



CREOGN Research Note

French Gendarmerie Officers Academy Research Centre

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS FOR ACTION AGAINST JIHADIST RADICALIZATION

By Dr. Laura ASCONE, Ph.D. in language sciences

Faced with the jihadist attacks that have struck the West in recent years, researchers and professionals have rallied to understand the dynamics that can lead an individual to adhere to the ideology promoted by Daesh. If several disciplines such as psychology¹, sociology² and computer science³ have found their legitimacy in action-research programs on the phenomenon of jihadist radicalization, language sciences seem to encounter some difficulties. Therefore this study is conducted in a context where the role of language has been recognized but not sufficiently examined. Our objective here is to show how the analysis of jihadist discourse can contribute to understanding the phenomenon of radicalization and to formulating a strategy for dealing with it. This is not a research in language sciences, and more specifically in discourse analysis, which would take jihadist discourse as a simple case study. On the contrary, we want to bring the knowledge and methodologies of language sciences to the study of a phenomenon of global interest that is challenging all disciplinary boundaries. This discursive characterization leads to criteria for identifying radicalization on the web and to recommendations for messages that would enable us to counter jihadist radicalization.

1. Jihadist discourse and institutional counter-discourse

Corpus and methodology

The two official magazines published online by Daesh have proven to be an important source for studying the rhetorical strategies adopted by the jihadist group to fascinate its supporters and terrorize its enemies. These are the two magazines distributed by Al-Hayat Media Center, Daesh's media center. *Dabiq*, which now has fifteen issues, is written in English and was first published on July 5, 2014, only days after Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi announced the reinstatement of the Caliphate in the Mosul mosque. In contrast, the French-language magazine *Dar al-Islam*, has ten issues, the first of which was released online on December 23, 2014. The fact that jihadist discourse appears so persuasive to many young people has raised questions about the effectiveness of institutional counter-discourse, which seems to have more difficulty in achieving its intended goals. In order to understand the factors determining the effectiveness of a discourse, it was necessary to build a corpus of counter-discourses, disseminated on the web by the French government and the European Union. The specificity of this multiple corpus, composed of four sub-corpora (French-speaking jihadist discourse, English-speaking jihadist discourse, French-speaking counter-discourse, and English-speaking counter-discourse), allowed us to conduct a contrastive analysis both between the two languages and between the two discourses. Adopting a quantitative-qualitative methodology, which relies on the use of textual analysis tools such as *Tropes* and *Iramuteq*, as well as on a more in-depth manual study, proved crucial. The combination of these two approaches allowed us to identify both the general characteristics and the specific features of each sub-

1 BENSLAMA, Fethi. *Un furieux désir de sacrifice : le surmusulman*. Paris : Édition du Seuil, 2016.

2 KHOSROKHAVAR, Farhad. *Radicalisation*. Paris : Éditions de la maison des sciences de l'homme, 2014.

3 LAMBERTI, Carolina. « Gli strumenti di contrasto al terrorismo e al cyber-terrorismo nel contesto europeo ». *Rivista di Criminologia, Vittimologia e Sicurezza*, 8(2), 2014, p. 138-161.

corpus.

Results

Jihadist discourse, in both the French and English languages, is built around four concepts: threat, obligation, prohibition and reward. Since the magazines *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* are aimed at an audience that has already adhered to the jihadist ideology, their objective is to incite the reader to act in the name of that ideology. The discourse of Daesh is thus built on a series of obligations and prohibitions that are presented to the reader as religious dictates. The reference to an unquestionable deity aims to legitimize the jihadist discourse and to lead readers to respect all the obligations and prohibitions that are imposed on them. In order to modulate readers' behavior and encourage them to respect these, the writer promises them rewards that they can only obtain by respecting all these indications. Specifically, these are rewards for adhering to the jihadist ideology, for adopting good behavior, and for any violent action taken against Daesh's enemies. These rewards include Allah's forgiveness, as well as glory and paradise. On the contrary, if the reader does not follow these dictates, he or she will face negative consequences that are presented and perceived as threats.

