A COGNITIVE CDA-APPROACH TO THE ARAB REVOLUTIONS: CONSTRUAL OPERATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL PRESS LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper investigates how the events of the Arab revolutions have been conceptualised linguistically in the media by applying notions of cognitive grammar in a critical study of press language. The analysis is based on a corpus of online news articles published as immediate responses to the 25 January protests in Egypt in 2011 and representing different regional and political perspectives. Focus is laid on grammatical constructions and how they generate alternative event-construal (Langacker, 2000, 2008, 2013). Recurring strategies in representation can be found vis-à-vis the use of transactive constructions, a schematisation of the events as well as different adjustments of scope. Within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, the paper also seeks to identify potential ideological qualities of these conceptualisations with regard to civil unrest.

1. Introduction

For some years now, cognitive linguists such as Langacker (2000, 2008, 2013) and Talmy (2000) have proclaimed that there is a strong relation between not only grammar and meaning, but grammar and cognition. In his Cognitive Grammar (henceforth CG), Langacker proclaims not only that grammar is meaningful, but also that it is central to cognition, thus crucially influencing the way we perceive and understand the world (2013: 3-4). Similarly, Talmy states that any portion of discourse is “to evoke in the listener a particular kind of experiential complex [i.e.] a cognitive representation” (Talmy, 2000: 21-22). More recent developments in cognitive science have also shown how our understanding of language is not only grounded in bodily experience but that we tend to subconsciously simulate whatever is encoded linguistically (Bergen, 2012). It has furthermore been demonstrated, on the basis of experiments, how specific grammatical constructions such as the passive or progressive forms do in fact influence our perception of events. To use Bergen’s words, “[g]rammar appears to modulate what part of an evoked simulation someone is invited to focus on, the grain of detail with which the simulation is performed, or what perspective to perform that simulation from” (Bergen, 2012: 118). It is on the basis of such findings that I believe in the relevance of analysing the use of such seemingly trivial grammatical structures especially in the context of a discourse that bears socio-political significance. Moreover, this makes the inclusion of a cognitive approach in a Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) framework an apposite method for investigating the specific grammar-induced conceptualisations of an event illustrating large-scale public dissent as well as possible implications thereof on the more general consequent discourse in society. Furthermore, previous work by Charteris-Black (2004, 2006), Chilton (2005), Hart (2011; 2013) or Koller (2005) has successfully managed to illustrate how valuable a merging of both cognitive linguistic approaches and CDA can be.

In this study, the 2011 Egyptian protests and their representation in the media pose as the central topic of investigation. For this, a case study has been conducted applying Langacker’s notion of construal in order to answer the question of how the events have been presented with regard to specific types of grammatical structures and techniques.
2. Theoretical Framework: Construal Operations

Langacker views construal as an integral part of the construction of lexical meaning. Construal here relates to the grammatical or structural form of any content that is being presented. Therefore, both content and grammatical constructions are believed to be equally essential and important or, in other words, how something is portrayed linguistically is about as vital as the content of the expression itself (Langacker, 2011: 23; 2013: 43). This emphasis on form and structure puts the role of grammar in our understanding of lexical and semantic meaning in a central position. From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, grammar is itself always meaningful (see also Bergen, 2012: 118-119) and imposes further interpretation frames on the already existing lexical content. This leads to the fact that different grammatical constructions can not only be used to encode and present one situation in diverse ways (a characteristic also attributed to grammar by Halliday (2004)); grammar can furthermore affect how we perceive and conceive a given event. Most notably, Langacker states that “[c]onceptual content cannot be apprehended in a wholly neutral fashion – it is always viewed at some level of specificity, from a certain perspective, with particular elements made prominent, etc.” (Langacker, 2011: 23; emphasis added). Therefore, different construal operations influence or even determine our conceptualisation of situations and events, making them a crucial criterion to consider in a critical approach to socio-politically relevant discourse. Langacker distinguishes four general types of construal: specificity, focusing, prominence and perspective. Depending on the grammatical structure, different elements of construal may be realised. The passive, for instance, can be taken as a good illustration of a number of construal techniques. Despite their depicting the same scene, active and passive constructions tend to put different aspects of a scene into focus:

(1) […] plainclothes officers beat several demonstrators (Times, 25 Jan.)

