

# The Positive-self and Negative-other Representation in Bashar Al-Assad's First Political Speech After the Syrian Uprising\*

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**Abstract**—This study examines Positive-self and Negative-other representation expressed in the Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad's first political speech in March 2011. This study investigates the way Al-Assad uses language as a tool to express his ideology and attitudes towards protests and the world's leading countries, and thus to win conflicts and gain power. Therefore, this study scrutinises the negative-other representation of Al-Assad's opponents and rival parties and what ideologies are reflected in this speech. It also examines the positive-self representation in relation to Al-Assad's ruling party (Ba'ath) and the Syrian regime's supporters. T. van Dijk (2002) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is utilised to highlight the way these representations are exhibited in the speech. An in-depth analysis is conducted to allow the identification of the strategies and techniques used in the speech analysed, following T. van Dijk (2002) ideological square.

**Index Terms**—political speech, ideology, positive-self, negative-others, critical discourse analysis

## I. INTRODUCTION

After a decade of the Syrian uprising which turned into a civil war, Al-Assad's first political speech attracted the attention of rhetoric scholars. His speech during the first year of the uprising had one common goal: to stop protests that aimed to topple his regime and to guarantee that he remained in power. He aimed at portraying himself as people's protector and underlining his claims of strong bonds between him and his public. Therefore, on the one hand, he tries to persuade his audience with political arguments, utilising different tools and strategies, such as positive-self representation to spark people's emotions, gain their support, and enforce certain ideologies. On the other hand, he tries to remind his audience that opposition to his regime may have dire consequences by the negative-other representation.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Political Speeches

Political speeches as part of political discourse can be defined as a "coherent stream of spoken language that is usually prepared for delivery by a speaker to an audience for a purpose on a political occasion" (Reisigl, 2008). They function due to their political activity; they are directed to a wide audience; and their topics are related to politics. Beyond this, political speeches are associated either with the struggle for power or the maintenance of it (Sharndama, 2015).

They are a vital communicative tool for politicians, with which political opinions and views as well as ideologies can be expressed, the latter not always explicitly. Their textual conditions have been seen as "directing oneself to an audience and respecting a topical (semantic) organization that is compatible with the issue on the (political) agenda at hand (Charteris-Black, 2018). Any political speech can exist prior to when it is delivered, and it is usually multi-authored. Yet, every politician differs in their adaptation of a written speech; this depends on their audience's level of knowledge and affects grammatical and word choices as well as other language features.

### B. Features and Characteristics of Political Speeches

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The language used in political speeches has certain characteristic features that differentiate it from other varieties of language use. Political speeches are among political texts that are written to persuade, affect and change public opinions (Irvine et al., 2009). This can be achieved by incorporating linguistic devices in the speeches. Many linguists (Babaii & Sheikhi, 2018; Clark et al., 1991; Qianbo, 2016) have focused on the ideologies reinforced by politicians when analysing certain strategies and techniques in the languages of political speeches. Rojo and Van Dijk (1997) also focuses on the influence of politicians on public discourse and hence on public opinion; for example, he points out that political discourse plays a major role in garnering popular support and the legitimization of certain policies. Therefore, the main goal of any politician is to persuade their audience of their views (Van Dijk, 1993).

Furthermore, some of the structures that typically exhibit underlying ideology are to be found in most political speeches delivered by leaders or politicians, specifically in time of war or conflict. For instance, rhetoric in Arabic aims to enrich and varnish the linguistic competence of writing and speaking. It is used by political speakers to provide an effective stylistic mechanism to produce powerful discourse. For example, Arrdaini (2021) argues that “the use of metaphors in politics is not mere coincidence, but that they have an important role to play”. Al-Hamad and Al-Shunnag (2011) argue that politicians employ various features, rhetorical devices, and tools as “a powerful means of conveying their feelings and attitudes towards critical political issues. For instance,

### *C. Political Discourse and Ideology*

Much has been written about ideology and plenty of definitions of the concept have been offered. Dunmire (2005), for instance, defines ideology as “any social policy which is in part or whole derived from social theory in a conscious way”. He also adopts a Marxist definition that presents ideology as “ideas which arise from a given set of material interest. He argues that ideology is presented in language, and that modern social sciences should focus on the ideological nature of language. He also introduces ideological power and relates it to discourse, where types of discourse function ideologically to sustain unequal power relations and practices. These ideological powers are “institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking” and that “often embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimize existing power relations” (Charteris-Black, 2018).

Ideologies consist of socially shared beliefs that are associated with the characteristic properties of a group, such as their identity, their position in society, their interests and aims, their relations to other groups, their reproduction, and their natural environment (Van Dijk, 2000).