The qualitative analysis conducted on the way the discourse of *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* revolves around these four notions (threat, obligation, prohibition, and reward) showed that English-speaking and French-speaking jihadist discourse follow the same rhetorical pattern. However, significant differences were identified between these two discourses. The Anglophone jihadist discourse focuses on the behavior that every Muslim should adopt. This is confirmed by the fact that the majority of the threats expressed in *Dabiq* are directed at any sympathizer who does not comply with the obligations and prohibitions imposed upon them. On the contrary, the Francophone jihadist discourse seems to focus not on the jihadist community but on the figure of the enemy. In *Dar al-Islam*, most of the threats refer to violent actions against the enemies of Daesh. In other words, the target of the message has a significant impact on the content of the message itself.

While the jihadist discourse follows a clear rhetorical pattern, the counter-discourse has no discursive structure. Differences can also be identified in the content of the four concepts. With regard to how the threat is expressed, unlike the jihadist discourse which presents the writer's community as the agent of the threat, both against its enemy and against its sympathizers, in the counter-discourse, the writer's community is shown as the victim of the jihadist threat. Furthermore, in the jihadist discourse, obligations and prohibitions indicate the behavior to be adopted in order to obtain Allah's forgiveness and access to paradise. In contrast, in the institutional counter-discourse, they indicate what to do in case of an attack. A further difference concerns rewards: unlike in the jihadist discourse, where rewards are intended to motivate the reader to act, in the counter-discourse this category is absent. The results from this qualitative analysis revealed that the jihadist discourse aims to incite the reader to take part in the conflict. In contrast, the institutional counter-discourse is limited to informing the reader, as it is only up to institutions to take action to address jihadist radicalization and terrorism. This difference between the two discourses could be the main factor that makes the jihadist discourse fascinating to its supporters, unlike the counter-discourse, which seems to have more difficulty in achieving its goals.

Faced with Daesh's propaganda, which modulates its discourse by proposing motives that adapt to and echo the different readers it addresses, the institutional discourse condemns jihadist action without proposing an alternative. If Daesh suggests to young people whose vocation is humanitarian work that they go to the Middle East to help Syrian children, the institutional discourse tends to focus on the plight of these children. However, this discourse is aimed at an audience that is looking for a cause to act on. Therefore, a message that presents the possibility of helping Syrian children who have fled the war in Syria and are now in Europe may prove more effective. In other words, through a targeted discourse, addressed to the different profiles likely to adhere to the ideology promoted by Daesh, the government could compete with the jihadist discourse. Moreover, the fact that the institutional counter-discourse tends to present the community as a victim of jihadist action risks feeding a feeling of hatred against Daesh and, in some cases, against migrants and Muslims. On the contrary, a discourse highlighting the values of the community and calling for unity would fuel a sense of "living together" and, consequently, to move away from any conflict and ideological polarization. In this perspective, the obituary portraits of the 159 victims of the Paris (November 2015) and Nice (July 2016) attacks published by

Le Monde, could be considered as a potential counter-discourse⁴.

2. Analysis perspectives

The case of Twitter

Dabiq and *Dar al-Islam* are thus an important source of information on jihadist ideology and discourse. However, it is through social networks that Daesh can reach a much wider readership, facilitated by the fact that its sympathizers are no longer merely passive recipients of jihadist propaganda but can actively contribute to the production of extremist content⁵. To deal with the proliferation of jihadist messages on social networks, several platforms, such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube*, have engaged in the detection and censorship of speeches that glorify terrorism and exalt the ideology promoted by Daesh. The techniques that are used to censor jihadist speech are based primarily on keyword detection.

