Grammars of Violence: Intifada, Modernity, and Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the discursive construction of the Intifada in the *Globe and Mail* using the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and discusses the ramifications of this construction in light of both the struggle for Palestinian statehood and post 9/11 discourses of violence and the middle east. By analyzing a corpus of 100 newspaper articles from between 1988 and 2003 and focusing on the uses of metaphor, relationships of synonymy unique to the corpus, naming practices and the lexical choices used in the descriptions of events, the analysis shows that the Intifada is represented primarily in terms of violent encounters between disorganized terroristic forces (Palestinians), and an orderly military machine (Israel). The implications of this surprisingly subtle representation are explored vis-a-vis the legitimating of claims for a Palestinian State, and the racializing of political violence (if there is any other kind) in the context of reaction to 9/11 and the ‘War on Terror’.

By all accounts, the second Intifada broke out in September of 2000 following a highly publicized and controversial visit by Ariel Sharon to the Haram As-Sharif/Temple Mount site in Jerusalem. However, few aspects of the Intifada are as uncontested and straightforward as this. One dimension of the complexity of the Intifada is the way in which it is discursively enmeshed with the reproduction of (Western) hegemonic notions of modernity, sovereignty and Orientalism. In this paper I explore one site of the discursive constitution of the Intifada, and its connection to these hegemonic notions in two ways.

First, using the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), I look carefully at the construction of the Intifada in the *Globe and Mail* from 1988 to 2003. For the purposes of this paper I will, rather broadly, define CDA as an analysis of the interstices of the semiotic and the social which takes a linguistically grounded approach and which focuses its gaze on transparent—that is invisible—relations of power and authority, aiming to denaturalize them through deconstructing the discourses which, in part, constitute them (for a more
detailed discussion of Critical Discourse Analysis, see Fairclough 2001; van Dijk 1997; Wodak and Chilton 2005).

Second, I highlight the similarities between this discourse and the post 9/11 terrorist talk arguing that both discourses are underwritten by the same socio-political historical grammar.

By using the term socio-political historical grammar, I refer to the underlying and unarticulated logic, framework and discursive rules, which allow this construction to make sense. I want to highlight that this grammar is not simply a fact in the world, but one that is constantly and consistently emergent and imminent in the socio-historical political context. In investigating this grammar, I argue, we begin to see the links between the discourse of the Intifada in the Globe and Mail, and post 9/11 discourse on terrorism, which carry disturbing implications. It’s also important to keep in mind that rather than asking why a particular speaker or writer produced a particular phrase, I want to ask out of what conditions did this discourse arise, what does it do and how does it do it?

My analysis of the Globe and Mail has two motivations. The first is my sense from reading the Globe and Mail after the beginning of the second Intifada that there was something important going on in the reporting on the Intifada. This was flagged for me by the fact that the term ‘intifada’ was virtually always printed in italics. This, in part, marked it as a foreign word. But I wondered if that marking carried other meanings. For example Knesset (the Hebrew word for the Israeli parliament) was never in italics, what were the implications of this, how did it represent authority? Given that there is not, nor has there ever been, any entry in the Globe and Mail style guide on the word ‘intifada’, what are the broader assumptions, or discourse formations, that allow this practice to appear normal, and to make sense?

The second motivation is that, though newspaper subscriptions are generally on the decline (Editor and Publisher International Yearbook 2006), newspapers seem to represent a legitimacy, and carry an authority, that much television and other media do not. I chose the Globe and Mail because, perhaps more so than most other major papers in Canada, it represents itself as centrist and neutral. Part of my agenda, and part of the agenda of CDA generally, is to highlight the inevitable partiality and constructedness of even those sources of discourse which claim this kind of neutrality.

Before presenting the linguistic data from my analysis of the Globe and Mail, I will briefly discuss some of the merits and deficiencies of CDA, as well as my decision to use this particular method of linguistic analysis. CDA has been criticized on a number of solid grounds (for a good synopsis of these see the Billig and Schegloff debate in Discourse and Society 10(4)). Perhaps most frequent among these are that it has no coherent, orthodox methodology, that because of its focus on the unsaid, it leaves too much to the fancy of the analyst, and that, due to a lack of ethnographic detail, it ignores important elements of the production and consumption of the discourses it examines. I would say that all of these criticisms are true to differing degrees for the work of various analysts. However, I also feel that when one takes discourse as an object of study, one cannot simply gloss over it’s
linguistic materiality and CDA, for all its shortcomings, offers a way to struggle with this materiality. And though there is no orthodox methodology, CDA is generally characterized by attention to linguistic details such as the grammatical construction of agency, special relationships of synonymy, and naming practices, that form a particular pattern in a particular discourse. This kind of analysis is a very important part of the work that I present here. And though it is true that CDA often leaves out important pieces of the picture of discourse production, this does not take away from its value as a linguistic tool. In the future, I hope to be able to augment the kind of linguistic analysis I present here with ethnographic detail to colour both the production and reception of discourse.

