

HIDING AGENCY OF SEVERE ACTIONS IN ENGLISH PRINT MEDIA: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF 2014 ISLAMABAD SIT-INS

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ABSTRACT: *Political events of grave political significance occurred in Pakistan after 2013 general elections. The alleged rigging in the elections and killing of 14 workers at Minahaj Trust in Lahore led two mainstream political parties, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) to march towards Islamabad with a plan to continue a sit-in protest until toppling the allegedly corrupt and cruel government. While covering the sit-in protest, the media seems to cover these events in a slightly different way. The media either supported the government or the opposition, with more fervor than ever before. Based on the basic assumption of CDA that language, as a social practice, is a network of different choices which can restrict and determine ideological meaning, this research aims to study the role played by the choice of active or passive voice structures in construction of social meaning by three mainstream Pakistani English newspapers-Dawn, The News, and The Nation. The framework of analysis has been borrowed from major CDA analysts who view that passive voice assuages the agency of the action or event, relieves the agent/actor from the responsibility of the action, and constructs a social meaning by choice of an ideologically embedded structure.*

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Linguistic Choices; Passivization; Agency; Long Marches

INTRODUCTION

A critical approach in linguistics provides a room for debates on the concept of a neutral media that is supposed to cover events of momentous political repercussions with complete impartiality. During 70's the work of critical linguists on media particularly focused how passivization and nominalization may blur bad actions, and how news material are transformed from source to news report and from one news form to another [1]. Their work was majorly concerned with what was later recognized as ideational function of language by systemic functional theory. In its ideational function language is supposed to represent events, situations and people [2]. This theory viewed language as a network of choices, and different choices may construct different meanings. Influenced by this approach in linguistics, CDA analysts emphasized that a critical examination of linguistic choices exploited by the language users may lead to different versions of social reality and individual or group ideology underlying the linguistic structures. After this approach the media all over the world was never considered a neutral reporter but a power centre constructing social realities according to the ideology of the group.

Pakistani media played its vital role in different movements of political and social significance. However, after it got a new sense of freedom in Musharraf's regime, its role assumed new dimensions when it started functioning as a power center creating social reality depending upon the policy of the group instead of being impartial mediator between conflicting parties. It exhibited the same role during its coverage of 2014 long marches and *Sit-ins (dharnas)* of PTI and PAT. In context of the newly defined geopolitical importance of Pakistan in post 9/11 and existing CPEC scenario these events were of international significance. From the very onset, different media groups appeared to cover these events as supporters of either of the two sides-the government or the opposition parties marching towards capital.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) announced a march towards Islamabad after the government of PML-(N) did not give space to probe into the matter of alleged rigging in 2013 general elections. PTI chief Imran Khan announced to depart on 14th August and to remain in Capital in a *sit-in* until the demand of resignation of the then prime minister Nawaz Sharif would be accepted. They named their march as Azadi March. *Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT)* grieved at the killing of their 14 workers at Minhaj Trust in Lahore decided to march towards the capital on the same dates to exert pressure on the government. However, they named their march as '*Inqilab March*'. The media of the country which had a short history of its newly independent form and function after General Musharraf's regime used its power either to support so-called symbol of status-quo-the government or the protagonists of change- the marching parties. The role of English print media was even more significant as it represented the country to the whole world.

This study aimed to critically examine how the mainstream English newspapers- The Dawn, The Nation, The News covered the whole event. It primarily focused how the media represented the important events during the long march and sit-in events by using alternative choices between active and passive structures; how it played its role in enacting, maintaining, or resisting social injustice; and whether it played role of a supporter or a reporter during its coverage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CDA assumes that language is a social practice liable to construct social reality, and everything is said from a particular ideological position [3]. Therefore, it emphasizes to critically examine newspaper language, which possesses particular ideology hidden in the subtle choice of linguistic forms. These ideological underpinnings can only be exposed by critically examining the linguistic structures without relying on the surface meaning they convey [4]. These linguistic choices may include choice of lexical items with particular ideological meaning; choice of metaphors or other

rhetorical expression; choice of themes in a clause complex; choice of visual aids, choice of voice (active vs. passive) etc [11]. Linguistic alternatives at all these levels convey different ideological meaning. However, choice of passive structures helps to relieve the agent of an action from its responsibility. Different CDA analysts have focused on the utilization of this tool by language users to expose biased use of language.

