

A Social-Political Content Analysis of Syrian Migrants' Reports Prior and Subsequent to the Death of Alan Kurdi



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Abstract:

The present research is an attempt to investigate whether an observable change of discourse in British press' articles --in which the tragedy of Alan Kurdi's death had been discussed-- is existent. The tragic death of the three-year-old Syrian boy whose lifeless body was found washed up on a Turkish shore on September 2nd, 2015 was reported through world-wide media. And even though the reports all tread on sympathetic and compassionate grounds, the difference and change that this research aims to capture within newspapers' social-political discourse is that reoccurring within the scope of before and after Alan's death. Through applying Fairclough's analysis method, this research is dedicated to collect data and analyze British newspapers' articles through description, input tables, lexical analysis, and an overview of linguistic changes, all in order to further demonstrate the way media is used not only to report, but to influence and manipulate the audience's perceptions.

Keywords: Social-political discourse analysis, British press, Fairclough's approach, Alan Kurdi.

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Introduction:

Power is pertinent to language. A linguistic message can be transmitted through media coverage to communicate an institutionally guided political orientation. Thus, giving it the power to shape public opinion. In the case of Alan Kurdi's tragic death on September 2nd, 2015, worldwide media broadcast the news sympathetically. Whether the event's broadcast was a political power move or a manipulation tool to cover previous –and rather prejudiced– orientations regarding the Syrian migrants' situation is one question begging to be critically analyzed and answered. Nevertheless, the public opinion appeared to be consenting to the sympathetic message and shifting towards a populist view over the Syrian migrants' once-rejected hospitality. To further demonstrate and investigate this phenomenon, this research paper will set out to highlight the British media's stand on the Syrian refugees' "crisis" before Alan Kurdi's death, and the changes occurring within said media's discourse subsequent to his death.

a. Statement of The Problem

The idea of language portraying power through political discourse under institutional influence to meet social and political needs raises a number of questions. While general public opinion still regards the Syrian exodus as a human crisis, countries which found themselves (even unwillingly) hosting the massive migration flux ended up holding a different opinion. With regard to Britain, as a host country to Syrian migrants, and to the pros and cons of such a variable on the socio/economic and political situation of the country, this research attempts to address the following questions:

1. What is the social-political stand of Britain on the Syrian migrants' crisis?
2. Is there a change of political view concerning said crisis after the death of Alan Kurdi?

1. An Overview on The Migration Crisis

Migration could roughly be defined as the movement of a person or a group of people from one place to another. Often over long distances and across a political or administrative boundary, with the intentions of settling permanently in the new location. The reasons for migration can be economic, social, political or environmental. Migration may be voluntary or forced.

The most recent mass migration that the world has witnessed is the migration of Syrian refugees fleeing their country after a civil war broke out in 2011. A bloody war going on for more than 9 years, being fought between soldiers who support the president of Syria, Bashar-al-Assad, and a group of fighters known as rebels, who do not want him to be in a position of power anymore. Since 2014 – as the civil war intensified in the Islamic State– an extremely religious terror group moved into eastern Syria and, in the chaos of the war, they were able to gain land and power and get involved in the conflict. This war has claimed the lives of more than a quarter of a million people.

Millions of other ordinary people have had to escape from their homes to find somewhere safer to live. According to the United Nations (UN), almost five million Syrians have had to leave the country. Many have gone to neighboring countries, like Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey or Iraq. Six million more people have tried to find safety elsewhere in Syria. And more than a million refugees crossed into Europe in 2015 through irregular channels. The conflict in Syria has caused one of the largest refugee movements in recent history.

a. Media Analysis

Mahtani, (2002), explains that it is the media that provides society with information regarding our society and environment, consequently shaping the attitudes and beliefs held by the readers, (p.3). In the study of mass communication, there has been a continuous debate over the more or less powerful effects of the media on the public and the role of language used in it. In analyzing the properties of language and how it changes in consideration to either having a negative or positive influence on the receiving groups, theories and studies assembled a general knowledge on how language influences the reader's mind unconsciously through guiding their mind into believing what they are reading, or hearing and thinking their own opinion. In the same line of thought, Teun A. Van Dijke, (1995), asserts that "Media power is generally symbolic and persuasive, in the sense that the media primarily have the potential to control to some extent the minds of readers or viewers", (p. 2.)

b. British Press

This research paper uses articles from the British press as the corpus of its study on the ground that the United Kingdom possesses one of the most universally respected and widely read national presses. The literacy rate is 99% of its population, and according to Brian McNair (1999), 80 percent of adults regularly read at least one national daily newspaper and 75 percent read a Sunday edition. In addition, despite growing fears among many journalists and academics about the consequences, increased concentration of ownership, and the growing ability of governments to "spin" the media, the British press remains one of the freest and most diverse in the world.

