic State and take a tour of our living quarters, and come to the arena of Jihad, and look at the curriculum that we teach in our training camps and you will only find the Sunna.

In conducting Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the previous excerpt, a few features are striking - namely, the fact that from the onset, the main speaker seeks to legitimize the letter as a whole by claiming that it is being said "In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful."¹⁴ The speaker then begins with a critique of the government in which he refers to the king as a tyrant and says that the government has - for tens of years - ruled Muslims outside of Sharia. The speaker therefore seeks to delegitimize the

¹⁴ 'Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*.

government. The speaker then engages in a pledge of support to the people of Ma'an, attempting to establish rapport as brothers-in-arms. Then, a call to arms is made towards the Jordanian people as a whole in further support of Ma'an. The speaker then makes direct threats to the Armed Forces, calling upon them to "repent" and turn to ISIS's version of Islam. Finally, the speaker addresses Islamic scholars and clerics in a threatening manner, so as to prevent criticism of Islamic State.

It is important now to look at the sociological impact that this speech had on the Jordanian community – particularly in Ma'an, which was the main subject of the previous excerpt. Once again, this "letter" was first released on June 2, 2014, shortly before the fall of Mosul. Accordingly, it is important to look at the specific reactions that took place in Ma'an as a result of this letter's release. On June 28th, for example, Jordan witnessed the first public protests in Ma'an in support of ISIS. Crowds of people gathered the streets to express their support, calling Ma'an "the second Fallujah" (i.e., their wellspring of support for ISIS).¹⁵ Similar occurrences took place on September 30th of that same year.¹⁶ This expression of support for ISIS took place immediately after an ISIS flag was spotted in the city on September 2nd.¹⁷ On December 9th, as well, ISIS support was expressed, particularly out of reaction towards an intensified campaign by the US-led coalition.¹⁸

4. Conclusion

Analysis of the previous excerpt from the press release entitled "A Letter to the People of Jordan in General and the People of Ma'an in Particular" shows a few striking features - namely, that from the onset, the main speaker seeks to legitimize the letter by claiming that it is being said "In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful."¹⁹ In addition, the speaker seeks to delegitimize the government by heavily critiquing it in saying that - for tens of years – it has ruled Muslims outside of Sharia. The speaker then attempts to establish rapport in engaging in a pledge of support to the people of Ma'an, calling them 'brothers-in-arms,' before making a call to arms towards the Jordanian people as a whole. The speaker then attempts to instill fear within the armed forces by calling on them to "repent" before attempting to dissuade criticism of ISIS by threatening religious scholars and clerics. Obviously, this letter had a huge impact on the people of Ma'an, as is witnessed above in analyzing the events that occurred in Ma'an shortly after the letter's release. Once again, these include the first sighting of an ISIS flag and the first public demonstrations of support for ISIS. It is the hope of the authors that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) can help us in the future to further analyze the impact of terrorist media communications to vulnerable populations, so as to render them null in reducing their impact.

¹⁵ William Booth and Taylor Luck, "Jordan Fears Homegrown ISIS more than Invasion from Iraq," *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2014, accessed August 24, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/jordan-fears-homegrown-isis-more-than-invasion-from-iraq/2014/06/27/1534a4ee-f48a-492a-99b3-b6cd3ffe9e41_story.html.

¹⁶ Samira Said, Jomana Karadsheh and Laura Smith-Spark, "Pro-ISIS Sympathies Simmer in Jordanian City," *CNN*, September 30, 2014, accessed August 24, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/30/world/meast/jordan-isis-supporters/>.

¹⁷ Su, Alice, "Fade to black: Jordanian city Ma'an copes with Islamic State threat," *Al Jazeera America*, September 2nd, 2014, accessed August 24, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/9/2/jordan-maan-daashthreat.html>.

¹⁸ Sells, Heather, "ISIS Tightens Jordan's Grip, Mayor Fears Catastrophe," *CBS News*, December 9, 2014, accessed August 24, 2015, <http://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/insideisrael/2014/December/ISIS-Tightens-Jordan-Grip-Mayor-Fears-Catastrophe/>.

¹⁹ 'Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*.

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