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Različiti aspekti značenja i upotrebe riječi terorizam s uvidom u suvremene anglosaksonske i frankofonske medije

Sažetak

Razlika u izboru vokabulara koji se koristi u medijima prilikom izvještavanja o terorističkim činovima je neosporna. Novinari se ne odlučuju upotrijebiti riječi terorist ili terorizam olako. Razvoj značenja ovih riječi, koji se u radu prati od doba Francuske revolucije sve do najnovijih primjera terorizma, ne može se razdvojiti od razvoja terorizma kao pojave. Osim što je riječ terorizam teško definirati u pravnom smislu, ona se može okarakterizirati kao pejorativna s rastućim brojem eufemizama. Primjeri iz suvremenih anglosaksonskih i frankofonskih medija potvrđuju da je riječ terorizam kontroverzna, subjektivna, snažno emocionalno i politički nabijena i da dobiva različita značenja ovisno o potrebi interpretacije. Njezina upotreba je određena kontekstualnim okolnostima, te političkim uvjerenjima, namjerom, stavom i osjećajima govornika.

Ključne riječi: terorizam, terorist, značenje, upotreba, mediji

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Different aspects of the meaning and usage of the word terrorism with an insight into the contemporary Anglo-Saxon and Francophone media

Abstract

The difference in the choice of the vocabulary used when reporting about terrorist acts in the media is undeniable. Journalists do not decide to use the words terrorist or terrorism lightly. Evolution of their meaning over time is inseparable from the evolution of the phenomenon of terrorism itself. It is traced back from the time of the French Revolution to the most recent examples of terrorism. Beside being difficult to define legally, the word terrorism is characterized as pejorative with a growing number of euphemisms. Examples from the contemporary Anglo – Saxon and Francophone media confirm that the word terrorism is controversial, subjective and highly politically and emotionally charged and it acquires different meanings depending on the needs of its interpretation. Its usage is determined by the contextual circumstances, political beliefs of the speaker, his intention, point of view and emotions.

Key words: terrorism, terrorist, meaning, usage, media

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Introduction

On 16th May 2003 in Casablanca five suicide bombers blew themselves up almost simultaneously on different locations of the city causing numerous casualties and injured. On the same date in Israel suicide bombers blew themselves up in different cities of the country killing and injuring a number of persons. *La Presse*, a Montreal daily, used the following expressions to report about these events:

Attentats terroristes à Casablanca

Un kamikaze se fait exploser à Hébron

The word terrorist was not mentioned in the article about Israel or in the others reporting about the same event. However, it is unquestionable that both attacks, the one in Israel just like the one in Morocco, are of the same nature. The difference in processing information, or more precisely, in the choice of the words used in reporting about the same type of events in the same newspaper is undeniable. Why is that so? Identical cases that we have encountered throughout this research are numerous and this is just one randomly chosen example.

Obviously journalists do not decide to use the word terrorist or terrorism lightly. However, the usage of the word is not accidental. When and why do they think that it is legitimate to use it? Does a justified difference in meaning really exist?

Etymology and historical development of the word terrorism

Two examples of contemporary dictionary definitions of the word terrorism are:

Merriam Webster Dictionary

Terrorism - *the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion.*¹

Larousse

¹ Merriam Webster Dictionary online, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/terrorism>, (25.10.2011.)

Terrorisme - ensemble d'actes de violence (attentats, prises d'otages, etc.) commis par une organisation pour créer un climat d'insécurité, pour exercer un chantage sur un gouvernement, pour satisfaire une haine à l'égard d'une communauté, d'un pays, d'un système.²

While the abstract meaning of the word terror itself is clear, when it is applied to acts and actors in the real world it becomes confused. Arnaud Blin, an expert in the history of terrorism explains the nature of the phenomenon of terrorism by saying: "Il est difficile de capter l'essence du terrorisme, principalement parce que le phénomène superpose la rationalité politique de l'objectif et l'irrationalité apparente de l'acte avec une symbolique..."³ According to Bruce Hoffman, a specialist in the study of terrorism, "Terrorism, in the most widely accepted contemporary usage of the term, is fundamentally and inherently political."⁴

It is necessary for a good understanding of the word terrorism to place it in a historical chronology in order to capture one of its crucial aspects: evolution of its meaning over time which is inseparable from the evolution of the phenomenon of terrorism itself.