2. Fairclough's Model For Critical Discourse Analysis:

Van Dijke, (1997), contends that political discourse analysis contributes to answering multiple political questions and helps shed light on hindering implied meanings. That, however, can only be accomplished and achieved through means of focusing on discourse features relating to both the sense and purpose of the discursive manner of a political speech. The latter can be attempted through a number of discourse analysis models. This research, due to its social and political dimensions, is best suited to follow Fairclough's CDA model.

Norman Fairclough founded the CDA model because he was concerned with the exertion and practice of power through language. CDA is spread to include

linguistics in its general orientation of studying language components, sociolinguistics in its leanings to deal with the social factors, and pragmatics in the sense of discussing intended connotations which pertain to language use. The CDA model, while unchanged, has been subjected to various remodels -each according to the study it carried. Some emphasizing the core steps, while others focusing mainly on the exterior and final dimensions. And while it has been mostly applied on social scientific research, CDA is defined as a research method and tool that focuses on the role of discourse in relation to the exertion of power, all within the problematic context of social reception and aspect.

Social-political discourse analysis deals precisely with speech and discourse produced by representatives of political allegiances, which is targeted at the common people. CDA, within this scope, critically deciphers discursive components in relation to both their ideological background and their targeted audience's social status. All with regard to the variables of meaning encoded within choosing one lexical item instead of the other. Therefore, this research takes into account the three dimensions of Fairclough's CDA model, (1989, 1995):

- 1- The description of the object of analysis (press articles).
- 2- The interpretation of the process and the platform through which the object of analysis is produced and received (table of input).
- 3- The explanation of the ideological-social relationship in terms of language use (analysis).

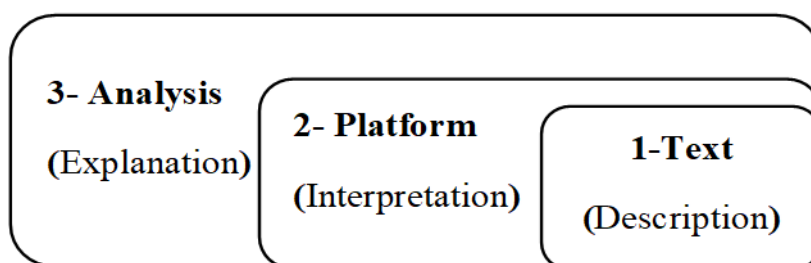


Figure 1: Illustration of the three-dimensional features of CDA as applied to this study.

Source: (Adapted from Fairclough, 1989).

In conclusion, Fairclough's CDA method is deemed the best fitting analytical method for a research of a corpus such as this, and a purpose of not only establishing discursive change but also describing it.

3. Text (Description)

a. The Sun

The Sun is a British newspaper that was launched in February, 2012. The Sun was founded originally in 1964 and became a tabloid in 1969, but went through different steps until it reached its final shape of today's second largest newspaper in the United Kingdom. It is one of the highest circulating newspapers in the world. It is a daily national "red top" tabloid newspaper and the biggest-selling newspaper in the UK. It is published by News Group Newspapers of News International, a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. It is known for being a right-wing oriented newspaper, ran buy conservatives whose major concern is often claimed to be manipulating their readers' opinions instead of being objective.

While about 41% of this paper's readers are women and 59% are men, they're from the working class and are interested in everyday politics as well as magazines and celebrities.

