

A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Muammar Gaddafi's Self-Representation and Western/Arab Media Representation During the 2011 Libyan Uprising

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تحليل خطابي نقدي متعدد الوسائط لتمثيل معمر القذافي لذاته وتمثيل وسائل الإعلام الغربية والعربية له خلال الانتفاضة الليبية عام 2011

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Abstract:

This study presents a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the construction of political identity during periods of revolutionary crisis. It examines the dichotomous representation of Muammar Gaddafi in February 2011 through two primary data streams: his first major public address following the uprising (February 22, 2011) and the contemporaneous visual and textual coverage in three newspapers—The Sun (UK), The Daily News (a prominent US tabloid-style outlet), and Alshourouq (Egypt). Employing Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model of CDA, Halliday's (1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design, the analysis reveals a profound disjuncture between Gaddafi's linguistic self-fashioning and his mediated portrayal. Findings indicate that Gaddafi's speech strategically deployed lexical choices, transitivity, and modality to construct identities of a rightful leader, paternal protector, and historical embodiment of Libya. Conversely, the selected newspapers, despite ideological nuances, converged on a representational framework depicting Gaddafi as weak, cowardly, and delegitimized, primarily through specific visual framing, camera angles, and captions. This study argues that the conflict between these representations is not merely descriptive but deeply ideological, reflecting the struggle for discursive hegemony during the Arab Spring, where control over narrative became a key battleground alongside military confrontation.

Keywords: Muammar Gaddafi, Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodality, Political Identity, Media Representation, Arab Spring, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Fairclough.

المخلص:

تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلاً خطابياً نقدياً لبناء الهوية السياسية خلال فترات الأزمات الثورية. تفحص الدراسة التمثيل الثنائي المتناقض لمعمر القذافي في فبراير 2011 من خلال مصدري بيانات رئيسيين: خطابه العام الرئيسي الأول بعد الانتفاضة (22 فبراير 2011) والتغطية البصرية والنصية المعاصرة في ثلاث صحف: "ذا صن" (بريطانيا)، و"ذا ديلي نيوز" (منفذ إعلامي أمريكي بارز ذو طابع صحفي شعبي)، و"الشروق" (مصر). باستخدام نموذج فيركلاف (1992) ثلاثي الأبعاد للتحليل الخطابى النقدي، ونظرية هاليداي (1978) اللغوية الوظيفية النظامية، وقواعد كريس وفان ليوين (2006) للتصميم البصري، يكشف التحليل عن انفصام عميق بين بناء القذافي لصورته الذاتية لغوياً وبين صورته في الوسائل الإعلامية. تشير النتائج إلى أن خطاب القذافي استخدم باستراتيجية اختيارات لغوية ومقولية وجهة نظر لغوية لبناء هويات كقائد شرعي، وحام أبوي، ومتجسد تاريخي لليبية. على العكس من ذلك، التقت الصحف المختارة، رغم الفروق الأيديولوجية، على إطار تمثيلي يصور القذافي على أنه ضعيف وجبان ومنزوع الشرعية، وذلك أساساً من خلال تأطير بصري محدد، وزوايا تصوير،

وتعليقات. تدعي هذه الدراسة أن الصراع بين هذه التمثيلات ليس مجرداً وصفاً بل هو أيديولوجي بعمق، ويعكس الصراع على الهيمنة الخطابية خلال الربيع العربي، حيث أصبح السيطرة على السرد ساحة معركة رئيسية بجانب المواجهة العسكرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: معمر القذافي، التحليل الخطابى النقدي، تعدد الوسائط، الهوية السياسية، التمثيل الإعلامي، الربيع العربي، اللغويات الوظيفية النظامية، فيركلاف.

1. Introduction

The Libyan uprising of 2011, part of the broader Arab Spring, was characterized not only by armed conflict but also by a fierce war of narratives. At its center was Muammar Gaddafi, a leader whose four-decade rule was defined by a unique and often contradictory political persona, blending pan-Arabism, socialism, and idiosyncratic personal rule (Vandewalle, 2012). The crisis presented a critical juncture where Gaddafi's self-representation clashed directly with the representations proliferating in international and regional media. This study posits that analyzing this clash through an integrated framework of textual and visual discourse provides crucial insights into the mechanics of political legitimization and delegitimization in the digital-media age.