In relation to ideology, Van Dijk (2000) introduces a multidisciplinary framework to analyse any discourse, specifically political discourse. His framework consists of discourse, cognition, and society, and is introduced as, Language use, text, talk, verbal interaction, and communication will be studied under the broad label of 'discourse'. The mental aspects of ideologies, such as their nature as ideas or beliefs, their relations with opinions and knowledge, and their status as socially shared representations, will all be covered under the label of 'Cognition'. And the social, political, cultural and historical aspects of ideologies, their group-based nature, and especially their role in the reproduction of, or resistance against, dominance, will be examined under the broad label of Society (Van Dijk, 2000).

Van Dijk (2000), in this sense, presents ideology as the attitude a group of people held towards certain issues. In order to reveal the ideology generated in discourse, the scholar draws on social analysis, cognitive analysis and discourse analysis of a text. In relation to ideology in discourse, ideology can exist in the form, content and meaning of discourse. While the first two can be ideologically marked, the ideological meaning can be reproduced through interpretation of the text (Matić, 2012). The analysis of ideology in discourse is, in fact, one of the main concerns of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). van Dijk (2002) socio-cognitive approach is primarily concerned with the interconnection between discourse, cognition, and society; or to put it differently, it is concerned with the relationship between discourse and society, a relationship that is cognitively mediated.

Research has shown a vast interest in the relationship between power, culture and ideology. Uncovering manipulations in target texts have been investigated from an ideological perspective by many researchers (Baker, 1996; Clark et al., 1991; Irvine et al., 2009; Qianbo, 2016). Some scholars have contributed to drawing a link between linguistics, pragmatics and TS (Baker, 1996; Irvine et al., 2009). Babaii and Sheikhi (2018) state that TS focuses on: Social, cultural, and communicative practices, on the cultural and ideological significance of translating and of translations, on the external politics of translation, on the relationship between translation behaviour and socio-cultural factors. In other words, there is a general recognition of the complexity of the phenomenon of translation, an increased concentration on social causation and human agency, and a focus on effects rather than on internal structures (Schäffner & Bassnett, 2010).

The significance of ideological issues varies from one text to another since some texts are more ideologically ‘loaded’ than others. In addition, political organisations, such as governments, parties and regimes propose ideologies that serve their political views and stances. As discussed by Van Dijk (1993) the concept of the exclusion of rival ideologies manifests itself through positive self-representation and negative-other representation, whereby opponent ideologies are presented in with negative attributes versus a political group’s own ideology which is presented with positive attributes.

### *D. Van Dijk's Approach to CDA*

Since the primary focus of CDA is on the structure of text and talk, one of its main applications is to study the way in which a speaker or a group exhibit power in discourse. Particularly, the way in which discourse influences an audience,

and the strategies involved in that process (Van Dijk, 1993). Van Dijk (1993) the discursive reproduction of dominance as the main object of his two-dimensional study: production and reception. He asserts that:

We distinguish between the enactment, expression or legitimation of dominance in the (production of the) various structures of text and talk, on the one hand, and the functions, consequences or results of such structures for the social minds of recipients, on the other. (Van Dijk, 1993)

Van Dijk (1993), for instance, describes the concept of dominance and asserts that the fewer surface structures are controlled by legal or moral rules, the more “unofficial exercise of power” emerges. He provides an example and speaks of the disrespectful tone of a judge or a police officer that might be interpreted as “impoliteness”, but which does not break the law, so that this may be one way to exercise dominance. Another point of view might say that this impoliteness is an expression of power, but not of social power or dominance (Van Dijk, 1993).

One key challenge for the user of CDA is to find ways to relate micro-patterns that are revealed in the textual analysis to the macro-patterns of the culture / society of which the discourses analysed operate. Therefore, Van Dijk (1993) shows the relevance of socio-cognitive interface between discourse and dominance and argues that this approach is essential in relating macro and micro-level notions. He then elaborates on this by arguing that: Indeed, the crucial notion of reproduction, needed to explain how discourse plays a role in the reproduction of dominance, presupposes an account that relates discourse structures to social cognitions, and social cognitions to social structures (Van Dijk, 1993).

This multidisciplinary approach represents participants who have greater authority over the content of the text: “public discourse, such as that of politics or the media, usually features institutional speakers or representatives who have more authority and hence more credibility” (Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997). In the same context, it is illustrated that, a socio-cognitive approach not only makes explicit the fundamental role of mental representations, but also shows that many structures of discourse itself can only (completely) be described in terms of various cognitive notions, especially those of information, beliefs or knowledge of participants (Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997).

Knowledge, in this context, is an essential factor of context models; hence it influences linguistic structures of the discourse and can be regarded as the common ground for language users. He elaborates that this is “possible because social members represent both social structures as well as discourse structures in their minds, and thus are able to relate these mentally before expressing them in actual text and talk” (Van Dijk, 2011). Accordingly, knowledge is arranged to fit the intentions of discourse initiators that aim to influence readers /receivers of the discourse. The most common features between critical and ideological analysis, as outlined above, are the concepts of power, domination and hegemony. Van Dijk (2011) model of analysis can provide a theoretical framework for the examination of the ideological manipulation on the social and the political level.