**Grammar of Violence**

In collecting data for my analysis I decided to limit myself to articles which contained the word ‘intifada’. My intention in doing this was to be able to get a sense of the discourse of the Intifada in particular, rather than events in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories more generally. Using a combination of microfilm and the Infotrac online database, I searched the Globe and Mail archives for all instances of the word from the beginning of the first Intifada in 1988 to 2003. This search produced 100 articles.

After reading all 100 articles and sorting out all editorials and opinion pieces as well as articles which used the word ‘intifada’ but were not about the Intifada I recorded the dates, bylines, and headlines of the remaining 82 articles and the various ways the Intifada was referred to in them. I then chose 32 articles for a detailed analysis. The criteria by which I selected these 32 articles are admittedly subjective. I chose a number or articles because they showed features typical of the larger pool such as certain lexical choices and collocation. However, I also chose some articles because they would be particularly useful in providing examples of one or another feature of the discourse. These articles often contained a higher than normal number of a certain feature, thus providing a rich source of examples of that given feature. I did try to maintain a steady ratio of articles from one year to another. I went through these 32 articles and, using colour coding and other notations, marked for nominalizations, passive and agentless passive constructions, naming of participants, explicit references to violence and the sentences which described individual acts of violence for the purposes of examining transitivity.

Of the many consistent features that I found there are three aspects that are particularly relevant to this discussion. They are: nominalization, special relationships of synonymy, and representation of participants.

One of the key linguistic aspects of the discourse is the treatment of the term ‘intifada’ itself. Aside from its marked foreignness, that is its italicization, it functions as a nominalization. A nominalization is a noun which stands in for, and therefore mystifies, a collection of actions or events. In this specific case, the Intifada is thus represented as an
object which can be meaningfully separated from it’s socio-historical context and from the complex conditions out of which it arose. Though it may seem obvious that the Intifada should be treated as a single and discrete object, this nominalization is a crucial feature of the discourse which enables the fundamental homogenization of representation of the Intifada, of its participants, and most critically, its meaning. This nominalization allows the Intifada to be very easily linked into relationships of synonymy with other terms. Looking to these relationships brings to the surface what are considered to be the most relevant aspects of the Intifada in this discourse.

The following article excerpts illustrate these relationships of synonymy. The terms underlined are in a position of grammatical reference to the word ‘intifada’ which is used elsewhere in the text:

Russia takes action as Barak’s deadline for end of Palestinian violence approaches

Israel is spending the holiest day of the Jewish calendar shrouded in despair over the prospects for peace as Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s deadline tonight for an end to hostilities by the Palestinians draws near

Diplomatic efforts to break the cycle of violence and restart peace negotiations accelerated yesterday

“They have to disengage. They have to.” U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said, arguing it serves little purpose to assess blame for the recent violence that has claimed 84 lives, most of them Palestinian

But international concern grew that the explosion of violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip could widen into a broader conflict with the Arab world, especially in the wake of tough words between the Israeli government and Syria

The sudden escalation of tensions in the region has again shown how tenuous the march towards peace can be.

Given the religious sensitivity of the compound, it is not surprising that it was a provocative visit there by the Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon that set off this latest round of fighting.

Either way, the violence carries with it extraordinary risks

The violence has served to embolden the forces against peace on both sides.
Last week, in the midst of the violence, Mr. Arafat quietly released a handful of Hamas militants.

Today’s supporters of the peace processes hope the violence of the last 11 days similarly will convince Arabs and Israelis that they must step back from the brink.

We can see from these examples that violence is clearly the most salient feature of the Intifada, and that all violence in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, including the violence perpetrated by the Israeli military, are connected to, and named as (even if indirectly), the Intifada. Thus the Intifada is represented as the source of violence, and there develops throughout the discourse a stable relationship of synonymy between violence and the Intifada. In fact, accounts of violence are so common that, in terms of content and topic, reportage of the Intifada is, in most cases, simply and exclusively the reportage of violent confrontations and events involving Israelis and Palestinians.

Another important point of analysis was naming and the construction of categories of participants. In reporting on the Intifada there are three main categories of participant: Israelis, Palestinians, and third party governments or political bodies. I will focus on the first two. The following is a selection of sentences which includes both reference to Israelis and Palestinians.

