



HAL
open science

Textual Analysis of Extremist Propaganda and Counter-Narrative: a quanti-quali investigation

Laura Ascone

► **To cite this version:**

Laura Ascone. Textual Analysis of Extremist Propaganda and Counter- Narrative: a quanti-quali investigation. JADT, Jun 2018, Rome, Italy. hal-02317752

HAL Id: hal-02317752

<https://hal.science/hal-02317752>

Submitted on 16 Oct 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Textual Analysis of Extremist Propaganda and Counter-Narrative: a quanti-quali investigation

Laura Ascone¹

¹Université de Cergy-Pontoise – laura.ascone@etu.u-cergy.fr

Abstract

This paper investigates the rhetorical strategies of jihadist propaganda and counter-narrative in English and French. Since jihadist propaganda aims at both persuading the Islamic State's sympathisers and threatening its enemies, attention was focused on the way threat and persuasion are verbalised. As far as jihadist propaganda is concerned, the study was conducted on the Islamic State's two official online magazines: *Dabiq*, published in English, and *Dar al-Islam*, published in French. As for the counter-narrative, the corpus was composed of the articles published on the main English and French governmental websites.

Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches allowed to examine the general characteristics as well as the specificities of both jihadist propaganda and counter-narrative. The software *Tropes* was used to analyse the corpora from a semantic-pragmatic perspective. The results' statistical validity was then verified and synthesised with the softwares *Iramuteq* and *R*. This study revealed that the rhetorical strategies varied between both jihadist propaganda and counter-narrative, and French and English.

Keywords: jihadist propaganda, counter-narrative, discourse analysis, threat, persuasion.

1. Introduction

The recent terrorist attacks by Daesh in Western countries have led researchers and experts to examine the islamisation of radicalism (Roy, 2016). Different studies have been conducted on the psychosociological contexts that may lead someone to adhere to the jihadist ideology (Benslama, 2016; Khosrokhavar, 2014), as well as on the role played by the Internet in the radicalisation process (Von Behr, 2013). Yet, even though terrorism would not exist without communication (McLuhan, 1978), the rhetorical strategies of the jihadist propaganda have been neglected and remained unexplored. In an "argumentative war" (Angenot, 2008; Aly, 2010), that is, a war based on language, language and emotions play a critical role (Lombardi, 2015).

This research investigates the rhetorical strategies of both jihadist propaganda and counter-narrative published on the Internet in English and French. More precisely, this analysis focuses on the way threat and persuasion are expressed in jihadist propaganda, as well as on the way French government and international institutions face and counter jihadist propaganda. Threat is considered as "a statement of an intention to inflict pain, injury, damage, or other hostile action on someone in retribution for something done or not done" (from Oxford Living Dictionaries). On the other hand, persuasion is considered as "the action or process of persuading someone or of being persuaded to do or believe something" (from Oxford Living Dictionaries). From a linguistic perspective, threat and persuasion are complex speech acts. Therefore, pragmatics and, more specifically, Searle's (1969) speech act theory, constituted the basis of this study.

As far as jihadist propaganda is concerned, the analysis was conducted on the Islamic State's two official online magazines: *Dabiq*, published in English, and *Dar al-Islam*, published in French. The French magazine, which is not a translation of the English one, addresses French readers only, whereas the English version addresses all non-Arabic speakers. As far as the counter-narrative is concerned, the corpus was composed of the articles published on the main French and English institutional websites such as *stopdihadism.fr* or *counterjihadreport.com*. The fact that jihadist propaganda and counter-narrative address different readerships, led us to hypothesise that differences in both content and form might be identified between the two magazines, as well as among the different governmental websites. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches (Garric and Longhi, 2012; Rastier, 2011) (that is, lexicometry and textometry for the quantitative approach, and the interpretation of the text according to the ideology behind it for the qualitative one), allowed to examine the general characteristics as well as the specificities of both jihadist propaganda and counter-narrative. Following Marchand's (2014) work, the software *Tropes* was used to analyse the corpora from a semantic-pragmatic perspective. The results' statistical validity was verified with the softwares *Iramuteq* and *R*.

By comparing the rhetorical strategies used in both jihadist propaganda (Huyghe, 2011) and counter-narrative, the aim of this research was to identify the linguistic differences between these two discourses and these two languages. After having presented the rhetorical pattern of jihadist propaganda, the linguistic characteristics of English and French counter-narratives will be examined. The jihadist and governmental rhetorical strategies will then be contrasted.