The analysis of ideology according to Van Dijk (2006) can be implemented at all levels of the discourse. For that, he presents ideological structures that will help exhibit hidden ideologies. One example is the strategy of positive-self representation and negative-other representation, which mainly examines participants as social groups and present them in terms of ‘Us vs. Them’. He presents this as a strategy that “is very typical in [the] biased account of the facts in favour of the speaker’s or writer’s own interests, while blaming negative situations and events on opponents or on the others” (Van Dijk, 2006). He then elaborates that these two strategies, influence the structure of various levels of any discourse (Van Dijk, 2006). Through this, he introduces the theoretical concept of the ideological square, in which he summarises the positive-self and negative-other characteristic of a group; these principles are as follows:

1. Emphasise positive things about Us (ingroups);
2. Emphasise negative things about Them (out groups);
3. De-emphasise negative things about Us (in groups);
4. De-emphasise positive things about Them (out groups).

These principles examine the representation of in-groups and out-groups within text and talk through using the ideological pronouns ‘We vs. They’ or ‘Us vs. Them’. Underlying political ideologies are typically expressed in political discourse by emphasizing ‘Our’ good things and ‘Their’ bad things, and by de-emphasizing ‘Our’ bad things and ‘Their’ good thing (Van Dijk, 2006). In this context, the ideological square constitutes a “manifestation of the group relations category of the ideology schema” (Van Dijk, 2006). Van Dijk (2006) critical analysis of texts tends to make explicit the ideological dimension of ‘Us vs. Them’ and to demonstrate the discursive structures and strategies used in exercising the dominant power (Jahedi et al., 2014). He presents ideological structures as in the following figure.

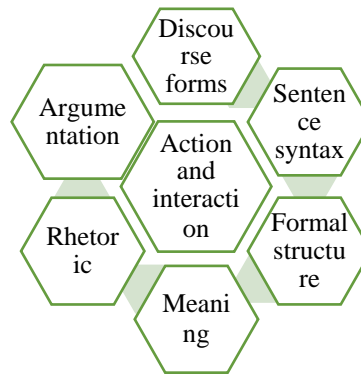


Figure 1: van Dijk's Levels of Discourse Structures

Concerning meaning level, Van Dijk (2000) argues that ideology is “most directly expressed in discourse meaning”. He then categorises this level as shown below in Figure 2.

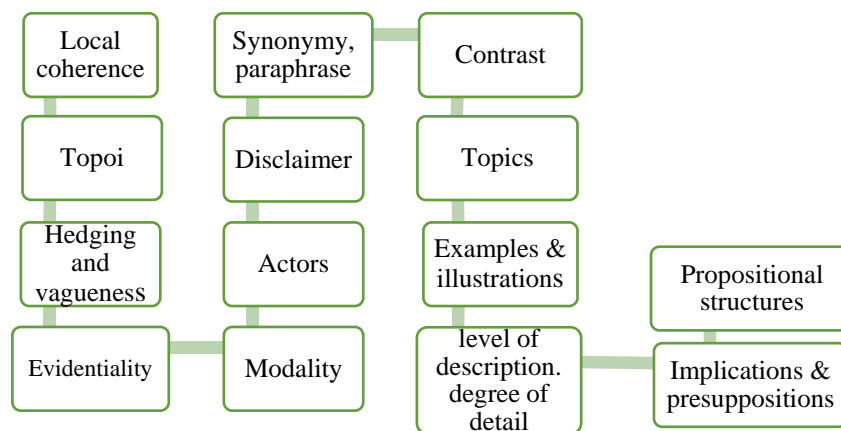


Figure 2: van Dijk's Discourse Meaning Levels

The importance of Van Dijk (2000) approach is related to each of these approaches' understanding of discourse and ideology; this approach highlight correlations between language, ideology and power relations. It can also be noted that Van Dijk (2000) considers discourse as a form of knowledge and memory. In addition, Van Dijk (2000) approach understands 'power' as a way of reflecting abuse in society. Social inequality and injustice have been the main concern of CDA theorists. Van Dijk (2000), for instance, emphasised the importance of methodological and theoretical integration that would help “the realization of a common aim, namely, to analyse, understand, and combat” social inequality and injustice.

### III. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The data analysed consists of one televised political speech in Arabic. The primary data (Al-Assad's original speech) were delivered in March 2011.

The four (transcribed) speeches analysed in this study depict the escalation of violence in Syria and increasing intervention by regional and world powers that have been drawn into the conflict in Syria. This speech has a specific theme and message that was expected to be more powerful in expressing Al-Assad's viewpoint and political position. Another important point is that this material represents the Syrian regime's political standpoint in the first year of the uprising; a controversial topic among national, regional and international communities. As such, the ideological structures that could have influenced Al-Assad's audience were expected to be present in such key speech, and therefore were thought to be influential to the Syrian regime's opponents and allies. In addition to this, the availability of the original Arabic texts is another reason for selecting the speech under examination. Al-Assad's original Arabic speech have not been analysed before, other than from a socio-political point of view. Therefore, the current analysis will draw on a body of literature from the field of Linguistic, in order to identify the role of ideology in the shaping of this speech.

