

Connotative Meaning and political conflict: emotive expressions in Arab Spring discourse

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Abstract:

This study aims at investigating the use of emotive expressions in political discourse in relation to Arab Spring countries uprisings. It explores the role of the connotative meaning in emotive expressions used in discourse surrounding the Arab Spring. The research deals with how lexical choices contribute to the framing of political actors and to the construction of ideological narratives. Therefore, a qualitative discourse analysis approach is implemented to examine a set of expressions frequently used in media and political commentary during the Arab spring. These expressions represent a set of political statements in news headlines by different political actors. The use of these emotive expressions play a crucial role in shaping ideological representations and in influencing public interpretation of political conflicts. The findings reveal that some expressions have positive connotations and various discursive functions; as a result, they legitimize protest movements positively such as "revolutionaries, citizens, martyrs." while some other expressions are associated with negative connotations, they delegitimize opponents negatively such as "regime forces, government forces, oppression actions, terrorist, and conspirers".

Keywords: Connotative meaning ; Emotive expressions ; Political discourse analysis ; Arab Spring

1. Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in shaping political realities; as a result, political actors frequently use carefully selected lexical items in order to frame events, influence public opinion, and legitimize or delegitimize political actions. In contexts of political conflicts, emotionally charged expressions become particularly important because they shape how audiences interpret political actors and events. In Arab Spring movements, lexical choices affected the political scene due to using highly emotive and connotative expressions. This

is mainly a result of the absence of neutrality amid political turmoil. According to Van Dijk (1998) "political discourse often reflect ideological structures that shape how social groups represent themselves and their opponents." (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 33). Similarly, Fairclough (1995) argues that discourse contributes to "the production and reproduction of social power relations." (Fairclough, 1995, p.2). Hence, political discourse analysis reveals the power of language in influencing and shaping political conflicts. In addition, political actors often engage in linguistic

confrontation in conflicting contexts. In light of this, this article attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1- What connotative meanings are associated with emotive expressions used in Arab Spring discourse?
- 2- How do these expressions frame political actors and events?
- 3- How do emotive expressions contribute to ideological polarization in political discourse?

2. Theoretical Background:

2.1. Political Discourse:

Thompson (1987) claims, "The fundamental patterns of political institutions arise out of words that people exert on behalf of their interests". (Thompson, 1987, p.14). It is said that politics is war with words. According to Chilton (2004) "At every stage of politics comes up against the questions of language and these questions range from the choice of words to the choice of Language, from fine detail of phrasing and wording to large scale issues of national language policy". (Chilton, 2004, p. 14). In this perspective, the linguistic-political dimension results in how those in power deploy language in order to achieve their interest. This indicates how important language is when it comes to political issues. According to Joseph (2004), "the study of language and politics aimed at understanding the role of linguistic communication in the functioning of social units and how these social units shape language itself" (Joseph, 2004, p. 347). Chilton and Schaffner also claim that political communication between the social

units can be divided into two levels, micro and macro. The micro level concerns the conflicts of interests, struggle for dominance and efforts for co-operation between individuals, genders and social groups. However, the macro level includes the power struggle or cooperation between political institutions, social groups or individuals on state level (Chilton and Schaffner, 2002, p. 05).

As Joseph (2004) notes, the relationship between language and politics was initially explored by George Orwell in his 1946 essay *Politics and the English Language*. Orwell argues that individuals often experience a mismatch between their genuine attitudes and what they wish to express in political discourse. Here, instead of carefully selecting words, speakers may rely on ready-made expressions that automatically shape their sentences, and to some extent even their thinking. This can reduce clarity and precision in communication. In other words, language does not simply reflect thought, but can also influence it and sometimes distort it. (Joseph, 2004, p. 352).

We can say that language shapes political realities. Luntz (2007) claims, "People will not understand what is happening to them, and they cannot rebel against what they do not understand" (Luntz, 2007, p. 49). So, unveiling the hidden ideological structures behind political discourse has been the concern of discourse analysts who apply given methods in analysing political discourse.