2. Corpus and methodology

2.1. Jihadist propaganda

The analysis of the rhetorical strategies in jihadist propaganda was conducted on Daesh's official online magazines *Dabiq*, published in English, and *Dar al-Islam*, published in French. Since these two magazines address a readership that has already adhered to the jihadist ideology, their goal is to both reinforce the reader's adhesion and to incite him/her to act in the name of the jihadist ideology. The reader is then incited to adopt the behaviour a good Muslim should have, and to take revenge on who is presented by Daesh as the responsible for the Muslims' humiliation, that is the West. As far as *Dabiq* is concerned, the corpus investigated was composed of all the articles published on the first fourteen numbers (*i.e.* 377,450 words). As for *Dar al-Islam*, the analysis was conducted on the first nine issues (229,762 words).

To analyse the rhetorical strategies used in jihadist propaganda, a quanti-qualitative approach was adopted (cf. Garric and Longhi, 2012; Rastier, 2011). More precisely, this iterative approach was composed of four stages. A first qualitative analysis of the jihadist ideology, the radicalisation process, and the linguistic characteristics of hate speech and propagandistic discourse was essential to the understanding of the jihadist discourse as well as to the advancement of our first hypotheses. The second stage corresponded to a quantitative analysis whose goal was to verify the validity of our hypotheses: the corpus was then examined with the software *Tropes*, which allows to investigate a text from a semantic perspective. More precisely, based on a pre-established lexicon, the software identifies the themes tackled in the text, and shows how these themes are linked to one another. The most frequent themes in both magazines are *religion* and *conflict*. However, in order to study the way threat and persuasion are expressed in the two corpora, a deeper qualitative analysis was conducted on the themes *sentiment* for the French corpus, and *feeling* for the English one (third stage). In other terms,

the quantitative analysis constituted the basis for a qualitative study, which was then conducted only on the expressions conveying feelings. Because of their size-difference, the nine issues of the French magazine count 318 *sentiment-expressions*, whereas *Dabiq* counts 705 *feeling-expressions*. Therefore, in order to conduct the analysis on same-size corpora and contrast the results, the study was conducted on the 318 French expression, and on the first 318 English ones. Finally, a last quantitative analysis was conducted with the softwares *Iramuteq* and *R* to test the hypotheses and results issued by the qualitative study (fourth stage). The combination and alternation of both quantitative and qualitative approaches allowed to examine Daesh's discourse in relation to the context in which it is produced (Valette and Rastier, 2006).

2.2. Counter-narrative

The analysis on the rhetorical strategies in French and English counter-narratives was conducted on the main governmental and institutional websites. The French corpus was composed of the articles published on *www.stop-djihadisme.gouv.fr* (the platform created after the first terrorist attacks in France in 2015), *www.interieur.gouv.fr* (the website of the Minister of Interior), and *www.cpdsi.fr* (the website of the Centre de Prévention contre les Dérives Sectaires liées à l'Islam). The corpus counts 115,950 words. As far as the English corpus is concerned, it was composed of the articles published on *www.counterjihadreport.com* (a news aggregating website), *www.consilium.europa.eu* (the website of the European Council and of the European Union Council), *www.ec.europa.eu* (the website of the European Commission), and on the Radicalisation Awareness Network (this is a specific section of the website of the European Commission). The corpus counts 116,000 words.

In order to conduct comparable analyses, the same quanti-qualitative approach was adopted. The qualitative analysis of the geopolitical context and of the different campaigns used to face and counter the radicalisation process was essential to the understanding of both French and English counter-narratives (first stage). Then, a quantitative analysis was conducted with the software *Tropes*, which allowed to identify the most frequent themes. The themes *religion* and *droit* ("law") were the most present in the French corpus, whereas the themes *education* and *communication* were the most frequent in the English one (second stage). The third stage corresponded to the qualitative analysis that was conducted on the category *sentiment*, for the French corpus, and *feeling*, for the English one. Since the two corpora had almost the same size, this time the qualitative analysis was conducted on all the propositions identified by *Tropes* as belonging to the categories *sentiment* (292 propositions) and *feeling* (370 propositions). A last quantitative analysis was then conducted with the softwares *Iramuteq* and *R* to test the results issued by the qualitative study (fourth stage). The results of the analysis on jihadist propaganda and counter-narrative were then contrasted to compare the rhetorical strategies used in jihadist propaganda and counter-narrative.