The English word terrorism comes from the French word *le terrorisme*. The French word *le terrorisme*⁵ comes from the noun *la terreur* meaning fear. It appeared in Dictionnaire de L'Académie française in 1798 and it was described as *system or rule of terror*.⁶ General sense of *systematic use of terror as a policy* is first recorded in English in the same year.⁷

The word terrorism entered into European languages in the heat of the French Revolution. For the first time it was used by the Jacobins. Writing about the French Revolution Victor Hugo noted: "À cette tribune, la guillotine a eu son orateur, Marat, et l'inquisition, le sien, Montalembert. Terrorisme au nom du salut public, terrorisme au nom de Rome, fiel dans les deux bouches, angoisse dans l'auditoire;"⁸ The Jacobins divided the world between pro – revolutionaries and anti - revolutionaries – the

² Dictionnaire français Larousse online, <http://www.larousse.com/en/dictionaries/french/terrorisme>, (25.10.2011.)

³ Blin, A.: *11 septembre 2001: la terreur démasquée: entre discours et réalité*, Le Cavalier Bleu Éditions, Paris, 2006., p. 60.

⁴ Hoffman, B.: *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006., p. 2.

⁵ *Le Petit Robert 1*, Dictionnaires LE ROBERT, Paris, 1990., p. 1950.

⁶ Dictionnaire de L'Académie française, 1798, <http://portail.atilf.fr/dictionnaires/ACADEMIE/CINQUIEME/cinquieme.fr.html>, (28.10.2011.)

⁷ Online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=terrorism>, (27.10.2011.)

⁸ Hugo, V.: *Napoléon le petit*, Librairie Étrangère de la Famille Royale, Londres, 1862., p. 157.

defenders of liberty versus its enemies. Describing these events Georges Lefebvre wrote: "Lindet répugnait au terrorisme; Billaud et Collot inclinaient vers les sans-culottes; les tendances sociales surtout, bien que tous appartinssent à la bourgeoisie, divergeaient profondément entre Robespierre ou Saint-Just, partisans d'une démocratie sociale, et Carnot ou Lindet, nettement conservateurs."⁹ In an attempt to root out any political dissent, they started a period that would become infamous as the Terror. The Terror demonized its political opponents, imprisoned suspected enemies without trial and eventually sent thousands to the guillotine. One of the most militant Jacobins was Robespierre. In 1793 he said: "La terreur n'est autre chose que la justice prompte, sévère, inflexible; elle est donc une émanation de la vertu."¹⁰ Hoffman says that: "Ironically, perhaps, terrorism in its original context was also closely associated with the ideals of virtue and democracy."¹¹ Therefore, a terroriste was, in its original meaning, a Jacobin leader who ruled France during the reign of Terror. The first terrorists were insiders in that powerful government. Hoffman adds that: "In contrast to its contemporary usage, at that time terrorism had a decidedly positive connotation."¹²

During the 19th century terrorism underwent a transformation, becoming associated with non-governmental groups and it acquired the new meaning of abuse. The first terrorists to be called by this name as we would recognize it today were Irish patriots back in 1866. That meaning can be also traced back to Sergey Nechayev, who founded the Russian terrorist group "People's Retribution" in 1869. Nechayev described himself as a "terrorist".¹³

For the next 150 years, the word terrorism led a double life - a justifiable political strategy to some, an abomination to others. The Russian revolutionaries after the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881 used the word with pride.¹⁴ At the beginning of the 20th century, Jack London described terrorism as a powerful weapon in the hands of

⁹ Lefebvre, G., Soboul, A.: *La Révolution française*, volume 1, Presses universitaires de France, 1963., p. 362.

¹⁰ Robespierre, M., Laponneraye, Carrel, A.: *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, tome troisième, Faubourg Saint-Denis, Paris, 1840., p. 550.

¹¹ Hoffman, B.: *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006., p. 2.

¹² Hoffman, B.: *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006., p. 3.

¹³ Le site de François-Bernard Huyghe: Terrorisme, médias, violence : histoire de la communication, http://www.huyghe.fr/actu_428.htm, (04.11.2011.)

¹⁴ Le site de François-Bernard Huyghe: Terrorisme, médias, violence : histoire de la communication, http://www.huyghe.fr/actu_428.htm, (04.11.2011.)

labor:”... terrorism is a well-defined and eminently successful policy of the labour unions.”¹⁵

In the first decades of the 20th century terrorism continued to be associated primarily with the assassination of political leaders and heads of state. The most prominent example was the killing of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand by Gavrilo Princip, a student also referred to by some as a terrorist, in Sarajevo in 1914 which initiated World War I.¹⁶

During World War II the Nazis used the word terrorist to refer to the members of the French resistance.