However, the use of a pre-existing dictionary can have significant limitations. The fact that the same statement, and in some cases the same term, can be interpreted in several different ways makes it even more difficult to detect such speech. The term "jihad", for example, is perceived as something positive by Daesh sympathizers, as it would allow them to enter paradise, while it is perceived negatively by those who do not adhere to the jihadist ideology, as they tend to associate jihad with the attacks fomented by Daesh. Moreover, the same term is used by jihadists as well as the media, professionals and academics. It would therefore be necessary to adopt detection techniques that go beyond the simple lexicon. In this regard, a quantitative-qualitative analysis was conducted on a corpus of 4,000 tweets extracted from a series of hashtags and accounts that, in the literature on Daesh's use of social networks, had been associated with jihadist discourse. In order to analyze this corpus of tweets and to be able to compare it to the corpus of the two Daesh magazines, we adopted the same methodology that we applied to study the discourse of *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam*. Specifically, we wanted to identify the expression of threat, obligation, prohibition and reward in the tweets constituting our corpus. The objective here was to verify whether the discourse disseminated on *Twitter* follows the same rhetorical pattern on which the discourse of *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* is built. This study revealed that the corpus of tweets presents the same components as the discourse of the two official Daesh magazines: threat, obligation, prohibition and reward. However, the production parameters imposed by *Twitter*, as well as the limited size of the corpus studied, do not allow for an advanced analysis of the discursive structure of the jihadist messages broadcast on this platform.

Limitations and avenues of analysis

While the study conducted on *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* revealed the limitations of some linguistic analysis tools, the study conducted on the corpus of tweets showed the difficulties that this type of data can pose. As far as *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* are concerned, our study has shown the limits of the analysis carried out with software that is based on a pre-established dictionary and therefore cannot detect the specific features of the text studied. Moreover, as they cannot take into account the point of view of the writer, these textual analysis tools do not allow the interpretation of the nuances and aims of the discourse. Developed from the limitations of these software programs, this qualitative analysis of jihadist discourse does, however, provide a basis for enriching the pre-existing dictionary or for establishing a lexicon specific to jihadist discourse. This would make it possible to refine the detection and categorization of discourse likely to have been produced by Daesh sympathizers.

Different difficulties were encountered in the analysis of the corpus of tweets. When extracting tweets, the text is taken out of its context of production. Therefore, as these are decontextualized statements of no more than 140 characters, the text can evoke several interpretations. Unlike the jihadist discourse of the two official Daesh magazines, the tweets we examined cannot be linked to a jihadist context with certainty. Moreover, the specific features of this corpus make it difficult, if not impossible, to determine the point of view of the writer as well as to model a rhetorical pattern of jihadist discourse produced on *Twitter*.

4 RENAUT, Laurène, ASCONE, Laura. « Contre-discours au discours de haine jihadiste : de l'expression de la conflictualité à la fabrique du doute ». *Semen*, 47, 2019.

5 Homeland Security Institute. *The Internet as a Terrorist Tool for Recruitment and Radicalization of Youth*. Prepared for U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Science and Technology Directorate, 2009.

The difficulties presented by this type of corpus suggest the need for a specific quantitative-qualitative study that could reveal specific features of jihadist discourse on social networks. From a quantitative point of view, a larger corpus would allow for machine learning and, consequently, for testing the results obtained. From a qualitative point of view, the contextualization of the tweets studied (user profile and chronology of photos and messages posted) would facilitate the distinction between jihadist discourse and any other discourse. The combination of these two approaches could thus reveal a rhetorical pattern of the discourse disseminated by Daesh on social networks that would allow the detection of jihadist content based not only on the lexicon used but also on their discursive structure. Furthermore, the comparison of the rhetorical pattern on which the jihadist discourse is built with other extremist discourses could lead to the modeling of a discursive structure specific to all extremist discourses.

Conclusion

This analysis of jihadist discourse and institutional counter-discourse has allowed us to identify elements that, until now, had gone unnoticed by other disciplines. We refer to the differences between Daesh discourse, which aims to incite the recipient to act, and counter-discourse, which, on the contrary, aims only to inform. Equally important are the differences between the French-speaking jihadist discourse, which focuses on the enemy, and the English-speaking jihadist discourse, which focuses on the jihadist community. These are factors that would need to be taken into account when different countries undertake collaboration to combat jihadist radicalization and terrorism. Considering the many findings from this research, we can say that linguistic analysis is crucial in the study of jihadist radicalization as well as in the development of a strategy to counter this phenomenon.

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