(2) […] a young Egyptian […] was beaten to death by two policemen (Fox, 25 Jan.)

(3) Two protesters were killed in Suez (Guardian, 26 Jan.)

While in the first example, plainclothes officers is the element in focus, in construction (2), focus is shifted to a young Egyptian. This is in-line with Langacker’s notion of trajector/landmark alignment. Trajector (tr) and landmark (lm) in CG refer to two participants in a profiled relationship that are depicted at different levels of prominence. The trajector is usually the participant in primary, the landmark the one in secondary focus. (Langacker, 2008: 113). In addition, Bergen (2012) and Bergen, Chang and Narayan (2004) claim that choosing the passive or active voice has crucial effects on whose perspective the reader/listener is more likely to adopt. Thus, for expression (1) this would result in readers being more inclined to take the officers’ perspective, while in (2) they would most likely tend to view the scene from the perspective of the victim, i.e. the young Egyptian. Lastly, choosing an agentless passive construction, for instance, may influence how fine-grained or specific an action is being depicted. Leaving out the agent – as in (3) – clearly lacks relevant evidence as to who is responsible for the said action and thus does not provide the reader with all necessary information. According to Chilton, “a missing by-phrase in English passive constructions might be seen as an ideological means for concealing or ‘mystifying’ reference to an agent” (Chilton, 2008 as qtd. in Wodak & Meyer, 2013: 7). Similarly, Danler points out that a specific structural or discursive strategy reflects a choice on behalf of the writer or speaker, thus never allowing language to be neutral or objective (Danler, 2005: 46). Whether made consciously or subconsciously, this choice has its consequences. Any grammatical construction may have its effects on how an event or a scene is being construed and eventually perceived by the reader and listener. Due to limitations of space only a selection of
the most noteworthy constructions and their construal as well as potential ideological qualities will be discussed in this paper, i.e. the use of transactive constructions – or so-called action chains – and their profiling tendencies, schematisation via the use of abstract nouns in subject position as well as adjustments of the scope of attention due to the use of present participle forms. All of these instances will be presented in more detail in chapter four below.

3. Data

The present study was conducted qualitatively on the basis of a 14,848-word sample corpus consisting of a total of 12 international news reports published online on 25th and 26th January 2011 as immediate responses to the Egyptian protests. In early 2011, Egypt bore witness to one of the largest revolutionary movements in the country’s history. What had begun in Tunisia in late 2010 as the so-called “Jasmine Revolution” soon reached Egypt and subsequently other countries in the region, a phenomenon which was later termed “Arab Spring” in international media and politics. On that specific day in January – retrospectively known as the “January 25 Revolution” –, thousands of Egyptians took to the streets to protest against the corrupt regime of former president Hosni Mubarak. The events caused an almost unprecedented amount of attention on a large variety of global media platforms (cf. Mason, 2013).

In order to enable a balanced data sample, the articles were collected from a variety of media organisations from the USA, the UK and the Middle East and North Africa (henceforth MENA) representing diverging regional and political affiliations. The sources are as follows: the British Guardian and Telegraph, the American New York Times and Fox News as well as the Qatari news channel Al Jazeera and the Egyptian Al Ahram. From each news site, two articles were chosen, one from each day.

