Representation of Refugees in the Western News as Victims and a Threat: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This paper investigated the representation of refugees in Western news with reference to the Guardian newspaper that covers global humanitarian crises. Adopting critical discourse analysis, the discursive practices used in this paper are analysed with the concept of security and securitization of migrants in the context of a global pandemic as the main analysis framework. It examined the representation of Libyan refugees in a Guardian newspaper article, which created a major controversy in the media after its publication. Based on this newspaper article, the study highlights that evolving immigration policies have changed the refugee discourse, including the individuals' health situation and travel restrictions. Also, the lockdown during the global COVID pandemic added to the discrimination and inequalities that the refugees face. Some linguistic tools selected for the analysis help in understanding whether this representation has contributed to the victimization or the alienation of the refugees in Libya in the event of the outbreak.

Keywords: news discourse, pandemic, refugees, representation, security

Introduction

Since 2011, millions of migrants have been trying to reach the EU from various crisis zones, namely African countries and the Middle East. North Africa is the closest access point to the European shores. Most studies (e.g., Finder et al., 2021; Graf et al., 2023) report refugees as groups with various nominations, such as refugees, illegal immigrants, asylum seekers, etc., who hide their individual suffering and personal needs; thus, any political or non-governmental action would treat them as a whole having the same necessities and profiles. The media coverage of the refugee crisis depended on several socio-economic and political variables (numbers, origin and destination country). It has been criticized for using the "in-group-out-group" classification of migrants. Thus, a negative identity of refugees has been constructed.

Refugee issues have been represented in various disciplines for decades (economics, security studies, social sciences, diaspora studies), attracting more attention from critical discourse analysis. The UNHCR defines refugees as individuals who escape dictators, wars and conflict zones, crossing borders to reach security in a different country (UNHCR Convention, 2020). They are considered 'forced migrants' in refugee studies and are eventually given different degrees of protection (Grove & Zwi, 2006). Several researchers have tackled this issue with various aims. To illustrate, Wodak (1997), Reisigl and Wodak (2001), and Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) analysed the 'other' discourse concerning refugee representations in the media and parliamentary documents. Besides, Van Dijk (1991), Jones (2000), Blommaert (2001), Baker and Mc Every (2005) analysed immigrants in the British media focusing on the narration of power and ideological standpoints concerning the perceptions of refugees. Fairclough (1989) and Van Dijk (2006) investigated the power of language in depicting refugees and asylum seekers in different countries. The instability generated by the revolutions and wars in the MENA region triggered the displacement of millions of refugees attempting to reach Europe. These mass movements created new threats not only for humanitarian reasons but also for national stability and international security (Saunders 2014).

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), human security is defined as security from threats like hunger, disease, repression and protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life (UNDP, 1994). This concept, however, is debatable as it acquires new aspects with the evolution of new wars and novel diseases. The conceptualization of refugees as threats to state security have gained momentum in the EU press after the German decision to open borders for Syrian refugees. In 2020, migration reached new records, with more than 70 million forcibly displaced people (UNHCR 2020). The German media portrayed the influx of migrants as a menace to society and a burden to the economy. The discursive construction of refugees as 'the other' was based on linguistic and journalistic processes of foregrounding the negative aspects of criminality, terrorism, and the vulnerability of social welfare systems (Avraamidou, 2020; Calabrese, 2018; Cantat et al., 2019). European Journalists (Cantat et al., 2019) often conceptualized migrants as natural disasters, waves, and obstacles, thus legitimizing the hatred and justifying the countermeasures to stop the influx of incoming migration. Therefore, an updated definition of human security is needed to consider these evolving concepts.

Since the coronavirus outbreak, the concept of state security has been a primary element in the efforts to contain the virus. Human security of the most vulnerable is no longer prominent in official discourse. Several studies have dealt with the humanitarian aspect of refugees. For instance, Cavalieri (2011) states that a victim is subsequently constructed or understood as the opposite of someone who possesses agency, an individual who is seen as a victim of external factors, which in different ways, undermines their ability to choose. According to Kirkwood (2017), studies on the humanisation of refugees are still insufficient. Thus, focusing on the human security level could challenge the balance of power by giving more prominence to those in need. The victim discourse also suggests a polarization between the innocent vs the guilty, a focal point in the analysis. Discourse on humanitarian events can be a tool to justify any intervention, whether to secure state borders or to provide humanitarian help for refugees and asylum seekers (Fassin, 2012).