The Israeli government has long insisted that it does not exact ‘collective punishment’ from Palestinians for the crimes of the terrorists. April 19, 2003

An elite unit of Israeli commandos surrounded the Ramallah home of a Palestinian official yesterday, but Zia Abu Ain was not their quarry. April 16, 2002

Israel is preparing for a very public showdown with one of its most wanted men and one of the most popular Palestinian politicians: Marwan Barghouti. July 12, 2002

A Palestinian involved in the bus ambush was killed in a gun battle with pursuing Israeli troops, Israeli military sources said. July 17, 2002

After a pair of Palestinian suicide bombers killed seven people last week, Israeli forces moved into the West Bank city of Ramallah and destroyed most of Yassir Arafat’s compound leaving him stranded in the ruins of the only building left. September 25, 2002

Similarly, the sight of Israeli soldiers again shooting en masse at Palestinian youths, to devastating effect, has enraged the Arab world and has led to massive anti-Israeli rallies in cities around the Mideast. October 9, 2000
The chart below shows the terms of reference used in the excerpts above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ISRAELI</th>
<th>PALESTINIAN</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Israeli government</td>
<td>Palestinians, terrorists</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>An elite unit of commandos</td>
<td>A Palestinian official,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Zia Abu Ain</td>
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<td>Israel</td>
<td>One of its most wanted men, one</td>
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<td>of the most popular Palestinian</td>
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<td>politicians: Marwan Barghouti</td>
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<td>Israeli troops, Israel</td>
<td>A Palestinian</td>
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<td>Israeli forces</td>
<td>A pair of suicide bombers,</td>
<td>People</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yasser Arafat</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Israeli soldiers</td>
<td>Palestinian youths</td>
<td>The Arab world</td>
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Looking at these terms of reference we see that there are differences in the kind of information deemed relevant in reference to Israel and in reference to Palestinians. Where Israelis are linked with organized government or military, Palestinians are rarely connected to these types of institutions. Israeli participants are more often referred to collectively, where Palestinian participants are more often referred to individually or severally. And Palestinians are more overtly connected to acts of violence than are Israelis.

Yassir Arafat, who holds the official position of President of the Palestinian Authority and Chairman of the PLO is nearly always referred to as “Palestinian leader” or simply Yassir Arafat but not with reference to either of his official titles. Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak are all referred to as either Prime Minister or Israeli Prime Minister during their respective tenures.

There are, however, some institutions and organizations which are part of the Palestinian category. Those mentioned most often are Hamas and Fatah (usually referred to as “Yasser Arafat’s Fatah faction”). These groups are mentioned much more often than the Palestinian Authority (PA) or the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) which are the official authorities over Palestinian territories according to Oslo.

This incongruence in representation of organizational structures, or political leadership and organization, constructs the Intifada not as an uprising of one institutional authority against another but of a hodgepodge of “militants”, “bombers” and “terrorists” fighting against a “government” and an “army”. This may have the effect of delegitimizing the Palestinian Authority and making the plausibility of an independent Palestine seem scant. It may also have the effect of portraying Israel as a state bully, who has Palestinians out-gunned and out-organized. Whatever the effect, Palestinian organization, when present at all, is rarely represented as political, but rather as militant in nature and Israeli organization is represented as politically legitimate, if overly aggressive. Rather than argue that this is or is not a biased representation I want to look at how this discourse fits when read along side other representations of an Eastern Other. It is in this reading that we see a socio-historical political grammar emerge.
Grammar of Modernity

One thing I did not find in my analysis of the discourse in the Globe and Mail--something that I was fully expecting to see--was a shift in the discourse after September 11th. But rather seeing this as an indication of some discretion or rupture between the discourse of the Intifada, and post September 11th terrorist talk, I argue this continuity reveals that it is a coherent grammar, and semiotic system, though which the Intifada and the terrorist talk are articulated.

That is to say, it is within the same model of time and modernity, of civilization and atavism, of the archetypical Oriental Other (Said 1979), that Palestinians are constructed as fragmented, violent, and stateless in the Intifada and, in the post 9/11 discourse, Muslims are constructed as the same, but if not stateless, then certainly governing in the wrong ways.

Mahmood Mamdani (2002) notes that popular discussions of Islam, particularly those that circulate in Western mass media, take the form of ‘culture talk’ where the complexities of the historical and the political are effaced by a reified, static and territorialized notion of culture, a notion that Verena Stolcke argues is intimately connected to new forms of racism (Mamdani 2002; Mamdani 2005; Stolcke 1995) Mamdani notes when I read of Islam in the papers these days, I often feel I am reading of a museumized peoples, of peoples who are said not to make culture, except at the beginning of creation, as some extraordinary, prophetic act. After that is seems that they--we Muslims--just conform to culture. […] If the premodern peoples are said to lack a creative capacity, they are conversely said to have an abundant capacity for destruction. [Mamdani 2002:767]

Reading this statement alongside the analysis of the discourse of the Intifada the connections become clear. It is as if the Palestinians are an example of this essentially violent ‘culture’ demanding submission and conformation. Although Islam is not usually a salient aspect of the representation of Palestinians, I argue that it is implicitly present. This is because of both the image of Palestinians as connected to the ‘Arab world’ and because of the subtext of religious conflict (in this case Jewish-Muslim) that pervades discussions of Israel.