After World War II the word terrorism regained revolutionary connotations which are most commonly associated with it today. The Western governments or media call some groups which are involved in a liberation struggle terrorists. Later, similar organizations call these same persons statesmen and leaders of the liberated nations. The example of this phenomenon is the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nelson Mandela. Hoffman explains that: “It was also during this period that the “politically correct” appellation of “freedom-fighters” came into fashion as a result of the political legitimacy that the international community accorded to strugglers for national liberation and self-determination.”¹⁷

In the period from the 1950s to the 1990s terrorism broadened beyond assassination of political leaders and heads of state. Terrorist attacks confirmed a determination to kill and came to be associated with indiscriminate victims. The main goal of the 1990s attacks was to produce as many casualties as possible. That was the beginning of the “new terrorism” that was more spectacular, less scrupulous and more often successful. The attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11 2001 confirmed the new face terrorism had acquired. Brian Jenkins, an authority on the questions on terrorism, states: “The distinctions between terrorism and terror began to blur in the 1990s as terrorists became increasingly determined to engaged in large-scale, indiscriminate violence. This was the “new terrorism”.”¹⁸ President George W. Bush, when addressing the U.S. Congress repeatedly used the word terror in his famous statement “our war on terror” rather than the

¹⁵ London, J.: *War of the Classes*, The Echo Library, Teddington, 2009., p. 30.

¹⁶ Bounan, M.: *Logique du terrorisme*, Editions Allia, Paris, 2003.

¹⁷ Hoffman, B.: *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006., p. 16.

¹⁸ Jenkins, B. M.: *Unconquerable Nation: Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves*, Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, 2006., p. 113.

specifically political phenomenon terrorism. His semantic choice, deliberate or not, opened new questions related to the usage of the word terrorism.

Legal definition of terrorism

Until now a common, universally agreed, legally binding criminal law definition of terrorism has not been accepted.¹⁹ Over a hundred different definitions of terrorism have been produced. Bruce Hoffman believes that in spite of the difficulty of defining the term it is possible to identify some key characteristics²⁰ of terrorism in order to distinguish terrorism from other types of criminal activities:

- political in aims and motives
- violent or threatening violence
- characterised by far-reaching psychological repercussions
- conducted by an organization

It is also important to bear in mind that the question of legitimacy or lawfulness is subjective, depending on the perspective of one government or another. It is common for both parties in a conflict to describe each other as terrorists.

Pejorative use of the word terrorism

Beside being difficult to define, the word terrorism is also characterized as pejorative. It means that it carries strong negative connotations and political labels and it tends to condemn as immoral entire segments of a population. The strength of the word is best illustrated by André Pratte, editor in chief of the Montreal daily *La Presse*,

¹⁹ Forst, B.: *Terrorism, Crime and Public Policy*, Cambridge University Press, 2008., p. 3.

²⁰ Hoffman, B.: *Inside Terrorism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006., p. 40.

who calls it “Le mot qui tue”. He also says: “Le mot lui-même sème la désolation”.²¹

For these reasons those media who wish to maintain a reputation for impartiality try to be careful in their use of the word. Therefore, they generally shy away from the word preferring euphemisms or other replacement words for different cases of terrorist acts. The ones that can commonly be found in the Anglo - Saxon press are: *activists, attackers, bombers, criminals, extremists, insurgents, rebels*. The ones that are commonly used in the French press are: *activiste, agresseur, attaquant, criminel, extrémiste, militant, tueur*.

Word terrorism in the media

Within a month of the infamous September 11 attacks in New York and Washington editor in chief for Reuters in Washington asked 2500 agency’s journalists in a memo to stop using the word terrorist in describing the attacks.²² The French daily Libération, reacted immediately by wondering if terrorists exist at all. The editor responded that they did not want to deny the existence of a terrorist act but that the usage of the word terrorist would be passing a moral judgement on individuals. He stated: “Nous ne nions pas que l'attaque contre le World Trade Center soit une attaque terroriste. Mais nous ne voulons pas que des individus soient qualifiés de terroristes parce qu'il s'agit d'un jugement et que nous nous interdisions de formuler des jugements.”²³ The policy decision of the BBC World Service was also not to describe the September 11 attacks as terrorism. The BBC's deputy director of news said: "However appalling and disgusting it was, there will nevertheless be a constituency of your listeners who don't regard it as terrorism. Describing it as such could downgrade your status as an impartial and independent broadcaster."²⁴

²¹ Pratte, A., La Presse, <http://archives.vigile.net/ds-Qc-monde/docs/02-4-17-pratte-affaires.html>, (09.10.2011.)