4. The Platform (Interpretation)

a. Table of Input 1

Articles	Titles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Softy Calais Goes Ballistic... Frenchies are Atrocious! • It's Life & Death. Issue Dates: July 29th , 2015 and September 2nd, 2015. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • URLs: 1- https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/121049/softy-calais-goes-ballistic-frenchies-are-atrocious/ 2- https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/30258/its-life-death/
Political Affiliation	Conservative/right Wing - 1997, 2005 switched to labor from conservative. - 2005 to now: conservative.
Target Audience	Working/ Middle Class
Ideological Statements	According to A Statement of The Conservative Party's 'Aims and Values', denounced by PM David Cameron (2006): "Our aims: - To improve the quality of life for everyone through: – A dynamic economy, where thriving businesses create jobs, wealth and opportunity. – A strong society, where our families, our communities and our nation create secure foundations on which people can build their lives. – A sustainable environment, where we enhance the beauty of our surroundings and protect the future of the planet. Our values: The more we trust people, the stronger they and society become. We're all in this together - government, business, the voluntary sector, families and individuals. We have a shared responsibility for our shared future.

	<p>Our Party: We are an open and inclusive Party. We will act to ensure that our Party, at every level, is representative of modern Britain. What we're fighting for:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A successful Britain must be able to compete with the world. 4. Public services for everyone must be guaranteed by the state, not necessarily run by the state. We will improve the NHS and schools for everyone, not help a few to opt out. But public services paid for by the state don't have to be run by the state. We will trust professionals and share responsibility - instead of controlling professionals in state monopolies. 5. It is our moral obligation to make poverty history. We will fight for free and fair trade, increase international aid, and press for further debt relief. But this is not enough. We will also take action to build those institutions - like the rule of law and property rights - that support development. 6. Security and freedom must go hand in hand. In fighting crime and terrorism, we will be hard-nosed defenders of freedom and security. We will ensure strong defense and the effective enforcement of laws that balance liberty and safety - instead of ineffective authoritarianism which puts both freedom and security at risk. 7. We understand the limitations of government, but are not limited in our aspirations for government. We believe in the role of government as a force for good. It can and should support aspirations such as home ownership, saving for a pension, and starting a business. It should support families and marriage, and those who care for others. And it should support the shared experiences that bring us together - such as sport, the arts and culture. 8. We believe that government should be closer to the people, not further away. We want to see more local democracy, instead of more centralization - whether to Brussels, Whitehall or unwanted regional assemblies - and we want to make the devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales work. Communities should have more say over their own futures." Rules 1 and 4 – 8.
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5. Analysis (Explanation)

a. Social- Political Discourse Analysis of An Article Issued Prior to The Death of Alan Kurdi

On the 29th of July 2015 at 11:01 pm an article was published under the title “Softy Calais goes ballistic... Frenchies are atrocious!”

“A POLICE boss last night called for the British Army to be sent in to halt the flood of migrants trying to swarm through the Channel Tunnel at Calais”. The very first opening line of the article, contains a clear forward message that migrants are not wanted; using terms such as “flood of migrants” which refers to the huge

number of people running with their lives but unwanted on that safe soil, and the word "swarm" which holds a connotation of resemblance to non-human beasts and animals.

In the first couple of lines, quotations such as: "[...] thousands who have laid siege to the train terminal, breaking through fences and fighting running battles with police" and "An extra 150 riot cops were drafted in as Home Secretary [...] captured migrants a mile from the terminal and freeing them for new border assaults" are noted. These three extracts contain words that are synonymous in meaning to violence. Whereas expressions such as "breaking through", "fighting running battles", and "an extra 150 cops" focus on bringing the reader's attention to the danger held by these migrants to European societies, and the hint that they are nothing but violent law breakers.

In the upcoming quotations from the following paragraphs, an increasing number of direct strict words that refer to the migrants as disobedient members who are in need of elimination is found.

"[...] more illegal immigrants massed last night", "[...] claims 100 migrants recently tried to get off lorries", "[...] help to ensure our border is not breached.", "They're trained and would know what to do.", "[...] migrants swamped the Chunnel terminal on Monday. A further 1,500 were caught crawling through fences, walking on tracks and trying to climb on trains and trucks on Tuesday.", "ILLEGAL migrants have been breaking into the Channel Tunnel through the same hole in the fence", "Dozens were last night snapped crawling through". The language used in these statements is –to an undeniable extent– disrespectful and unjust; "illegal, massed, swamped, caught, crawling". These lexical choices paint the migrants as disgusting dirty animals in the readers' minds. Whereas in reality they are men and women with their children seeking refuge and safety, which should only be worded as such and as the right of any human being.

