

Discursive Violence in Obama's Legitimization of Military Intervention in Syria: a CDA Perspective

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Abstract

The topic that is being addressed throughout the present study lies in the issue of violence. In fact, it can be perceived of as an umbrella term that encompasses in turn different related concepts. Its manifestations can then comprise the physical, the psychological, the political, as well as the rhetorical ones. In this respect, this paper limits its scope of analysis to the reproduction of violence in political discourse that can in turn legitimate its use. Hence, two speeches on behalf of the American President, Barack Obama, form the corpus under study. As for Van Dijk's (2005) critical discourse analysis approach, it constitutes the chosen framework that provides a lens through which the idea of violence would be made explicit. Moreover, such an investigation allows concluding that such instances of political speeches can provide the American President with a soft weapon to justify a rather bloody condemned act. Furthermore, the violent can take two different forms, namely political and psychological. The first being obvious and instrumental is justified by a rather invisible symbolic second one.

Key Words: violence, discourse analysis, legitimization, context, setting, participant, positive self-presentation, negative other-depiction.

1. Introduction

The idea of the violent can be paralleled to a crossroads which represents both the area at which two or more roads cross each other and the point from which these same paths can depart. Accordingly, violence can be approached from various angles regarding its extended scope. Besides, it may be communicated whereby a multiplicity of channels ranging from verbal to non-verbal ones. In relation to the present study, it aims at uncovering the discursive strategies employed while legitimizing one of the political forms of violence, namely American military intervention in Syria. Hence, the manifestation of violence in political discourse exemplified in two instances of speeches on the part of the American President, Barack Obama, constitutes the essence of the present paper.

2. Violence

The plethora of violence definitions deriving from various contexts can reinforce the flexibility characterizing such a concept. For instance, it pertains to the physical domain when it refers to the intentional use of force causing harm. In addition, it may be psychological, resulting in emotional abuse or disorder. In relation to the present study targeting one form of political violence, the latter is said to include "war as the primary instance of such violence but it is also meant to cover other violent activities [] that encompass terrorism, armed intervention and armed revolution" (Coady, 2008, p.3). To put it in more general terms, the violent can be conceived of as any action that engenders either physical or non-physical harm to one or more persons.

Besides, Zizek (2009) classifies the phenomenon of violence into two main categories. These then comprise both an obvious, subjective assumption made up of acts of crime and terror, civil unrest and international conflict performed by a known agent as well as a less visible, objective one having its roots in the workings of language. Hence, the relationship between violence and language can be captured in Zizek (2009) arguing that "there is a symbolic violence embodied in language and its forms [], its imposition of a certain universe of meaning" (p.1). In other words, the violent can be arranged for and put at work by means of verbal or non-verbal communication.

Moreover, regardless of the form it takes, it is very often justified whereby an array of reasons ranging from “the bully in the schoolyard, a member of a lynch mob [to] a dictator engaged in genocide” (Alvarez and Bachman, 2014, p.3). Hence, legitimization is a closely-related strategy which serves above all the motive of providing ready-made interpretations of the violent act allowing it to appear in a more favorable light. Accordingly, these justifications on the part of the doer of the action are described by Heitmeyer and Hagan (2003) as being “plans or motives [that] precede the concrete act” (p.1114). Thus, this matches the ultimate objective of the present paper, seeking the investigation of this dual expression of violence. Put differently, it aims at studying how a verbal instance manifested in political discourse settles the ground for one form of political violence, namely military interventions. At a deeper level, it attempts to uncover how the violent can satisfy the equation of being horrible and heroic, disgusting and exciting, the most condemned and glorified of human acts.