### IV. ANALYSIS

#### A. Contextual Background of Al-Assad's First Speech

The Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad makes his first public address to the Syrian parliament on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2011 after two weeks of widespread unrest that challenged his regime. The protests that started in Daraa (Dar'a)

demand reform. The protests were violently repressed by the government, so this speech is indeed so crucial for Syrian people who were waiting for it and hoping for a reassuring and drawing a clear feature of the new phase in Syria. This speech was televised on the same abovementioned day.

### *B. Practices and Strategies*

Al-Ba'ath is the ruling party in both Syria and Iraq. The party's ideology and its narrative, call for secularism, socialism, and pan-Arab unification, as well as freedom from western influence. For instance, Al-Assad reinforces the desire for Pan-Arabism when speaking about the Palestinian - Israeli conflict as well as the freedom from Western influence. He also addresses the unrest, which is affecting his country extensively, by highlighting factors that might cause social and economic problems in the future. The party's official narrative emerges evidently in the presidential speech. A further social practice that is displayed in the speech is Al-Assad's opposition against Western domination in Syria and the region, specifically in relation to the country's enemies - the US, Israel, the EU, and the GCC which are hoping to topple his regime in Syria. Referring to the Lebanon war in 2006, Al-Assad infers that his relationship with Iran and with Lebanon's Hezbollah might stand out as a reason why these countries oppose him and his regime (ibid). These might be some of the reasons why the conspiracy narrative is found to be the most crucial theme of the speech, allowing Al-Assad to assert his point of view against these countries (his perceived enemies).

The following discursive strategies, discernible in the speech, will also be examined: positive self-representation and negative other-representation, membership and topoi. On the one hand, the speaker's aim is to convince his audience of the conspiracy against Syria in order to gain people's trust and support. And yet, the use of negative-other representation is also evident to the reader or listener of Al-Assad's speech which was delivered a short time after the unrest. By reinforcing the negative outcomes of the unrest, for instance, Al-Assad triggers people's fear for their country's future. In this sense, he uses the negative-other attribute when describing conspirators, i.e. the out-group. Group membership, as described by (Van Dijk, 2000), "has to do with who belongs or does not belong to Us". In these terms, Al-Assad regards the members of the in-group and out-group as the following:

1. In-group: Al-Assad, his regime and his allies
2. Out-group: conspirators which include: opposition, demonstrators, saboteurs, Western countries, Israel and some Arab countries

The third discursive strategy used in the speech is topoi, or "ready-mades" in argumentation, that is, topics that become standardised and publicised (Van Dijk, 2011). The emergency law is one such topoi in Al-Assad's speech: he refers to the country's emergency law which has been in place since the Al-Ba'ath party gained power in Syria in 1963 and which gives the Syrian government "a free hand to arrest people without charge and extended the state's authority into virtually every aspect of citizens' lives" (Hamad, 2020); this can be seen in the following example 'عندما أعلننا زيادة رواتب والحديث عن موضوع الأحزاب والطوارئ' (when we announced wage raise and discussed the parties and the emergency law). This example is used by Al-Assad as one of the reforms he offers to stop the demonstrations that might destabilise his regime: he promises to withdraw the emergency law, in the future, which had caused controversies for many decades.

Social practices and discursive structures are going to vary from one speech to another, due to the progression from a long-term conflict into a civil war in Syria. These variations are going to be discussed in detail throughout this study to highlight the change in Al-Assad's discourse over the five year period of the conflict.

### *C. Structure of the Speech*

Despite the important role of the narration of conspiracy in Al-Assad's speech, a variety of other themes, which are perhaps not as prominent but which are equally important, are also introduced in this discourse. The structure of his speech, for instance, also serves the message that is being conveyed, so that the structure may have influenced the speaker's lexical choice, degree of formality, speech acts and discourse structures. The structure of the speech is concerned with the internal organisation of the text, and it should be coherent, organised and logical to persuade the audience; this is considered to be crucial in order to generate and convey a specific message (Fairclough, 1992). This strategy explores how the speech is organised, to whom it is addressed, and how it begins and ends. Al-Assad starts and ends his speech by glorifying Syria and the Syrian people. He begins his speech by greeting the Syrian parliament and directs his speech at his people, calling them 'أبناء سورية الأعزاء' ("children of Syria"). He then concludes the speech addressing his people with 'يا بنات وأبناء هذا الشعب العظيم' ("Great sons and daughters of Syria").

