



Semantic Complications in the War on Terror Discourse and Manipulation of Language by State and Non-State Actors



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Abstract

Since September 11, 2001, attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, the US along with its allies declared War on Terror, where the binary opposition of ‘Us’ vs ‘Them’ was firmly established and channelized via both electronic and print media. The media’s discourse on the war against terrorism has been an intriguing research area for linguists as well as international relations experts. This paper highlights the problematization in defining a universally accepted definition of terrorism, the idiosyncratic nature of the War on Terror and how it differs from conventional wars, and, later how media, state and non-state actors (those labeled *terrorists*) use language to legitimize their views.

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1 Introduction

Terrorism scholarship, among other things, looks at how relevant terms undergo semantic transformations (Hoffman, 1998). It also brings into mainstream discourse the problematic nature of defining terms like *terrorism* from a normative stance, implying that various countries have their own parameters for defining such terms. The vagueness in the semantic structure of terrorism discourse where various events are enlisted along with multiple actors, such as oppression by state actors, mass shooting by a single person, and civilian carnages, contribute to the difficulties for the researchers to study in the very domain (Lizardo, 2008). The problem in conceptualizing terrorism is evident from previous research where more than 200 different dimensional definitions exist (Matusitz, 2013; Simon, 1994; Schmid 2004b; Astawa *et al.*, 2017; Schmid, 2011). Terrorism as an 'ism' is hard to define as there is a lack of consensus on what constitutes terrorism. The first-ever use of the root word *terror* from the Latin term *terrier* is documented in English in 1528 (Young, 2006). With the suffix 'ism' it implies the practicing and causing of terror (where terror is synonymous with frighten) and this 'ism' (both as a practice and a word) has its roots in the French Revolution of the 1790s. The significant aspect of the semantic understanding of the very ism was then related to the state actors rather than non-state actors (this aspect has drastically changed in the modern understanding of terrorism). Terrorism was considered integral to counter the anti-revolutionaries thus maintaining law and order (Hoffman, 1998). The revolutionary leader Maximilien Robespierre articulated his justification of the use of terror in the following words;

So, the use of terror was seen as a form of justice tied with democracy. But during the French revolution, it changed its meaning to what is now termed *state oppression* implying abuse of authority and power. The revolutionaries executed 40,000 people by guillotine on the charges of anti-revolutionaries and thus deemed them as traitors (Hoffman, 1998). It is recalled in history as the reign of terror. It is also pertinent to mention that in this very epoch the term *terrorist* was first employed by Edmund Burke in 1795 in his "Letters on a Regicide Peace" (Thorup, 2010). Due to the heterogeneity of the contexts in which the word *terrorism* is used, the consensus-building around its semantic side is problematic (Ramsay, 2015). There are many arguments put forth to elaborate on the problematic nature of having a universally accepted dimension of terrorism ranging from political, legal and cultural dimensions to variety in its goals, and lack of clarity on its boundaries (in the sense of nature of violence) (Schmid, 2004a). Ganor (2002), argues that an objective definition is possible and differentiates between *guguerillareilla* warfare and terrorism. The key aspect which he discusses is the identification of a target i.e., if they are military personnel, it is a guerrilla attack, whereas if they are civilians, it is a terrorist attack. Such a demarcation is misleading as in the case of Pakistan, Al-Qaeda's major target is the military and the motive is largely based upon revenge. According to the above definition, Al-Qaeda as a group will fall under guerrilla and the bombings against the military will not be counted as an act of terrorism. Terror is nothing else than immediate justice, severe and inflexible; it is, therefore, an outflow of virtue; it is not much to a specific principle than a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to the most pressing needs of the homeland (Schmid, 2011).

Similarly, the specific approach of defining terrorism (Golder & Williams, 2004) is also problematic as it categorizes specific activities like hijacking, assassination, and suicide bombing, etc as an act of terrorism. The debate of whether mass shooting in the US is an act of terrorism is gaining momentum while previously it was not seen as domestic terrorism per se, but now people are demanding it to be enlisted under acts of terrorism (Umontuen, 2018). Similarly, not all countries classify assassination as an act of terrorism and some scholars distinguish between criminal and terrorist assassination (Rapaport, 1971). In terms of the general approach towards defining terrorism (Greene, 2017), "intention or motivation" (Golder & Williams, 2004), are taken into consideration. The social or political motives of the perpetrators, at times earn for them different labels: freedom fighters may or may not be termed *terrorists* depending upon the cultural, and geographical context. Due to such complexity in what constitutes terrorism, there is still no universally accepted legal definition. Although the United Nations' Security Council proposed one in 2004, it is non-binding and has no legal authority.

