

# **Role of Political and Linguistic Rhetoric in Arab Spring Communication**

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## **Abstract**

Early in 2011, the Arab World surprised the world with the Arab Spring which has resulted in unplanned and spontaneous revolutions. The revolutionary public and plain activities are still continuous with intervals. The last of which has just started in Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon (2022). Our study delves in the phenomenon of automatic and innocent revolutionary behaviours which have generated a spontaneous kind of linguistic communication starting from the vocabulary level used in public posters/labels and ending with the strange and nervous body language used by the protestors on the one hand, and the TV interviewees on Al-Jazeera Channel on the other hand. The data used in this study were collected from different Arab mass media (e.g., newspapers, satellite channels, social networking web sites (e.g., Facebook, twitter, You Tube, etc.)) and observations collected from the language of the Arab protestors. It was found that the Arab revolutionary communication represents a new communicative rhetoric amalgamated with anger, uncontrollability, daring, impoliteness and violence and sometimes physical attacks encapsulated with strange behaviours. The study is concluded with a number of practical and research recommendations\*.

## **Keywords:**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Arab spring ignited by the Tunisian revolution on January 14, 2011 surprised not only the Arab world, but also the whole world with its peaceful practices and new linguistic discourse. Later on, many other Arab countries like Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, etc. have followed the Tunisian revolutionary framework in its simplicity, peacefulness and rhetoric. The Arabic word 'irhal' which means 'leave': (step down) in English was the first word used in Tunisia and echoed around the whole other revolutionary Arab countries to indicate the desire of the Arab people to abandon their leaders. Although the word 'irhal' is very peaceful and simple, it has become very heavy and shocking when heard by leaders not willing to step down their positions. This becomes evident when we consider the violent reaction of Arab regimes where hundreds or even thousands of people who used the word 'irhal' were killed. The above example as well as the new political situations in the Arab world seems to generate a new linguistic rhetoric in Arab streets and mass media. Due to the fact that Arab revolutions are still folding and/or ongoing, it is appropriate and significant to investigate the psychological and linguistic rhetorical features involved to avoid any miscommunication between and/or among Arab nations on the one hand, and between the west and east on the other hand. Therefore, in this changing world which needs to exchange information and communication, we need to rethink some linguistic discourses generating from the new sociological, psychological and political circumstances. This will help raising cultural awareness and consciousness among different nations worldwide. Moreover, the study will be another step towards making the world a small village by breaking down the socio-political and cultural barriers among nations. Finally, if our research is read by Arab leaders, the research might reveal that Arab revolutions are cyclic and seem to be rotational. In other words, Arab protestors seem to have similar language, practices and maybe results. If we assume so,

then the study has an indirect humanitarian objective which is encouraging Arab leaders to hold back their horses and stop killing their people because Arab peoples' demands will eventually prevail and dominate as history has revealed.

## **2. LITERATURE REMARKS**

Language and politics have never been separable (Dunbar 1996) and that is why we see different levels of interrelated connection between politics and language including its position as a foreign or second language. For example, in Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, English is spoken as the foreign language, while in Morocco, Lebanon and Tunisia, French is the foreign language due to many political consideration and the colonisation of France and Britain to these countries. In his book 9-11 (September the eleventh), Noam Chomsky (2001:14-15) mentions a very good example about the strong connection between politics and language. When he was asked about the semantic and political difference between a crusading war in the Gulf and a humanitarian intervention war in Kosovo, he stated that:

At first the U.S. used the word 'crusade,' but it was quickly pointed out that if they hope to enlist their allies in the Islamic world, it would be a serious mistake, for obvious reasons. The rhetoric therefore shifted to 'war'. The Gulf War of 1991 was called a 'war'. The bombing of Serbia was called a 'humanitarian intervention' by no means a novel usage.(ibid).

This quotation reveals the strong interrelatedness and the highly sensitive connection and accuracy between language and politics. That is to say, USA, a superpower, avoids the use of a certain word which indicates the dangerous side of language use in politics which might affect international relations between the west and the east. This means that the study of rhetoric seems very significant. Muaranen (1993: 20) quoted in Khuwaileh (2006: 39) argues that:

The study of rhetoric has been rediscovered not only as a means of improving efficiency in verbal presentation, but as an analytical tool that can be used by different disciplines uncovering certain aspects of discourse.