Here, political discourse analysis deals with how politicians promote their authority and ideology in an implicit way, successfully

employing linguistic means. Therefore, political analysis is concerned with 'credibility' and legitimization of one's deed according to the ideology one is supporting. Research in this field is mostly rooted in communication and linguistic theories, which attempts to disclose the politicians intentions and analyse the effects of their speeches. One of the pioneers to address the question of implied meaning and credibility of linguistic communication was Paul Grice. His 'Theory on Implicature' has inspired many scholars in this field. Grice (1967) proposed four conversation maxims: the maxim of quantity (give information as required), quality (be truthful), relation (be relevant) and manner (avoid obscurity). Therefore, when a speaker follows the four maxims, there is no implicature. However, when the speaker 'flouts' one of the maxims, the situation resulted in conversational implicature (implied pragmatic meaning) (Vine, 2004, p. 47). According to Chilton (2004), the usage of implicatures in political language enables politicians to convey more than what they say through intended meaning which is only recognizable to the hearer if he/she adopts a particular ideology or a set of attitudes and values. Hence, the modern approach to political discourse is a critical study of signs of deception and authority in the language of politicians. (Chilton, 2004, p. 37).

2.2. Connotative Meaning and emotive expressions:

Nida and Taber (1969: 91) indicate that the connotative meaning of a sign is called 'associative' or 'emotive'; it is "the aspect of meaning which deals with our emotional

reactions to words." It is associative, subjective and affective (Nida and Taber, 1969, p. 91). Leech (1981) defines it as "the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to over and above its purely conceptual contents." (Leech, 1981, p. 12). According to Waard and Nida (1986), connotative meaning consists of certain features derived primarily from the practical contexts in which such a term is used; including people who habitually use such expressions and the circumstances in which such words frequently occur (Waard and Nida, 1986, p. 146). Newmark (1988) also maintains, "All texts have connotations, an aura of ideas and feelings suggested by lexical words (e.g. 'run' may suggest 'haste' and 'sofa' may suggest 'comfort')." (Newmark, 1988, p. 16). In our selected context, words such as "revolutionaries, martyrs" may suggest heroism and courage and words such as "extremists, terrorists" may suggest danger and threat.

Nida (1969) states that we do not only understand the references of words, but also "react to them emotionally, sometimes strongly, sometimes weakly, sometimes affirmatively, and sometimes negatively." (Nida, 1969, p. 91). Unlike the conceptual meaning the connotative is culture-specific. Hence, different languages frequently articulate different connotations and associations of feeling because of differences in cultural roots. As far as political concepts are concerned, connotations play an important role in determining the word usage in certain contexts rather than others. For example, the words *munaḍil* and *thawri*, which are equivalent to militant and revolutionary respectively, have positive connotations in a

given political context as they may have negative connotations in another different political context.

Taking the present period as an example, certain concepts could be analysed according to their communicative value, evaluative meaning, and connotations. That is to say, what messages do they communicate, and what sorts of results to be evaluated? Lakoff (1972) points out that to be able to measure the communicative value and evaluative meaning of 'a concept or signified', "its connotation in a given culture associated with a certain historical period have to be the indicators". (Lakoff, 1972, pp. 221-271). In relevance to the present investigation, it would be convenient to measure political terms and concepts according to their positive and negative connotations and to investigate their communicative value or discursive function. Hence, the connotations of particular political concepts differ from one speech community to another according to the adopted political systems and the policy of their mass media, for instance, the word 'jihadist' has positive connotations in some Muslim nations, while negative connotations in all Non-Muslim ones. In addition to this, a word such as 'revolutionaries' may have a positive connotation in one setting as it may have a negative connotation in a different setting according to the context and the circumstances of the events. In Tunisia, for instance, it communicates positive connotations such as heroism, sacrifice and bravery. However, in Syria, it connotes negative connotations such as traitors and terrorists. This is mainly due to

the difference between the two political settings in terms of political polarization.