In the first part of his speech, Al-Assad addresses all children of Syria to emphasise the good relation between the regime and the people of Syria, while also responding to accusations and allegations of torturing fifteen children in Daraa who were demonstrating against the regime: "A local uprising erupted in the southern town of Daraa as a response to the arrest and torture of fifteen children by the regime" (Üngür, 2013). He then emphasises the importance of "unity and self-denial" throughout this crucial phase, describing it as a test of the nation's unity. Al-Assad describes the situation in Syria as a test. He does not use the word "revolution" to describe the unrest, and this might reflect his opposition to another "Arab Spring" in Syria. He moves on to talk about Arab Nationalism and links what is happening in Syria to the changes in the Arab world, thus emphasising the distinctive nature of Syria amongst the other Arab countries. Following on, Al-Assad elaborates on the protests; on their cause, their main objectives, and on how the regime is reacting in these situations. This part of the speech is crucial as the people are waiting for the regime's reform

plan following the demonstrations. Amongst other newspapers in the world, *The Guardian* (Everson & Joerges, 2014), for example, reported that “in a highly anticipated speech he offered none of the reforms that protesters had hoped for”. This may be regarded as one of the main causes for people’s discontent after the speech. Later on in the speech, Al-Assad continues to attempt to convince his audience of the conspiracy against Syria, as to prepare them for the fight against conspirators. This can be seen in the following examples: ‘علينا مواجهة الأزمات بثقة كبيرة’ (“We have to face the crises with big confidence”) and ‘وَأَدِ الْفِتْنَةَ وَاجِبٌ وَطَنِيٌّ وَأَخْلَاقِيٌّ وَشَرْعِيٌّ’ (“To bury sedition is a national, moral and religious duty”). This specific part of the speech plays a significant role in shaping the entire speech, as do the references to the demonstrations that started in Daraa. Despite the fact that Al-Assad insists on the loyalty of people from the city of Daraa, he never offers an apology for their deaths. On the contrary, he uses the word ‘فوضى’ (“chaos”) to describe the unrest in Daraa and only justifies the brutal attacks on the people of Daraa by calling them ‘أخطاء اللحظة’ (“instant mistakes”). This might be another reason that following the speech further protests broke out all over the country.

In the conclusion of his speech, Al-Assad clearly appeals to the audience’s emotions by declaring himself equal to his people, chanting that they will sacrifice their souls and blood for him, and that he would do the same. This way he portrays himself as the hero who would sacrifice himself for the sake of his country and its people, in an attempt to win the audience over. Furthermore, he seeks to refute the idea of a dictatorship, to reassure his allies that he will not step aside, and to send a message to his opponents that he will do anything to stop the demonstrations.

#### D. Conspiracy

This section examines the way in which Al-Assad narrates the conspiracy against Syria. By applying Van Dijk (2000) socio-cognitive approach, this section aims to highlight hidden ideologies contained within the speech. With this approach I will also introduce an analysis of the meaning level which includes meaning, discourse forms, argumentation, formal structures and rhetoric.

Narrative theory places an emphasis on the role and power of the narrative, whereby narratives are understood as “the stories which belong to us as well as shape who we are” (Baker, 1996). In this, a public narrative as one type of narrative is presented as “stories elaborated by and circulating among social and institutional formations larger than the individual” (Baker, 1996). Any individual can “either buy into the official or semi-official versions of such public narratives or dissent from them”. Therefore, politicians play a major role in circulating public narratives to make sure that they are “socialized into the view of the world promoted in these shared stories” (Baker, 1996). In any narrative, as Baker (1996) illustrates, there should be a plot that guides the selection of events. In this context, conspiracy is seen as a public narrative which is plotted by Al-Assad and his regime. Baker argues that ‘the special doubt that arises over the definition of the situation’ is often experienced by different parties of a conflict as a by-product of competing attempts to legitimise different versions of the relevant narrative (1996). The use of any “lexical item, term or phrase to identify a person, place, group, event or any other key element in a narrative” reflect certain “viewpoints, beliefs or political commitments of a community” (Baker, 1996); in that sense, Al-Assad’s reference to “conspiracy” embodies his viewpoint of the unrest in Syria. As has been pointed out previously, the conspiracy narrative is a salient theme in Al-Assad’s speech and plays a significant role in shaping and directing this discourse. Al-Assad reinforces the conspiracy narrative in order to strengthen his argument and to convince his audience.

The events of the Arab Spring affect the way in which Al-Assad narrates conspiracy, as numerous regimes in the Arab world were overturned during the uprisings, such as, for instance, in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Al-Assad is aware that the outcome of the Syrian uprising might be ousting him, similarly to the way in which other Arab dictators were forced out of office. Interestingly, some elements of Al-Assad’s speech can also be found in other Arab presidents’ speeches during the uprisings; what they all share is the idea of holding on to power at all costs. For instance, the speeches of Bin Ali and Mubarak, both of which were addressed right after the eruption of the protests, were blaming “foreign agents” and “external forces” that aimed at undermining their countries. Therefore, it can be said that Al-Assad uses the same justification of the unrest, holding foreign agents as well as inside conspirators responsible for the recent situation in Syria.