Talal Asad (2003) notes that, in linking terrorist violence and Islam, Islam is represented as a kind of dictatorial faith, one which demands, and invariably receives, absolute and singular submission from all adherents (2003:10). This idea of Islam is set in opposition to an idea of Judaism and Christianity wherein adherents are allowed free and individual experiences of their faith (Asad 2003: 11). Thus Muslims are cast as violent simply as a function of their faith. Violence, and particularly the religious violence associated with Islam, are seen as antithetical to a modern secular democracy, even though violence is often (perhaps always) very much a part of these kinds of state. When it comes to the
intersection of violence, religion and modern secular states Asad notes that “a secular state does not guarantee toleration; it puts into play different structures of ambition and fear. The law never seeks to eliminate violence since its object is always to regulate violence” (Asad 2003:8 original emphasis).

There is a contradiction between the characterizations of Islam and Muslims that Mamdani and Asad discuss and one of the features of the discourse in the Globe and Mail which begs comment. In the Globe and Mail, Palestinians are often represented severally or singularly, whereas Israelis are almost always represented collectively. This might not be what one expects if Palestinians are represented in a similar way to Muslims. One might expect that they should be represented as an undifferentiated mass. However, in the absence of overt discussions of radical religiosity and fundamentalism, this is a key part of the discourse that disqualifies Palestinians from statehood. They are represented as inherently both violent and disorganized. So we have an apparent contradiction held together in a single representation; they are all the same, but still incapable of forming a collective body. They are dysfunctional individuals, and dysfunctional citizens. This representation fits well within the psychological explanations for terrorism and suicide bombing in particular, that identify the critical problem within the body or mind of the individual, or each individual of a group, rather than in the historical or political context of an event (Hage 2003: 69).

The issue of statehood is also of critical importance because it brings up the very important notion of territoriality. While Palestinians are most certainly represented as stateless, they are also most definitely located squarely in the Middle East. And those states which are the worst offenders, and best exemplars, of ‘Muslim backwardness’ (Afghanistan being the most poignant example) are also those with the most porous and insignificant borders. Borders blurred by ‘rebel territory’, borders that disappear into the horizon along ‘hostile ground’. Borders that don’t do; that don’t construct space in the way a Modern state should.

Thus territoriality is key for contradictory purposes. For putting Others in their place, Orientalizing and circumscribing. But also, in obfuscation of places, for denying sovereignty which is a crucial ingredient for alleged Modernity. This denial of sovereignty also implies the denial of the enlightenment idea of a rational, ethical, self-possessed agentive individual. It is this kind of individual who matches sovereignty as it is popularly imagined in the West. This underwrites both Mamdani’s and Asad’s explanations of the characterizations of Muslims as homogenous and violent and religious in a way that is incompatible with Modernity. The discursive denial of ‘Modern’ self and sovereignty, along with an unbreakable linkage to violence--violence which has been mythologized out of western democracy--add up to the denial of Modernity and a fixing in the past that Mamdani discusses.

The overall picture that has emerged from my analysis of the discourse of the Intifada in The Globe and Mail is that the Intifada is constructed as a static and violent object. It’s participants are, we are to believe, fundamentally not of the same kind. The Intifada
is constructed as something that happens in a vacuum, that is not in anyway related to the conditions of settler occupation or extreme discipline that exist in the region. As Ghassan Hage points out in his brilliant piece Comes A Time We Are All Enthusiasm (2003) which, among other things, questions academic responses to and investigations into Palestinian suicide bombings, contextualization is critical. As the Intifada is continuously constructed in this way it becomes naturalized, and the conditions out of which it arises vanish further into the background. Hage writes; “That one can come to consider such a ‘brutish’ state of affairs as an analytical norm is a sad indication of how far the situation has moved from the logic of political negotiations and solutions”(2003:75).

I have not done an analysis of the discourse since the death of Yassir Arafat. My feeling is that political negotiation is displacing violence as the central issue in the Palestinian struggle, but that this politics is not connected to the Intifada. Though there may be some progress to come, both of the politics of government and of representation, we must continue to ask how this progress is understood, what its grammar is, and if Palestinians and other members of the so called Muslim world, will ever be cast as more than outside, over there.
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