Another level of the inseparability between language and politics is the linguistic discourse allowed in Arab countries where democracy is restricted and, therefore, not any word, phrase, clause and sentence can be openly spoken, framed or labelled in political protests. Consequently, it seems that not any rhetoric can be used in a political context, at least in the Arab world. To be not allowed to express your viewpoint is something disgusting in the new millennium while the whole world has become a small village. Joseph (2006: 143) states that:

Being human means being able to make choices. Bringing our choices to fruition depends on other people, whether they are supportive or standing in our way. Our relationships with them are negotiated through language, sometimes explicitly, always implicitly, including1 through that very peculiar form of language.

Nevertheless, most Arab governments are not happy when it comes to freedom of expression because this could uncover what is covered. In fact, the phenomenon of suppressing the linguistic freedom of

expression is not confined to the Arab countries. Even Britain where the oldest democracy was born, attempts sometimes to keep certain political stances covered. Joseph echoes this stance by stating that:

There are easy cases – when a government does not permit any opposition voices to be heard, or when it tries single-mindedly people that policies it is implementing are for their good, even when they patently are not (ibid: 133-134).

Considering the whole context of this quotation, we know that Joseph talks about democracy in Britain and debates of the British two major political parties, the Labour and Conservative Parties. This example shows also the marriage between politics and language. This marriage might result in certain rhetoric.

Another level of connection between politics and language is the ‘time’ level which plays a crucial role in shaping the political course of nations. That is to say, the time factor might play a role in shaping the linguistic political terminologies (Khuwaileh 2012). Beard (2004:1) reckons that:

When the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson said ‘A week is a long time In politics’, he was referring to the fact that success and failure were never Far apart, and that a week could make all the difference either way.

Consequently, the linguistic features of rhetoric may change by time. This is exactly what is happening in the Arab world which is the focus of this research. For example, in the past few decades, Arab peoples were not daring or even did not have the courage to use criticizing strong rhetoric and/or vocabulary against their governments or leaders. On the contrary, in the Arab Spring, peoples have started to use defying rhetoric and very sharp vocabulary like: "go away", execute the corrupted leaders", etc.

### **3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study will help raising the political, linguistic and cultural awareness and consciousness among journalists, linguists, researchers and different nations in all the cotenants as the researcher plans to publish the research in an international journal which has excellent readership. Moreover, the study will be another step towards making the world a small village by breaking down the socio-political and cultural barriers among nations. Finally, if the research is read by Arab leaders, the research might reveal that Arab revolutions are cyclic and seems to be rotational. In other words, in most of the Arab countries which have witnessed Arab Spring, protesters seem to have similar language, goals, practices, rhetoric and results. If we assume so, then the study has an indirect significant humanitarian objective which is helping Arab peoples to have their voices heard and their poster read by intellectuals and the readers of journal articles.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

Our research methodology will be based on both: the qualitative approach theory and the quantitative one. The qualitative approach theory focuses on content analysis as suggested by Cohen, D. & Crabtree, B. (2006) and Cohen, L. et al. (2007). In qualitative data analysis, the researcher relies on how to interpret different texts (e.g., poster language) in accordance with their social contexts. In this case, the core element of interpretation is meaning rather than the structure and that every act of language is an act of meaning (Halliday, 2013). Simultaneously, the quantitative theory is based on descriptive and inferential statistics, where significant tests, percentages and numbers are interpreted and their meanings are translated into actions and decisions.

The data used in this study will be collected from different Arab mass media (e.g., daily newspapers and

satellite channels), social networking web sites (e.g., Facebook, twitter, You Tube, etc.) and observations collected from the language of the Arab protestors. All fliers, posters and labels as well as significant statements to our study are taken from news bulletins and mass media published in hard and soft mass media. The researcher will use the data collected to answer the following research questions:

1. To study the implicit and explicit daring rhetoric used in Arab Spring in terms of its politeness, nervousness, conciseness and purpose.

2. To uncover and reveal the linguistic features of Arab Spring language in relation to mass media interpretation

3. To identify whether the language used is:

Colloquial or Standard

Purely Arabic or mixed with English

And if mixed with English, for what purpose?