Furthermore, in situations of conflicts, political connotative expressions legitimize or delegitimize given actions. Therefore, rival parties engage in lexical battles between one another trying to depict a good picture of themselves and a bad picture of their opponents and lexical choices become influential.

3. Research Methodology:

3.1. Research Tools:

We have selected a corpus of 32 most used and repeated emotive expressions from news headlines and political commentary. The selection criteria took into account the constant repetition of the selected words. Therefore, these expressions are analysed according to their connotative meanings, ideological orientation and discursive function. The selected expressions carry highly emotive and connotative meanings and different political actors used them during the events.

3.2. Procedure of Analysis

First, we have selected connotative emotive expressions from the Arab Spring political movements as a context. These expressions constitute our data. Second, we have analysed them in the light of their connotations. Third, we have specified their ideological concept and finally we have identified the discursive function of each expression. Here, the word "regime" carries a negative connotation of an authoritarian rule, which of course presupposes an anti-democratic dominance as an ideology. Consequently, such

expression implies a discourse function through legitimization or deligitimisation. The selected expressions and their analysis shed light on the relationship between language and political conflicts in the Arab Spring countries, mainly, Libya and Syria.

3.2. Procedure of Analysis

Table 1 consists of a list of the most used expressions in relation to the events. They are selected from media discourse and political commentary related to the Arab Spring. Therefore, the analysis focuses on the connotative meanings of these expressions, their ideological orientation and their discursive functions in framing political actors and events.

This section analyses a set of expressions frequently used in media discourse and political commentary during the Arab Spring. Here and as explained previously, the focus is on their connotative meanings, ideological orientations, and discursive functions. The analysis adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, emphasizing how language is used to construct and shape social and political conflicts rather than simply reflect them. The analysis is based on four critical discourse analysis principles. First, language as an ideological tool by which power relations are encoded. Second, framing and representation where different actors are constructed positively or negatively. Third, legitimization strategies when discourse justifies actions and positions in respect to this context. Finally, polarization when division surfaces the political scene amid conflicts and becomes "us" vs "them". So, we have categorized the selected

expressions into four major discursive categories, expressions legitimizing protest or opposition, expressions delegitimizing protests and oppositions, expressions used for militarization and conflict framing, and expressions used for sectarian and ideological framing. We have also identified a number of discursive strategies.

Table 1. Table of selected expressions

Expression	Connotative Meaning	Discursive Function
Freedom protestors	Positive: liberty, human rights	Legitimizes demonstrations
Democracy protestors	Positive: justice, reform	Frames protests as moral struggle
Anti-government protestors	Negative: disorder, illegitimacy	Delegitimizes protests
Pro-democracy protestors	Positive: righteousness	Justifies escalation
Pro-government forces	Stability vs opposition	Justifies repression
Rebels	Ambiguous: resistance or chaos	Frames conflict as insurgency
Looters	Criminality, chaos	Delegitimizes movements
Revolutionaries	Heroic struggle	Glorifies uprising

Conspirators	Treason, betrayal	Criminalizes opposition
Terrorists	Extreme threat	Justifies military action
Extremists	Radical ideology	Escalates fear narrative
Jihadists	Religious militancy	Frames conflict as global threat
Takfirists	Religious extremism	Intensifies sectarian framing
Gaddafi forces	Illegitimate authority	Personalizes conflict
Assad regime	Dictatorship, oppression	Delegitimizes authority
Saleh brigades	Personal loyalty, factionalism	Highlights fragmentation
Free Syrian Army	Legitimate resistance	Legitimizes armed struggle
Resistance forces	Armed struggle against injustice	Justifies militarization
Popular protection forces	Civilian defense	Frames conflict as protective
Legitimacy support forces	Defense of legal authority	Legitimizes war
Arab coalition forces	Regional power	Normalizes foreign involvement

	intervention	
Shia	Sectarian identity	Frames conflict as sectarian
Sunni	Sectarian identity	Reinforces polarization