As there is no consensus on the universality of what constitutes terrorism, and my research's focus is on the US media, it is essential to define *terrorism* according to a specific country's institutional and legal context. Under the United States Law Code, *terrorism* is defined as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents" (US State Department, 2005). Further, it is defined under the Code of Federal Regulation as "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives" (2005). The Federal Bureau of Investigation further differentiates between domestic and international terrorism, where the former implies violent/dangerous acts intended or committed on the US soil and the latter outside the territorial jurisdiction of the USA (Golder & Williams, 2004). As there is no universal legal definition of terrorism,

the scholarship on terrorism takes into consideration four domains of discourse, i.e., academia, the state, the public sphere and mass media, and terrorists and their supporters' arguments (Schmid, 1992). But these four domains at times overlap where the mass media debate may be positioned in the light of the state's policies and statements. Various studies have been conducted to decipher how academics define and reach consensus in defining the term *terrorism* (Weinberg *et al.*, 2004; Schmid, 1992 and 2004). Schmid's 22 distinctive elements in defining terrorism have been employed by various studies along with modifications to scrutinize its consensual blocks. But Schmid's definition lacks the territorial dimension. Pinos & Radil (2018), argue that the territorial claim is the major motivational force where the non-state actors want to exert their influence via spreading terrorism.

2 Materials and Methods

This is a conceptual paper based upon the reviews of articles published on identifying semantic complications in defining the term terrorism from its etymology to present-day usage. The paper then relates terrorism in the light of US law and relates it to the war on terror. The final strand of this paper then comments upon how state and non-state actors have been using language in the backdrop of terrorism discourse to disseminate their ideologies. It also comments upon the research gap where still a lot of studies are required to study how non-state actors especially terrorists declared organizations use media to manipulate their target audience.

3 Results and Discussions

The state's discourse on terrorism positions the state as the most powerful actor who has the power to define and create truths related to terrorist acts (Martini, 2016). The state has the power to define and build the discourse on legitimizing state policies to counter-terrorism (Hülse & Spencer, 2008). The scenario becomes more complicated when the state itself becomes an agent of terrorism thereby sponsoring terrorist organizations or directly getting involved in spreading terror. On the contrary to state actors, terrorists have less control over the terrorism discourse (Martini, 2016) as the government officials shape the events. Scant studies have been carried out to scrutinize this side of the narrative, i.e. as to how terrorists channelize their views, use media to gain support and build their own discourse of legitimization of violent action. Terrorists use discursive strategies to build their identities via websites (Rothenberger *et al.*, 2018), shape narratives to suit their goals (Pokalova, 2018) and justify their actions (Rothenberger & Kotarac, 2016). There have also been attempts to study how the general public understands terrorism. Huff & Kertzer (2018), using the survey method compiled a questionnaire based on the aspect of the use of "tactics, target, location, casualties, actor description, actor type and motivation" (p.67). Their findings suggest that there may be a significant connection between public opinion and the media's framing of violent events.

The density in defining *terrorism* is also much reflected when we research the phases in the history of modern terrorism. Rapoport (2016), an expert in the domain of terrorism scholarship, divides the history of terrorism into four waves i.e., Anarchist, Nationalist, Marxist and Religious. In his view, the first wave emerged in the 1880s in Russia by a group named *Narodnaya Vola* and it continued till the early 20th century. The next one gyrated around anti-colonialism from the 1920s until the 1960s, and the third one from the 1960s lasted until the end of the 20th century. The last one, the religious tide, began in late the 1970s and continues to date (Parker & Sitter, 2016). Rapoport also predicts that the present tide will be replaced by a new one by 2025. But Parker and Sitter (2016) criticize the wave metaphor and use the strained metaphor to present their own version of four waves; "Socialist, Nationalist, Religious and Exclusionist" (Parker & Sitter, 2016). They think that terrorists learn and modify their strategies by taking aid from their predecessors. Like strain, they have the tendency to spread; when one tactic/strategy is successful in one part of the world, it is more likely to be used by other terrorist groups.