Finally, content analysis will be implemented on the basis of posters frequencies and quantities, repetition, similarity of the same posters, phrases, clauses, etc. After filtering the results, the researcher tabulated them to be ready for discussion and rhetorical interpretation. Later on, conclusions are to be drawn for researchers, mass media reporter and maybe political practitioners.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

Without any prior indication or warning, which surprised the west and east, the Arab revolutions destabilized so many individuals, peoples and even states. This event have drawn the attention of the whole globe which in turn affected all nations as some nations have been witnessing these revolutions like Syria, Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, etc. and other nations have been suffering from the hit of their interests and economy in the Arab world like USA, UK, China, Russia, etc.

For the purpose of guiding the readers and making our research easier to read and understand, the researcher tabulated the major rhetorical and political concepts and/or highlights of our results as seen below. Accordingly, the two tables below will guide our discussion.

Obviously, the political unrest in the Arab Middle Eastern and North African Arab countries shocked the world by the simple and spontaneous language they have used and the actions they have practiced, as mentioned above. The language and actions practised by most Arab protestors started with spontaneous small gatherings to demand reformations like in Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Sudan etc. asking for justice and corruption fight. Of course, Arab governments did not respond to these gatherings and demands. Psychologically speaking, the gatherings of the protestors felt humiliated, angry and insulted which put them in a position to raise their linguistic and political ceiling of demands. At the beginning, they wanted reformations as shown in the table below, but later on, they moved into another layer of meaning or rhetoric and they demanded the stepping down of the their leaders. Semantically and rhetorically speaking, the phrase 'step down' was a very dangerous and a forbidden phrase if said in any of the twenty three Arab countries on top of other phrases like: "reformation", "justice", "corruption", etc. However, in defiance of the Arab regimes and/or governments, the protestors spoke of what was unspeakable though death and jails were evitable consequences for such actions. Openly, they called for executing their leaders and most recently, Algerians called and named their ruling party members as gangsters. This was shown by the slogans used by the Arab protestors in more than one country. On top of that, it was obviously shown by the rhetoric used by the political interviewees on Al-Jazeera Channel (based in Qatar) appearing in the program of opposite direction which is shown at 10:05 pm (Qatari time) on each Tuesday. In this program, the presenter or the interviewer, Dr. Faisal Al-Gassim, invites two interviewees to argue about Arab Spring and sometimes other political hot issues; one representing an Arab regime and another representing the opposition of that regime. In this program, several opponents demanded not only the stepping down of the leaders but they also demanded the

execution of those leaders. In short, the rhetoric moved from the least dangerous word to the most dangerous one like the following hierarchy:

Reforms = 'irhal': stepping down = execution

Leaders = 'isabat': gangsters = execution

It is worth mentioning that the ultimate and maximum demand of most Arab revolutions has been the execution of the leaders (presidents). After the stage of calling for execution, the protestors have been determined to do so and therefore no more maximum demands were raised. So their rhetoric did not go beyond this stage. This becomes evident when we consider the rhetorical aspects of repetition and changing the word order while maintaining the same idea of execution. For example, the sentence: 'People want to execute the president' has become a usual rhetoric in most of the Arab Spring revolutionary language.

Nevertheless, other protestors paraphrased the same idea by writing the following slogans to serve their political propaganda:

'Hanging is waiting for the president'

'Killing is waiting for the killer president'

'killing leaders will be executed', etc.

This change of wording could be due to the increasing determination of the protestors to punish the leaders or presidents for killing innocent and unarmed innocent people. Psychologically speaking, they want their message to be acquired by their leaders. An appropriate justification for this rhetoric might be that the people use the strategy of repetition in different wording and paraphrasing to help their leaders acquire their demands.

The other rhetorical feature of Arab spring language is the uncontrollability of the language when the victims or their relatives talk on TV programs. It has been easily noticed that the victims of the regimes' killers used to generate untidy language whenever they report on what they have been exposed to. Visiting the web site cited below, we might notice all these rhetoric.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4zqwGUjei](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4zqwGUjei)

This web site shows that the victims spoke with a lack of organization and tidy manner during their TV interviews. These linguistic features mark their rhetoric. For example, when the victims want to cover a certain event in a certain place, they speak with a sort of confusion like talking while breathing quickly to the extent that what they say might not be understandable or intelligible. A plausible explanation for this kind of rhetoric is that they feel scary from their authority and therefore their talk might not be well-balanced. Alternatively, they are psychologically shocked of what they saw. Seeing a house falling on the heads of its inhabitants is something outrageous, for instance. Sometimes, from the body language, the researcher noticed that the interviewed victims were shivering while speaking