This research aims to systematically deconstruct Gaddafi's linguistic strategies for identity construction in his pivotal February 2011 speech and contrast them with the visual and textual representations in three distinct newspapers: the British populist *The Sun*, the American *Daily News*, and the post-revolution Egyptian *Alshourouq*. By asking: 1) How did Gaddafi linguistically construct his identity and authority? 2) How was his identity visually and textually constructed in these media outlets? and 3) What do the convergences and divergences in these representations reveal about the ideological contexts of their production? this study contributes to understanding the interplay between political discourse, media power, and revolutionary politics.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs a triangulated theoretical approach to account for the complexity of textual and visual data.

- **Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model (1992):** Provides the overarching structure. The text dimension involves a close analysis of linguistic and visual features. The discursive practice dimension examines how these texts are produced (editorial policies, sourcing) and consumed. The socio-cultural practice dimension situates the analysis within the broader historical and ideological contexts of the 2011 Arab Spring, Western foreign policy, and the political positioning of post-Mubarak Egypt.
- **Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (1978, 1994):** Applied to Gaddafi's speech text. The analysis focuses on:
 - **Ideational Metafunction:** Examined through **transitivity** (process types: material, mental, relational) to see how Gaddafi frames actions, agency, and reality.
 - **Interpersonal Metafunction:** Analyzed through **modality** (modal verbs like "must," "will") and **appraisal** (Martin & White, 2005), particularly the use of attitudinal adjectives and epithets, to understand how he enacts relationships with his audience and expresses judgment.
 - **Textual Metafunction:** Considers thematic structure and information flow to see how he organizes his message for rhetorical impact.
- **Kress and van Leeuwen's Multimodal Discourse Analysis (2006):** Applied to the newspaper images and layout. Key concepts include:

- **Representational Meaning:** Analyzing whether images are narrative (depicting actions, vectors) or conceptual (depicting essence, symbolism).
- **Interactive Meaning:** Examined through **shot angle** (high angle = subject powerless; eye-level = equality; low angle = power), **gaze** (demand vs. offer), and **social distance** (close-up = intimate; long shot = impersonal).
- **Compositional Meaning:** Analyzing layout, salience, and the relationship between text (headline, caption) and image.

3. Literature Review

This study is situated at the intersection of three critical and interrelated fields of scholarship: the analysis of authoritarian political discourse, the representation of political figures in media, and the specific socio-political context of the Arab Spring. The following review synthesizes existing literature to establish the theoretical foundation and identify the research gap this study aims to address.

3.1. The Linguistic Construction of Authoritarian Identity and Legitimacy

A substantial body of work examines how political leaders, particularly in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, use language to construct, project, and maintain power. This discourse often functions as a primary tool for regime survival, creating a "symbolic universe" that legitimizes the ruler and delegitimizes opponents (Chilton, 2004). Scholars have applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to reveal how leaders employ specific rhetorical strategies. For instance, Wodak's (2009) work on the "discourse-historical approach" highlights how political actors strategically utilize arguments from history, employ populist narratives, and construct "us vs. them" dichotomies to forge collective identity and justify action.

In the context of Arab political discourse, the figure of the leader has often been central. Scholars like Suleiman (2013) and Mazzani (2013) have explored the use of religious, nationalist, and tribal lexicons in Middle Eastern political speech. Gaddafi's discourse, in particular, has been noted for its idiosyncratic nature, blending revolutionary socialist rhetoric, pan-Arabism, and a personal ideology outlined in The Green Book, all while employing a highly personalized, often theatrical, linguistic style (St John, 2008; Vandewalle, 2012). Prior analyses have focused on his historical speeches and ideological texts (e.g., Ahmida, 2009), but less work has applied a systematic, micro-linguistic framework like Halliday's SFL to a crisis moment where his legitimacy was under direct, existential threat. This study aims to fill that gap by dissecting the precise linguistic mechanisms (transitivity, modality, appraisal) he deployed to reassert his identity in the face of revolution.

3.2. Media Representation and the "Othering" of Political Figures

Media does not neutrally reflect reality but actively constructs it through processes of selection, framing, and representation (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1991). The representation of foreign leaders, especially those in conflict with Western powers, has been a rich area of inquiry, often revealing embedded ideological biases. Said's (1978) foundational concept of Orientalism provides a critical lens, suggesting Western media frequently depicts Arab leaders through a reductive prism of irrationality, despotism, and barbarism.