Al-Assad begins his speech with the “extraordinary moments” that Syria is facing. He presents “the test” and “conspiracy” against Syria which would affect its stability. He discusses the chaos this conspiracy is causing, sending a message to his opponents and calling for people’s support. Van Dijk (2000) argues that any information that is placed at the beginning of a text has a specific function, unlike information that is positioned at the end of the discourse. In doing so, Al-Assad puts reform plans, which were supposed to be the main theme of his speech, to the end, causing significant public discontent. In this sense, Al-Assad’s speech disappoints his broad audience and was thus regarded as deceptive, “a well-choreographed effort to showcase his firm grip on power, as he refused to offer concessions and labelled pro-democracy demonstrators as either “duped” or as conspirators in a plot to destroy the nation” (Schäffner & Bassnett, 2010). Hence conspiracy is the major theme of the speech; Al-Assad is pointing fingers and blaming external forces that manipulate protestors to undermine his regime and cause the unrest. He attempts to engage people with the conspiracy against Syria, by mentioning specific events that become مرحلة من الضغوط (“a period of pressure”). He presents conspiracy at the beginning of the speech, emphasising the idea of the continuous attempts to destabilise Syria. However, each time this happens, Al-Assad then reinforces the idea that Syria has passed all these tests. This is reflected in the use of positive attributes, such as, for example, أن ننجح في مواجهته في كل مرة (“succeed in passing the test every time”).

In political speeches, speakers are accountable for what they say. Thus, if they express a belief, they are often expected to provide some 'proof' and engage in a debate with those who deny it (Van Dijk, 2000). In this regard, some evidence, and examples from the present and past are introduced to support Al-Assad's narrative. He accuses the TV satellite channels of deceiving their audience when reporting on the two weeks of demonstrations in Syria and illustrates this with much detail. Van Dijk (2000) discusses levels of description that are concerned with detailed or general ideas that a speaker introduces about a topic in any discourse. In this, being specific about a topic might be considered as a way of showing *our* good representation as opposed to being more general in order to show *their* bad representation. When a speaker makes a general statement about a negative representation of the other, s/he finds it more reliable to illustrate providing certain examples (Van Dijk, 2000).

Al-Assad also provides examples of the present when speaking about sectarianism. In this example, he draws on people's fear of this issue and reinforces their anger towards sectarian violence to increase and strengthen the unity of Syrian people against such conspiracies. The use of repetition in this example is emphasising this. Al-Assad repeats the word 'طائفة' ('sect') eight times in this example.

#### Example 1:

اخذوا المحور الآخر وهو المحور الطائفي

*The other axis the conspirators worked on was sectarianism...*

Lexical repetition is defined as "repeating a word that has already been used, either exactly or with some changes" (Al-Kl-Iafaji, 2005). There are other forms of repetition, such as repetition in structure and content. It is argued that in some languages repetition is used more often than in others; the Arabic language is among those that use repetition frequently.

Repetition in Arabic is used to serve "didactic, playful, emotional, artistic, ritualistic, textual and rhetorical functions". However, as illustrated by Lahlali (2011), lexical repetition might also function ideologically in discourse in order to impact on the receiver, which is how Al-Assad's use of repetition may be interpreted. Repetition is frequent in his speech; it varies from the repetition of a word, repetition in word structure and repetition of a stem. Repetitions of a word, for example, can be found throughout the entire speech. Lexical and word structure repetition can also be seen in the following example, where he addresses the people of Daraa city:

#### Example 2:

ان أهل درعا هم أهل الوطنية الصادقة والعروبة الأصيلة.. أهل درعا هم أهل النخوة والشهامة والكرامة

*The citizens of Daraa Governorate are the people of true nationality and Pan-Arabism; they are the people of generosity and dignity...*

In this specific example, the speaker's strategy of repeating the phrase 'أهل درعا' ("people of Daraa") is related to the brutal attacks against demonstrators in the city of Daraa, the city where the unrest began. The President glorifies the people of Daraa by using a repetition in the word structure and by using a frame in which positive attributes are introduced in subsequent order. The intention may be to gain the trust of the people of Daraa after the brutal attacks of the regime. Another example is the repetition of the lexical item "lahum", which is also indicative. Al-Assad addresses his conspirators using the word "lahum", then glosses it with a negative attribute, such as 'نقر لهم بغيالهم' ("we acknowledge that they have been so stupid"). Repetition of a word stem, on the other hand, can be found in these examples: 'السليمة والسالمة' ("pacific, safe"), 'الأسباب والمسببين' ("causes and causers") and 'نؤثر ونتأثر' ("influence and get influenced"). The excessive use of this speech act is designed to convince the people of his message and to draw the audience's attention (AL Khafaji p.16) as well as to increase people's fear of the consequences of the unrest.