4. Analysis: Construing the Egyptian Revolution

4.1. Action Chains and Ascription of Agency

Action chains or transactive constructions are typically finite clauses “describing an action performed by an agent on some affected thing” (Goatly, 2007: 284). This definition is vital in that it essentially distinguishes transactive structures from transitive ones, which are simply not always actional (Hodge & Kress, 1979: 8). The prototypical transactive construction or action chain, as Langacker calls it, represents a flow or transmission of energy from one participant – the agent or instrument – of an event along an action chain to another participant – the patient (Langacker, 2000: 30). Similarly, CDA also distinguishes between transactive and non-transactive actions, the first “involving two participants, so that the action is represented as actually having an effect on people or things” and the latter “not affect[ing] anyone or anything other than the actor him- or herself” (Wodak & Meyer, 2013: 155).

1 The Guardian and The New York Times are considered liberal papers while The Telegraph and Fox News are known as taking a more conservative stance. The concept of political affiliation is difficult to apply identically to Al Jazeera and Al Ahram. Nevertheless, contrasting both Jazeera and Ahram, it can be said that, as one of the leading international news channels, the former may still to a certain degree be considered more liberal-oriented, whereas the latter – especially in the context of the Egyptian revolutions – could be expected to represent a more conservative view on the events.
Transactive constructions can be either asymmetrical or reciprocal leading to different participants of an action being focused or profiled (cf. Hart, 2013). The differences are illustrated in figures 1 and 2 below. While in figures 1a. and 1b., the action is clearly unidirectional, i.e. performed by an agent on a patient as in examples (1) and (2), figure 2 illustrates instances in which both participants are seemingly equally involved and responsible for said actions.

Figure 1: Trajector/landmark alignment in asymmetrical constructions (adapted from Langacker, 2008: 115)

However, via closer inspection, it becomes obvious that even within a reciprocal construction, asymmetrical profiling may take place. Example (4) shall further illustrate this. Due to the topicalisation of the protesters (instead of the police), these participants are put more strongly into focus and thus profiled. Even if both parties seem equally involved in the action, the author has a choice as to which participant s/he presents first. It is likely that this topicalisation of protesters shall indicate more involvement by the protesters.

(4) *Egypt protesters clash with police* (*Jazeera*, 25 Jan.)

In the context of Langacker’s CG, the asymmetrical profiling in example (4) can also be described in terms of trajector/landmark alignment. One participant is put into focus (tr) and is viewed relative to another (lm). In this sense it is indeed crucial, which participant is chosen as trajector since it is the action of this particular participant that is being accentuated (Langacker, 2008: 115). The trajector – the protesters in (4) – inevitably becomes the participant from which the force is exerted. Consequently, it does make a difference if a text reads *Egypt protesters clash with police* or *police clash with Egypt protesters*. This difference is illustrated schematically in figures 2a. and 2b. Finally, a construction may also be truly reciprocal as can be seen in illustration 2c. An example of such an alignment, i.e. type of profiling is presented in (5).

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2 The abbreviations $P_1$ and $P_2$ simply stand for Participant 1 and Participant 2. There are no specific roles assigned to participants at this point, since this is a general schematic illustration and, depending on the example, those roles may shift from protesters to police and vice versa.
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(5) […] as both sides pelted each other with rocks (Fox, 26 Jan.)

In such a case, the action in which both parties are involved is profiled symmetrically. According to Langacker, “trajector status is not conferred on either one individually, but rather on the group comprising them. This group […] is the only focal participant in the profiled relationship” (2008: 115).

All of this is relevant in the current context specifically because the study is interested in identifying different types of profiling and their respective frequencies in the corpus. In other words, which participant is profiled as the agent of an action-chain event and how often this occurs relative to another participant are in focus.

To conduct this analysis, focus has been laid specifically on identifying all transactive constructions depicting actions performed by one protest participant on another. Altogether, transactive constructions can be encountered in all news sources in the corpus (see table 1 for exact numbers). However, the Egyptian Al Ahram tends to stand out with a relatively small number of action-chain schemas compared to the others. This point will be addressed in more detail in the context of schematisation in section 3.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ahram</th>
<th>Jazeera</th>
<th>Guardian</th>
<th>Telegraph</th>
<th>New York Times</th>
<th>Fox News</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Numbers of action chains

Investigating the action-chain schemas in more detail, what stands out is the predominant use of asymmetrical transactive constructions profiling the police as agents (79%). Some of these ascriptions are, in fact, quite explicit and do not embellish actions on behalf of police officers in the slightest as can be seen in example (6).