3. Political Discourse

Such an instance of discourse constitutes the corpus to be analyzed throughout the present study. Indeed, its essence lies in politics which is the overarching category. In addition, it can be exemplified in speeches on political issues, parliamentary debates, party conferences, as well as presidential statements. It is then “a discourse that translates words into action and is designed to get people to do things” (Dunmire, 2011, p.47). Hence, it can be conceived of as a message on behalf of politicians addressing both their populations and the whole world on different issues. In addition, the view of language as constitutive of politics is mostly reflected in political discourse. As for violence, it is by no means a theme, foreign to such type of studies, regarded as a political issue in all its manifestations. In this respect, Humes (2009) asserts that “an ordering facet of discourse tends to legitimize, explain, or ignore various types of violence” (p.111). For instance, American political discourse tends to restrict the phenomenon of political violence to the actions by the other or non-state agents. This can be traced back to Coady’s (2008) claim that “in the United States, [] this form of discourse would have it that war and armed intervention by states are not uses of political violence” (p.3). Therefore, such a practice will be brought to focus all through this paper.

4. Critical Discourse Analysis

Rhyming with the objective of the present study, lying in revealing the discursive techniques allowing the legitimization of force use in Syria, the CDA approach is selected to illustrate the followed framework. It is then “fundamentally interested in analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control [] as [they are] expressed, constituted and legitimized by language use” (Huckin et al , 2012, p. 107-108). Such a perspective can apply to an array of domains among which politics can be distinguished. Accordingly, Van Dijk (2005) accentuates the fact that political discourse analysis should not be limited to structural features of text and talk, but also account for their functions in the political process. Moreover, Okulska and Cap (2010) argue that “critical scholarship provides political linguistics [] with important insights into the way of analyzing via discourse the [] existing [abuses] in a society” (p.4). For example, political violence which can exemplify such abuses can be communicated whereby discourse. In this respect, McKeever et al (2013) stress the fact that “violence is a human activity imbued with meaning, which is not inherent but is acquired through discourse” (p.110). Thus, the application of the CDA framework is essentially motivated by the possibility it offers to study language as a social practice enabling the achievement of particular aims in a specific context. Hence, this same objective has its counterpart in the present paper, namely turning a violent act into a morally-appropriate, honorable course of action.

5. Methodology

The selected corpus comprises two political speeches on behalf of the American President, Barack Obama, extracted from the presidential rhetoric website and constituting an online repertoire of American presidential speeches. They date back respectively to August 31 and September 10, 2013, making the case for action in Syria. Hence, their subject matter illustrates one form of political violence, namely military intervention in Syria and more importantly the legitimization of such an act. Expressed differently, whereby those speeches, the American President has made his case for getting his country involved in Syria, stressing the military readiness to strike it upon his command. In addition, constituting the sole speech instance targeting such a topic may explain the selection of this particular corpus. As for the framework of analysis to be made use of, it consists in Van Dijk’s (2005) CDA approach to political discourse.

Starting then from the assumption that such a discourse “should not only be defined in terms of its textual properties, but also in terms of a contextual analysis” (Van Dijk, 2005, p.65), the analysis will be carried out at two major levels. First, context models such as the setting and participants will be investigated as possible legitimization tools.

Second, ideological properties, namely positive self-presentation and negative other-depiction as well as their related textual rhetorical techniques will be used to detect the discursive strategies allowing justifying one form of the political violent. All in all, the present methodology has led to the following findings.

6. Results and Analysis

Following Van Dijk’s (2005) framework, this part comprises two sub-sections, the first of which will provide a contextual analysis of the violent related to the corpus at hand.

6.1 The violent in context:

This first step characterizes most of the discourse analysis approach in general and critical discourse analysis in particular as it manifests the emphasis placed not only on a textual study of the phenomenon in question but also on a contextual one. Accordingly, Van Dijk (2005) conceives of context as being “the way individual participants represent, understand or otherwise construct the now-for-them relevant properties of such a situation” (p.68). In other words, this relates to the components of the communicative situation which are each time unique and representative of the communicative act. As far as this study is concerned, these are then exemplified in the spatial setting and participants.