[5], views that the choice of passive voice is one of the known tools to hide the agency or to alleviate the negative impact of the process on it. This is done either by pushing the agent to the end of the clause or by leaving it out from the clause altogether. The use of active voice shows that the responsibility of the action is to be brought to light. [6], presenting concrete instances, supports the argument that agency might be made less prominent by shifting the structures as '*a suicide bomber killed several Afghan children*' into '*several Afghan children were killed by a suicide bomber*'. It is also possible that the agent is totally kept hidden by passive as in: '*several Afghan children were killed*' or by utilizing the nominalization such as '*Killing of Afghan Children*'. The last one represses the agency of such a severe misconduct.

[7], emphasizes that converting a structure from active to passive causes no harm to grammaticality of the sentence. By virtue of this strategy the target of hiding an agent is achieved by forming perfect grammatical clauses like '*Chris was killed in the city that he helped to save*'. In fact, agent becomes circumstance in passive structures, and circumstance can be removed from the clause without causing an ungrammatical construction. [8], in their analysis of Obama's speeches as a presidential candidate, observe that the orator used *by-passive* voice structures to de-emphasize the agent and underscore the action and event. However, in most of the cases the agent was altogether removed from the clauses for certain reasons i.e. to avoid responsibility or blame, to emphasize the event/action, to make event seem more abstract, or to conceal responsibility of particular individuals [10]. The utilization of this linguistic tool in internationally significant political discourse has severe repercussions worldwide.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research which, falling under CDA paradigm, pivots around the assertion of [2] that language is network of choices made at various levels of a clause complex that can restrict meaning to achieve certain objectives. Among such choices, this study concentrated on the choice of voices (*active vs. passive*) made in the discourse of major English newspapers of Pakistan-*Dawn*, *The News*, and *The Nation*, during their coverage of the two long marches of PTI and PAT. It relied on the framework developed for the analysis of the role passive voice structures in construction of social reality in discourse (particularly media) as mentioned by major CDA analysts [9,5,6,7].

The headlines were selected from the three mainstream newspapers to find out how an alternative choice of active or passive voice constructed different pictures of the same event, whether the English print media kept the agents of such significant events implicit or relieved them from responsibility by choosing passive structures. A news items

were selected from the most crucial days which witnessed the departure and arrival of the marches.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Dawn

PTI and PAT allowed to march on Islamabad (Dawn, August 15, 2014)

This is a passive voice structure which does not tell who allowed PTI and PAT to march on capital. There might be two reasons for the choice of passive voice here. One is that the newspaper does not intend to give credit to the government who allowed the two parties to march on capital. The other reason might be that there is someone else, other than government, who allowed the PTI and PAT. This news has been chosen here for analysis because other newspapers chose active voice to present the same news.

Azadi march attacked in Gujranwala (Dawn, August 16, 2014)

This lead of the dawn chooses a passive structure for the description of a very important incident which occurred when the Azadi march of Imran Khan's PTI was on its way to the capital. The subject of this sentence is Azadi march who received the attack. Being a passive structure it hides the doer/actor of the action. In this way it mitigates the responsibility of the action from the shoulders of the government by hiding the agent who performed this action. This structure of discourse would favor the government whose activists attacked the marchers. The first paragraph of the same news story mentions the doer of the action; however, this aspect has been discussed in the methodology section of this research that the most important news becomes the headlines and leads of the news stories. The absence of the doer of the action from the top position would certainly favor him. A question may be raised here that it may be the style of the newspaper to present headlines in this fashion. But if we compare this lead story with the headline story of the same day the fact will be very clear. The headline reads: **Marches keep capital on tenterhooks**. We have discussed this headline in the analysis of macrostructures, but owing to the fact that it contains an active voice structure it is important to compare it with the above mentioned lead which possesses a passive structure. The question arises why the newspaper not said in its headline: **Capital kept on tenterhooks**. Had the newspaper wished to hide the actor/doer here it would have written its headline in that way. So, the choice of voice in headlines and the leads clearly shows that the discourse of Dawn news is not objective in its approach. It uses the choice of voice as a discursive practice when needed.