The concept of security was historically defined in terms of wars and military intervention, and this traditional definition "dominated research in politics and security studies during the last decades" (Morgan, 2007, p. 23). Recently, the discourse on security started to include novel aspects, namely human and humanitarianism which is mainly found in the discourse on migration, particularly after the outbreak of the COVID pandemic. Therefore, a definition of state security would necessarily incorporate the individual and human levels. Social and political events are part of security discourse only when framed from a security perspective (Does 2013). Securitisation is a process more about which frames are selected when approaching the events. Even though certain events are not considered threats, they can be analysed in terms of security discourse and could then be used to justify and legitimate defensive measures (Buzan et al.,1998; Huysmans, 2006).

News discourse studies and reports apply critical discourse analysis (CDA) that enables journalists to emphasize or mitigate themes (Van Dijk, 2006). Jorgensen and Phillips (2008) defined CDA as a method useful for investigating different causality relations between discourse structures, texts, and social actors. The analysis of these structures and power relations between discourse and society should be considered to reconceptualise aspects of hegemony and power embedded in discourse (Fairclough, 1993). CDA has shown that news articles use language to portray the actors involved in the events in various ways. According to Van Dijk (2006) and Fairclough (2003), this objective is fulfilled by using different devices that build up syntactic structures reflecting the ideological standpoint of the news outlet. CDA has received ample criticism.

The CDA analysts can subjectively influence the analysis, and their beliefs may shape their understanding of discursive practice (Wodak, 1999). Fairclough (2003) introduces the concept of principles that represent social events and social actors. These principles include legitimizing, excluding or including events, thus assigning different roles to social actors. Jorgensen and Philip (2008) state that the perception of reality depends on rhetorical and discursive descriptions of events. There is a focus on the miserable reality that refugees face, the extreme conditions of living in the detention camps in a country in a constant state of war with the absence of systematic help from NGOs or the official authorities. This reality is rarely presented in news discourse. There is rather a focus on the journey metaphor that refugees go through in order to reach safety. This metaphor, arguably, backgrounds the different obstacles and the individual challenges of the refugees and foregrounds the mass movement as a threat to the transit and the host states.

To extend the literature on the humanitarian crisis worsened during the pandemic, the aim of this attempt is to examine the security discourse advocated by the British newspaper called the Guardian. Adopting the academic concept of security as the main framework of analysis, it specifically investigates the representation of Libyan refugees in a Guardian newspaper article that created major media controversy after its publication. The focus is on the discursive practices used, and several linguistic tools are selected for the analysis in order to understand whether this representation has contributed to the victimization or the alienation of the refugees in Libya in the event of the outbreak. The following two questions are central to this investigation:

- How is the refugee crisis in Libya represented during the coronavirus in terms of international security in The Guardian?
- How is the refugees' vulnerability against coronavirus represented?

Method

This paper adopts the model of critical discourse analysis developed by Fairclough (1989) better to understand the representation of refugees in a British newspaper. This model helps investigate the grammatical and linguistic choices made in order to reach an understanding of the ideological standpoints. According to Fairclough, intertextuality is used to analyse how language is a continuation of previously built discourse practices, thus 'already established meanings' (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2008). With the coverage of the refugees' situation in Libya, CDA is very useful in interpreting the news article. It allows an analysis of the various linguistic devices

used by journalists. The analysis includes the interplay between state and human security from a critical discourse perspective.

Data Collection

The data selected for analysis is an article from the British newspaper 'The Guardian' published on the 24th of March 2020 by the journalist Sally Hayden. The article is entitled Libya's refugees face being cut off from aid due to Coronavirus. A screenshot of the article's heading, as it appears in The Guardian, is provided below. It was written in 1034 words and highlighted the extreme conditions refugees in Libya go through, especially during the global pandemic-Covid-19, which should have disastrous effects on thousands of vulnerable people. The reason for selecting the Guardian and the article is related to the journal being a liberal newspaper. It covers stories on ethnic minorities and migrants all over the world since the outbreak of the Coronavirus; however, little news has been published on these topics, and more news has been published about the circulation of the pandemic. The Guardian has achieved high readership levels in the UK (Osnos & Priddle, 2011). It has a reputation for sustained and detailed coverage of the global humanitarian crisis (Scott, 2019). The choice of this news article emanates from the fact that it is relevant to the concept of security and securitization of migrants in the context of a global pandemic.

The data analysis adopted a combination of discursive devices from van Dijk's (2006) and Fairclough's (2003) approaches to critical discourse analysis. The concept of security in this paper considers the human level, representing the refugees as victims of exploitation, poverty, and lack of necessities, especially during a global pandemic that is shifting the world's attention away from their reality.