3. The rhetorical strategies used in French and English jihadist propaganda

The quantitative analysis conducted with the software *Tropes*, and the qualitative study conducted on the categories *sentiment* and *feeling*, revealed the components of the jihadist discourse. The propaganda of the Islamic State is based on five key concepts: threat, persuasion, reward, obligation, and prohibition. Each of them was examined from both quantitative (*i.e.*, its identification and distribution in the two magazines, *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam*, using the softwares *Tropes* and *Iramuteq*, and the corpus analysis toolkit *AntoConc*) and qualitative (*i.e.*, analysing each concept in relation to the context in which it was produced)

perspectives. Yet, these five concepts are not independent from one another. Rather, they are strongly linked to one another.

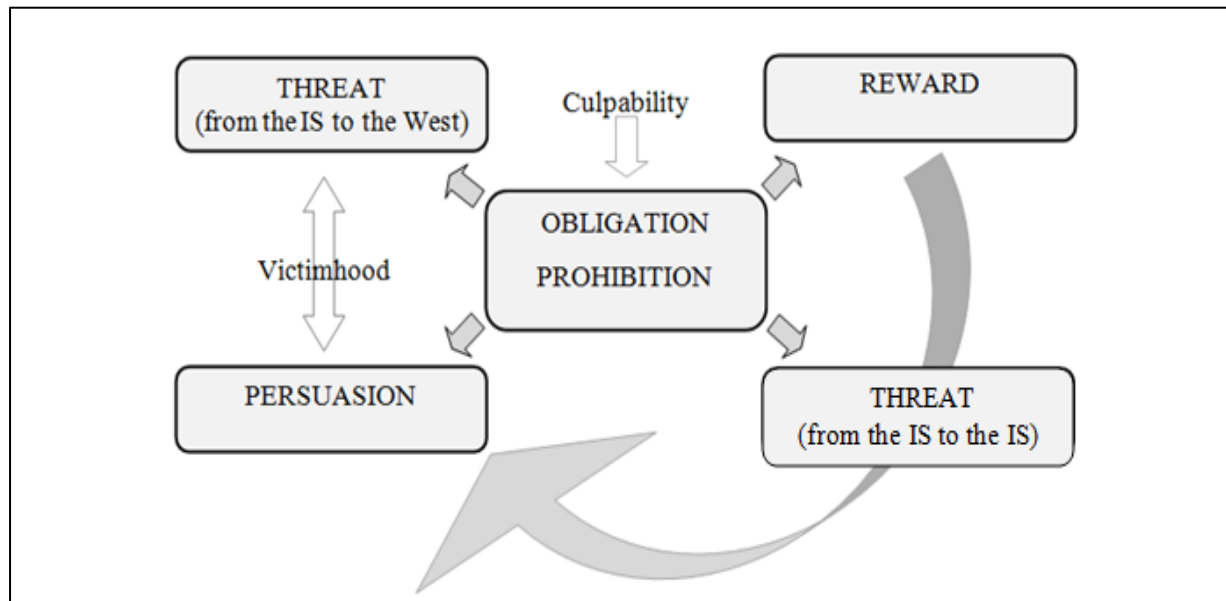


Figure 1: the rhetorical pattern of jihadist propaganda

Figure 1 shows the rhetorical pattern of jihadist discourse. Since *Dabiq* and *Dar al-Islam* aim at manipulating the reader's behaviour, jihadist propaganda is based on obligations and prohibitions. Rewards as well as guilty feelings towards the Muslims living in the Middle-East, aim at leading the reader to respect these indications. Not respecting them would mean facing negative consequences. Threat may then be expressed against the members of the Islamic State themselves and, more in general, against any Muslim. Obligations are also exploited to impose the readership a hostile and violent attitude against Western countries, which is justified by the feeling of victimisation. Fighting against the Muslims' enemy is presented by jihadists as a heroic and valorising action, and therefore, a persuasive one. Furthermore, not only are attractive factors rewards for the reader's obedience. They are sometimes presented as independent from the reader's behaviour. In other terms, persuasion is presented as a positive and valorising act that, contrary to rewards, does not depend on whether the reader respects or not the prescriptions imposed

The sentence "*Jihad* is necessary to obtain Allah's forgiveness", for instance, presents an obligation ("it is necessary") and a reward that will be granted if the obligation is respected ("to obtain Allah's forgiveness"). However, this sentence expresses more than an obligation and a reward. *Jihad*, which is interpreted as persuasive by jihadists, tends to be associated with terrorist attacks and, consequently, it will be perceived as threatening by Western countries. Furthermore, this sentence implies that if the obligation is not respected, the individual will not obtain Allah's forgiveness. In other terms, this sentence indirectly expresses a threat against the readership too.