"So, under cover of darkness gangs of around a dozen crawl through holes in the terminal fence.", "[...] dodging police and security staff, in a bid to smuggle themselves on a train or lorry.", "Migrants fought Eurotunnel security and riot police", "[...] swamped the train terminal have been arrested and prosecuted.", "Asked if the military should be used"; said by Home Secretary Theresa May. The four previous quotations describe migration as a rather criminal act; the migrants are "gangs" as in dangerous, they "smuggle themselves" and "fight the security" that is to say that these people are criminals and they must be prosecuted.

The upcoming quotation draws a rather odd distinction between legal and illegal migrants. "Either they are genuine asylum-seekers who should be given asylum or they should be deported." Regarding the fact that all refugees are asylum-seekers, the "genuine" situation attested to some is framed by their ownership of legal entry documents.

As a conclusion to the article, an analysis to the migrants' crisis was written under the form of questions and answers. However, the statement that precedes that analysis is: 'Britain is very nice' written in bold letters. This statement, next to the questionnaire, is meant to convey that –once rules are followed, and legal migration documents are obtained– migrants are more than welcome to Britain.

b. Social- Political Discourse Analysis of An Article Issued Subsequent to The Death of Alan Kurdi

With two heartbreaking pictures on the front page, The Sun published an article on the 2nd of September, 2015 entitled: It's Life & Death. And a headline that reads: "Mr. Cameron, summer is over... Now deal with the biggest crisis facing Europe since WW2". The picture on the right, a rescue man picking up a little boy on the beach, represents the bad, cruel situation that innocent refugees face and go through while seeking a safe place to live in. The 2-year-old boy, Alan Kurdi, was washed up on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey. His family, the father Abdullah, his mother Rehan, and his brother Galip, were fleeing Syria in an overcrowded boat filled with refugees looking for safety in Europe. Unfortunately, the father was the only survivor of this small family. The picture is accompanied by a description that says: DIED ON A TURKISH BEACH YESTERDAY.

Next to the first one, the second picture, situated on the left is for a newly born baby who, according to the accompanied description, was "Born in a Hungarian station yesterday". As the contrast can be seen in the two descriptions, DIED and BORN, the title was thus worded: It's Life & Death.

"ONE drowned as his parents fled war-torn Syria for safety in Europe. The other was born at a refugee camp at a rail station".

The quotation above is preceded by "The Sun Says". Therefore, suggesting that the article was not written by a specific journalist, but the paper's view in general.

"Fled war-torn Syria for safety in Europe". Here, the article clearly states the real reason why Syrian people are leaving their country; which was not mentioned before in articles that discussed this issue –by using the verb "to flee" to show that it is an obligatory leaving. Followed by describing their country as "war-torn Syria". This kind of description was not used before the tragic death of Alan. Then, the article carries out to say that "these two children became heartbreaking symbols of the migrant crisis". A straightforward and clear description of their view on the migrant crisis is embodied in the word "heartbreaking", which alludes sentiment and provokes compassion –something that was hardly ever used in any discursive content when it came to the migrant crisis engulfing England.

"Today The Sun urges David Cameron to help those in a life-and-death struggle not of their making". In this particular quotation, language has completely changed; from previously saying that those migrants are threatening England and that they must be stopped from entering, and how they represent danger; to now being in "a life-and-death struggle not of their making". To furthermore declaring that they are on their side and seeking help from the Prime Minister David Cameron.

"Today The Sun urges David Cameron to help". "Today" here is an unnoticed slip of proof of the change of mind of this paper, and to emphasize on the immediate need for help. The article here confirms the total change of this paper's view to migrants and the struggle "not of their making".

"Britain has rightly held back the thousands massed at Calais [...] We know well the pressure from Britain's soaring population on our public services and housing [...] But our nation also has a proud record of taking in desperate people".

The above quotations from the article state the fact that Britain has already held back thousands of migrants at Calais, and concentrated on describing the record of taking in desperate people as a "proud" one, as well as declaring: "We should not flinch from it now". Which indicates the necessity of taking in and accepting those migrants like they always did with "desperate" people.

"[...] if it is beyond doubt that they have fled for their lives". The underlying reasons that they did not want to understand before, are now of utmost consideration and hospitality to migrants is expressed because they fled their countries for their lives, i.e., now LIFE becomes the most important thing.