(6) […] officers set upon fleeing protesters, beating them with bamboo staves. (Times, 26 Jan.)

(7) Protesters […] were pelting police officers with stones (Jazeera, 26 Jan.)

In comparison, asymmetrical structures profiling protesters (see (7) for an example) are relatively rare (12%). Looking at the numbers of reciprocal constructions – which make up 10% of all action chains – more closely, though, protesters turn out to be profiled more often than the police. Here, protesters can be identified as agents in 7 out of 9 cases, whereas the police are profiled only once (see examples (8) and (9) as well as (4)).

(8) There have been a few clashes between protesters and riot police (Ahram, 25 Jan.)

(9) […] violent early morning confrontation between security forces and protesters (Jazeera, 26 Jan.)

Furthermore, as has already been illustrated above by example (5), a truly balanced reciprocal construction symmetrically profiling both entities can also only be found occurring once. Altogether, however, the profiling of the police as agents of forceful and violent acts clearly prevails. (See figure 3 for a more detailed overview of the distribution of all different action chain types).

3 For now, non-transactive actions as well as cases of actions performed against objects or instances of symbolic violence have been disregarded.
In contrast to the use of transactive constructions the depiction of actions as motion events (see (10) and (11)) is relatively rare. Hart\(^4\) has previously identified the construing of an action as a motion rather than a transactive event as having a potential ideological character since “there is no transmission of energy between entities but rather a motion path of one entity (the ‘trajector’) is delineated relative to another entity (the ‘landmark’).” (2013: 410). He states further that “[t]he construal invoked of the event as a motion event rather than a transactive event is the kind of conceptual process involved in realising framing strategies of euphemisation” (ibid).

(10) A large security forces moved in [on a sit-in] around 1 a.m. \((\text{Fox, 25 Jan.})\)

(11) […] the government moved to isolate them [protesters] \((\text{Guardian, 26 Jan.})\)

However, the use of such motion patterns (x9) is clearly underrepresented in this corpus when compared to transactive constructions (x94). In the current context then, this construal may possess a reversed ideological quality in that it specifically does not attempt to alleviate any of the directness of performed actions and even exerted violence but lays bare the rawness of the events. Thus, the events tend to be delegitimised rather than euphemised.

\(^4\) \text{Fox News (25 Jan.) once presents an instrument (“police vehicles”) as agent. Since the action is nevertheless clearly attributable to the police, the construction is included here.}

\(^5\) Hart (2013) conducted a study of British news reports on student fee protests in the UK. His results regarding the use of motion events relative to action chains paint a similar picture, showing that, for instance, The Guardian construes actions with police involved as agents as motion events in only 3 out of 14 cases compared to transactive constructions.
Finally, it may be noted that agentless passive constructions (23%) are relatively rare and that a clear assigning of agency prevails in all sources (77%).

4.2. Schematisation

The current corpus also uncovers that the events tend to be schematised to a certain extent. By means of schematisation an event or process is likely to be abstracted away from its usual complexity. An abstract noun is found in subject position of an active clause. The construction thus disregards any real processes underlying an event. Viewed against the backdrop of Halliday’s functional grammar, this might also be seen as an instance of an ideational metaphor by which a process is eventually presented as if it were an entity (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 636f.).

In the context of political protest, Hart describes such schematisation as an attempt “to reduce protests to a spectacle” and thus having a de-legitimising effect (Hart, 2013: 416). Representative examples can be viewed in (12) and (13).

(12) […] the protest turned violent (Telegraph, 25 Jan.)

(13) […] the occasional protest escalated (Ahram, 26 Jan.)