Findings

The analysis is divided into two sections following the research questions. The first is devoted to the representation of refugees as a threat, and the second is to the vulnerability of refugees in the face of the coronavirus outbreak. To reiterate, the article selected from The Guardian for analysis is an example of how refugees can be foregrounded or backgrounded through different linguistic devices such as passivisation, activisation, nominalisation and quoting patterns, and this is what is discussed in this section in more detail.

Human Threat Discourse

Two levels of analysis for the human threat discourse can be identified: refugees are represented as victims of negligence from the Libyan government, and NGOs' efforts are insufficient. The refugees also struggle in extreme conditions against the militia, exploited and represented as enslaved people. The refugees are represented as victims throughout the news article. The writer describes them as helpless, subordinate and desperate. They are used, exploited

and treated as 'slaves, as seen in the following example: *"dozens of detainees have already died from tuberculosis and other medical problems".*

This sympathetic representation is paralleled with rhetorical strategies such as individualization. The writer directly quotes the refugees, using their names and origins, giving them more space, thus helping build a humanitarian character to the refugees. Adding personal information to the quotes gives credibility to the refugees. This is frequently done in quotes starting with the name and age of each refugee. The individual narrative is a humanizing strategy to represent them positively and attract more sympathy to their conditions.

At first reading, the most obvious rhetorical feature used by the writer is the quantification of refugees. The writer refers to the refugees in great numbers using *'many', 'thousands', 'dozens'*. This high frequency of quantification helps conceptualize the refugees as a large body which could have a threatening presence. It also foregrounds the metaphors of 'wave', which constructs a powerful image of the refugees, referring to them as dangerous and threatening, especially in the events of a virus outbreak. This rhetoric presents refugees as a phenomenon and, as such, dehumanizes them. This conceptualization also emphasizes the extreme living conditions and the vulnerability of the refugees.

The high mortality rate of the refugees is caused by a lack of medical assistance, the spread of viruses and other medical problems. As governments all over the world are trying to contain the deadly virus, the reference to 'thousands of refugees trapped together in detention centres is conceptualized as the alarm bell for the spread of the virus and that the Libyan government and the UN should be alarmed. An illustration is in the following quote: *"Covid–19 is a grave threat for the thousands of refugees and migrants still locked up in detention centres".*

However, the writer focuses on the individual stories of the refugees by quoting them and foregrounding their individual sufferings rather than portraying them as a mass. This strategy foregrounds the grievances of individual refugees and reminds the readers that they are still human beings with simple needs. *"If the disease [comes to] Libya, it will be very dangerous, especially for the refugees, because we live densely in one place".* In this quote, there is mostly use of the inclusive 'we' when they talk about their problems. They identify themselves as part of a group with similar challenges and conditions which is typical for minority groups.

Another discursive device in the article is passivisation, defined as "turning an active sentence or clause into a corresponding passive voice" (OED, 2023). It is basically the shift in focus from the agent to the receiver of the actions. The writer employs the active voice to foreground the doer of an action and shifts to the passive voice when the agent is hidden. The analysis of the data reveals that the passive voice is mostly used to depict the refugees as helpless and subjects to exploitation, as in these examples: *"they were forced to unload and carry heavy weapons".* They are represented as responsible for the outbreak of diseases as migrants being unfairly blamed and stigmatised and under the control of local authorities or the United Nations as in these examples *"migrants still locked up in detention centres"* and *"migrants were effectively forced to leave the UNHCR-established, donor-funded gathering"* (The Guardian, 2021). This representation is found in other studies conducted on refugees whereby the active voice is adopted when there is a negative association of the refugees or minorities with events and tragedies happening in the host countries (Fowler et al.,1979).

The writer also uses negative verbs such as *'deteriorate', 'worried', 'halted', 'confined'...* and negative adjectives like *'disastrous' 'afraid', and 'desperate'* when voicing the refugees' fears from the virus and the lack of services. These lexical choices reinforce the image of refugees as victims and the most vulnerable with a focus on their emotional situations. There is also a use of both direct and indirect quotations from refugees and UN officials. Local authorities, however, were not quoted. This coincides with the Guardian's orientation of allocating more space to the victims of conflicts and crises.