Al-Assad recognises the impact of the Arab Spring on the demonstrations, so he continues to refer to "Arab Spring" and insists on the uniqueness of his country and regime, which sends a clear message to his audience: he will not allow another Arab Spring in Syria. He justifies his reasons by reinforcing the unity of the Syrian people, using the phrase 'اجماع شعبي' ("popular convergence"). He then emphasises the conspiracy against Syria that threatens Syria's stability through three elements: 'الفتنة والإصلاح والحاجات اليومية' ("people's daily needs, sedition and reform"). Al-Assad elaborates on these three elements as the causes of the unrest. He gives examples, including raising wages, and illustrates the efforts that have been made during his time of leadership to meet people's demands in the hope of winning people's support.

A rhetorical device used in this speech to support Al-Assad's conspiracy narrative is the "use of reference". This device is applied implicitly or explicitly, whereby the speaker leaves information in relation to positive self-representation implicit as opposed to dealing with information that is explicitly expressed in relation to negative other-representation. According to Van Dijk (2000), the implication and presupposition level of meaning is based on the mental model of the recipient towards an event. Retelling past narratives is considered as a means of control. "It socializes individuals into an established social and political order and encourages them to interpret present events in terms of sanctioned narratives of the past". The long history of Al-Assad and his party's opposition to Western domination in the region, and its stance against the Israeli occupation, motivate Al-Assad to bring back these past narratives to validate his story and to make people believe in his ability to overcome these events (Van Dijk, 2000).

Al-Assad supports his argument with an implicit analogy which he draws between the events in Syria now and the events that took place in 2005:

#### Example 3:

ان جانباً مما يحصل اليوم متشابه مع ما حصل في 2005 هي الحرب الافتراضية

*Part of what has happened is similar to what happened in 2005. It is a virtual war...*

In this example, he implicitly refers to the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri in 2005, and how this incident affected the Syrian military presence in Syria. He also refers to the conspiracy against Syria during the war against Afghanistan and Iraq, with which he may suggest that Syria is paying the price for opposing the American and Western intervention in Iraq.

The use of the word المقاومة ("resistance") in Al-Assad's speech is referring to the Palestinian conflict, and might indicate to what extent the Syrian position against the Palestinian occupation may be the conspirators' primary concern. The reference to the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006 can be seen in this context: "ولاحقاً حرب عام 2006 وتداعياتها" ("the 2006 war and its consequences"). Al-Assad also refers to the Syrian sanctions when saying "قبلها في عام 2004" ("before that in 2004"). Supporting this is also the use of contrast: Al-Assad strengthens these sanctions, which were authorised by the United States, are part of the conspiracy Al-Assad is implying in his speech narrative by contrasting his version of the narrative with an opposing one, so that he is able to label in-groups and out-groups. This is described by Van Dijk as "underlying attitudes and ideologies that are represented in polarized terms" (Van Dijk, 2006). In this sense, specific strategies are employed on the level of contrast. The first one is the use of disclaimer; with this the speaker uses a positive description of somebody, then rejects or negates it by using coordinating conjunctions such as /لكن/ ("but") in the subsequent sentence. Van Dijk (2000) defines a disclaimer as "briefly save face by mentioning our positive characteristics, but then focus rather exclusively, on their negative attributes" and this "directly instantiates the contradictions in ideological based attitudes". In Arabic, this coordinating conjunction tends to contrast two complete sentences (Babaii & Sheikhi, 2018), as can be seen in the following example:

#### Example 4:

ان سورية ليست بلداً منعزلاً عما يحصل في العالم العربي ونحن بلد جزء من هذه المنطقة نتفاعل ونؤثر ونتأثر ولكن بنفس الوقت نحن لسنا نسخة عن الدول

*Syria is not isolated from what is taking place in the Arab world. We are part of this region. We interact, influence and get influenced, but at the same time we are not a copy of other countries...*

Al-Assad refers to the distinctness of Syria to refute the outcomes his opponents might think of gaining from the hostile situation; he puts an emphasis on the "uniqueness" of his country.

Repetition of contrast sentences are also employed in the speech. For example, Al-Assad uses the repetition of the phrase من أجل, to convey a message to Syrian people from different groups (out-groups and in-groups), as to consider closely the negative consequences of the uprising. This repetition frame is emphasising the negative-other vs. positive-self strategy, whereby he uses the phrase من أجل followed by a positive attribute, such as 'وحدة' ("unity"), 'قوة' ("strength") and 'ضرب الفتنة' ("thwarting sedition"), while inserting the negation لايس before the affirmative phrase من أجل followed by another negative attribute, such as: 'تفريقهم' ("dismemberment"), 'ضعفه' ("weakness") and 'تأجيلها' ("sowing").