Individual actions involved in the process of demonstrating are “represented as an event, as something that ‘just happens’ without anybody doing it”, a phenomenon also referred to as “eventuation” by Wodak and Meyer (2013: 157). It may be noted that the Egyptian source Al Ahram stands out regarding its use of such schematising and eventuating constructions. At the same time, as has already been mentioned above, Ahram presents a noticeably smaller number of transactive constructions assigning specific actions to participants. The level of specificity when it comes to depicting the events is thus considerably lower and less fine-grained than in the other articles. This may or may not be related to the fact that Ahram is a state-owned media organisation. However, quotes such as the one in (14) may indicate a certain tendency towards embellishing the events and legitimising the government.

(14) The state of Egypt has for quite a while now stopped using repression as a way to deal with protests and political activities, which opened the door for more participation and freedom of expression. (Ahram, 26 Jan.)

4.3. Scope

Another means of focusing is the adjusting of scope of attention or viewing frame in which an event is observed. Aspects or elements of an event are selected for specific inspection. Langacker states that this selection has a cognitive basis, i.e. we literally have a restricted viewing frame and “only a portion of our spatial surroundings falls within the scope of vision” (2013: 62). The same is true for our understanding of discourse and linguistic expressions. We can choose how much we want to present and which aspects we want to put focus on. Scope can therefore also be arranged in terms of foreground and background. If only a limited extent of coverage is provided by the author, it is this specific piece of information only which is put at the centre of attention. This limited viewing attention would then be referred to as immediate scope (as opposed to maximal scope). In terms of linguistic expressions, scope may be narrowed or broadened. The difference between the two concepts can be observed in examples (15) and (16).
The demonstrators were given a chance to express their demands and raise their banners for long hours, continuing until dusk when some hooligans became violent and were rightly stopped in their tracks [...] (Ahram, 26 Jan.)

But as crowds filled Tahrir Square [...] security personnel changed tactics and the protest turned violent. (Fox, 25 Jan.)

In (15) we can see an example of a noticeably narrow scope. Protesters – here referred to as hooligans – are being described as turning violent. There is no further explanation as to what caused this to happen. In comparison, example (16) – which also mentions the protest turning violent – does provide additional information about relevant actions that occurred prior to this, i.e. security officers changing tactics, and may explain why the situation changed. It is, of course, up to the author to include possible precursors in such a change of events or, similarly, to mention or leave out possible effects of an action. Viewed from a pragmatic perspective, it may also be noted that the narrow scope observed in (15) goes hand in hand with the notions of existential presupposition and implicit meaning (Verschueren, 1999: 27, 156, 246-247). The referenced hooligans are given as presupposed. The phrasing also suggests that these hooligans are part of the protesting group. Without any further elaboration regarding this term, the reader is thus lead to conceptualise demonstrators in general as hooligans.

Furthermore, including previous events or possible effects and thereby extending the scope can potentially be seen as a means of legitimising actions. At the same time, a narrow scope can lead to an action being perceived as seemingly unjustified and thus even more extreme. Giving no reason for protesters to turn violent makes them appear reckless and unnecessarily aggressive. Another example – found in the same article by Fox News – illustrates how the protests in Egypt are presented more as an inevitable reaction to what had previously happened in Tunisia: Tunisia’s popular uprising [...] appears to have pushed young Egyptians into the streets, many for the first time. Even more so, the uprising in Tunisia is used as an active agent of the action verb push, assigning even more responsibility to this event. Here, this can truly be read as an attempt to legitimise people’s behaviour in Egypt by broadening the scope. This impression is further emphasised by the adding of many for the first time. It reads as if these people had never before protested and maybe, if it had not been for the events in Tunisia, would otherwise have never taken to the streets. May the scope be narrow or broad, how specifically an event is depicted can certainly influence readers’ perception of a situation in any possible direction and thus assumes – especially in the media – an ideological quality.