Security Discourse

The news article has a prominent use of the security discourse. There is a focus on the refugees' history of fleeing wars and dictatorships. They are also represented in connection with the Militia who are using them as 'human shields' as illustrated in this example from the Guardian article *"Militia leaders also sheltered there, hoping it would stop them being hit by an air strike".*

According to (Buzan et al.,1998), the securitization of events involves contextualizing security issues. This is usually done using certain speech acts. The article employs a security discourse to highlight the threat that refugees could represent to each other and to the host countries. The lexical choices are similar to warfare diction, highlighting the dangerous situation in the detention centres and representing the refugees' crisis in Libya as a national threat (bombing, survivors...). The virus outbreak cannot be controlled since they live in 'cramped conditions.

By portraying refugees as a security threat, an implicit reference is made to the immediate measures needed to deal with the refugee crisis. Securitizing migration (situating migration within a security discourse) is thus depicted as a need, not from a humanitarian position but from an international security one; governments affected by the crisis are indirectly responsible for the containment of the situation and the reinforcement of UN aid.

Another rhetorical device useful for this analysis is modality. Modality is about the degree of affinity and affiliation the writer has to the text. Halliday (1994) states that modality is the level of certainty about the speaker's judgements, his/her commitment to what he/she is proposing. The writer employs epistemic modality, which reflects the commitment of her propositions. Examples of epistemic modals are 'will, would, may and must,' which all express certain degrees of certainty about the writer's propositions (Jordan, 1999). In this example, *"the outcome for migrants and refugees would be disastrous"*, the writer evaluates the gravity of the virus outbreak using the modal 'would'; reference to the worsened conditions of refugees is made using the modal 'would. The virus outbreak is often rhetorically presented as a threat in these examples: *"there could be a backlash against refugees and migrants if Covid-19 spreads"* and *"the outcome for migrants and refugees would be disastrous if there is an outbreak"*. The writer also uses negative words when talking about the virus, she links the desperation and fear of refugees to the danger of a possible outbreak which can affect the readers' perception of the situation in Libya, representing refugees as a security threat if the virus spreads.

Another connection is made between the refugees and poverty, the writer focuses on the UNHCR's impossibility of sustaining the refugees financially because of the banking problems in Libya illustrated in this example *"hope cash distributions can resume in a few days"*, if refugees are left without work and financial aid, they may turn to crimes in order to survive. This reasoning adds to the representation of refugees as a threat.

Touched on the above analysis, passive voice predominantly portrays refugees as helpless and susceptible to exploitation. In the newspaper article, the author centres on individual refugee stories, emphasizing their personal suffering and reminding readers of their basic human needs. The author has employed negative verbs and adjectives to convey the refugees' fears about the virus and the absence of vital services, reinforcing the image of refugees as victims in vulnerable emotional states. The findings hold significant relevance in understanding the portrayal of refugees in the media, as it sheds light on the linguistic choices and narrative techniques employed to depict them as victims and potential threats. The insights gained from this analysis can inform policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and the general public about the importance of considering individual refugee experiences rather than viewing them as a homogeneous group. This understanding can lead to more empathetic and effective solutions to address the needs of refugees and improve their living conditions.

Conclusion

Prompted by the humanitarian crisis of refugees, which has worsened during the Coronavirus pandemic, this study investigated the media coverage of the refugee crisis with a focus on how news articles use language to portray the actors involved in the events in various ways. The already struggling refugees and asylum seekers located in UN Camps and detention zones have challenges that resulted from the pandemic. Analysing the discursive practices and linguistic tools helps understand how this representation has contributed to the refugees' post COVID situation. The analysis was divided into two parts. The first is about depicting refugees as victims and potential threats, and the second is about their vulnerability during the coronavirus outbreak. The study emphasizes the refugees' past experiences of fleeing wars and dictatorships in their home countries, highlighting the potential danger that is likely posed to one another and host countries. Linguistic choices, such as warfare-related terms, underline the perilous conditions

within detention centers. Implicit suggestions are made regarding the immediate actions required to address the refugee crisis. As with all such studies, some limitations offer opportunities for further research. Future researchers may expand the scope of analysis by examining news articles from diverse news outlets and countries, allowing for a broader perspective on the portrayal of refugees across various media sources and cultural contexts and analysing the evolution of refugee representation over time to identify changes in discourse patterns and trends, providing insights into the shifting dynamics of migration and global politics.

Disclosure Statement:

I hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of this paper. Thus, I take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

Ethics Statement

I confirm that the manuscript has been created by the authors and not an AI tool/Large Language Model (LLM). I am fully responsible for the content of the manuscript and am thus liable for any breach of publication ethics.

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