The lack of idea organisation was also evident when the victims reported geographical descriptions. When they were interviewed, they mentioned local places which were known only by them. For example, so many Syrian appeared on Al-Jazeera channel describing the event from their angle like saying: 'the grenade exploded near the house of Ahmad Muhammad', for instance. That is to say, they do not mention well-known places like 'near the mosque', near the police station', near 'the market place', 'near the municipality' and so on. An appropriate justification for this choice is the fact that the victims and/or interviewees think or assume that Al-Jazeera correspondent is familiar with the names of these local places. While this phenomenon might appear not important to the reader, we believe that it is important for the viewers to have a delicate image of the geography of hot places bombed by the regimes. Moreover, mentioning a place like 'near the mosque' is very important for Muslim viewers who can have a precise idea about the violation of regimes as mosques are holy places for Muslims everywhere.

As far as the rhetoric feature of the daring language used is concerned, any TV viewer in the Arab world

or newspaper reader can notice how daring the protestors were in all the Arab countries which undergo revolutions and unrest. For example, we were astonished by the level of the daring vocabulary used in the rhetoric of Arab revolution like the word ‘gang’ or ‘gangster’, ‘outlaws’, ‘thieves’, ‘underground rulers’ and so on

**Table 1.** The Rhetorical Features Characterizing Arab Revolutionary Language

COMMUNICATIVE FEATURES	C O N T E X T	E X A M P L E
Anger & increasing layers of demands	Protests, TV Interviews, newspaper interviews	Reformation, stepping down, executing the president, etc.
Uncontrollability	Reporting complaints	Lack of organisation.
Daring	Protest rhetoric (e.g., labels, slogans, etc.	Gangsters, outlaws, thieves, etc.
Impoliteness	TV. Interviews on Al-Jazeera Channel & Al-Arabiya	Son of a bitch, a slave for Iran, a servant for a certain party.
Violent communication including physical attacks & new trends of body Language	TV. Interviews on Al-Jazeera & other Arab Channels between political rivals	Slapping on the face, chasing around the table in TV interviews, facial expressions, etc.

This kind of vocabulary has been frequently used thought it might lead to or execution or at least prison. Nevertheless, in all the Arab countries which have had revolutions, the protestors used these words repeatedly and they have become expected words in everyday political slogans. For example, the Libyan described their leader as well as his followers with as thieves and gangs. We also saw these words in Egypt, Sudan, Algeria and Syria. The suitable explanation for this daring vocabulary is the fact that Arab peoples have gone ultimately with their expression against their authorities. In other words, the Arab peoples apply the rule that ‘when you have nothing, you have nothing to lose’. That is to say, they have become careless about the consequences of using these words as they have been suffering from unemployment, high prices, injustice, corruption, deprivation, etc. Another explanation is the fact that Arab people have realized that their authorities will do nothing about these words as governmental authorities are in weak conditions and they struggle to calm down their peoples. Consequently, no penalty is to take place. These circumstances have encouraged the Arab people to use any forbidden rhetoric whatsoever. In other words, Arab people have started to use defying rhetoric hoping to reach what they want to achieve. In short, they have become not afraid or scary of their governments.

The impoliteness in using the revolutionary rhetoric has also been noticed in both written mass media and many other channels like Al-Arabiya (a Saudi Satellite Channel based in Dubai) and Al-Jazeera through several programs (e.g., interviews conducted in news bulletin, opposite opinion, beyond the story or news, etc.). For example, during the news coverage of Arab revolutions, we have started to see and hear impolite words, phrases and even sentences like ‘son of a bitch’, ‘bastard’, ‘you are a slave for that regime’, ‘you and followers are thieves’, etc.

A plausible interpretation for the phenomenon of using impolite rhetoric could be that Arab activists have started to rethink their frame of rhetoric for two reasons. First, they lose temper during TV interviews to the extent that they might not be able to refine their wording or the production of their spoken rhetoric. Second and/or alternatively, the interviewees insist on using the impolite language to humiliate their counterparts. This means that Arab people have started to impose new rules of political communicative and rhetorical exchange. This could be evident when we consider the tolerance of Arab public who do not resist these impolite phrases and/or sentences. For example, neither the TV interviewers nor the viewers of these programs complained about the use of such structures. When viewers are not happy about a certain situation,

they used to interrupt and call the programme leader as the programme was alive.