Table 2. Table of selected expressions

Expression	Connotative Meaning	Discursive Function
Regime loyalists	Blind support	Delegitimizes supporters
Dictator	Absolute power, oppression	Moral condemnation
Martyrs	Sacrifice, heroism	Emotional mobilization
Victims	Innocence, suffering	Elicits sympathy
Armed groups	Militarization	Avoids ideological bias
Militias	Irregular violence	Suggests instability
Foreign-backed forces	External interference	Delegitimizes actors
Occupying forces	Illegitimate presence	Frames invasion
Security forces	Law and order	Justifies control
Crackdown	Harsh repression	Highlights abuse
Uprising	Popular movement	Legitimizes revolt
Civil war	Internal collapse	Frames severity
Chaos	Disorder	Justifies authority

Stability	Order, security	Justifies repression
Reform movement	Gradual change	Softens conflict framing

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4. Detailed Interpretation of the Table:

4.1 Discursive Categories of Expressions

4.1.1 Legitimizing Protest and Opposition

Here, expressions such as freedom protestors, democracy protestors, pro-democracy protestors, revolutionaries, martyrs, and free Syrian army construct protestors and opposition actors as morally justified, and politically legitimate; therefore, they are engaged in a struggle for their rights. This reflects a pro-revolutionary ideology which emphasises values such as freedom, justice and dignity.

4.1.2 Deligitimizing Protest and Opposition

Expressions such as anti-government protesters, looters, conspirers, terrorists, extremists, and militia all function to criminalize protestors, associate them with violence or illegality, and justify repression. These expressions align with a pro-government or security-oriented discourse which aims at maintaining authority and order.

4.1.3 Militarisation and War Framing

Expressions such as armed groups, resistance forces, civil war, crackdown, security forces and Arab coalition forces play a vital role in framing the events as violent and military in nature as well as they indicate an escalation from protest to war. Hence, this type of discourse normalises violence and shifts a civil resistance to an armed conflict.

4.1.4 Secretarian Ideology and Framing

The following expressions are famous expressions in the Arab world and they constitute public perception during political conflicts. Therefore, expressions such as Sunni, Shiaa, jihadists and takfirists all introduce religious identity into political conflict and further reinforce divisions. As a result, they indicate a sectarianisation of discourse, which means that the political struggle or conflict is reinterpreted as a religious one. Therefore, it becomes more complicated and increases hostility.

5. Discursive Strategies Identified

5.1 Nomination or labelling

It is noticed that actors in this political context are named differently depending on ideological consideration, take for instance these pairs of expressions 'revolutionaries vs terrorists' and 'security forces v regime force. This shows that naming in this context is a linguistic and a political act.

5.2. Characterisation

It is also noticed that groups are assigned characteristics, and based on this they are morally evaluated. Take the following examples, peaceful protesters, and violent extremists.

5.3. Fear Appeal

From our analysis, it is observed that given expressions such as 'terrorists and extremists' are used in order to evoke feelings of fear among public opinion, thus any military intervention in the course of events becomes justifiable and legitimate.

6. Findings

Our analysis of the data revealed main findings in relation to the political discourse

in the Arab Spring context; these findings are explained as follows,

6.1. Strong Ideological Polarisation

It is observed that there was a clear ideological polarisation represented in using different expressions, which carry positive self-representation of some actions, and other expressions, which carry negative representations of other actions. Hence, two sides of the conflict are identified which are 'us' vs 'them'.

6.2. Discursive Construction of Legitimacy

The analysis of the data shows that legitimacy of actions and reactions were made and constructed through language. Here, the term 'protestors' may indicate heroes or criminals, and the expression 'government forces' may also indicate either protectors or oppressors. So, language is used to construct legitimacy.

6.3. Gradual Shift in Discourse

The analysis of the data further identifies that there was a gradual progression of events in relation to the conflict in question. This progression can be divided into three stages. First, initial stage, which was characterised by using less connotative and emotive expressions such as peaceful protestors and freedom protestors. Second, escalation stage was characterised by using more connotative and emotive expressions such as rebels and armed forces. Third, confrontation stage was characterised by using highly connotative and emotive expressions such as terrorists and extremists. Therefore, this indicates

that language shifted along with the course of the conflict.