Another grammatical feature that stands out is the frequent use of the present participle. In the first article published by Fox News on 25th January, for instance, in only four short paragraphs with a total of 160 words, there are altogether 8 instances of actions being described using the present participle as can be seen in (17) and (18).

(17) a. waves of protesters filled Cairo's central Tahrir…
   [...] hurling rocks
   [...] climbing atop armored police trucks

   b. thousands of demonstrators stood their ground…
   [...] blocking the streets
   [...] setting the stage for even more dramatic confrontations

(18) a. A large security force moved in…
A similar example is (19), taken from the same article:

(19) Protesters emerged *stumbling* amid clouds of acrid tear gas, *coughing* and *covering* their faces with scarves. Some had blood *streaming* down their faces. One man fainted. Police dragged some away and clubbed a journalist, *smashing* her glasses and *seizing* her camera. (*Fox*, 25 Jan.; emphasis added)

With regard to the use of present participle forms, Langacker states that “in CG terms, –ing imposes a limited immediate scope (IS) in the temporal domain […]” (Langacker, 2008: 120; emphasis in original). Only a small proportion of the described scene – i.e. that which is explicitly encoded in the participle form – is thus put into focus and profiled, while any other content fades into the background. In other words, the present participle or the progressive tends to only highlight specific aspects or facets of an event (Bergen, 2012: 115), as can be observed in figure 4.

![Figure 4: Immediate scope of the present participle](image)

The use of the present participle also invokes a special kind of viewing arrangement, namely that of summary instead of sequential scanning (see figure 5). Reading a paragraph or passage with as many instances of participles as illustrated in (17), (18) and (19), for instance, evokes summary scanning of the event(s). Via simultaneous activation, summary scanning imposes on the reader the impression as if all individual states of the process were occurring at once, thus creating one single holistic entity or, to use Langacker’s words, “a single gestalt” (2008: 111).

![Figure 5: Different types of mental scanning](image)
Especially in relation with action verbs, some of which describe forms of extreme violence, this construal can have powerful effects on the reader. If we then also consider studies conducted by cognitive scientists such as Bergen (2012) which indicate that we simulate a lot of what we hear or read mentally with our sensor-motor system, the invoked perception of so many unpleasant actions happening at the same time may easily overwhelm and discomfort the reader when processing the information. In a CDA context, this technique, again, appears to put special prominence not only on these specific proportions of an overall event, but also on the trajector, i.e. the agent who is responsible for said actions.

5. Conclusion and Outlook

Altogether, what can be observed based on the present corpus is a type of press coverage that, with only very few exceptions, creates a distinct and explicit representation of the events, while concealing neither details nor responsibility. In the majority of cases depicting interactions between protesters and the police, there is a frequent and clear ascription of agency, presenting a high number of action chains illustrating asymmetrical profiling on behalf of the police. Moreover, differences between sources are almost non-existent, regardless of region or political affiliation. With their explicit depiction of violence, especially on the part of the police, they all tend to delegitimise the said actions. Only Al Ahram stands out in this context, showing a more abstract and schematic portrayal and in effect seemingly downplaying the events. Lastly, a relatively high use of present participle or progressive forms can be observed with regard to different adjustments of scope and viewing arrangement, essentially causing the focusing on selected facets only.

Finally, it is important to note that this paper does not aim at providing a full analysis of press language on the events in Egypt, but instead serves to offer initial insights into selected cognitive aspects in discourse surrounding it. Further research is intended to extend this qualitative method to a more quantitative approach and test hypotheses gained from this sample study against a larger tailor-made corpus comprising 10.5 million words of news coverage on the Arab revolutions by using corpus processing tools. The goal is to enable a methodology as unbiased and automatised as possible while still performing a critical analysis of language, i.e. a study in which “the possibility of striking a balance where the corpus data itself is used in the framework of total accountability, but the detailed analysis is reserved for a subset of the data, once those hypotheses that are testable in practical terms on the whole corpus have been tested (KhosraviNik, 2009).” (McEnery & Hardie, 2012: 18).

References

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