

'Us' vs. 'Them': Semantic and contextual interpretation of statements about the beheading of Egyptians in Libya

Mohamed El-Nashar

Language and Translation Department, College of Language and Communication, Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, Egypt

Heba Nayef

Humanities Department, College of Language and Communication, Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport, Egypt

Abstract

This paper aims at providing a semantic and contextual analysis of four statements that were associated with modern grotesque scenes of violence that involved Egypt; namely, the beheading of 21 Coptic Egyptians in Libya at the hands of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The four statements are: (1) ISIS statement that was released in the video featuring the grotesque beheading incident; (2) the statement of the Egyptian Orthodox Church; (3) the statement of the Egyptian President; and (4) the statement of the Egyptian Armed Forces. The paper investigates the ideological 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomy as represented by each of the four statement speakers. Under a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, this study employs van Dijk's socio-cognitive theoretical framework and his proposed ideological strategies (van Dijk 2000, 2005, 2008). The paper attempts to analyze the four statements not only in terms of their textual properties but with reference to their contextual properties as well. Some of the political implicatures of the four statements are also addressed. Language choice is highlighted to draw the division between 'us' and 'them' in the four statements as well as the identity of the in-group 'us' and the out-group 'them'. Emphasis is also made on positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

Keywords: contextual interpretation, ideological strategies, ISIS, socio-cognitive framework, 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomy, Critical Discourse Analysis