6.1.1 The violent in the setting:

This section aims at showing how one instance of the setting, namely the spatial one can contribute to the formulation of one of the forms of the violent particularly the political. In this respect, the speeches under analysis are meant to communicate the speaker’s intention to engage his country in military action against the regime in a reaction to the use of chemical weapons. Hence, the two spatial settings in question can be made use of in an attempt to legitimize the violent, namely the United States and Syria. In fact, both of them represent two major spots that have the potential to grab listeners’ attention. This may be then explained by the mission the US is assumed to carry out in terms of being the safeguard of democracy and freedom everywhere in the world. Expressed differently, the issue of military intervention can be licensed whereby the agreed-upon role the US should play in vulnerable areas of the world. Examples of these ones may lie in the second spatial setting, namely Syria. The latter can then be paralleled to Iraq and Afghanistan. In other words, preparing the practice of the political violent in such a setting brings to mind previous American military operations in similar unfortunate soils such as the Iraqi and Afghan ones. Even the motive driving the Syrian case, lying in the regime’s use of chemical weapons can find its counterparts in Saddam Hussein’s ownership of mass destruction weapons as well as Afghanistan’s terror cultivation. Thus, the spatial setting can be the first element to set the ground for this form of the violent. The communication of such a message as well as its subsequent legitimization can be said to gain from these specific spatial circumstances in terms of standardizing the issue of military intervention.

6.1.2 Participants and the Violent:

The second contextual feature to be studied in relation to the transmission of the violent lies in participants. Indeed, Van Dijk (2005) conceives of this category to include “who are speaking and listening, what are their roles, what kind of actions they engage in [and] with what intentions” (p.68). In relation to the present case study, participants can be limited to the American President, Barack Obama, being the speaker in both corpus instances and the particular targeted audience, namely the American and Syrian people. They then can contribute to the communication of the violent in three ways. First, following in his predecessors’ footsteps, the American President addresses his nation as well as the world to inform them about his intentions. More importantly, his role is aimed at arousing the public awareness of the urgent need to use the violent to remedy the Syrian disorder. Besides, his distinguished position as the nation’s leader may increase support for his policies. In particular, being the commander-in-chief of the armed forces grants him the right to take such a decision. Therefore, the communication of this specific instance of the violent turns to be a ritual on behalf of the Head of America’s Executive if need be.

Second, receivers of this same message lie in the American population. Indeed, whether welcoming or rejecting the President’s suggestion, the latter cannot help being involved in the transmission of the violent.

In addition, they may be used by the President to further advance his military plan. Put differently, tempted by the threat posed on their national security may increase the chances of supporting such a form of the violent. Third, Obama's speeches have other targets, namely the Syrian people. In this respect, they represent the category of audience to whom the issue of military action directly relates as it is on their soil that the violent might take place.

For this reason, restoring their peace and putting an end to their daily war scenes whereby the violent can motivate them to accept it. In other words conceiving of the political violent as being the lifeboat that will transfer them to safety can soften and alleviate the harshness that usually characterizes any violent act. Thus, these three types of participants may in one way or another contribute to the legitimization of the use of military action in Syria. This same example of the violent can be interpreted differently by a variety of participants with an array of intentions.

6.2 The Violent in Text

In addition to the contextual analysis provided in the previous section, a textual one is necessary to fulfill the objectives of the present study. Accordingly, the second step in Van Dijk's (2005) approach consists in examining the textual structures that have the potential to legitimize the violent in both of Obama's speeches. Expressed differently, the present aim of analysis is to uncover how the text level allows not only the communication of one political form of the violent, namely military action in Syria but also its legitimization.