4. The rhetorical strategies used in French and English counter-narratives

The large number of Daesh's sympathisers and *foreign fighters* shows that the communicative and rhetorical strategies adopted in Daesh's propaganda have an important and persuasive impact on the readership. On the contrary, the counter-narrative produced by the different

governments to face and counter jihadist propaganda, has been criticised not to be as efficient as jihadist propaganda. In the French corpus, 292 propositions conveying *sentiment* (“feeling”) were identified, whereas 370 propositions conveying *feelings* were identified in the English one.

The frequency of the five categories (*i.e.* of the propositions conveying threat, persuasion, reward, obligation, and prohibition) was calculated in the French and English corpora. The reward-category is the only one that was more present in the French corpus than in the English one. Contrary to the Islamic State’s propaganda, the propositions conveying rewards and prohibitions are almost absent in both French and English counter-narratives. On the contrary, what these two discourses have in common is the high frequency of the propositions conveying threat (Example 1).

1. “Terrorist groups will continue to exploit the refugee crisis in their propaganda, seeking to portray Western mistreatment of Muslims, and inciting fear by alleging that their supporters are being smuggled in amongst genuine refugees.” (RAN website)

As Example 1 shows, threat tends to be associated to the *other* (*i.e.*, the Islamic State), which implies that Western countries are presented as victims of the Islamic State. In the English corpus, 355 occurrences of the word *victim(s)* were identified. The corpus analysis toolkit *AntConc* showed that the most frequent collocation of this term is the word *terrorism* (57 co-occurrences). On the contrary, the French corpus, where the word *victime/s* occurs 70 times only, presents only 2 co-occurrences of the term *terrorisme*. Rather, French counter-narrative tends to talk about rescuing and helping victims (*secours/aide aux victimes*). Furthermore, differences were identified between the different websites in a same language.