Defining the war on terror and its idiosyncratic nature

Terrorism is what we call the violence of the weak, and we condemn it; war is what we call the violence of the strong, and we glorify it (Harris, 1986). Despite the fact that *terrorism* remains a non-consensual term across various disciplines, there is a shared agreement upon what constitutes the War on Terror. The War on Terror refers to the military campaign launched by the US along with its allies against terrorism after the 9/11 attacks (Katz, 2012). Other terms such as *Global War on Terror* (GWOT) (Smith & Zeigler, 2017) and *Global Struggle Against Violent Extremism* (GSAVE) have been used, but *War on Terror* remains popular. The phrase was first employed by the Bush administration in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers. Our enemy is a radical network of

terrorists, and every government that supports them. Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated (Bush, 2001). When the term is first used, the antagonists in the narrative are non-state organizations and governments around the world who support terrorism. But what remains unclear is “every terrorist group” and who it refers to, what are the normative issues in it and how to reach a consensus over group identification.

The 9/11 attacks were termed *terrorist attacks* by the US media due to (i) the tactics employed, (ii) civilian targets, (iii) non-state actors’ involvement, (iv) developing fear, (v) immediacy of the distance and (vi) political goals. It is also pertinent to mention that the 9/11 attacks mark the historical shift in the wave/strain of terrorism (as explained in the previous section) to religion (Smith & Zeigler, 2017). Al-Qaeda’s status as a terrorist group was designated by the US administration in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks. But had the organization always been a terrorist group is an interesting question. The organization was formed during the Afghan-Soviet War in the 1980s and at that particular time, its role was to provide logistics to those Muslims fighting against the Soviet (2018). The concept of ‘Jihad’ (not to be confused with multiple variations in its meaning in Arabic language and Islamic Holy Book), which is now equated with *Holy War* (see Encyclopaedia Britannica), in those days was seen as a method to defeat the Soviet Army and the United States played a crucial role in promoting this concept along this line. The word appeared in an ABC song in Afghan textbooks designed by the University of Nebraska to turn people towards it, “Jihad is an obligation. My mom went on jihad. My brother gave water to the Mujahidin” (Gul, 2010; Stephens & Ottaway, 2002). The books mentioned were filled with the images of guns, rifles, soldiers, and highlighted Mujahedeen’s glory (the word implies militias fighting in the name of Islam). But this narrative dramatically changed in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Again the USAID injected dollars to revise the above-designed books to remove the violent contents like guns, bullets and also the concept of Jihad. This change in strategy also highlights the change in the semantic evaluation of such terms. The term *jihad* is no longer used in the positive sense of a strategy to win the battle as was the case in the Afghan-Soviet war.

But this war differs significantly from the conventional wars in many ways. Beginning with the name itself, the metaphor was employed for domestic political objectives to vest more power into the Presidency and to present the war as the only solution to defend the US public (Lakoff, 2006). The same metaphor has been used to defend the invasion of Iraq. Though on one level the *War on Terror* is a conceptual metaphor it does refer to a military campaign. The problem arises with respect to terror, as to how real wars (conventional wars) can be waged against an emotional state. So terror is an embodiment of an existential threat posed by multiple enemies. But unlike conventional wars, there is no clear identification in terms of the geographical, national and ethnic dimensions of the enemies’ identities. Conventional war has been fought against certain countries but in terms of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, although the territories were bombed, the war did not involve uniformed soldiers. Conventional wars have a beginning and an end, yet the War on Terror does not have a specific timeline for its end (Raz, 2006). This implies that the War on Terror, unlike conventional war, lacks a battlefield (Sitaraman, 2009), thus the war metaphor should no longer be employed (Hass, 2006). In a similar way, Lakoff (2006), argues that the *War on Terror* metaphor is problematic and progressives should avoid it; as it is oriented towards creating fear rather than pointing to terrorists. Despite much chagrin over the usage of the *War on Terror* metaphor by linguists and social scientists, it is still widely employed by politicians around the world to legitimize their military campaigns both on the domestic and the international levels.