"Mr. Cameron and President Obama must finally get serious about bringing order to Syria, Iraq and Libya [...] MPs must soon approve air strikes against IS in Syria as a first step towards wiping out the death cult there... Much greater force will be needed [...] Britain must help re-establish law and order in Libya too". The article, based on the previous quotations, moves further to talk about other countries where war is taking place (Iraq and Libya), and how it is a must-do job or a duty for Mr. Cameron, President Obama and MPs to bring order to these countries as well as approving air strikes to stop the death cult in Syria and Iraq. The "desire to help" that the paper obviously showed in the above quotations, and the continuous mentioning of the fact that " Britain must help re-establish law and order in Libya too"; suggests that it is obliged to help not only Syria, but also Libya, because of " a power vacuum and civil war". That is, according to The Sun, wherever wars, struggles and death are present, Britain must help in reducing death.

"Our vast overseas aid budget –now foolishly enshrined in law and much of it spent on far worse cause– could be diverted to fund it". This part of the

article states that the aid budget of Britain is used in a meaningless way and on issues that are not of the same importance as the life and death struggle and wars, and suggests that it should be diverted to fund this issue better.

Since the entire article insists on the necessity of helping the innocent migrants who are fleeing their home for their lives and seeking asylum, it is quite clear and evident that the paper's view has changed, as well as the language. From endorsing the right-wing, conservative party –which was against accepting migrants in any way, to the calling of help from the Prime Minister and MPs to take care of them and urge Britain to help other countries in war too.

As a final statement to this article, The Sun wrote: "It is time for Mr. Cameron to show both them and us what he's made of", which shows their encouragement. The paper stated some sayings of MPs and other political figures to show their collaboration. Here are some of them:

"We must help the truly desperate"

"Now Germany has agreed to let 800,000 in and calls on Britain to accept a bigger share" –Martin Philips.

"EVERY day we see the heartbreaking sights of families drowned or suffocated in the back of a refrigerated lorry"

"But we also need Britain to do its bit to help refugees arriving"

"If every area in the UK took in ten families, we could help nearly 10,000 desperate people. I'm asking every council and community to say how many they could help"

"Let's ensure we can tell our grandchildren we did the right thing" –Yvette Cooper

6. Conclusion

Media coverage analysis –in all its methods and purposes, is both a tool and a platform with and upon which the power of language is deciphered and established. According to Teun A. van Dijk, media analysis falls under the category of social-political discourse analysis. The latter being a means which attempts to shed light on the links existing between structures of political ideologies and those of social context.

Among the most uncharacteristic changes occurring on the used semiotic elements within these articles is the switch to the word "refugees" when describing "immigrants". According to Merriam Webster's dictionary, the two terms differ in the former including a meaning of escape from certain death. Hence, the neglect of said imbedded meaning when using the word

"immigrants" vis-à-vis the use of "refugees". There exists also expressed changes of discourse after Alan's death. Said changes are noticed in the use of more compassion-rate words towards the migrations' situation; such as describing the refugees' situation before Alan's death as "chaos", "threat" or "untenable situation", whilst the terms "heartbreaking", "cruel situation", and "crisis" were exclusively and prominently used after his death. In the article issued before Alan's death, it is also noticed how most interviewees were holidaymakers, ferry boat captains, policemen and workers who experienced slight inconveniences due to the migrants' augmenting situation. Whereas on the article issued after his death, the interviewees consisted mainly of government officials in an attempt to make amends of the inconsideration that was expressed openly through the newspapers' article before; by shedding light on how poorly the situation has been handled.

Media outlets exude such a power that cannot be ignored. It is noticed that the focus of this newspaper's purpose switched from the attempt to influence and manipulate the readers to form a negative perception of the migration situation, into a more rectifying position; in the sense that the newspapers were more focused on building a compassionate and humanitarian façade.

In conclusion, the hypothesis stated in this research; questioning the existence of change in British press discourse prior and subsequent to Alan Kurdi's death, is, therefore –to an extent, confirmed. Many aspects of this change remain uncovered.

7. Recommendations for Further Research

Provided the time proves sufficient, a large corpus is recommended for further research on the topic to better establish and confirm the hypothesis. In light of the extent to which this research's hypothesis was confirmed, Fairclough's method has proven to be a perfect fit for any research of the social-political discourse analysis type.

8. List of annexes

Figure 1: Illustration of the three-dimensional features of CDA as applied to this study

Table of Input 1: The Platform (Interpretation)

9. Bibliography:

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10. Articles' URLs

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- 2- <https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/30258/its-life-death/>