6.2.1 The Violent in Positive Self-presentation vs. Negative Other-depiction

Two main strategies whereby political violence is formulated in the present corpus lie in positive Self-presentation and negative Other-depiction. These then refer respectively to presenting "oneself in a positive light [] and in general to manage the impression on interlocutors" while downgrading the other or "the enemy" (Van Dijk, 2005, p.76). Besides, they are made explicit by means of a number of discursive structures or moves. For instance, national self-glorification illustrates the first strategy in terms of praising the Self, the country and its citizens. It can be traced in examples of the type:

- "This nation more than any other has been willing to meet those responsibilities." (August 31, 2013)
- "We do what we say. And we lead with the belief that right makes might." (August 31, 2013)
- "Out of the ashes of World War, we built an international order and enforced the rules that gave it meaning." (August 31, 2013)
- "for nearly seven decades, the United States has been the anchor of global security." (September 10, 2013)
- "That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional." (September 10, 2013)
- "The burdens of leadership are often heavy, but the world is a better place because we have borne them." (September 10, 2013)

Hence, they put forth the American President's acclamation of his nation's relentless protective efforts toward its people and the world. Several positive qualities are also invoked to describe the Self such as care, willingness, protection, as well as exceptionalism. This tool can then facilitate the legitimization of the violent in terms of arousing American citizens' national feelings. Moreover, military intervention becomes in turn to be seen as a measure of national self-glorification and patriotism. It is no longer a violent form but rather a duty the US has to fulfill in order to further conserve its leadership of the world. Another technique fitting the same aim lies in consensus. In fact, Van Dijk (2005) defines it as a "political move [] asking for or affirming that policies are not partisan but in the national interest, and hence should be supported by the opposition" (p.88). This same idea is manifested in Obama's speeches in relation to his call for Congress to approve of military action in Syria. It is then made explicit in the statements below.

- "I will ask those who care about the wit of the international community to stand publicly behind our action." (August 31, 2013)
- "To all members of Congress of both parties, I ask you to take this vote for our national security." (August 31, 2013)
- "I ask you members of Congress, to consider that some things are more important than partisan differences or the politics of the moment." (August 31, 2013)
- "Our democracy is stronger when the President and the people's representatives stand together." (August 31, 2013)

Hence, whereby those examples, the political violent takes on a new dimension. It ceases being a form of distortion and harm in order to become a cause advocated by the Self around whom support should be rallied. Its legitimization stems from its being the unique alternative that will guarantee both national security and democracy. Hence, this is formulated in Obama's vigorous attempt to make of the violent a matter of consensus.

More importantly, this strategy further glorifies the Self exemplified in the American government and Congress members in terms of strengthening its unity in the face of the threatening Other. As for negative other-depiction, it is made explicit through hyperbole. Indeed, the exaggeration effect accompanying the use of such a rhetorical figure can manifest itself in the instances below.

- “the world watched in horror as men, women and children were massacred in Syria in the worst chemical weapon attack of the 21st century.” (August 31, 2013)
- “Our ideals and principles, as well as our national security are at stake in Syria” (September 10, 2013)

These two instances illustrating both speeches carry evidence of the Self's consistent tendency to highlight the danger posed by the other. In details, the superlative form in the noun phrase “the worst chemical weapon attack of the 21st century,” used to refer to the triggering events of August 21st communicates the President's intention to amplify the impact of such actions on the audience. Put differently, by means of this tool, there is an overt inclination towards magnifying the violence by the Syrian regime in order to legitimize another type of violent measure, namely military strike. Likewise, the second illustration shows how American people themselves can be seriously affected by the Syrian conflicts. Accordingly, combining the use of all-encompassing concepts such as “ideals, principles, national security” and the peculiar choice of the prepositional phrase “at stake” may communicate the exaggeration impression resulting from such a possible hyperbole. Another rhyming technique is number game. In fact, the use of numerical data is detected to suit the same objective of negative Other-representation.