7. Quantitative Analysis of the Data

This section deals with the quantitative analysis of the data. It aims at transforming the qualitative discourse analysis into measurable data, which enables us in the identification of dominant patterns, in the comparison between categories, and as a support for critical discourse analysis.

7.1. Categorisation and Frequency Count

First, we have classified all expressions into major categories:

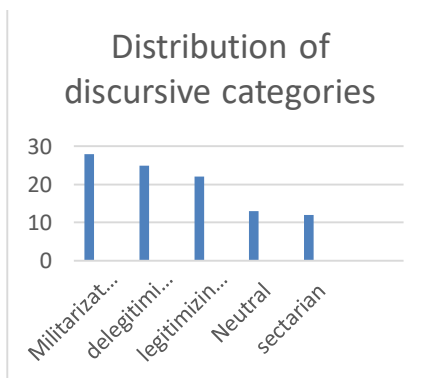
Table 3 .Categorisation of expressions

Category	Number of Expressi ons	Percent age
LegitimizingProtest	7	22%
Delegitimizing Protest	8	25%
Militarizing / Conflict	9	28%
Sectarian / Ideological	4	12%
Neutral / Ambiguous	4	13%
Total	32	100%

This table represents the main categories of the expressions. It illustrates the category of expressions, the number of expressions used in each category, and the percentage of using the expressions during the political conflict

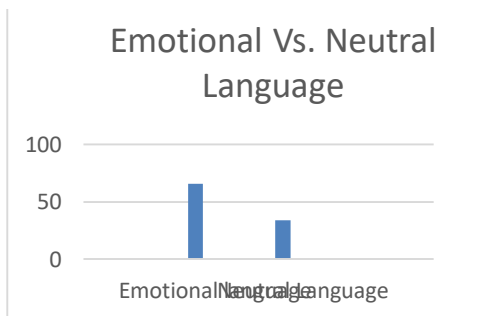
8. Bar Chart Representations

8.1. Figure 1: distribution of discursive categories



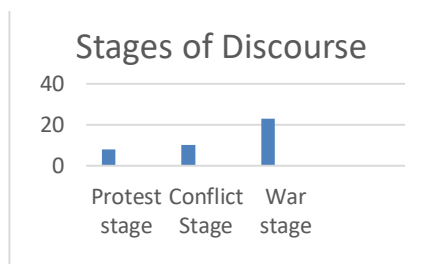
This chart illustrates that the highest percentage is militarization and conflict discourse by 28% in total, which shows a strong shift toward confrontation discourse. This shift indicates a discursive struggle in the Arab spring context.

8.2. Chart 2: Emotional Vs. Neutral language



This chart shows that the highest percentage of expressions in respect to our data is highly emotive because the expressions are emotionally loaded. Therefore, it is indicative that the aim was to persuade, mobilize and influence public perception

8.3. Figure 3: Stages of Discourse



This chart indicates that the use of emotive language progressed during the conflict. It shows that at the confrontation stage, more emotive and war-like terms were used which represents 46% compared to other stages of the conflict. As a result, this illustrates a discourse escalation which influenced the course of events.

9. Conclusion:

The previous analysis demonstrates that discourse surrounding the Arab Spring was deeply ideological and connotative. It is noticed that language was used not only to describe events but to legitimize or delegitimize actors, to construct political identities, and to justify violence or resistance. Thus, discourse played a central role in shaping both the perception and the course of events in respect to the political conflict in question.

From the previous quantitative analysis, we can sum up that, firstly, 28% of expressions were related to war and conflict which indicate that militarization discourse was a dominant factor. Secondly, a high polarization was noticed which confirms ideological conflict in discourse. Thirdly, it was observed that emotional language was dominant and 66% of the expressions were highly emotive. In addition to this, the analysis shows a strong negative framing of

the events with 59% of negative terms focused on fear, instability and threat. Furthermore, the analysis revealed an escalating pattern during the events; that is to say, there was a gradual shift towards violence related terms.

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