The last rhetorical feature of Arab spring is the new trends of violent communication including live physical attack and humiliating body language. Ever since the November 2011, the date of birth of Arab revolutions till now 2019, we have started to see on Al-Jazeera, JOSAT (a Jordanian Satellite channel) and Al-Arabiya channels a new kind of communication amalgamated or encapsulated with live violence. For example, during the opposite opinion program mentioned above on 31 January 2012 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4zqwGUjeig](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4zqwGUjeig), the pro-Syrian interviewee was very nervous to the extent that he stood up and went to the other side of the table and slapped the other anti-Syrian interviewee on the face which was very shocking to the Arab viewers. It was strange as it is the first time we watch such a live negative behavior on TV. What made the situation worse was the process of chasing in the studio as one of the interviewees who wanted to take revenge chased the other around the table which put the whole studio into chaos and disorder because the wired microphones were fixed on the jackets of the interviewees. All viewers observed by the researcher laughed aloud and kept speaking about that event for hours.

The same physical attack was also seen on JOSAT (a Jordanian Private Channel) where one of the interviewers physically attacked the other by boxing him on face on 30 November 2011.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXfnPjFXmBk&feature=related>

On top of that, the body language accompanying the above-mentioned interviews has shown a quite strange kind of body language. During one of the interviews, an interviewee shouted remarkably and rounded his eyes to express his anger. The response of the other interviewee was throwing the documents he brought to the studio on the face of the other, and then the other threw his own documents to shatter and scatter on the discussion table. Another strange example was hitting the table they are sitting around to the extent that the table shacked and the sound quality was affected and hit.

A suitable interpretation to these body language practices could be of course the excessive anger the interviewees felt. Alternatively, it might be related to the fact that they were about to be defeated due to the nature of their argument. We have noticed also that whenever an interviewee becomes in a weak argumentative position, he/she turns to be not only nervous, but also neurotic, noisy and disturbing. Therefore, he attempts to compensate his argumentative weakness by creating a chaotic situation so that things could be messy. This messy situation puts the viewers who are usually millions in a position not differentiate between the weak argument and the strong convincing one.

The final research question was whether the rhetoric of Arab Spring is formal or informal or purely English or Arabic. Here again we back at the start. The issue of previous colonization has affected Arab countries in the past and present. For example, all Arab Middle East posters and fliers like in Syria, Jordan, etc. were written colloquial Arabic with an English translation in most cases. Their posters included phrases like "go away", "we want to get rid of you", etc. Nevertheless, the poster of North African Arab countries like Algeria and Tunisia translated their colloquial Arabic into French, not English. France colonized Algeria and Tunisia in the previous century and Britain did the same in Jordan and Iraq, for instance. Obviously, the reason behind the foreign language use (French & English) is allow the whole world read and understand what is going on since Arab leaders conceal their suppression of their people.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

As stated above, the central aim of this research was to investigate the rhetoric generated by the Arab revolutions since the year 2011 which marks the birth of Arab revolutions till now like the Arab Spring in Algeria and Sudan in 2019. We have found that the revolutionary rhetoric seems to have certain unprecedented linguistic and psychological features associated with a new framework of language. The linguistic framework is new in the sense that it is explicit, nervous, daring, open, impolite, uncontrollable and not scary. From these considerations, we can safely conclude that the Arab revolutionary rhetoric appears to be defying not only to Arab leaders, but also to superpowers supporting Arab regimes. The defiance of that revolutionary rhetoric seems to achieve its objectives which is evident from overthrowing certain regimes. That is true because Arab peoples felt fed up of the lack of freedom of expression which made them rhetorically determined to get what they want. All of that was through the linguistic strategies they adopted; a

tough language, open slogans, a good vocabulary choice which scared leaders (e.g., people want the execution of the president... etc.) and a firm and direct style of both spoken and written English including the body language. As mentioned above, this research is limited in scope due to the shortage of time and space. Therefore, other researchers might deal with other aspects associated with Arab revolutions like the appealing speech of leaders immediately delivered before they step down. It worth studying the psychology of such speech which might give linguistic indications and signs to not only to Arab peoples, but also to other revolutionary nation worldwide.

#### Note

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