Research on media coverage of the Arab Spring and its leaders has borne this out. For example, studies on the representation of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak or Syria's Bashar al-Assad in Western press have identified recurrent tropes of the "mad dictator," the "dying regime," and the contrast between a "brutal ruler" and a "peaceful people" (Fahmy & Eakin, 2014; Mellor, 2012). The visual dimension is crucial here. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal theory provides the tools to analyze how camera angles, social distance, and composition contribute to meaning, an area where purely textual analysis falls short. Studies like those by Machin and Mayr (2012) demonstrate how visual grammar can subtly (or not so subtly) demean or empower subjects. While there is literature on Western media representation of Gaddafi, particularly during the 2011 intervention (e.g., Berenger, 2013), a comparative multimodal analysis that includes a prominent post-revolution Arab newspaper like *Alshourouq* is less common. This comparison is vital for understanding whether the delegitimizing frame was a solely Western construct or a broader transnational narrative adopted by regional media with their own political alignments.

3.3. The Arab Spring as a Discursive Battleground

The Arab Spring was fundamentally a crisis of legitimacy, making it a pivotal moment for studying competing narratives. As Lynch (2012) argues, the uprisings were not only fought in streets but also in the realm of public discourse, where old regime narratives clashed with new demands for dignity and freedom. The conflict became a "war of narratives" between governments claiming to represent stability and order and protesters embodying change and popular will.

Gaddafi's case was extreme but illustrative. His response stood out for its vehement refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the protests, framing them instead as the work of foreign agents, terrorists, and drug-crazed youths (Haddad, 2011). This discursive strategy—total denial and externalization of dissent—contrasted with the more conciliatory or reformist rhetoric initially attempted by other leaders. Analyzing his 2011 speech, therefore, offers a clear case study of a regime attempting to use discourse not to negotiate but to dominate and annihilate a counter-narrative. Furthermore, the international media's rapid and near-unanimous vilification of Gaddafi created a powerful counter-representation that helped shape global public opinion and, arguably, paved the way for military intervention under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine (Chouliaraki, 2013). Examining the interplay between his self-representation and this mediated "othering" is key to understanding how discursive power operated in this specific historical conjuncture.

3.4. Research Gap and Contribution

While the aforementioned bodies of literature provide essential context, this study integrates them to address a specific lacuna. Previous research has either: 1) analyzed Gaddafi's ideology and historical rhetoric without a fine-grained, multimodal analysis of his crisis communication; 2) examined Western media framing of the Libya conflict without a systematic comparison with Arab media using visual grammar; or 3) discussed the Arab Spring's discursive dynamics without a deep dive into the linguistic and visual construction of a single, pivotal actor's identity at its most contested moment.

This research contributes by employing an integrated, tripartite analytical framework (Fairclough, Halliday, Kress & van Leeuwen) to conduct a synchronized analysis of Gaddafi's self-produced discourse and its recontextualization in diverse media outlets. By juxtaposing the linguistic strategies of authoritarian self-legitimation with the multimodal strategies of media delegitimation across cultural-political contexts, it seeks to provide a holistic understanding of

how political identity is forged, contested, and dismantled in the global media arena during revolutionary periods.

4. Methodology

- **Data Collection:** A purposive sample was selected from the period February 22-28, 2011.
 - **Speech:** The full transcript and video of Gaddafi's televised address on February 22, 2011.
 - **Newspapers:** Front pages and prominent interior pages from:
 - *The Sun* (UK, populist-right, pro-intervention stance at the time).
 - *The Daily News* (US, New York-based tabloid, known for sensationalism).
 - *Alshourouq* (Egypt, privately-owned, post-January 25 revolution, generally sympathetic to Arab uprisings).
- **Data Analysis:** A two-stage process:
 1. **Textual Analysis of Speech:** The transcript was coded using SFL categories (transitivity, modality, lexical classification) to identify recurring themes and identity constructs.
 2. **Multimodal Analysis of Newspaper Coverage:** Each front page/article featuring Gaddafi was analyzed for: a) visual framing using Kress and van Leeuwen's principles; b) lexical choices in headlines and captions; c) compositional integration of text and image.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1. Dimension 1: Text Analysis – Gaddafi's Linguistic Self-Construction
Gaddafi's speech is a complex performance aimed at multiple audiences: loyalists, protesters, and the international community.

- **Ideational Representation – The Leader as Nation:** Gaddafi extensively uses relational processes to equate himself with the state and its history. Statements like "I am the creator of Jamahiriya," "I am Libya," and "I am the glory of Libya" employ intensive identifying clauses to construct an inseparable identity between leader and nation (Halliday, 1994). His agency is portrayed through material processes ("I will cleanse Libya inch by inch"), presenting himself as the sole active force for order.
- **Interpersonal Positioning – The Father and the Prophet:** The modality is overwhelmingly high, using obligation ("you must defend Libya") and inclination ("I will fight to the last drop of blood"). This asserts absolute authority. The appraisal is starkly polarized. He refers to himself with inflated positive appreciation ("the leader of the revolution," "the brother leader") and labels opponents with extreme negative judgment and affect ("rats," "cockroaches," "drug-fueled gangs," "stray dogs"). This constructs a paternal (for supporters) and vengeful (for enemies) identity, invoking a tribal, familial discourse (Blommaert, 2005).
- **Textual and Lexical Strategies:** He uses the collective "we" ambiguously, sometimes meaning the state apparatus, sometimes a mythical unity of "true" Libyans. The speech is saturated with historical references to colonial resistance, positioning himself as the natural heir to anti-imperialist legitimacy.