- “Well over 1.000 people were murdered. Several hundred of them were children.” (August 31, 2013 speech)
- “Over 100.000 people have been killed. Millions have fled the country.” (September 10, 2013)

These two examples from Obama's speeches can function as a reminder of the crimes committed by the Syrian regime. In addition, the increasing numbers of victims may illustrate the gravity of the situation on the Syrian territory. Therefore, the number game tool legitimizes in turn the use of the violent as it increases the addressees' awareness of the enormous danger posed by the Other. Furthermore, it equips the Self with a valid concrete proof of the Other's atrocious acts, namely victim numbers which will again legitimize the use of force. In a nutshell, such a stressed condemnation of the other may further valorize the Self as well as his actions whatever their nature is. Thus, those strategies bring into evidence how the violent can be justified and even welcomed as the most peaceful of all actions.

6.2.2 The Violent in Positive Self-presentation and Negative Other-depiction

Different from the previous section, the present one targets the textual techniques fitting both strategies of positive self-presentation and negative other-depiction. While the afore-mentioned strategies have rhymed with either objective, lexical choice and polarization match both interests. In this respect, the legitimization of the violent can be made possible whereby the vocabulary used throughout Obama's speeches. For example, a set of positive criteria have been used to describe the Self as being both “exceptional” and “peaceful”. Also, the atmosphere associated with the Self is deemed one where “security”, “democracy”, “ideals”, “values” and “principles” prevail. Even the violent turns to be “the right thing” to do as a means of “diplomacy” following several “negotiations” and “sacrifices” on the part of the Self exemplified in the government and the people. Meanwhile, lexical choice can be said to still contribute to the process of legitimization in relation to the depiction of the Other. Accordingly, the diction of crime is used to refer to the Other's actions, manifested in the terms “massacred”, “violated”, “gassed to death”, “atrocious”, and “poison gas”. Contrary to the Self, their related atmosphere is rather one of “danger”, “harm”, “menace”, “tyranny”, and “extremism”. Moreover, violence turns to characterize the other depicted as “brutal”, “terrible”, “horrifying,” and “heinous”. Hence, lexicalization can be said to further legitimize the political violent, namely military intervention whereby widening the gap between the Self and the other. This effect can be achieved by means of another device, lying in polarization. Indeed, the latter is aimed at the categorical segmentation of people into in-groups and out-groups. It is then detected in the following two statements.

- “It also presents a serious danger to our national security.” (August 31, 2013 speech)
- “It endangers our friends and our partners along Syria’s borders.” (August 31, 2013 speech)

Thus, the need for the violent exemplified in military action is explained by the harm posed by the Other or the Syrian regime “It” on the Self “our friends and our partners along Syria’s borders”. In particular, this same threat or “serious danger” is inflicted upon the Self’s “national security”. Hence, the resulting disharmony between the victimizer and the victim can boost in turn the process of legitimization. All in all, both lexicalization and polarization can be seen to rhyme together in terms of setting a suitable ground for the practice of the violent. Put differently, they provide strong motives that may legitimize the American President’s recourse to military action in Syria.

7. Conclusion

This study has accounted for the legitimization of one of the forms of the violent, namely the political one. This then has been made possible whereby Van Dijk’s (2005) CDA framework to political discourse applied to two of Obama’s speeches making the case for action in Syria. In details, the legitimization process can be achieved at the situational context level manifested in both the setting and participants. Besides, the text in turn carries a number of techniques that can set a favorable ground for the practice of the violent. In this respect, Van Dijk’s (2005) Us / Them categorization is made explicit through the devices of national self-glorification, consensus, hyperbole, number game, polarization together with lexicalization. Expressed differently, the simultaneous glorification of the Self and vilification of the Other allowed by those techniques can be said to constitute the essence of the violent legitimization. Thus, discourse in general and political speeches in particular are shown to provide the American President with a soft weapon to justify a rather bloody condemned act. Accordingly, the violent can take two different forms, namely political and psychological. The first being obvious and instrumental is then justified by a rather invisible symbolic second one. In other words, the violent does not only relate to military action, but also the process of legitimization can be perceived of as glorified, welcomed, expressive, discursive violent imposing on the addressee a certain universe of meaning.

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