²² Le Monde, http://www.lemonde.fr/web/recherche_breve/1,13-0,37-725255,0.html, (20.09.2011.)

²³ Libération, <http://www.liberation.fr/evenement/0101387660-le-mot-terroriste-n-existe-plus-dans-le-vocabulaire-de-reuters>, (21.09.2011.)

²⁴ The Guardian, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2001/nov/15/warinafghanistan2001.afghanistan> (01.10.2011.)

Consequently, the BBC has been criticized for its reluctance to use “the T-word” and for its attempts at political correctness. However, after the London 2005 bombings, the BBC was accused of confusion and double standards over its policy on the word terrorist. Namely, early BBC reports used the word terrorist on TV, radio and online to describe the event. Why did they use the word terrorist when people were being killed closer to home? The network appeared to throw away its own policy for a while. Following criticism about their coverage of the London bombings, the BBC Editorial Guidelines²⁵ were sent internally to journalists. Among other things, the BBC’s Guidelines tell its reporters not to use the word terrorist as part of a factual report unless it is in the mouth of someone else.

The most recent event from Norway, namely the massacre that was committed by Anders Behring Breivik, a 32 year old Norwegian is an excellent example of using replacement words to denote a clearly terrorist act. Most of the French press, such as *Le Parisien*²⁶ and *Libération*²⁷, in the first reports following the attack, systematically avoided the word terrorist calling Breivik: *un monstre*, *un tueur*, *un tueur fou*, *suspect*, *fondamentaliste chrétien*, *auteur présumé de l’attentat*, *auteur présumé du massacre*, *le tireur*, and calling the act: *massacre*, *tuerie*, *carnage*.



Picture 1 Cover of the July 2011 Libération



Picture 2 Cover of the July 2011 Le Parisien

²⁵ The BBC Editorial Guidelines, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/search?q=on+the+word+terrorist&filter=all&submit.x=0&submit.y=0>, (25.09.2011.)

²⁶ Le Parisien, <http://www.leparisien.fr/international/carnage-en-norvege-le-tueur-presume-entendu-ce-vendredi-28-07-2011-1548148.php>, (26.09.2011.)

²⁷ Libération, <http://www.liberation.fr/monde/01012350595-un-suspect-penchant-vers-la-droite-et-antimusulmans-arrete>, (26.09.2011.)

Meaning construction

It is unquestionable that the word terrorism is controversial, subjective and highly politically and emotionally charged. Can rules or guidelines which determine when to use the word terrorism or not to use it be applied? The answer is no. The meaning is being constructed as discourse unfolds in a given context. In other words meaning is not a static entity. It is inseparable from mind and it is derived from the process of conceptualisation of the world that surrounds us, and that includes knowledge, experience and physical environment. Lakoff, a famous expert in the new and still developing branch of linguistics called cognitive linguistics says: "Meaning is not a thing; it involves what is meaningful to us. Nothing is meaningful in itself. Meaningfulness derives from the experience of functioning as a being of a certain sort in an environment of a certain sort."²⁸ Tuđman Vuković, a Croatian cognitive linguist confirms: "Značenje, dakle, ne postoji kao kategorija *per se*, već je uvijek dijelom čovjekova konceptualnoga sustava i kognitivnih procesa."²⁹ One of the central categories in meaning construction is perspective, that is to say the point of view from which a situation is being observed. Different speakers who decide to use the word terrorism or to avoid it, are always people coming from a certain physical environment, with a certain perspective and a certain amount of knowledge and experience. In this way they actively participate in the dynamic processes of meaning construction.

Conclusion

The word terrorism acquires different meanings depending on the needs of its interpretation. Nowadays the word carries an obvious pejorative meaning. It stigmatizes people and whole nations passing a moral judgement on them. Its usage is controversial because it is determined by the contextual circumstances, political beliefs of the speaker, his intention, point of view and emotions. Consequently, in the contemporary world characterized by global audiences journalists are faced

²⁸ Lakoff, G.: *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, The University of Chicago Press, 1987., p. 292.

²⁹ Tuđman Vuković, N.: *Meaning in Cognitive Linguistics*, *Suvremena lingvistika*, n. 67, 2009., p. 126.

with the challenging task of selecting the right words when reporting about terrorist acts. A wide range of euphemisms or replacement words can be found in the press. Generally journalists recur to them in their factual reports and use the word terrorism only if it is in the mouth of someone else. The subjective connotations of the word can be summed up in the aphorism:

One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter.

or

Le terroriste des uns est le combattant de la liberté des autres.

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