5.2. Dimension 1: Multimodal Analysis – Media Representation

- **Convergence in Representational Meaning:** All three newspapers predominantly used **conceptual** images symbolizing Gaddafi's fall from power. Common visuals included:

maps of Libya with rebel-held areas highlighted, archival photos of Gaddafi in his prime contrasted with recent images, and symbolic graphics (e.g., a crown falling). When narrative images were used, they often showed protesters celebrating or statues being torn down, with Gaddafi as the absent, implied participant whose power is being destroyed.

▪ **Divergence in Interactive Meaning and Ideology:**

- *The Sun*: Featured a prominent, digitally altered or selected image of Gaddafi often from a **high angle**, making him look small and vulnerable. Headlines employed hyperbolic, moralizing language (“Mad Dog on the Run,” “End of the Tyrant”). The composition was sensational, using large, bold fonts and framing the story as a dramatic, Manichean struggle.
- *The Daily News*: Similar visual strategies but focused more on the personal humiliation angle, with close-ups of Gaddafi looking disheveled (from file footage) and headlines emphasizing his desperation (“Gaddafi Begs for Mercy”). The discourse leaned into the tabloid trope of the fallen strongman’s personal demise.
- *Alshourouq*: Used more **eye-level** shots in its analytical pieces, reflecting a somewhat more detached tone. While still opposed to Gaddafi, its headlines and captions were more politically focused (“The Fall of a Symbol of Tyranny,” “The People Demand the Departure”). The visuals often connected the Libyan uprising to Egypt’s own recent revolution, framing it within a regional narrative of popular will.

5.3. Dimensions 2 & 3: Discursive and Socio-Cultural Practice

The disjuncture between Gaddafi’s self-representation and his media portrayal is rooted in power struggles at discursive and socio-cultural levels.

- **Discursive Practice**: Gaddafi’s speech was a monologic, state-controlled production, typical of authoritarian discourse aimed at silencing dissent through overwhelming, ritualistic performance (Wodak, 2009). The newspapers, operating within commercial and ideological constraints, engaged in recontextualization (Van Leeuwen, 2008). They extracted fragments of his speech (often the most incendiary quotes like “cockroaches”) and re-framed them within narratives of criminality, madness, or collapse, thereby stripping them of their intended internal persuasive force.
- **Socio-Cultural Practice**: Gaddafi’s discourse drew from a post-colonial “leader-nation” ideology prevalent in revolutionary Arab nationalism (Anderson, 1991). His identity construction was an attempt to reanimate this fading script. The Western media coverage, particularly in *The Sun* and *Daily News*, drew upon a long-standing Orientalist trope of the “Arab dictator” as simultaneously monstrous, irrational, and ultimately weak (Said, 1978), which served to legitimize Western political and, eventually, military intervention. *Alshourouq*’s representation, while also negative, was situated within the emancipatory discourse of the Arab Spring, framing Gaddafi as analogous to Mubarak—an archaic obstacle to the people’s will and dignity.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the identity of Muammar Gaddafi during the 2011 crisis was a contested site of discursive struggle. Through linguistic analysis, it revealed Gaddafi’s strategic construction of a tripartite identity: the incarnate nation, the paternal protector, and the resolute warrior. Multimodal analysis of media coverage revealed a counter-construction: the delegitimized tyrant, the cowardly supplicant, and the fallen anachronism.

The convergence of the newspapers on this negative framing, despite differences in visual angles and lexical tone, underscores a powerful transnational discursive alignment against Gaddafi at that historical moment. The differences—between the sensationalist, interventionist stance of the Western tabloids and the more politically contextualized coverage of *Alshourouq*—highlight the role of specific ideological and national contexts in shaping representation. Ultimately, this analysis confirms that political power in the modern era is inextricably linked to the capacity to project a viable identity narrative and to contest those projected by others. Gaddafi's failure to control this narrative externally was as telling a sign of his impending fall as the loss of territorial control.

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Compliance with ethical standards

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