Media and the war on terror: the interplay of language by state and non-state actors

The relationship between terrorism and media can be studied on three levels; “terrorists and government”, “terrorists and media” and “government and media” (Crelinsten, 1989). All three actors use and manipulate language to suit their purpose. When the media are used by the governments especially in the case of the War on Terror, not only the government policies are articulated and made legitimate, but also the portrayal of the enemies’ identities is built around the discourse of ‘others’, where at times they are dehumanized via animal metaphors like *rat*, *hunt*, and *snare*, etc. (Steuter & Wills, 2009) and object metaphors like *elements*. Such dehumanizing strategies are used to depict enemies as monsters not worthy of humane treatment (Maiese, 2003). The media are not only used by the governments to channelize their views and to shape public opinion but recently the terrorist organizations have also been making use of media to disseminate their views. They also use the media for propaganda to achieve their goals (Wilkinson & Gunnell, 2000) and spread terror (Weimann, 2005). Rothenberger *et al.* (2018), have employed Critical Discourse Analysis to study the discursive strategies used by ‘terrorist groups’ to build their identities by using websites to communicate. Similar methods have been employed to scrutinize how magazines produced by Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) position their identities. The results indicate differences in the policy goals where the former is

directed towards the outward change i.e. other countries, whereas the formers' aim is to declare the Caliphate (Novenario, 2016).

When it comes to media as an actor, Schudson (2011) gives three main reasons which compel American journalists to abandon a "neutral stance". "In moments of tragedy, journalists assume a pastoral role" (Schudson, 2002) means that while covering tragic stories, an element of grief is added into the script and an atmosphere of gloom is created. Then, in moments of "public danger" (ibid.) journalists abandon an objective approach. By "public danger" Schudson means danger posed by "hurricanes" and "terrorists". The third situation arises when there are 'threats to national security' (ibid.). The 9/11 event provoked all these three factors, there were deaths of innocent people, there were threats to the public by terrorists, and lastly, it was a matter of national security. Under normal circumstances, journalists would have covered the event by detaching themselves from the public, but it was a matter of war, so journalists had to abandon objectivity. Soon after the collapse of the twin towers "the media hunt for the villains had begun" (Huffington, 2001). President Bush's speeches were hugely backed up by the US media. The rhetoric had once again begun, "Us vs. them," (Clift, 2010) "peace lovers vs. terrorist," "democracy vs. tyranny" etc. Lewis (2014), explicates how the Bush-Cheney administration had built up their discourse on key terms like 'freedom' and 'democracy'.

US media backed the Bush Doctrine (the foreign policy principles, majorly based upon unilateralism and pre-emptive strikes, of President Georg W. Bush) but what came out as a negative-strand was the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims as mere agents of terrorism. The possible threat in the choice of lexemes in the wake of 9/11 was hinted by Clark, where he speculates the threat of the development of xenophobia, he is of the view that "the collateral damage of building a culture of war is xenophobia and paranoia, much of it directed at our own citizens" (Clark, 2002). The question arises of how US media should have acted. Surveys show that the events of 9/11 raised the interest of Americans in international affairs and the public did not want traditional current affairs programs, so the media responded to their concerns and catered to their feelings (Gorman & McLean, 2009). There has been scant literature on the coverage of domestic terrorism in the context of the US prior to 9/11 (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006). But since then there has been a significant rise in the coverage of domestic level terrorist acts. Apart from the US government and media houses' backing of the US domestic and foreign policies in the wake of the War on Terror, there is a whole other spectrum pertaining to the coverage of terrorist incidents in foreign countries. In the case of the *New York Times*, terrorist incidents in some countries are statistically given more status conferral (implying that some incidents are singled out and given more prominence) than other countries; like terrorist incidents in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are covered more than those in India or Iraq (Beckman, 2016). Such results are not without bias as a country's alliance with the US, its location, and political orientation in defining terrorism may affect the results (ibid.). Similarly, the coverage of terrorist attacks is also influenced by the religious orientation of the perpetrators; if they are Muslims they are likely to receive much more status conferral (Kentish, 2017).

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to review the theoretical problems posed by vagueness and complexities in defining terms like *terrorism* and *war on terror* which are conspicuously used by social scientists in their research. This complexity further highlights the biases and manipulation of language by majorly state and non-state actors to justify their acts and policies. Until the terms like *terrorism* remain vague, there would always be conflict over what to label as an act of violence and biases will continue to prevail over counter policies and strategies. Since it is a review paper, there needs to be done extensive research over the non-state actor's use of language and how they build their discourse against state actors' via media.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declared that they have no competing interests.

Statement of authorship

The authors have a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The authors have approved the final article.

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