The News

TI allowed to march on Capital

Nisar says LHC decision to be implemented; no violent mob could bully PM to resign; Islamabad sealed. The news follows the same structure, which is followed by Dawn to present this news. However, it does not mention PAT in its headline. A reason for this absence may be that there remained a constant confusion about the status of PAT's 'Inqilab' march. But the important thing to note here is that the passive voice structure does not give the due respect to government who allowed the parties to march on capital. In spite of that it carries a paradox. The lead says that PTI has

been allowed to march on capital, but the sub lead mentions the things, which hamper the way of marches. Nisar's statement contains self-contradiction. He claims to implement LHC's decision that says that containers should be removed from the way of marchers. He also gives guarantee that 'no violent mob could bully PM to resign'. This might be taken as a threat to the marching parties implying to them that they should not consider it so easy a way even if the containers from their passage would be removed. Furthermore, the mentioning of fact 'Islamabad sealed' makes the lead more paradoxical. It suggests that the government has allowed marching on capital, but it is not ready to unseal capital so that the protesters enter the capital freely and record their protest that is their constitutional right. This way of presenting the news unveils the reality of government's claim to allow the marchers.

PML-N, PTI activists clash in Gujranwala

Imran says Azadi March participants fired upon; leaves container, departs for Islamabad in bullet-proof vehicle; PML-N's Pomi Butt arrested. The lead heading uses the word clash instead of attack. Both the lexical choices have different connotations, but the difference they make in discourse and the discursive function they perform is even more significant than the difference in their dictionary meanings. The word attack suggests the innocence of the PTI workers. It implies that the people who attacked were guilty for the situation. On the other hand the word clash means that both the parties had a role in the incident, and both are responsible for the mishap. The choice of active structure using the verb phrase 'clash' is a clear favor of the government. No media group could use better structure than this one to support the government. There are other clues, however, in the headline which reveal that it is an open support to the government. For instance, 'Imran says Azadi March participants fired upon'. 'Fired upon' is a passive structure which hides the actor of the action. Moreover, this fact has been presented as a saying of Imran instead of as a **fact**. PML-N's Pomi Butt arrested makes the government more deprived of justice in this matter because the reader of this news story would certainly feel that if it is a clash why only a PML-N's activist has been arrested. So, the news undoubtedly favors government in presenting the facts about Gujranwala incident.

The Nation

Govt allows Azadi March to enter Islamabad

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has decided to allow the Azadi March to enter Islamabad, a private TV channel reported on Wednesday. (The Nation, August 16, 2014).

The Nation, unlike Dawn and The News, has chosen active voice structure to impart this news. This discourse goes in favor of government as it gives direct credit to the Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, instead of portraying it as an act by the government. In this way the newspaper acknowledges the generosity of the PM. The choice of passive voice in the two previously analyzed newspapers, Dawn and the News, hide

the doer/actor; therefore, their discourses do not appreciate the wise act of the government. It appears from this news item that the Nation is in favor of the PM's policy of dealing with the long marches.

12 injured in PTI, N workers clash in Gujranwala

The Nation depicts the tragic scene of Gujranwala as a clash instead of an attack. The Dawn presents it as an attack while the News and the Nation portrays it as a clash. The two lexical choices evoke two different images in the mind of the readers. The choice of word 'attack' favors the PTI followers, but the choice of word 'clash' favors PML-N activists. Moreover, instead of a complete sentence, whether active or passive, the Nation chooses a fragment structure for presentation of this important incident. This structure hides the cruel act of hampering the marchers by the PML-N activists. It presents it as a clash, and a clash may occur accidentally. So, it happened, in the eyes of the Nation reporter, by chance and 12 injured in the clash. This choice of discourse structure, consciously or unconsciously, relaxes the responsibility from the shoulders of the PML-N activists.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of the data selected from three main stream English newspapers of Pakistan-Dawn, The News and The Nation showed that the media utilized the technique of using passive structures for representing significant events during their coverage of August 2014 Islamabad sit-ins of PTI and PAT. Through this technique the media hid the agency of the actors of severe actions and reduced the blame from them. This technique was particularly utilized for representing the Gujranwala incident wherein the PTI march was reported to have been attacked by the workers of the ruling PML-N. The representation of this incident by the three newspapers favored the Government as all these papers kept the agency of the action hidden either by using the passive structure with the verb 'attacked', or missed the verb at all from the headline story clauses by replacing the verb with a noun 'clash'. The representation of attack as a clash and passivization of the structure surely hid the responsibility of the government and constructed a tilted picture of reality. The media also kept hidden the agency of the government in some positive actions where they allowed the opposition for marching towards capital, but here it did not cause a heavy loss to the government as some media groups used active voice structure like - 'Govt allows' which highlighted the positive action of the government by introducing it in an active voice clause.

This injustice in the utilization of the technique of passive voice structures show that the mainstream English print media of the country functioned to maintain social injustice and inequality by constructing titled discourse to favor a particular stakeholder- *the government*. This was achieved by highlighting their positive actions and hiding their severe actions.

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