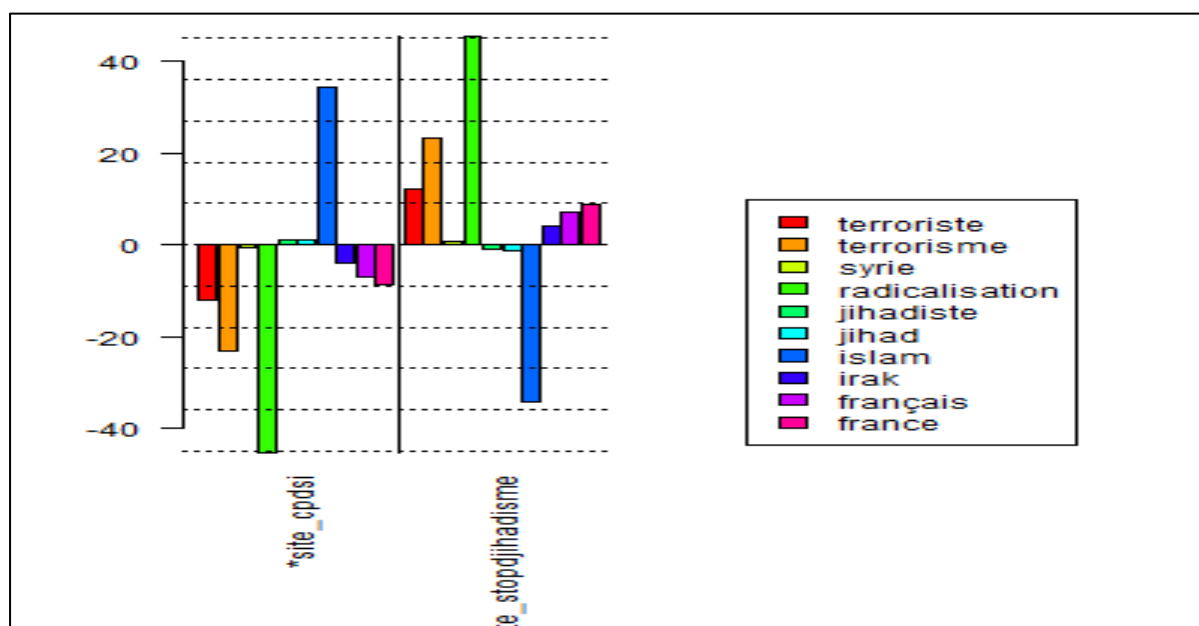


Figure 2: under- and overuse of some key-terms in French counter-narrative

Figure 2 shows the distribution and, more precisely, the under- and overuse of the most representative terms in two French governmental websites: *stopdjidhisme* and CPDSI. The figure revealed that CPDSI website focuses more on the religious dimension. The words *islam*, *jihad* and *jihadiste* (“jihadist”) are overused in this sub-corpus. This implies that *jihad* and *jihadiste* are presented and interpreted as religious terms. On the contrary, the website of the *stopdjidhisme* campaign is characterised by an overuse of the words *terroriste*

(“terrorist”), *terrorisme* (“terrorism”), *Syrie* (“Syria”), *radicalisation* (“radicalisation”), *Irak* (“Iraq”), *français* (“French”), and *France* (“France”). The overuse of these specific terms shows that the campaign and, consequently, its website focus more on the geopolitical dimension, where the radicalisation process is presented in relation to terrorism and not to Islam.

5. Conclusion

This comparative analysis revealed that jihadist discourse and counter-narrative present both similarities and differences. As far as the differences are concerned, the frequency of the propositions conveying threats, persuasion, prohibitions, obligations, and rewards varied between these two discourses: they were more frequent in counter-narrative than in jihadist propaganda. The Islamic State’s propaganda aims at reinforcing the reader’s adhesion to the jihadist ideology, and at inciting him/her to act against its enemies in the name of the jihadist ideology. On the contrary, counter-narrative does not aim at reinforcing an ideology. Rather, it aims at countering the jihadist radicalisation process. This difference was confirmed by the variation of the different category-frequencies in jihadist propaganda and counter-narrative. Despite this crucial difference, similarities between these two discourses were identified. More precisely, both discourses present the respective speakers’ communities as victims of the *other* and, consequently, incite the readership to fight, whether violently or not, against the enemy.

References

- Aly, A. (2010). The Internet as Ideological Battleground. *Edith Cowan University Research Online*.
- Angenot, M. (2008). *Dialogue de sourds. Traité de rhétorique antilogique*. Paris : Mille et une nuits.
- Benslama, F. (2016). *Un furieux désir de sacrifice : le surmusulman*. Paris : Edition du Seuil.
- Garric, N., & Longhi, J. (2012). L’analyse de corpus face à l’hétérogénéité des données : d’une difficulté méthodologique à une nécessité épistémologique. *Langage*, (3) : 3-11.
- Huyghe, F.-B. (2011). *Terrorismes : violence et propagande*. Paris : Gallimard.
- Khosrokhavar, F. (2014). *Radicalisation*. Paris : Editions de la maison des sciences de l’homme.
- Lombardi, M., & Fornio, C. (2006). Terrorismo e comunicazione. Piste di ricerca e primi risultati. *Itstime*. Retrieved from <http://www.itstime.it/w/terrorismo-e-comunicazione-piste-di-ricerca-e-primi-risultati-by-marco-lombardi-e-chiara-fonio/> (last access 11/06/2016).
- Marchand, P. (2014), Analyse avec IRaMuTeQ de dialogues en situation de négociation de crise : le cas Mohammed Mehra. *Communication présentée aux 12es Journées Internationales d’Analyse statistique des Données Textuelles*, Paris, 25.
- McLuhan, M. (1978). The brain and the media: The “Western” hemisphere. *Journal of Communication*, 28(4): 54-60.
- Rastier, F. (2011). *La mesure et le grain : sémantique de corpus*. Champion ; diff. Slatkine.
- Roy, O. (2016). *Le djihad et la mort*. Le Seuil.
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts : an essay in the philosophy of language*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Valette, M., & Rastier, F. (2006). Prévenir le racisme et la xénophobie: propositions de linguistes. *Langues modernes*, 100(2),68.
- Von Behr, I. (2013). *Radicalisation in the digital era: the use of the Internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism*.