#### Example 5:

وإذا كان الجرح قد نزع فليكن ذلك من أجل وحدة أبناء الوطن وليس من أجل تفريقهم.. من أجل قوة الوطن وليس من أجل ضعفه.. من أجل ضرب الفتنة وليس من أجل تأجيلها

*If the wound has bled, let it be for the sons of the Homeland and not for their dismemberment, for the power of the Homeland and not for its weakness, for thwarting sedition and not for sowing it...*

The speaker could not have achieved the same degree of negativity if he had used أو (or) instead.

Binary statements are another rhetorical tool that is used in Al-Assad's speech in order to imply contrast. This is shown in the following example:

#### Example 6:

لا يوجد خيار امامكم الا ان تستمروا في التعلم من فشلكم اما الشعب السوري فلا خيار امامه الا ان يستمر بالتعلم من نجاحاته

*You don't have any choice except to continue in learning from your failure. The Syrian people however have only one choice which is to continue in learning from their successes...*

This device is used to compare and contrast between the conspirators and his allies, reinforcing the idea of the expected failure of all those who oppose the President and his regime. On the other hand this rhetorical device might be used as a way to emphasise Al-Assad's point of view, as the following example indicates:

#### Example 7:

أن نبحث ن الأسباب والمسببين ونحقق ونحاسب

*It is necessary to contemplate about the causes and causers, to investigate and punish...*

Ideology becomes visible through the application of other strategies in this discourse, such as in the use of the word "actors". Analysing this level of meaning in any ideological discourse is very important, since it can be presented individually or as a group; either the in-group or the out-group. This indicates which groups support the speaker and which ones do not (Van Dijk, 2000).

In the speech examined here three main actors are presented: Al-Assad who, throughout the entire speech, does not refer to himself as a president or a leader. He indicates out-group actors that fit his conspiracy narrative by using different lexicalisation to refer to these actors, such as, for example, "regime's opposition", "conspirators", "saboteurs", "Syrian enemies", "protestors", "some Arab countries", "Israel" and "Western countries". However, it becomes clear



that he considers all of them to be conspirators and enemies of the country. In-group actors, on the other hand, are those to whom he addresses his speech and for whose support he asks 'بنات وأبناء هذا الشعب' ("Sons and daughters of Syria") and ("children of Syria").

One of the strategies also used in this discourse is speech act which does not only "have a political function as part of various political relevant speech acts (such as promises, threats or recommendations), but also have a more general persuasive function" (Rojo & Van Dijk, 1997). One of these speech acts is declarative, in that it is stating, claiming and testifying. Al-Assad statements can be seen as a way to serve his general argument about the uprising and the situation in Syria. However, this type is the most dominant speech act in the speech. Al-Assad's claims refer to his people as well as to his enemies. On the one hand, his claims support the idea that the decisions that were made by him and his regime were in compliance with his people demands 'ان ما حصل يعبر عن إجماع شعبي' ("what has happened reflects popular convergence"). On the other hand, his claims towards his enemies are pursuant to his stance towards the uprising and the conspiracy against Syria, as can be seen in: 'وسر قوة سورية هو الأزمات الكثيرة التي واجهتها' ("The secret of the Syrian power is the many crises the country has faced").

## V. CONCLUSION

In this section, a detailed analysis of the inaugural speech of President Bashar Al-Assad at the beginning of the unrest in Syria has been presented. The analysis contains the main themes of Al-Assad's speech and, more importantly, it presents the alleged conspiracy against Syria, a topic that dominates the speech. Al-Assad insists on this specific theme for a purpose: his aim is to gain his people's trust and approval so that they will support him against the country's enemies.

Moreover, 'positive-representation' of the *self* and 'negative-representation' of the *other* as part of van Dijk's ideological square are employed in this discourse to support Al-Assad's argument regarding the bad consequences of the uprising, in comparison to the regime's efforts towards a political, economic, and social change. This ideological structure introduced in the STs analyses was meant to achieve two aims: first, to emphasise the negative impact of the uprising and opposing groups on the country's stability. Second, to reflect the Ba'ath Party's ideology of resistance and pan-Arabism which aimed to increase enmity towards the countries leading the opposition to Al-Assad and his regime. The analysis of this throughout the four speeches led to the conclusion that a negative-representation of the *other* in Al-Assad's four speeches contribute to the regime's ideology of undermining rival parties or groups of the Syrian regime and its allies.

Positive self-representation, on the other hand, can be said to achieve two aims for Al- Assad: first, to support his argument in relation to the bad consequences of internal and external opposition, and protests on Syria's future; secondly, to serve his national rhetoric, and enhance the image of the current regime. To achieve this, semantic macro-strategies, such as patriotic language, self-glorification, hope, and praise served to promote a positive image of Al-Assad's regime and its allies. For example, the use of patriotic language is sometimes employed at the beginning and/or at the end of the speech to arouse people's emotions and gain their trust as 'ولن يخيفنا رصاصهم ولن يرهبنا حقدهم' (their bullets will not scare us, and their grudge will not terrify us).

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