

Politics of Donald Trump and Jacinda Ardern in the Christchurch Mosque Shootings: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Ali Jalalian Daghig
Hajar Abdul Rahim
School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia

jalalian@usm.my

Introduction

With 1.8 billion adherents of Islam in the world, Muslims make up about 24% of the world's population. However, their immigration to some Western countries, in the hope of a better life (Syed & Pio, 2017), has made them minorities in the target countries (e.g. UK 5%, Canada 3%, Australia 2%, USA and New Zealand 1%) (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017, p. 227). One of the major problems that they face in the 21st century is a false negative narrative spreading in these countries that terrorists are always Muslims (Corbin, 2017), leading to hatred towards Muslims (Mogan, 2016). This has had several negative impacts such as formation of anti-Muslim groups, anti-Muslim attacks (Pitter, 2017), bullying of school children because of their faith (Abo-Zena, Sahli, & Tobias-Nahi, 2009; Corbin, 2017), mosque shootings in Canada ("Quebec mosque", 2017) and more recently in New Zealand (Hunter, 2019). The 15 March 2019 shooting in New Zealand was reported to be two consecutive terrorist attacks at mosques in Christchurch, leaving 50 people dead and some other 50 injured. The gunman declared himself as a White nationalist, referring to President Donald Trump as "a symbol of renewed white identity" (Batrawy, 2019). This caused the attacks to be linked mainly to supremacism and alt-right extremism dominating the Western world, specifically the USA emerging from Donald Trump's administration. Since his presidential campaign Trump's right-wing populist ideology is characterized by rhetoric of exclusions targeting minorities including Muslims as a threat while promoting supremacy of the Whites (Giroux, 2017). On the other hand, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern who advocates social-democratic party intends to create a society in which inequality is lessened and to ensure that every individual, regardless of their background, feels socially and economically secure, and that people show kindness and understanding toward each other (Ardern, 2018). As the discourse of politicians affects the way people perceive themselves and others, the current study analyses the function and meaning of the strategies employed by the two leaders reacting to the mosque shootings in New Zealand to unravel their ideological stance on cultural hybridity resulting from diasporic encounters.

Methodology

The corpus of the study is a collection of both Trump and Ardern's posts on their Twitter accounts as well as their speeches at news conferences following the 15 March tragedy. The framework is an integration and triangulation of three different approaches to Critical Discourse Analysis, that of Fairclough (1995; 1998), Van Dijk (1993; 2001; 2005), and Wodak (2001). It is mainly informed by the socio-cognitive approach of Van Dijk, but also considers Wodak's (2001) historical approach to discourse analysis.

van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to CDA consists of three components: society, cognition, and discourse. The layer of cognition (ideology) lies between society and discourse.

van Dijk (1998) points out that the meaning of the text is embedded in the discourse by language producers, and as such, it exists and is represented in their minds. van Dijk characterizes his ideological square (cognition) as polarization of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ through which the positive and negative features of in-group (Us) and out-group (Them) are (de)emphasized by applying some discourse structures, which are interpreted as one of the following overall strategies:

(a) Positive-Self Representation: representing the in-group members (Us) positively, via discourse, by de-emphasizing their negative and emphasizing their positive features;

(b) Negative-Other Representation: representing the out-group members (Them) negatively, via discourse, by de-emphasizing their positive and emphasizing their negative features.

Besides the discourse procedures identified by van Dijk, ideology may be represented in the text via syntactic features of language as well. Since van Dijk has not included these features in his framework, the linguistic toolkits which are set forth and shared by Hodge and Kress (1993), and Fowler (1991) and Fairclough (1995), i.e., passivation, nominalization, modality, and theme/rheme change, are employed in this study as well.

Discussion

The data analysis shows that Ardern and Trump both appeal to two main strategies of promoting and demoting to construct their desired representation of the tragedy according to their ideology. Trump attempts to demote the depth of a tragedy in which Muslims have been the victim, while Ardern promotes them as the target of hatred. On the other hand, both leaders demote the negative representation of the gun man who is a “white Australian”. Their overall strategies have several linguistic manifestations for which an example from each leader is provided in what follows.

(1) *Just spoke with Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, regarding the horrific events that have taken place over the past 24 hours. I informed the Prime Minister that we stand in solidarity with New Zealand – and that any assistance the U.S.A. can give, we stand by ready to help. We love you New Zealand!* (Trump, 2019)

As evident in example 1, Trump appeals to certain procedures to demote the depths of the incident. First, he refers to the shootings at the mosques by using the phrase “*horrific events.*” This is the only information he includes. In fact, by nominalizing, Trump not only hides the details on who committed the act, but also on who has been affected, i.e. the minority Muslims living in New Zealand. Second, while he attempts to present the USA positively by offering help and expressing solidarity, he avoids mentioning with whom he is showing sympathy. In fact, using the word “*New Zealand,*” as a general term (generalization), provides him with an opportunity to avoid stating explicitly that the Muslims are the victims.

(2) *[...] our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad and have no sense of reason or respect for human life. If I win the election for President, we are going to Make America Great Again* (Lind, 2015)

Example 2 is a statement by Trump during his presidency campaign, calling to ban all Muslims from entering the USA. As opposed to the use of nominalization in the tweet above, he does not only state who the actors of the action of terrorism are, but also constructs a negative and an inhuman image of Muslims through lexicalization depicting them as people who merely “*believe in Jihad*” and “*have no sense or respect for human life.*” Moreover, through victimization, he warns that the non-Muslims would be a victim of his described threat [by Muslims].

(3) *What words adequately express the pain and suffering of 50 men, women and children lost, and so many injured? What words capture the anguish of our Muslim community being the target of hatred and violence?* (Arden, 2019)

The above statement is a part of the speech Arden gave at the memorial service of the victims two weeks after the Christchurch attacks. As opposed to Trump's statement, she provides details of the victims not only by stating the number of lives which have been lost (number game), but also by stating that the victims were Muslim. Furthermore, by using such lexical items as "pain", "suffering" "hatred", and "violence," she promotes the depths of the incident.

Conclusion

The ideology of each leader is reflected in their narrative of the terrorist attacks and the Muslim community by emphasizing and de-emphasizing their desired and undesired representations. Arden's discourse appears to reflect her ideal New Zealand where every individual, regardless of their background, feel being treated equally. By contrast, Trump's discourse is a reproduction of his "white supremacy." It is also (perhaps) partially a face-keeping strategic move to not contradict himself with what he has stated in several tweets and speeches in the past on Muslims (see Giroux, 2017; Kreis, 2017; Ott, 2017). The analyses of the current study indicates that he continues to employ such discourse. Not only such rhetoric may hurt Muslims in the host countries (Cobin, 2012), but also it may prevent them from integrating (Kunst, Tajamal, Sam, & Ulleberg, 2012). Thus, while the discourse of leaders such as Arden may help people show kindness and understanding toward each other, the discourse of leaders like Trump is not inclined to do the same.

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